



National Research and Development Centre  
for adult literacy and numeracy

# Progression

## Moving on in life and learning Research report

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# Contents

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<b>Preface: Policy context.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Executive summary .....</b>	<b>5</b>
Key Findings .....	6
Key issues for policy and practice .....	7
<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>2. Methodology .....</b>	<b>11</b>
2.1 Looking at lives over time .....	11
2.2 The longitudinal cohort .....	12
2.3 Data collection .....	12
<b>3. People over time .....</b>	<b>14</b>
3.1 Jez .....	14
3.2 Paula.....	16
3.3 Sadie.....	18
3.4 Abdul and family .....	20
3.5 Sameera .....	22
3.6 Tommy.....	25
3.7 Martina.....	27
3.8 Sana .....	30
<b>4. Individual lives need personalised responses .....</b>	<b>32</b>
4.1 Multi-layered lives and learning careers .....	32
4.2 Multiple motivations and resources .....	33
4.3 Mindsets .....	34
<b>5. Progression over time: Transitions, turbulence and choice .....</b>	<b>35</b>
5.1 Changing purposes and circumstances.....	35
5.2 Transitions .....	36
5.3 Turbulence and critical points .....	37
5.4 People's choices.....	38
5.5 Brokering learning and progression.....	39
<b>6. Transformative learning and progression: moving on in life and learning ..</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>7. How can policy and practice support progression in life and learning? .....</b>	<b>43</b>
7.1 Progress and progression.....	43
7.2 Supporting achievement, progress and progression .....	44
7.3 Overall comments.....	44
7.4 Recommendations for policy and practice.....	45
<b>References.....</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>Appendix 1: People over time (continued from Chapter 3) .....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Appendix 2: Participatory mapping.....</b>	<b>90</b>

## Preface: Policy context

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Since this research was undertaken, the government has committed itself to the ambition of being a world leader in skills by 2020, benchmarked against the upper quartile of OECD<sup>1</sup> countries (Leitch 2006). For Skills for Life, this means ensuring that, by 2020, 95 per cent of adults possess at least functional levels of literacy and numeracy – defined as Entry level 3 numeracy and Level 1 literacy.

To make progress towards this ambition, the government has a Public Service Agreement (PSA) target that between 2008 and 2011:

- 597,000 people of working age achieve a first Level 1 or above literacy qualification;
- 390,000 people of working age achieve a first Entry level 3 or above numeracy qualification.

To deliver this target and in doing so drive progress towards the 2020 ambition, the government published a refreshed Skills for Life strategy in March 2009 (DIUS 2009). The refreshed strategy focuses on three central themes:

1. Focusing Skills for Life on employability, ensuring that the literacy, language and numeracy skills we help people develop will support them to find, stay and progress in work.
2. Raising demand for literacy, language and particularly numeracy skills among individuals and employers, changing the culture and attitudes to Skills for Life that prevent people from embarking on learning.
3. Delivering flexible and responsive Skills for Life provision which meets learner and employer needs, is high quality, delivered in innovative ways and embedded in wider skills provision where that is the best way to meet individual learners' needs.

The priority learner groups identified within the overall refreshed strategy are:

- people who are unemployed and on benefits;
- low-skilled adults in employment;
- offenders in custody and those supervised in the community; and
- other groups at risk of social exclusion.

Since this research pre-dates the refreshed Skills for Life strategy, there may be information in this document that relates solely to the original strategy and information which does not reflect more recent developments including those set out in the refreshed Skills for Life strategy.

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<sup>1</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

# Executive summary

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This report contributes to broader understandings of progression and personalisation and how these are linked, by exploring people's experience of support in their learning and progression both inside and outside of the classroom. This report builds on earlier NRDC studies, in particular The Learner Study and the Adult Learners' Lives Project.

The study also links closely to other NRDC studies which contribute to understandings of progression in both formal and informal learning contexts: the Progression from Non-counting Provision to Counting Provision Project, which looks at issues around moving from provision which does not count towards the national targets onto provision which does count; the Motivating Skills for Life Learners to Persist, Progress and Achieve Project (the PPA Project); and the Priority Groups Project which explores provision and experiences of learning of people in priority groups, including the homeless.

Progression is central to the Skills for Life agenda. The aim of the study was to address key issues related to progression, such as how we define progression, the barriers to progression, and the ways in which the Skills for Life Strategy is supporting progression. It seeks to define what progression is and to distinguish it from progress.

The availability of existing NRDC data allowed the possibility of following individual people over time for a longer period than is usually possible. By revisiting participants from these studies and by documenting life and learning histories we are able to take a longitudinal detailed view in investigating the connections between literacy, learning and progression. We are able to see how this shapes and impacts on 'moving on' or progression in people's formal learning and in their lives generally. To illuminate the diversity, richness and complexity of people's lives, learning and progression over five years, we have used a range of tools common in qualitative research within a multi-method approach. With vulnerable young people we have also used instruments newly applied to research in language, literacy and numeracy programmes (LLN), including social mapping and photography, in order to build rapport and to lessen distance between researcher and researchees.

The research was structured around four themes:

- Life factors: significant events and factors which have impacted on life, learning and work journeys.
- Experiences of learning: people's experiences of learning inside and outside of formal learning environments.
- Networks of support: the different types of social and learning support/lack of support that have impacted on moving on in life and learning.
- Choices: people's own choices; choices others made for them; their imagined futures.

We analysed the interview transcripts in terms of these four themes. We then wrote case studies for each person under those headings in order to understand how life, learning and progression had unfolded over a period of time in each

person's life. In addition we re-analysed the learner datasets from two recent and closely linked NRDC projects – the Progression from Non-counting Provision to Counting Provision and the PPA Projects.

## Key findings

- The diverse and changing circumstances and environments of people's lives and learning over time will significantly and differently influence and impact on their learning choices, their learning experiences and their progression.
- Recognition of the diversity of reasons and multiple motivations people have for being engaged in learning is crucial to understanding, measuring and supporting their progression towards their goals.
- People can be progressing, standing still and regressing all at the same time in different areas of their lives. Learning 'careers' run alongside and overlap with other careers in their lives such as health, family, employment and citizenship careers, all impacting on each other and on learning and progression. People's broader progression can be hidden if they are not going ahead in formal learning.
- Progression can mean moving on to another LLN course or different type of course within the same institution or at a different one. More broadly still, it can mean moving on in other ways, such as progression from learning into work or increased social participation and personal development.
- People's perception of the 'right time' for taking hold of learning is a significant factor in progression, particularly with vulnerable young people. There can be a huge gap between people's short-term or long-term goals and the possibility of achieving these. This is highly influenced by the transitions, turbulence and critical points people go through in their lives.
- Choices about progression are often not personal decisions but have to fit with the well-being of the whole family, costing individual sacrifice and delay in reaching individual goals. This is highly gendered although there are exceptions.
- The combination of effective support in the learning environment with strong support in social networks is key to helping people sustain their learning and to progress. A thread running right through this study has been the impact of strong tutor support, particularly in relation to building confidence and impacting on progress and progression. Most adults cite teacher qualities, encouragement and increasing self-confidence as motivating them to go on further than they originally intended. This study has highlighted the importance of strong support for facilitating a return to learning after dipping out.
- Brokered transitions which support the individual from one learning context into another, bringing coherence and continuity, are key to meaningful progression. There is a need for strong, careful facilitation of return to learning after dipping out. This is especially important for younger people without family support.
- Advice given by people acting as brokers is sometimes conflicting, causing confusion and incoherence. People with marked learning difficulties or with limited knowledge of the cultures of learning and work are particularly vulnerable to poor or conflicting advice and guidance which can seriously

impede progression and cause loss of confidence and mental health problems.

- There is a lack of appropriate pathways for people with marked learning difficulties. Being wrongly placed in mainstream LLN provision falsely raises expectations and sets people up to fail.
- Progress includes movement outside of formal education and work. Many people are making a contribution to society through voluntary and community work or caring work.
- People's degree of social capital has a strong impact on their choices and their progression. Strong motivation and LLN qualifications are often not enough in themselves to realise meaningful progression. Systemic and structural factors such as citizenship status and rights to education can seriously impede progression.

## **Key issues for policy and practice**

Based on the findings there are four key issues which are as follows.

### **Acknowledging progression as social, broad and lifelong**

- There needs to be joined-up thinking between different agencies in order to address the broader systemic and structural factors which impede learning and progression.
- LLN learning should be supported in a way which connects with broad progression in life and learning. It is important to acknowledge and value learners' wider skills, resources and interests and build on these in learning.
- Progression in terms of 'soft outcomes' should be recognised and recorded. There is a need to document steps in 'moving on' as well as test achievement and to count small steps in real terms.

### **Promoting diverse pathways for learning**

- There need to be diverse pathways of learning for the most vulnerable cohorts of learners i.e. people who plateau at a low level, disenfranchised young people and people with marked learning disabilities. Some people need to be signposted to alternative progression routes rather than to discrete Skills for Life learning. The issue of developing alternative progression routes needs to be urgently addressed.
- There need to be diverse pathways of learning for the most vulnerable cohorts of learners i.e. people who plateau at a low level, disenfranchised young people and people with marked learning disabilities.
- There need to be coherent long-term progression routes for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) learners, across transition points such as from ESOL programmes to vocational programmes, with language support where necessary.

- There needs to be a coherent approach between the agencies and learning organisations that people are in contact with. Advice and guidance for progression needs to be consistent and not conflicting.

### **Supporting learning**

- There is a need for more in-depth advice and guidance in the learning environment. Sufficient resources for effective tutorials and pastoral support are important, particularly for those who have little other support in their lives.
- Support organisations which have regular contact with vulnerable young people in education need to keep in close touch with their learning, their issues and their achievements.

### **Supporting transitions**

- Expertise, continuity and coherence are essential to supporting transitions. A more holistic approach is needed with attention to appropriate cultural information about education and employment.
- Colleges and other providers need to recognise that vulnerable young people in particular will test the waters or face constraints which mean they may dip in and out of learning or relocate mid-course. Strategies such as flexible enrolment are needed.

# 1. Introduction

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The Skills for Life Strategy covers progression along several stages: from adult learners' varied starting points into qualification bearing courses, through the Skills for Life levels, and into Levels 2 and 3 vocational training and employment. A key commitment integrated within the progression strategy is on personalisation 'to give every learner an experience that really meets their needs' (DFES 2006). This study seeks to contribute to broader understandings of progression and personalisation and how these are linked, by exploring people's experience of support in their learning and progression both inside and outside of the classroom.

Progression is central to Skills for Life. We need to understand the key issues related to progression, such as how we define progression, what the barriers to progression are, and in what ways the Skills for Life Strategy and LLN programmes based on it support progression. In relation to LLN learning, progression can mean progressing from one level to another within a particular course, moving from one course to another or moving from one institution to another to take a higher-level course. More widely it can mean moving from LLN learning into other types of learning. More broadly still, it can mean moving on in other ways such as progression from learning into work or increased social participation and personal development. We need to define what progression is and distinguish it from 'progress'. In adult education, 'progress' is generally synonymous with doing better, and is usually used to describe how a learner is doing within a particular class or course. Progression requires progress but it is not the same thing.

In this study of progression we want to get an understanding of how life histories influence learning and what this leads to. This brings together both retrospective work, interviewing learners about their histories, and longitudinal work, keeping in touch with people over time to see how their lives develop. We look in detail over time at the connections between literacy and learning and people's everyday lives and how this shapes and impacts on 'moving on' or progression in their formal learning and in their lives generally. Progression does not just happen: people make it happen or they can be held back by various interplaying factors. People's multi-layered lives help us to connect histories, immediate circumstances and practices with the future; they illustrate how all of these aspects of a person and how they are situated in society impact on how they are able to 'move on' in life and learning, the availability of resources and the degree of choice they have had.

This study builds on earlier NRDC studies, especially the Learner Study (Rhys Warner and Vorhaus 2008) and the Adult Learners' Lives Project (Barton et al 2006). In the latter, rich data of 134 learners' lives were collected over time from different life and learning contexts: from inside and outside the classroom and within formal provision to informal learning. We carried out retrospective interviewing with most of the people we worked with across the diverse settings and kept in longitudinal contact for up to three years with around 50 people. Revisiting participants from these studies enabled us to take a five-year view of the meanings of progression and moving on in people's lives. The existence of

this NRDC data made it possible to follow people over a longer time period than is usually possible.

The study also links closely to other NRDC studies which contribute to understandings of progression in both formal and informal learning contexts: the study of progression from non-counting to counting provision within Skills for Life LLN programmes (the Progression from Non-counting Provision to Counting Provision Project), which looks at issues around moving to provision which counted towards the national targets (Brooks et al. forthcoming 2009); the Motivating Skills for Life Learners to Persist, Progress and Achieve Project (the PPA Project)<sup>2</sup> and the Priority Groups Project which explores provision and experiences of learning of people in priority groups including homeless people (Reisenberger et al. forthcoming 2009; NIACE forthcoming 2009; Satchwell and Barton forthcoming 2009).

This work needs to be understood within the context of quantitative studies such as the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and the National Child Development Study (NCDS) (Sabates et al. 2006) which provide us with snapshots and an aggregate picture of lives unfolding over time. Studies like these can inform us about the impact of the Skills for Life Strategy in numerical terms – of percentages of people who have progressed from one level to another. They need to be complemented by work which can examine the interplay of different types of progression and systemic factors which impact on this. Measuring progression on a large scale is difficult because of the nature of the data available at present but analysis of Individual Learner Records is beginning to piece together an overall picture which complements the current work.

The particular contribution of this study is in providing a detailed longitudinal perspective of people who have participated in LLN learning. Through their case studies a broader understanding of progression emerges.

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<sup>2</sup> See [www.excellencegateway.org.uk/stickwithit](http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/stickwithit)

## 2. Methodology

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### 2.1 Looking at lives over time

Leading up to this progression study, taking an ethnographic approach over several years has allowed us to look in detail at people's lives and at how they are situated in communities and in wider society (Tusting and Barton 2005). A qualitative approach enables a study of complexity and change in people's lives by looking at significant factors both in personal surroundings, such as home and family and beyond, to factors in wider contexts within communities, workplace and identity networks. This approach seeks to understand meanings and practices from the perspective of the participants, capturing both patterns that people have in common as well as the uniqueness of lives and situations. It provides data which can complement quantitative data.

To illuminate the diversity, richness and complexity of people's lives and their learning and progression over five years, we have used many tools common in qualitative research within a multi-method approach. These included: participant observation with detailed field notes; in-depth and repeated interviews, both structured and unstructured; case studies, for example with asylum-seekers and refugees (Hodge and Pitt 2004), which focused in detail on particular issues and over time; collaborative photography (Hodge and Jones 2000) and video; and collecting images and documents, as well as examples of free writing such as poems and rap. In this study we have introduced tools of participatory mapping common in overseas community development work, as described with examples in Appendix 2. Gathering this range of data allowed us to see 'complexity, multiple values, different positions, opposing perceptions, and different identities in different contexts. It allowed for shared meaning making and shared knowledge production that depended on participation built through dialogue and the establishment of research relationships' (Appleby and Barton 2008).

We began by reviewing the existing literature on personalisation and progression. Based on this, along with our earlier research, we identified four key themes to structure our investigations of people's progression. We wanted to explore people's life and learning journeys over time. Our participatory dialogues and interviews covered four main areas:

- Life factors: significant events and factors in life which have impacted on life, learning and work journeys.
- Experiences of learning: people's experiences of learning inside and outside of formal learning environments – including topics such as relevance, gains, progress, enjoyment.
- Networks of support: the different types of social and learning support/lack of support that have impacted on moving on in life and learning.
- Choices: reflecting on their own choices and those that others made for them, imagined futures, their agency.

## 2.2 The longitudinal cohort

We drew upon existing NRDC data, primarily from the 134 students studied in the Adult Learners' Lives Project, including 50 people who were studied over more than two years. From this a total of 45 transcripts were analysed alongside the new interviews. In addition to this we gathered all previous interview transcripts from other NRDC projects related to each person we worked with in this study. This method of data collection allowed us to work in detail with a range of people who have attended provision, showing some of the complexity in their lives, learning and progression and providing their own perspectives on issues around progression.

In the current study we carried out 28 further interviews of people who had been part of earlier NRDC projects. The people included in this longitudinal cohort were chosen to represent a wide spectrum of people who we first met engaging in different types of learning provision in earlier research. We took account of age, work histories, health issues, race/ethnicity, along with type of provision. The sample covered three regions of England. For this study the longitudinal cohort in the North West was accessed through our continuing links with individuals who were part of the Adult Learners' Lives Project. We re-established contact with seven former ESOL students, three people who had been on Entry to Employment (E2E) courses and three former literacy students who had been in an Adult College. In the South West and the South East the cohort were people who had participated in the NRDC Learner Study. In the South West five people were from Family Learning programmes and in London ten people were from Adult and Community Learning (ACL) provision, covering literacy, numeracy and ESOL and a range of levels. There were often difficulties in locating people as we had not been in contact with some of them for two years and several people, particularly the young homeless and asylum-seekers, had moved on and could not be contacted. We acknowledge that the large majority of our informants are women. This reflects the fact that most of the people studied in the Adult Learners' Lives Project and the Learner Study were women.

## 2.3 Data collection

Data for this study was collected through in-depth follow-up interviews of people, the large majority having been interviewed at least twice on other NRDC projects. These were face-to-face and audio-recorded; where this was not possible we carried out phone interviews. In preparation for this set of new interviews we went through the existing interviews for each person, identifying specific issues to follow up with them. The face-to-face interviews were carried out in the style of a 'participatory dialogue' using social mapping tools. Involving people in this way quickly built rapport, created interest and lessened the distance between the researcher and the informant. We found that young people in particular were responsive and comfortable with this approach. We used a visual timeline (or river) to map significant events in life and learning and a wheel diagram to map different types of support which had an impact on people's learning and progression. Examples of these are given in Appendix 2. The dialogue covering the research questions was carried out around the process of mapping and with reference to the completed map, discussing what had most facilitated and constrained learning and progression.

We analysed the interview transcripts under the four main categories: Life factors, experiences of learning, support networks and choices. We then created case studies for each person under those headings in order to understand how life, learning and progression had unfolded over a period of time in each person's life. We looked across all these case studies to find emerging themes, significant patterns and differences. In addition we re-analysed the learner datasets from two recent and closely linked NRDC projects – the Progression from Non-counting Provision to Counting Provision and PPA Projects – and drew on interview transcripts from those same two projects: 30 people from the PPA Project and 36 people from the Progression from Non-counting Provision to Counting Provision Project.

Looking in detail over time gave us a way to represent people fully in order to explain what they told us about the immediate context of their lives. We needed to capture the three-dimensional reality of people's complex and multifaceted lives. Each person we talked to came with a past, were living in the present and had hopes and aspirations for their future. In response to this we took into account each person's history, current circumstances, their everyday practices and their thoughts about their future, as in Barton et al (2006).

## 3. People over time

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In this section we provide eight case studies of life and learning which provide a picture of the complexity and diversity of people's learning and progression: Jez, Paula, Sadie, Abdul, Sameera, Tommy, Martina and Sana. (See Appendix 1 for a further 19 case studies.)

### 3.1 Jez

#### Life

Jez, aged 21, had an unsettled childhood with her mother who suffered from mental illness, moving and changing schools frequently, being bullied and in turn becoming a bully, often being suspended and leaving with no qualifications. She left home aged 13, spending time in reception centres and in care. This unsettled and unhappy life led to habitual offending from the age of 10. She chose to move to supported accommodation after she found living independently in a bed and breakfast hotel with no support unworkable.

On leaving school she went to college but quickly dropped out and joined an E2E programme with a private provider, which is where we first met her. The following year was very difficult for her, dropping out of this programme, moving into her own flat and continually binge drinking and using drugs heavily. In September she decided to return to her supported accommodation and go back to the college introductory course for BTEC Art and Design which she had dropped out of after only one month. From late 2004 to September 2005, aged 19, she was not in any course or work and was 'in a bad way' through substance use.

She has continued to work since the age of 16, both voluntarily and paid, for the Children's Society, after contacting them to make a complaint. Jez feels that there is thin line between her life going well or badly at any particular time as she suffers from a split personality syndrome. At the present time her health is not good and she is undergoing tests. She is still a substance user and does not intend to stop yet but says she mostly manages it well.

#### Experiences of learning

After school, aged 17, Jez went to college but felt labelled and was bullied by her school peers so quickly dropped out. She got into trouble and was referred to an E2E course through the Youth Offending Team to fulfil a condition of her licence after a conviction. On completion of her licence period Jez decided to stay at E2E as she got used to it and liked it. She did not enjoy literacy and numeracy classes, much preferring art, so did not achieve the qualifications that she was capable of. She found it very difficult to concentrate, due to 'havoc' and lack of sleep at the supported accommodation and boredom in the classes, but the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) payments were the incentive to keep going. She left in 2004 after 'trouble with tutors'. She joined an introductory Art and Design course at college but dropped out of this too. The reasons she gives

for dropping out of courses are not being 'ready' and 'usually me being drunk or kicking off and getting into trouble or personality clashes with tutors'.

She feels she made the most progress in 2006 when she returned to the BTEC course, passed that and English and Maths Level 1, which allowed her to go on to the next year course. She had good learning support but feels her success was mainly 'because I'd grown up, moved on ... it was the right time, I was settled enough to get on with it'. Out of class she had always been learning informally with a wide range of interests: reading novels, writing a diary and poems, reading and playing music, needlework and often teaching her peers these skills when they asked her to. She does not use the computer at the house much but uses the college suite which is open in the evenings and during the holidays.

The Children's Society quickly spotted her creative potential and she feels she has really developed her skills – such as desktop publishing, DVD production, composing and performing music and, more recently, becoming a board member and attending meetings in London. She says she has also learned a lot with them through:

'going to art galleries in London, meeting people, learning how to manage language – talking in different ways to mates and adults, putting your point across without getting angry, f-ing and blinding, campaigning and persuading people. It's made me more confident and more trusting so that means I can also cope with college.'

## **Support**

Jez found the one-to-one support from most E2E learner advocates were excellent – constantly checking she was ok, phoning her if she missed class – but did not feel supported as an individual by teachers in her learning. She felt that bullying was not well dealt with when she started at college. The learning support she had last year at college on her BTEC Art and Design was:

'excellent – treated very much as an individual with very individual ... goals, ... personality, ... style, ... problems. Well prepared, committed, excellent support. I was ready and I could get on with everybody. If I wasn't in mood they left it until another day, explained very well in lots of different ways. ... They give you all the time you need to explain stuff, rearrange your work for you for when you feel better, ring you when you're ill or drop off.'

The course team had also supported her by putting her in touch with young enterprise schemes.

Jez felt that without her house manager and the Children's Society constantly being there for her and calling her she would not have achieved anything at college. The voluntary work and support has greatly increased her confidence and self-worth. The house manager supported with regards to her substance use: 'keep talking about what I take, making sure I have information and helping me to manage it better'. Her mates are important to her and the best support has been from her 'after care' worker who she has known for five years. Jez had help from Connexions to apply for college but then preferred to manage herself: 'I don't want them keep asking me how are you doing and you feel you have to tell them'.

## Choices

Jez felt that she did not do well at E2E because it was not her choice to go. It was her choice to go back to college to do creative arts. This was a pragmatic educational and financial decision as social services pay expenses until she is 24 and she gets Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA). She prepared herself better the second time by calling in to see friends there and getting to know teachers, 'testing the waters', and this made her feel safe about her decision and not so afraid of being labelled. She chose to do voluntary work with the Children's Society because:

'they did so much for me and I want to do it for other children and it's top fun.'

'I've learned from all my choices. I could have done something other than dossing but I wasn't in the right frame of mind. I was stoned and smashed all the time. I'm happy with my choices recently.'

In the short term Jez wants to get her BTEC diploma and Literacy and Numeracy Level 2. In the longer term she wants to start her own business. She says that her substance use will not get in the way and she is confident she can change when she needs to.

## 3.2 Paula

### Life

Paula, now in her late thirties, came to the UK in 2000 with her two young children and husband as an asylum-seeker from Colombia and quickly gained refugee status. Paula was highly motivated to make a new life for herself and her family, but the displacement she and her children faced meant that she went through periods of depression and ill-health from time to time, dropping out of all learning and social activities. She constantly worries about her family in Colombia. Paula's marriage broke up due to the stress of displacement. Since then she has had two relationships in which she has faced controlling behaviour, violence and a clash of cultures, all of which has had a very negative impact on her and her children's life and learning. She had to move house because of severe dampness and vandalism. It has been difficult at times for her to care for her home and children and at one time she was suicidal. Paula wanted to learn English as quickly as possible, in order to get employment in childcare or as a teacher's assistant. She is a very intelligent, capable woman with ESOL Level 1 but has found it impossible to find even cleaning work and feels ostracised as a foreigner.

### Experiences of learning

Paula completed high school in Colombia. Her ambition was to study psychology, before early marriage and childbirth interrupted her plans. Despite all her ups and downs she has managed from 2002 to 2006 to go from Entry 1 ESOL to Level 1, though there have been periods when her attendance has been very erratic and infrequent due to social, financial, childcare and health pressures.

Although an avid learner, Paula found it difficult to move on from ESOL in a coherent and sustained way. She twice enrolled on three courses at once but, not surprisingly, she found this unworkable and demoralising. During times of severe depression she would drop out of learning all together and she lost rather than gained confidence which has lead her to keep changing direction. She feels she has had excellent support from each of the teachers but has not been able to take up extra learning support or control outside factors. She has not been accepted on full-time vocational courses or on a Spanish teaching course as her level of English and other qualifications (e.g. Maths) has been assessed as too low.

She was given information about a childminding course at the Job Centre and on applying was offered a place straight away. Paula obtained and read a good deal of information about health and safety requirements to make her house childminding friendly. However she could not afford to pay for these modifications. She also could not get Criminal Records Bureau clearance as she had not been able to verify her address for the last five years – impossible since she had only been in the country for three years.

As a student herself and as a mother of two primary school children, Paula and her children spent time every evening helping each other with homework. Paula's son would help her with pronunciation and spelling, which he teased her about, and she would help him with maths and other subjects. She would also read stories in Spanish with the children as she was afraid they would lose the ability to read in their home language. Paula had an old computer at home but she found it very frustrating as it often crashed and she could not afford the repairs. She still enjoys reading books on child development that she gets from the local library in order to prepare for the teacher's assistant course: 'Always, always, I am trying to learn'.

Paula paid for her driving lessons by teaching her driving instructor Spanish. However her refugee status and lack of the right papers has so far stopped her from getting a driving licence.

Paula learned about British culture, community issues and citizenship in its broadest sense as she was chosen to take part in a Community Leadership programme which involved her giving presentations to the council. Sadly due to the possessiveness of her partner at the time she had to withdraw from this and also from visiting the asylum drop-in centre.

## **Support**

She received support from Sure Start and joined a self-help group to help her cope with her children's emotional and behavioural difficulties. Getting counselling and treatment for herself was more difficult due to long NHS waiting lists. The Women's Centre offered her some limited support. She says that her refugee friends and her young son (now 13 years old) have pulled her through. Twice when she was in hospital she had to leave her children in the care of social services due to lack of support networks.

Paula, like several other asylum-seekers, has always found the most support for her learning from her first ESOL teacher who continues to advise her when

asked. She felt that others had let her down: at college she had filled in forms for a childcare course and at the library for a computer course and two months later was still waiting for replies. At times she has been 'caught between' different sets of advice. For example recently she has been assigned a Job Centre project worker whose aim is to get her into work within four months and who encourages her to do short courses related to her interests – photography, beauty therapy and computers. The ESOL department, on the other hand, has suggested a longer term ESOL with Hairdressing course which could lead next year to a Level 2 vocational qualification.

### **Choices**

Paula has had learning choices but found it difficult to make 'the right one' due to outside factors and conflicting agendas of different organisations. She feels her original goals – to get a job in childcare or as an assistant teacher, or to teach Spanish, and to drive – have all been thwarted, and when we last met her she was feeling very confused. She was feeling well enough to move on but felt she needed the 'right advice' and support to make realistic choices and see them through. Since she was last interviewed we have heard that Paula has chosen to focus on her ESOL with Hairdressing course; she is working towards ESOL Level 2 and will progress to Hairdressing Level 2 next year.

## **3.3 Sadie**

### **Life**

We met Sadie, who is in her thirties, at an evening literacy class in a small further education (FE) college. She lives with her husband and two young children. Sadie left school with very few qualifications. She wanted to be a hairdresser so started a Youth Training Scheme in hairdressing but was sacked after six months. She had taken on another job in addition to the hairdressing to boost her earnings because she couldn't earn enough money to survive. She was told she was sacked because she was too tired to work properly and wasn't concentrating, which she admits was true. In Sadie's words she has 'ended up in a factory ever since'. Despite it not being her preferred option, Sadie has progressed well at the textiles factory where she works and is now a supervisor after 13 years of employment there. She feels happy and gets good job satisfaction.

The firm was a little family run business but since the owners retired it has been taken over by a large firm. This has meant that the literacy demands at work have increased as 'they're doing everything by the book, rules, health and safety, paperwork left, right and centre'. Sadie struggles to cope with these new demands as she says she is dyslexic and so decided she should join a class to improve her English.

The other change under the new firm was related to stricter control and discipline in the workplace: 'they were banging everybody with disciplinaries, and I got a big massive one, disciplinary'. Sadie became worried about her job security and lost her trust in them: 'Now first one I just bowed down to, the second one I thought, are they trying to get rid of me? Been here thirteen years, it's like are they trying

to get rid of me because it cost them more, you know'. This led her to want to be able to research her legal rights herself rather than rely on her brother's help. All this has spurred Sadie on and given her the motivation to strengthen her position in work and life. Since gaining confidence in her literacy class she has now felt able to apply for an NVQ Level 2 Line Leader course but she needs to save £350 before she can do it.

### **Experiences of learning**

Sadie says that she has learnt much more since she left school than when she was at school. Her spelling and reading have improved which she puts down to her practice at home and work, where she is regularly repeats certain reading and writing tasks. At home she sorts out the bills and has had to read and learn about things like the mortgage. She explains how in the reading and writing she does at work she needs to make things clear for others as well as herself:

'It's like every time we do like a sample pair of curtains I'll have to write exactly what I've done with it, so I can ... if the order comes through say in six months time I can look back and see how I've made it and what cottons I used and what fabric I used and ... and it's like looking back. And other people have to be able to read it as well.'

Sadie says that she enjoys the literacy class much more than school and puts this down to her being older: 'I suppose I'm grown up now' (laughs). She had very little confidence when she started and was terrified of being seen as 'thick'.

'When she said how she were putting me into a mixed group, I turned round and I said, "I've come here for confidence." I said, "I don't want to be the thickest in the class," I said, "I've come here for confidence, not to be shoved further down," you know, "to how I feel now."'

Sadie says it feels good to be getting rid of what she calls her 'phobias'. Improving her reading through formal learning has led Sadie, through a classmate who she borrows books from, into reading for pleasure for the first time: 'I've never, ever read a book in my life ... And I've read one for the first time from cover to cover.'

### **Support**

Sadie's networks of support include her brother who helped her to research her employment rights, and her classmates who help her with class work. Good relationships with teachers have been key to her making progress, along with their constant encouragement and understanding of her particular learning needs and style:

'they're not as strict [as at school] ... you know, they're more laid back.... You're not like made to do it, it's at your own pace, at your own speed and at your own level.'

## Choices

Sadie's earlier choices were made in the context of needing to make enough money to survive. Changes at work and worries about job security were the catalyst for her to re-enter learning but she had multiple motivations – related to work, family and personal development. As the earlier quotes have shown, one motivation was to be able to manage better. Another was that she wanted to understand and protect her employment rights. Her brother explained everything to her but she wanted to feel in more control which led to an important decision: 'I'd seen this leaflet that you get from college through post about Line Leader which is what I want to do. But then I thought, well I need to sort my English out first ... so that's how I ended up here'. Thirdly, she wanted to develop herself intellectually: 'I just would like to be cleverer'. Finally, she wanted to gain a qualification: 'I'd like to gain a qual. To say what I do, what I can do'.

## 3.4 Abdul and family

### Life

Abdul is an agronomist in his early 50s from Iraq who came to Britain in 2002 with his wife and three young children. He was in an Entry level 3 ESOL class when we first met him. Abdul is a very positive person but as time went on he became more and more worried about the family's situation and became increasingly frustrated and depressed as he was waiting for a decision from the Home Office about his legal status and this affected his ability to move on in his learning.

After completing an Entry level 3 ESOL course, he went on to do a gardening course at the same college. He soon found that the course was very basic and well below his level. Later he joined a beginners' computer course but felt that one day a week was not enough for him. Abdul is an educated man and very keen to study but his main priority is his children's learning needs. Moving on for Abdul is not an individual thing, it involves the whole family. He has always taken a lot of responsibility for looking after and supporting his children and sometimes finds it hard to find time for study. This led him later to choose an ESOL evening class instead of a day class. Unfortunately the class folded due to low student numbers. His one regret is that he did not find the right type of agriculture course.

Abdul eventually managed to get a work permit and did some occasional work at a printing works when they were short staffed. Soon afterwards he was shocked to find that all his benefits had been stopped, the family were evicted and then the work ran out. The benefits were only reinstated 10 months later when he proved, after many attempts, that he was no longer working. During this period the family were living on the charity of a Pakistani neighbour who let them stay in an empty property he owned. Abdul and his wife are very dignified, positive people but being asylum-seekers has at times caused them to lose their dignity and be treated with a lack of respect by the authorities.

Later Abdul and his family found out that they were in fact granted leave to remain a few months after their arrival four years previously, but due to a mix-up they were never informed about this. They found out 'by accident' when their son

enquired about permission to work in February 2007. This uncertainty about their legal status has had a massive impact on their ability to move on and progress in life and learning. It has meant that they have had benefits cut, been evicted, not been entitled to study or to work and been forced to relocate without choice. At the time of writing this situation was still not resolved and the family are still living in limbo. This has put their eldest daughter Marin in the position of having to flout the law by applying for a student loan against Home Office regulations when she started university.

### **Experiences of learning**

Abdul was very positive about the full-time ESOL class he attended. He always felt confident as a learner, as he had some knowledge of English and was accustomed to studying, since he had a degree. He felt intellectually challenged, well supported, and responded to the combination of working alone or in small and large groups with others in class, and to teacher direction and a grammar-based curriculum. Despite his enjoyment of learning and progress in reading and writing, Abdul feels disappointed with his progress in spoken English. He still finds the speed of spoken communication and strong accents outside the class the most demanding. He feels he never has enough opportunities to practise spoken English as his social networks are mainly Iraqi. He understands English well and says he can read and understand the Home Office communications. Abdul reads books and local and national newspapers outside class and he likes to study grammar.

Abdul was not computer literate when he came to England and joined basic computer courses at college and at BBC Learning. He has learned how to use the internet to access news on both English and Kurdish websites and how to word process. He has learned about email but does not use it.

### **Support**

He talks about the material help the family received from the Asylum Support Team (housing and benefits) and the support they received from neighbours, both white and Asian. The family received other help from the children's schoolteachers, medical practitioners and the college and all this support helped them to settle. They have always found the Citizen's Advice Bureau helpful in contacting the Home Office if there were any problems related to benefits. Sometimes the family have felt embarrassed about asking for too much social support. They did not want to inform the asylum children's team when they were evicted. 'You know C. helped us so much at the beginning with everything so we find it embarrassing to ask her again.' For Abdul and his children, learning and language support at home is reciprocal. He helps them with their homework, supporting subject-specific learning such as maths, science, and English vocabulary and grammar. His children help him with how to use contemporary English and how to communicate in informal spoken English. Abdul explains the difference between his more formal approach and his children's informal way of learning English: 'they help me about pronouncing some words because they learn from people, I learn from book. The first is different'. Abdul has always been very concerned for his children's education and has given them his full support but also the freedom to choose: 'I told to my daughter I prefer you study medicine

... I advised her but I don't oblige her, I said you are free, I think either medicine or business something like this'.

It is clear that Abdul himself has not had the advice and support needed to quickly build on his specialism and realise his goal of further study and work related to agronomy. He picked up a leaflet about the gardening course and chose to do it but was not properly advised by Student Services and had unrealistic expectations of this course as a progression route. He said at the time:

'I like [to do] work in gardening, legal work, that's why I study gardening at college because I want to take certificate, if I have certificate I can find job in future.'

### **Choices**

Abdul has had very little choice about his life and learning over the past five years due to what he believed to be his legal status as an asylum seeker. He wanted a job but as an asylum-seeker was not allowed to work and explained that the rules had changed recently making it even more difficult. As an asylum-seeker his lack of choice was such that he was not even allowed to own a computer given by a friend as a gift to his children to support their learning.

'One day they came from Home Office to person to check my house ... computer was upstairs ... they said "where do you get this computer? ...you are not allowed to buy this computer because the money you take is just for food and clothes". I said "OK I know this, I didn't buy with my money." He said "if you get anything from anyone you should inform us ... you're not allowed anybody help you".'

When they lost their house and benefits due to Abdul's part-time work they had no choice of town or accommodation when they were re-housed and had to relocate to Manchester. In terms of learning, he and the family have had some choices and have achieved remarkably well but these have also been constrained due to poor advice and guidance, social and legal problems.

## **3.5 Sameera**

### **Life**

Sameera is a 19-year-old British Asian woman. She lives with her mother and three sisters, one who of whom is doing a business studies degree while the other two are job seeking. Her parents recently separated which has caused her considerable anxiety. She attended a mosque school until she was 11 years old. For her statutory education she attended what she described as a 'special school' in Blackburn and applied from there to attend an E2E programme run by a private provider. This is where we first met her. Her tutors there described her as having mild unspecified learning difficulties. She was unable to find a work placement and a job as she hoped so went on to an E2E course at college. In the 18 months since completing that course she has been very unwell with mental illness caused, her sisters feel, from not doing well in her studies and not being able to find any work experience or jobs. She has now signed up for a

literacy course at college but her sisters say she is unable to join the numeracy course as she has to be at least at Entry 2 level which she is not. This means that she is now looking at other community-based providers to find a maths course. Because of her health problems she is only able to study two or three days a week. Her sister is worried that having to attend two different providers, potentially at opposite ends of town, will put too much strain on her.

### **Experiences of learning**

Sameera told us that her learning at E2E was quite different from school, suggesting that it was more closely related to work: 'if you want to like write letters or photocopying and other stuff in the office, like write on the computer and reading stuff out in alphabetical order...'. She found the literacy class the most difficult and said that although she didn't really want to bother she realised that it was important in preparing her for writing at work: 'if they ask you to write something down or put it in a file and you don't know what you're doing then they'll think you can't do it'.

She was not as socially confident as her class peers and sometimes got teased by the other Asian girls. Sameera said that worries getting a job and life in general are what most filled her mind and distracted her when she was learning.

Sameera said she gained confidence from being on the first E2E programme she attended, putting this down to both the tutor and peer support she received:

'like the way they help and do the explaining and show me how to do like the photocopying ... if you need help you just ask them ... and working in groups or in twos.'

This is in contrast to her experience at school:

'if you couldn't do it you have to just ... you have to solve the work, you have to do it by yourself ... and if they ever got to you, you could tell them but they never explained stuff when you used to tell them. If you used to do something wrong they [some of the teachers] used to blank you out'.

She found E2E at college even more fulfilling as she had a college support worker who helped with all general college information as well as offering more one-to-one learning support and less whole group work which she had found difficult at the first E2E provision. She also found the teachers more punctual and more organised. Her sister blames her secondary school for her lack of achievement: 'they didn't educate her well enough that she could go and study at college'.

Sameera told us that she learned things at home – how to cook and how to clean and manage the home. She says she does not bother with much reading and writing for everyday purposes and that her sister helps her with anything she needs such as reading and writing letters for official purposes. She does however like to go to the library sometimes, and especially likes romantic novels by authors such as Barbara Taylor Bradford and Jackie Collins, which her sister reads to her. She uses the computer to search for books or authors but not for any other purposes.

Sameera has always felt well motivated on her courses and has never wanted to drop out of a course. But her learning journey has left her feeling very demoralised, especially when she has been rejected for work placements. Her sister says: 'because she's been turned down and it's very hard for her to accept that ... everyone else can do it, why can't I?'. Sameera feels she is getting nowhere: 'keep on going to Connexions and keep on going ... back to square one, around in circles and we're not getting anywhere'. Her sister is very concerned, especially since Sameera has been ill with depression, that she should be strong enough to face another challenge: 'she lacks confidence and she needs to build that before she goes somewhere ...'. A key issue seems to be that, on the one hand, Sameera's family feel that educational providers have let her down and not taught her well, but that on the other hand the providers do recognise that she needs more support than others.

### **Support**

During the research we saw Sameera flourish with one-to-one learning support. The support for transitions has not helped Sameera in the long term. She has been led down a Skills for Life LLN pathway, going from provider to provider, unable to achieve anything that would lead to progression. Her school referred her to E2E with a private provider, while Connexions referred her to college E2E. The council has since tried to help her find LLN courses with other providers. Whereas Sameera argues that the support worker 'was there for me' by offering her support and helping her to find courses, her sisters say that this support was very limited and not in-depth at all.

'She's just been taking her to college and bringing her back, like she hasn't sat with her and had a proper conversation and all, how she's getting on, what she needs to do ... they don't discuss anything ... I don't think she got the help she needed ... because if she got the support she wanted she wouldn't have become ill.'

### **Choices**

When we first met Sameera she described her life goals as getting a job in administration and learning to drive. She said she could not imagine at this stage what her life choices might be with regard to how she wants to live i.e. whether she'd want to: 'live on my own ... or get married'. In terms of learning, Sameera said at that her short-term goal was to carry on at E2E but said that if she got a job she wanted to 'leave it to that' and not do any more formal learning. Her tutors expressed concern that it was hard to see where Sameera could go next as efforts to find her work placements had proved unsuccessful as potential employers had not felt her to be employable when they interviewed her. When we met recently we discussed the possibility of a volunteer placement but her sister feels very concerned that her confidence is too low at present. We suggested that a carefully supported volunteer placement may help. We felt so concerned about her that we contacted the volunteer bureau and found out that there is a specially supported scheme for people with learning difficulties and a self-help 'circle of friends'. Sameera's experience would suggest that E2E and LLN learning have not been the right pathways for her.

Sameera was very disappointed that she was not able to do a computer course 'because they were too complicated and it wasn't better for me'. She wants to be able to do this and she says that in the long term she wants to be a nurse. I asked her if she would like to be an assistant nurse and she said, 'no, a proper nurse'. She says that her English and maths are what will hold her back.

## 3.6 Tommy

### Life

We met Tommy, aged 19, at a government supported accommodation scheme. He had had an unsettled home life: his father left home when he was three years old, his mother had 'her own problems' and his older siblings were told to leave home in their late teens due to drug addiction and behavioural problems. A crisis point came for Tommy at the age of 14 when the family had to move house to get away from a potential attacker whilst a court case was being heard. Tommy found the separation from his lifelong friends very difficult and it affected his schoolwork.

Tommy ran away from home but was constantly moving back and being 'kicked out' by his mother and stepfather. Later he was on remand for eight and half months, accused of 'a criminal act' whilst staying at his stepmother's. Tommy faced further rejection by his mother and ended up in foster care: 'I was away from home and that and I just missed being around my mum'.

Foster care turned out to be a surprisingly happy experience for Tommy as he received a lot of support. Later his further attempts to go back to his mother were unsuccessful and he ended up sleeping on the sofa at his girlfriend's house. Although this was a dire situation, it was the support of his girlfriend's parents that led him to attend college.

Though Tommy has achieved well at college he has become increasingly distressed at his court case being repeatedly adjourned through lack of evidence. The stress and fear of eventual prosecution makes it difficult for him to concentrate on his studies and move on. Despite this he has fierce determination and motivation to make something of his life and he is now, influenced by his soldier cousin, in the process of joining the army: 'to fight for queen and country'.

### Experiences of learning

Tommy told us he attended special needs classes at primary school. At secondary school his learning difficulties, interrupted schooling, loss of existing friendships and bullying all affected his work and culminated in poor GCSE results, despite him taking homework and revision seriously.

He found learning at the remand centre a mixed experience, saying that the simple maths was 'really boring' but that he enjoyed the English, mentioning that he enjoyed poetry and other interesting work, not worksheets. Going to college was a turning point for Tommy: '[I] just got myself back on track'. E2E at college was a very positive learning experience for him. He said that the reasons for this were that the teacher was 'spot on': being well prepared, explaining tasks clearly,

and offering group and one-to-one support. Tommy achieved Level 1 Literacy and Numeracy. He was proud of this and also of the fact that his teacher acknowledged that he could manage higher-level work:

‘Because the work I got off her were just like level two work ... I found it more interesting with the working.’

Tommy feels he took a backwards step after this as a result of poor advice from college Student Services, which led to him taking a course which was unsuitable for his needs. In contrast to E2E, he has had a poor learning experience on the Public Service Foundation course and left during the first term:

‘that were really boring – a lot of people who didn’t want to work and no class discipline – I quit that about two months ago ... the work were too easy like entry level three work.’

There is clear evidence that despite all the problems Tommy has faced in life, he was confident, well motivated and determined to achieve.

‘Just my self-confidence, I tried making something of myself instead of sitting on my backside all day. I just thought, right, I’m going to go to college and just keep my head down, but it didn’t happen until I left the court case.’

Tommy mentioned informal learning experiences that were important to him and that had increased his self-confidence and sense of achievement, including learning survival skills in his Beavers group, winning championship trophies in motorcross biking, and story writing, learned at the Foyer in a group led by a library extension worker.

## **Support**

Tommy had to develop ways of coping on his own with little family support: ‘because my mum wouldn’t help me because she was having problems herself’. He did have encouragement from his stepfather, a plasterer:

‘When I was sixteen, when I left home he rung me up saying, “Right, there’s jobs going. Come and work for me and I’ll help you along.” ... he were telling me I need to get back to school.’

Tommy’s close friends are very important to him, which was why moving house and schools was devastating for him. Before he moved, he was regularly completing his week’s homework with friends in the public library. Aside from peer learning support, his friends’ parents were also key in supporting him. His girlfriend’s parents gave him the support to join college. His best friend’s mother had always given Tommy the emotional support he did not get from his own family:

‘I talked to her a lot because she understood what I were going through and like her and my mum have been best mates for years. So I could talk to her and she wouldn’t say anything to my mum.’

Tommy found his foster carers very helpful: ‘Because they had everything there which I needed, like they support your needs and that’. From the age of 16 he also had a Liaison Officer but feels that there should have been someone at

school picking up on his home problems. He has found his Connexions Personal Advisor very helpful, as he has had the same person for a year who understood him well, saw his college tutor regularly, helped him to keep on track and finally helped him to apply for the Army.

He sometimes felt he fell between the gaps of support because college thought he had what he needed at the young people's supported accommodation. Tommy found it difficult to share his needs at the communal accommodation as: 'you can't even tell anyone you like anyone in here because it just goes like round'. He also often found it difficult to access his support worker when he most needed help and advice.

### **Choices**

Tommy's choices for learning and work have partly been influenced and limited by his difficult childhood and lack of family support, which culminated in low school achievement. Despite this he has always had a goal – to do well – and the confidence to make his own choices with regards to learning, training and work. At the same time he is clear that he has always needed and responded to the support of the older adults he respects – his stepfather, his friend's mother and his Connexions Personal Advisor. He feels that poor advice and guidance has caused him unnecessary confusion and delay in making the right choices. His cousin, currently serving in Iraq, was the role model in influencing him to join the Army. Although he sees an army career as long term, he again shows his confidence and desire to achieve, choosing to go down the 'qualifications route' rather than the 'trade route' in preparation for the longer-term future:

'Because it's the best way to be. Because I want to learn everything, then when I come out of the Army I've got it behind me.'

## **3.7 Martina**

### **Life**

Martina came from Angola seven years ago, as an asylum-seeker aged 16. Initially she lived with a family in London and went to college, but as soon as she reached 18 and ceased to be a minor, she was moved to Blackburn, in line with dispersal policy. She was in an Entry level 3 ESOL class when we first met her. She talked about how she coped with this enforced move and having to live alone, gradually making friends and building up her activities – mainly swimming and keep fit, activities which she seems to do on her own. She talked about the difference between living in London and Blackburn as a young African and explained the difficulties she faces in a town where there are not many African people. She attends college almost full time, studying IT and computers as well as English.

Martina is a fiercely motivated young woman who has always had clear goals: to progress from ESOL on to business studies, do a degree course and then work in business. She has achieved well, moving from Entry 3 ESOL on to GNVQ Business, then an access course, followed by HND Business year 1 and 2 and starting her degree year. When her asylum application failed she continued to

study at the discretion of the college through charitable funding, despite the loss of her legal right to education and so has gone from being a young student on very low benefits to one living entirely on the charity of refugee friends from Africa who live in the town. Martina describes the effect that this has had on her and her learning. She has consciously kept herself healthy and positive throughout all of this by eating as healthily as possible and always keeping fit by going to the gym and swimming. She often repeated the phrase 'I like keep myself busy'. She said this kept her focused and stopped her from feeling too anxious or sad. She also writes proverbs which help her to reflect on what she regards as the important values in life and give her inspiration and encouragement: 'you're thinking, you write down. It's a help in life you know, it's true'. Her demeanour is one of determination and resilience but there is at the same time an extreme emotional fragility.

'I've got a problem anyway, the problem is there. I'm no going to give up my life [tearful] I have to hope for ... I won't give up I will carry on.'

She is also very interested in world current affairs and in keeping up-to-date with the situation in Angola. She surfs the internet for information.

### **Experiences of learning**

Martina attended secondary school in Angola, right up until the time she came to Britain. She is a highly motivated learner and talks about her enjoyment of the ESOL class and the teaching as well as her learning strategies both in the class and outside of it. She explains her desire not just to learn to communicate but 'to speak properly'. Martina's goal is to do business studies and she is seeking advice from the college Student Services. She said that she enjoys learning new grammar more than anything and she explains to me how important it is to her and how she applies this to learning English outside the class – listening and looking for word patterns when she is listening to people in the market for instance or when reading newspapers.

On her learning journey Martina has experienced very different student dynamics which have affected her learning in different ways but have not stopped her from progressing. She mentions the difficulties of varying levels of learners in the ESOL class; although all were highly motivated, she felt 'held up' at times waiting for the weaker ones to catch up. Moving on to the GNVQ class threw her into a very young student group, most of whom were not strongly motivated and who messed around a lot. This was a culture shock for her as her parents had made considerable sacrifices for her education which made her value it highly. Finally she expresses the satisfaction of being in a challenging and highly motivated learning group on the degree course.

### **Support**

Martina speaks of different types of support she has which facilitate her learning and which she gets from different people: there is the support from her tutor and business support tutor for understanding classes and for the business content of her assignments; and the language support she has from an ESOL teacher to help her with grammar and vocabulary. The third type of support helps her with ideas and cultural information she needs in relation to business in Britain. She

gets this from informal discussions with her former teachers and from a friend working at a volunteer bureau, as well as from searching the internet and watching business programmes such as *The Apprentice* and *Dragon's Den* on the TV. Again her own strong motivation, initiative, self-confidence and self-belief have meant that she has been able to make the most of all aspects of her support network.

Martina, though a quiet and reserved person, has always been incredibly assertive and very much her own advocate. Although she has had support in managing her life and learning, for much of this she has taken the initiative herself. For example, after she was refused leave to remain in the UK, she found out how she could see her MP and went herself to ask him to intervene in her case, although she feels that his lack of proactiveness led to her losing her appeal. When advised by the college finance department and Student Services that she would need to pay overseas student rates, even though she was living only on charity with no benefit entitlement, she made an appointment to see the College Principal and got this decision overturned. When her case went to tribunal she had no money for solicitors' fees: 'I went to the tribunal on my own and filled in the papers on my own with no help'.

In relation to her case, she has felt let down by solicitors, her MP and the Home Office. The only people who had given her any meaningful support on this had been the Volunteer Bureau, though this was limited as it is not their speciality and they had also been let down in turn by solicitors they had tried to involve. Apart for the Asylum Team Director who recently left, she felt badly let down by the Asylum Support Team and said that she and other asylum-seekers are not treated with any respect. All this has had a very undermining and demoralising effect and has at times seriously interfered with her learning.

However, her view of learning support is very different. Martina speaks glowingly of the support she has had both from her course teachers and from learning support tutors. She has sought this support out whenever she needed it and it has always been there for her. Martina says that remaining in the same institution when all else in her life has been so uncertain has been key to her progress. She has kept in touch with teachers from previous courses and they continue to encourage her and help her with ideas and advice. She has found Student Services helpful in terms of resources but not in terms of guidance:

'they are not really helpful, but helpful as long as you know what you want to do ... sometimes they don't know everything about the course, the college ... they don't know enough ... even the prospectus they just give it to you to read.'

### **Choices**

Martina has had very little choice regarding where she lives, where she studies, her citizen status, making a living and being independent. In terms of learning she has been able to progress along her preferred route but, as already explained, she has had to fight hard for it and has achieved it despite not being legally entitled to it. Martina has made all learning choices for herself in the light of her clear goals. She has made these choices with guidance but with a great deal of self-advocacy, persistence and determination. The ESOL liaison tutor

found out about an access course which took two years. Martina had heard from a friend in London that there should be a one-year course: 'I say no if I find something which takes only one year it could be better for me'. Soon after the college contacted her to say they were starting a one-year course which she then joined. Politically and financially Martina's future is uncertain. Her self-belief and fierce determination are so strong that emotionally she refuses to be defeated by the 'rules' and so far she has been able to transcend the constraints put upon her and move on. However, unless her case is overturned she will find herself unable to progress into the employment that she has worked so hard to prepare herself for. Martina wants what many people want: 'A job ... house, husband ... it's what I really want, you know'.

### **3.8 Sana**

#### **Life**

Sana, who is from Pakistan, came to England ten years ago to get married, when she was sixteen years old. She has three young children and her husband has a jewellery business. She finished her secondary schooling in Pakistan and after coming to Britain she attended a community-based ESOL class. Her studies were interrupted when she was caring for her small children but three years ago she again attended a community class and then went on to do Entry level 2 and 3 at college, which is where we first met her. She then completed a course for childminding but a news story about a childminder accused of abuse frightened her so she did not pursue this work. She started ESOL Level 1 but did not enjoy it as much as Entry level 3 and then took the decision to start her own women's clothing business. She very much enjoyed the new found independence this brought, but it became too much as she was still expected to take full responsibility for the children, running the home and entertaining her extended family every weekend. After closing her business she did not return to learning, as she had her third baby who is now two years old. She looks forward to going back to college to do beauty therapy once he is at nursery school.

#### **Experiences of learning**

Sana felt she lost ground with the interruptions she had to her learning when she had her children and that it was hard to catch up on previous learning. She found a mainstream First Step childcare course very demanding, as it was not tailored for ESOL learners, even though she is a very confident learner and has had a very positive experience of both schooling and ESOL learning. Learning English has made a big difference to her life. Sana speaks of her husband passing on many jobs requiring English to her which he used to do. She is very assertive and confident in using English outside the class and feels a sense of progress and achievement in that she can now socialise with her husband's friends: 'not worried about make mistakes. I'm realise not a big deal if I don't know English'. Sana has always felt she has not had enough practice with spoken English and is not able to get this at home. Her children speak to each other and their father in English but not to her. Sana found that the Entry level 3 teacher's ways of teaching helped her to learn: 'when he learn me I remember ... he doesn't answer straight away, he is try to make me think and very like it use my brain'. She found the Entry level 3 course intellectually challenging and she gained confidence both

socially and as a learner. In Level 1 she had a few different teachers which caused her to lose momentum and motivation.

Sana has developed her English and learned other things in her everyday life outside the class. She has learned to run a business and to use new technology such as the satellite navigation system in her car. She follows news by reading an English newspaper and accessing news in Urdu on the internet. She has learned about pregnancy and childcare from reading health leaflets a midwife has given her and she gets both English and Urdu recipes from the internet. She also texts her husband and children in English as this is their preference. Sana has also been helping a friend who runs community classes for South Asian women who cannot get out of the house very often and she speaks English there to help them to develop their language skills.

After leaving college and before she had her last baby Sana told us that she decided to follow her religion, Islam, more seriously. Despite her husband's reservations she began wearing the veil and started to attend a women's Koranic class. Sana feels that this has helped her grow in confidence as a Muslim woman. Recently she persuaded her husband to go on the Haj pilgrimage to Mecca with the two older children. She says that even her husband gained a lot from this experience and they both felt they had grown in their faith and self-development, helping them to be more concerned for others and to be less materialistic.

### **Support**

Sana says that she has had the most support in her life firstly from her parents and then from her husband, who has always encouraged her to participate in learning and to develop her business.

### **Choices**

It is clear that cultural expectations and norms mean that Sana has to realise her individual goals within the context of taking full responsibility for her home and children. But she is happy to do this and is fulfilled in her home life. Sana's goals and choices have not been narrowly confined to college courses but also to learning more about her religion, developing a business and supporting others to learn in her community. Her goals for work have changed over the years and she now looks forward to starting a beauty therapy course when her youngest child starts nursery school.

## 4. Individual lives need personalised responses

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In this section we concentrate on the eight people who are our key case studies. We demonstrate the individual complexity of people's lives and show how each of the significant aspects identified so far interacts in different ways in the life histories we have collected. Their diverse individual lives point to the need for personalised responses.

### 4.1 Multi-layered lives and learning careers

The life and learning journeys of Jez, Paula, Sadie, Abdul and the other people we studied show that progression and moving on involve complex multi-layered journeys. Influencing these journeys are people's backgrounds and aspirations, their mindsets, their resources, the conditions and realities in which they live, the transitions, turbulence and critical points they have been through, the types and networks of support available to them and the way in which they transform their lives despite their position in society and the constraints they face. People's stories illustrate the difficulty of separating out these aspects as they interplay and impact on progression and moving on through life and learning.

One way we approach this is by drawing on the concepts of 'careers'. Lives consist of a variety of different careers, one of which is a learning career. The notion of careers is very useful in understanding a longer-term view, looking at changes in people's lives over time and their relationship to learning. Elsewhere (Appleby and Barton 2009) we explain how people have many careers within their life, including learning, health and work careers; these careers form their past and affect both their current circumstances as well as the future. People's histories shape their confidence, attitudes, values, expectations, identities and sense of place. We have used the notion of career to understand how events and circumstances influence each other and how they significantly impact on people's progression in learning and in life more generally. The life and learning journeys of Paula, Jez and the others illustrate how learning careers run alongside and overlap with other careers. For example we see how Paula's health career, family career, employment career and citizenship career all impact on each other and how they impact on her learning career and her progression.

Disentangling these careers illustrates how people can be progressing, standing still and regressing at the same time in different areas of their lives, and that people's broader progression can be hidden if they are not going ahead in formal learning. Sana's life story illustrates this. Links can be made with other research. By using the concept of career it is possible to see points of transition and change that are influenced by various roles in people's life and biographies. There has been other work on adults' learning careers, such as Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) and Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997). (For more recent development of this approach, see Hodkinson et al. 2008.) Studies of youth transition have showed the interplay and relationships between people's

educational, family, drug taking and criminal careers (e.g. Cieslik and Simpson 2006); Jez's story also illustrates this. From a social practice perspective the notion of careers enables different roles and identities both inside and outside of education to be understood and taken account of.

## 4.2 Multiple motivations and resources

We found that the different individuals we worked with had multiple reasons for engaging in educational provision and this influenced their progression. For people like Paula, Abdul and Martina, as asylum-seekers and refugees their main motivation was the need to learn English and learn about British culture as quickly as possible in order to be able to access further and higher education and to gain employment which matched their abilities, prior education, qualifications and experience. Another major motivation for them was to meet other people and progress to become more integrated into society. This started with participating in a learning environment. Sadie expressed multiple motivations, some related to work and some to personal development. She wanted to manage better: to understand and protect her rights; to work towards promotion at work; to develop herself intellectually; and to gain a qualification. Recognition of the diversity of reasons and multiple motivations people have for being engaged in learning is crucial to understanding, measuring and supporting their progression towards their goals.

We saw how every person has a unique set of resources which they bring with them into learning. However, it is the interplay of resources and lack of resources, as well as other factors, which impact on learning and progression. For example, the culture, strong family background and life experiences of Martina, as well as her inner resources, interests and skills, meant that her motivation to succeed as a young, single asylum-seeker and her academic achievement have been supported by her high valuing of educational opportunity, a high level of self-esteem, study skills, courage and determination, despite being at the same time depressed and emotionally fragile. However, this is not enough to enable her to progress when she lacks crucial resources such as legal citizenship status and access to education.

Abdul's prior learning experience, knowledge of English, personal dignity and maturity have supported his children's learning and progression through very difficult times as asylum-seekers. However, like Martina, lack of other resources have held up his journey to his preferred employment. Most asylum-seekers we met showed high degrees of resilience, but also desperation, helplessness and a surrender to perceived higher spiritual powers, which reflects their own lack of choice and power. Sana's middle class socio-economic status meant that she had access to technology, travel and resources that others with less means would not be able to access. Jez's resilience, her intellect and her creativity have helped her in her life and learning and have led to increased social participation and employment with a charity and academic progression to BTEC Art, but her lack of personal networks of support and poor health always threaten to hold her back.

### 4.3 Mindsets

The mindsets people bring into learning, how they see themselves and what they imagine is possible, can influence participation in learning and the ability to move on. Referring to homeless young people interviewed in the Adult Learners' Lives Project, a Connexions advisor explained that it was their current 'psychological makeup', the pressures around 'where they are at and what's happened to them before as adults', which stop them from participating and moving on rather than substance misuse itself. Mindsets can and do change for better and worse depending on experiences and circumstances and support which people receive. Abdul's son and Lisette (see Appendix 1) were strong, confident children in their own countries but less able to progress in a new country. Jez and Sophie (see Appendix 1), both intelligent, have been weakened by unsettled childhoods. Some like Sophie were not able to overcome this easily and got stuck in a poverty trap. Jez and Tommy on the other hand, despite coming from the same kind of unsettled background as the others, seemed, with intensive support, to have the inner resilience and clear goals to work towards transforming their lives.

## 5. Progression over time: Transitions, turbulence and choice

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### 5.1 Changing purposes and circumstances

Nearly everyone we talked to described their long-term aspirations in conventional terms: a settled home, a family, a good job, happy relationships – although these aspirations were often held in tension with the reality they faced, either because of their difficult backgrounds or because of changing conditions, from stability to instability. All the young people interviewed in the PPA Project, for instance, cited these conventional goals as being their significant goals in life. However, these longer-term goals often took a secondary place to more immediate and urgent priorities.

At the homeless shelter which Sophie attended, for instance, the principal purpose for many was every day survival (see Appendix 1). Safety, happiness and achieving well-being had a much greater priority for people than formal learning achievements and the former were regarded as progression by the staff who worked with them. Most of them in the medium term wanted to train and to prepare themselves for work, and most of them had dipped in and out of vocational study and training at college or with other providers. Our follow-up work with young homeless people has shown a continuum of stability is necessary for formal learning, progression and moving on. Only one of the ten most vulnerable young people we had followed in the homeless-shelter provision had been able to move on in the last five years to more stable living and into any education, training and employment. What has happened to them in their earlier lives has left too much of a mark on them, Jez being a notable exception to this. Some of the others are now living in hostels and some are still struggling with debilitating alcohol and drug dependence and are often sleeping rough. A volunteer worker, who was homeless herself when younger, has been back in psychiatric care and can no longer work.

Where engaging in learning challenged their safety and happiness, learning was not taken up or not sustained. For example, when Jez attended college first time around, she became very uncomfortable as she felt she did not fit in with the others and that the teachers did not understand her. This led her to lose heart and drop out. At that time she also did not know how to manage anger and conflict, something that she conquered later.

At the other end of the continuum were young people who have been vulnerable and have dipped in and out of learning provision but who had less severe problems than those described above. These young people have been able to sustain living in supported accommodation and have moved on and progressed, such as one young person who is now doing Level 2 Childcare, Tommy who is joining the Army and another who has now gained A-level Maths and has had employment in the retail trade.

In the current cohort, Paula's dream of being a psychologist and Abdul's previous career as an agronomist, along with their middle class lifestyles, statuses and aspirations all disappeared as they faced the reality of learning a new language

and living on minimum benefits as asylum-seekers in Britain. Paula has changed her goals here several times from studying psychology, to childminding, to teaching Spanish, as she has been defeated by the constraints attached to each, finally focusing on hairdressing, a goal she can more realistically achieve under her circumstances. Part of this trial and error has been due to lack of cultural knowledge about learning, training and employment pathways.

Others have started from a position of having a home and family and being settled, but their desires, goals and circumstances have changed over time. As people's life circumstances changed, the relative priority of their goals could shift rapidly, and the place of literacy and numeracy learning within these could shift too. For example Sana had a good education in Pakistan and could have gone on to higher education. This changed when she came to Britain to get married. She moved from ESOL learning into her own business but then gave it up to have a baby although she hopes to return to study when her child is older. Jez moved from 'putting up with' mandatory discrete literacy and numeracy learning as part of her young offender's licence to more purposeful learning that she had chosen herself, achieving literacy and numeracy qualifications as part of a vocational art award.

When Vicki (see Appendix 1) was younger, commitments to family did not allow space for formal learning. Now in retirement, whilst time is no longer an issue, health problems within her family have constrained her learning opportunities. People's purposes and desires also changed as a result of the learning and support activities they were engaging with. As they built up confidence and self-esteem, they began to consider options which they did not feel were open to them before. Paula, for example, after being on a course unsuitable for her level and her circumstances, joined an ESOL with hairdressing course which will give her a Level 2 vocational qualification within two years and a route to paid employment, and Sadie now considers going on to do a line manager's course.

## 5.2 Transitions

In our earlier longitudinal research with adult learners (Barton et al. 2006) we identify transitions as highly significant. These common life changes, such as going from school to work or leaving home are in themselves types of progression. There are also hidden but highly significant transitions which people experience within themselves as they go through life – the reworking of their identities, the way they view the world, their place in it and their aspirations. In young people this can be influenced by the process of growing up and by changing conditions. This is important because it explains people's short-term, longer-term and changing goals, as well as their perception of 'the right time' for taking hold of learning. For Sophie (see Appendix 1), and the other homeless young people, despite the high abilities of some of them, discrete literacy and numeracy learning were not seen as a priority. Rather, integrated learning, safety and support, and confidence building were more important and useful to them and to their short-term progression goals of being able to live more independently and achieve well-being.

Transitions in learning and work can come at what people perceive as the right time for them, which may not always seem logical to others such as teachers or

family members. Jez explains why her first transition on from an E2E provider was not successful: 'I started college the first time before I was ready and soon got into trouble'. As explained earlier, Sadie identified a right time for her to move on. Poverty and the need to get a job can hold up progression in learning terms, as in Sadie's case, but may be a step forward in terms of employment and life experience. Sadie had progressed at work, had developed her literacy skills and was ready to train for promotion.

### **5.3 Turbulence and critical points**

Transitions are rarely smooth especially for people who are marginalised or disadvantaged in different ways and they can often be influenced by and involve periods of turbulence. The use of the term 'turbulence' draws attention to the effects of external events which can impact upon people's lives. We see from the case studies that things happen in people's lives that are outside of their control, changing their lives suddenly and unpredictably. We argue that the term 'turbulent' is preferable to the idea of people having 'chaotic lives', as the term 'chaotic' suggests that the unpredictability is people's own fault; in reality what we have often seen have been the systemic and other external pressures which people have had little control over (Barton et al. 2006).

This is starkly illustrated by those who have been forced to leave their own countries suddenly and seek asylum. Abdul's work life was cut short when he came to Britain. Due to a mix-up of cases, he was not informed that he had leave to remain in Britain, which meant that he and his family were wrongly treated as asylum-seekers for four years, unable to move on in learning, work and home life, even being evicted from their home. The stress of Paula migrating to Britain contributed to the break-up of her marriage, behavioural problems in her children and periods of depression for herself. When Martina's appeal to remain in Britain was rejected she faced destitution and lost her right to any education. This meant she had to work illegally to survive, beg for special dispensation from her college and accept charity from fellow asylum-seekers.

Similarly, turbulence can be seen in the lives of the young people we interviewed who had come from difficult home situations. This had often led to behaviour that resulted in exclusion from school, as with Sophie (see Appendix 1), who eventually became homeless at the age of 15 and as a result underachieved in her school exams, became drug dependent and is still unable to live independently with her child or be engaged in any formal education or employment.

There are also many examples in our data of unexpected health problems altering people's lives and holding up people's progression, such as people having to stop attending classes or changes in work following accidents and many stress-related health problems. Lisette's ESOL learning was interrupted due to her health problems (see Appendix 1). Sophie's and Jez's substance misuse led to them dipping in and out of college and Sophie had to give up her landscape gardening course for health and safety reasons when she became pregnant. Many people, especially women, including Paula, Sophie and Sana but also Abdul, had to leave or change jobs or interrupt learning to enable them to care for their babies and children. However these circumstances sometimes

presented new learning opportunities. Martin, a farmer, joined a literacy class after an accident forced him to give up farming and Vicki (see Appendix 1) returned to learning for the first time since leaving school after early retirement on health grounds.

Wider changes which appear to be threatening can sometimes bring opportunities. Sadie was worried about her job security when the family firm she worked for was taken over by a big company. Ironically, this worry has led her to progress into literacy learning, to increase her knowledge of her employee rights and to set a goal of taking up work-related training to gain a promotion. Different degrees of social and economic capital impact on people's choices. Sadie cannot undertake her line manager's course until she has saved enough money.

In relation to transitions and turbulence, people could sometimes identify moments of radical change in their lives which influenced learning and progression. Jez's story has a number of critical points at which her life changed radically. The first was moving house and school due to her mother's mental illness. This transformed her school experience, leading to her being bullied and later to becoming a bully herself. The second was her homelessness, leading to a life of crime and substance misuse and the third was her conviction. The fourth was linking with a small supported housing organisation which has supported Jez ever since. The fifth was making a complaint about abuse to the Children's Society, as this led to unexpected opportunities to use her personal and creative skills and energy in campaigning work, both voluntarily and paid. This in turn gave her the confidence to re-enter formal learning and to focus on her goal to do an art and design qualification, the sixth critical point.

We can see from the above discussion that people's goals and their ability to achieve these and to progress in various ways are highly influenced by the transitions, turbulence and critical points they go through in their lives. There is clearly a link between people's experience in early childhoods, their mental, physical, emotional, intellectual health and the ability to move on. As a result of the barriers they face, there can be a huge gap between people's short-term or long-term goals and the possibility of achieving these.

## **5.4 People's choices**

Choices about progression are not individualised decisions but are closely related to other people within learners' social networks. Paula, Abdul, Sana, Sadie and Vicki all have families and their individual learning goals and progression had to fit in with the well-being of the whole family; this often meant individual sacrifices and putting their own goals on hold. This is highly gendered but there are exceptions: Abdul made the support of his children's progression his first priority. As a result his daughter is now studying for a law degree and his son has been offered lucrative jobs in web design, whereas Abdul himself has not been able to progress from ESOL learning into his chosen field of agronomy. Culturally Abdul and Sana see progression as a family rather than as an individual endeavour and they regard capital from learning and progression as communal rather than as individual.

We can see then that progression is inextricably linked to systemic and structural factors. People's degree of social capital strongly impacts on their choices and their progression and so LLN qualifications are often not enough in themselves to realise meaningful progression such as obtaining paid employment.

## 5.5 Brokering learning and progression

The ways in which people talked about their experiences of learning emphasises the importance of social support networks. The degree to which people can be helped to access different types of support is an important aspect of personalisation, in the sense of being able to respond to the needs of each individual learner.

Within their current learning environments people frequently spoke a great deal of the open, friendly and supportive attitude of tutors and their good relationships with them as being key to their learning and progression. Many young people interviewed, like Jez and Tommy contrasted this to their negative experiences of schooling. Jane did say that the key to her progress and progression was having a teacher with specific expertise – who was a specialist in dyslexia and so properly understood her potential and the support she needed. Conversely where people did not have good relationships with tutors they found it very hard to make progress. Once people had gained confidence in a learning environment, this had a snowball effect, increasing their desire to keep on as Vicki, Sadie, Martina and Jane and many others said. All the people we spoke to said that it was a combination of support in the learning environment with the support of others in their lives that had helped them to sustain their learning and to progress. Jane and Marie's stories revealed the high degree of support needed for people, and especially women like them, to move from a culture where education is not a conscious frame of reference to where it becomes so for them.

Brokered transitions i.e. transitions where other people act as brokers to support the individual from one context to another, are key to meaningful progression. This is especially important for younger people without family support. Jez told us that though good relationships with tutors and support in the learning environment had been helpful, the key to her success has been the continuing support of her supported housing manager who helps her manage her health and substance misuse, and the Children's Society who have always supported her and helped her grow in confidence through giving her opportunities to use her skills. Both Martina and Paula took the initiative to seek out continuing support from past tutors to help them, not with specific learning tasks, but to discuss ideas, where to access information about how learning and work culture works in this society, and advice about next steps they should take. These tutors had become their friends and gave their own time as they did not have time to do this in work time. Jez, Paula, Martina and Jane trust the continuing support they have because people know them well, understand their goals and can advise them in a realistic and coherent way. Conversely, they have learned that relying only on the official advice and guidance routes such as Student Services, the Careers Service and the Job Centre can only provide limited support. Martina said she got more information and knowledge from asking her friends in London about access courses to HE than she did from official sources. This led her to push for a one-

year course instead of the two-year course she was originally offered as the only option available to her.

Those with marked learning difficulties or limited knowledge of the cultures of learning and work in this society are particularly vulnerable to poor or conflicting advice and guidance. For example both Jodie and Sameera were signposted into LLN learning ever since they left their special schools, first into E2E programmes and then on to discrete literacy and numeracy classes. Though their initial and ongoing assessments showed that they had marked learning difficulties and limited cognitive ability, these were the only routes offered to them. Although Sameera and Jodie, who both come from very supportive families and were each content in their learning environments, ultimately their lack of achievement and inability to access work experience and employment led to feelings of rejection and, in Sameera's case, despair and serious depression which kept her out of learning for a year.

Brandt (1998) discusses this in terms of sponsors of literacy and argues that teachers themselves can be conflicted brokers between what she refers to as literacy's buyers and sellers and this, as we see, can stall progression if targets conflict with people's real needs. Sometimes brokering is conflicting, causing confusion and incoherence. Both Jodie and Paula suffered from conflicting agendas in advice and guidance. Jodie spent endless sessions jobseeking on Job Centre computers with her Job Centre support worker but never managed to find work and became very depressed. She eventually found fulfilling voluntary work through her friends and family. Paula became confused because the Job Centre worker's agenda was to get Paula into work within three months and was advising her to take short courses until that time. At the same time the college was advising her to take a longer-term study route in order to gain a vocational qualification and a job in hairdressing.

People often talked of the support they received from others in their class. Support in learning is often reciprocal both within and outside of the learning environment. Vicki, a retired Spanish woman who attended a literacy class, spoke of the peer support she received in addition to that of her tutors: 'They gave me confidence as well because I felt I was part of a group and joining in with others'. Families could also be a source of support: Paula helps her children with Spanish and her son helps her with English. She also bartered Spanish lessons for driving lessons with her instructor. Abdul helps his children with maths, science and English grammar and his children help him with colloquial English and pronunciation, as well as helping him to navigate legal matters and bureaucracy.

## 6. Transformative learning and progression: moving on in life and learning

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Progression is related to change: changing circumstances in people's lives, as well as changes in people's perceptions and their understanding of the world. In order to progress, people need to be able to take control of their own learning and this is central to the idea of personalisation. However taking control of learning and managing change is never an individual pursuit. To the contrary, it is work which is often highly brokered i.e. involving support from others. This is true both within the classroom through tutor and peer support, as well as through people's wider networks of support such as family, friends and outside agencies. This support for progression in life and learning is of particular importance to the most vulnerable and powerless people in society, as we discuss further below. The idea of learning as being transformative is very useful in understanding how people can make positive changes in their lives which can impact on their learning and how in turn people's unfolding, changing landscapes of learning can transform their lives and help them to move on. Personal transformational models of learning are most associated with the work of Jack Mezirow (1991) through his model of learning as 'perspective transformation'. He suggests that this has three primary purposes: to guide action, to give coherence to the unfamiliar, and to reassess the justification of what is already known.

It is at critical points and at times of transition that we reassess the assumptions that we acquired during our formative childhood years, often in response to disorientating dilemmas that challenge the notions of reality we had previously taken for granted. Learning at these points enables people to reorganise experience and 'see' situations in new ways. In this way, adult learning is potentially transformative, both personally and socially. This is crucial at times of transition and it is exactly what we see when people are changing their lives in different ways, such as moving on from homelessness or drug dependence and alcohol abuse. In Tusting and Barton (2006) we show how taking transformative models of adult learning draws attention to the potential role of literacy, numeracy and ESOL learning in both personal and social change; and this current study shows some of the social and cultural factors that govern when and how transformation can be possible.

A central aspect of this transformation is to lift literate resources from one learning sphere to another. Deborah Brandt (1998) describes this transformative practice as being part of the appropriation of literacy resources. In other words people rework and transfer their resources (not just literacy) from formal learning into individual and social pursuits which not only bring personal fulfilment and development but significant contributions in social relationships and so to society as a whole. Learning can have an immediate impact on people's lives and progression. But it can also have effects later on in people's lives. People bring with them different resources from their life and learning histories and are able to draw on them and progress when the right point comes. For example, Jez drew on her existing creative talents to help the Children's Society with their website and leaflets, and at the same time progressed both in terms of personal development and social participation, as well as taking a first step into

employment. Abdul drew on the skills and education he acquired in Iraq to support his children's learning and progression in Britain. This helped him to maintain his self-respect and to cope with his own stalemate in terms of progressing in learning and work due to his asylum status.

As mentioned above transformative practice is often highly brokered. Though Martina took the initiative and the control of her own learning and progression, she would not have been able to do this without the support of her past and current teachers, particularly in relation to cultural knowledge of the worlds of education and work in Britain which, as a recently arrived Angolan she did not have. Jodie, with her mother's support, was able to use her personal resources of kindness and the desire to help others by helping with the local Brownies and Rainbows groups. This progressed her into voluntary work, developed her social confidence and gave her feelings of self-worth which went some way towards making up for the disappointment and rejection she had faced in job seeking. Sana, with her husband's support, was able to start her own women's clothing business using her driving skills and learnt to use satellite navigation to get around to fabric suppliers. This is the kind of social and educational capital which people draw upon more at later stages in their lives.

Transformative practice is not necessarily enough though to achieve lasting and meaningful progression. The lack of social and economic capital can stop people from achieving their goals. Abdul and his son were held back for four years, materially, educationally and financially due to not being informed of their legal right to live in Britain. Martina fought her way through the education system, funding her studies through illegal work and was about to complete her degree despite the fact that her right to remain in the country had not been sorted out. Jez will need those who support her to continue to do so if she is to achieve in the face of substance misuse and physical and mental health problems.

This research has shown how people have rich literacy and learning lives beyond the classroom which can remain hidden and which influence progression. They may have a rich range of resources which they can use in a transformative way, for example Paula, who is multilingual, did an interpreters' course, and Jez, being highly computer literate and musical, taught herself and others new skills. In using, developing and sharing these skills outside the classroom they are learning and progressing in diverse ways. Our study provides evidence of how people reflect and respond to their changing circumstances, how they develop learning by doing, how they use strategies to teach themselves, and how they draw on networks of support to scaffold their learning, all of which lead to different types of progression.

## 7. How can policy and practice support progression in life and learning?

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### 7.1 Progress and progression

The contribution of this research is to illustrate some of the complexities around people's progress (within a course) and progression (to other courses, work or broader goals) and to suggest ways in which progress and progression can be better understood and better supported for people of all backgrounds and at all levels. There are different types of progression in life and learning which can be built upon in learning provision. Adults of multifarious backgrounds within and across learning cohorts have diverse defining characteristics which influence progression and its timescale. Within formal learning itself progress can mean different things. It can be anything from small steps such as improved attendance, increased confidence, increased ability to manage their own learning, to achieving a qualification. Progression routes may be upwards through the Skills for Life levels framework or it may be through a variety of other routes, sideways or outwards to jobs. Adults often learn and progress in different places at one and the same time.

What happens to people in life which impacts negatively on their progression is often outside of their control and is frequently connected with systemic factors both within education and more widely. For example, people like Martina who are appealing in relation to failed asylum cases are no longer eligible for any education, funded or non-funded. People like Paula who have refugee and resident status cannot move on along certain pathways such as childminding due to both poverty and the lack of ability to show evidence of residence covering the last five years. We saw examples where restructuring and retargeting of provision can change eligibility for courses, leaving some already engaged learners stranded. For instance, there was a case where Family Literacy, Language and Numeracy (FLLN) provision changed and relocated to fit in with a new Children's Centre on a primary school site; this meant that people who did not have children in Early Years provision were no longer eligible to attend.

Although there is often a link between the motivation to progress within a course and the need for progression, for example to gain employment or a better job, other adults who want to 'keep going' are doing it for themselves and do not mention it in relation to work, many because this is not a possibility for them. They still need support for these forms of progression and are making positive contributions to society through voluntary work and other types of social participation. These kinds of progression should be valued and supported.

Sameera's and Jodie's experiences strongly illustrate that at lower levels it is often inappropriate to push people who are 'maintaining' skills or who have 'plateaued' in learning for cognitive reasons and are not making obvious progress. This study has highlighted the lack of appropriate pathways for people with marked learning difficulties who have, by participating in LLN learning, been unintentionally but damagingly set up to fail and lose confidence. Analysis of the Progression from Non-counting Provision to Counting Provision Project data

clearly showed that cuts in lower level LLN learning and other adult education provision have seriously limited participation in learning and progression routes for this cohort.

## 7.2 Supporting achievement, progress and progression

A thread running right through this study has been the impact of strong tutor support, particularly in relation to building confidence and impacting on progress and progression. Most adults cite teacher qualities, encouragement and increasing self-confidence as motivating them to go on further than they originally intended. This study has highlighted the importance of strong support for facilitating a return to learning after dipping out, particularly for vulnerable young people living with turbulence like Jez and Paula. It also emphasises the need for effective advice and guidance and coherent support of transitions from LLN learning to other types of learning as Martina's journey from ESOL to business studies illustrates. Providers need the resources to develop and sustain what are in fact vital aspects of personalisation in learning.

Entering a new course or learning environment is a key and often a positive moment of transition. However it can also, for many people, particularly vulnerable young people, be a time of uncertainty and low confidence. This study suggests that personalisation involves supported learning and progression where the level and type of support needed will depend on each individual, their needs and their wishes. This research suggests that we need to engage with the diversity and complexity of people in a teaching and learning relationship and in provision more widely, such as in initial assessment and in advice and guidance to fully explore with individuals the best learning choices for them and to facilitate their progression and transition. We need to take more account of what they each bring into the learning environment, such as their learning and life histories and who they are – their unique personalities, their learning styles, their abilities, their goals and aspirations and their current circumstances.

## 7.3 Overall comments

This study has explored progression in people's lives over time, gaining a longitudinal understanding of their lives and exploring how life factors, experiences of learning, networks of support and people's choices interconnect in a complex way and lead to a richer, more nuanced understanding of the different meanings of 'progression'. Paula's, Sadie's, Abdul's and the others' stories illustrate that we need to understand what is going on more broadly in people's lives, and understand that LLN learning itself is just a part of the jigsaw of life and learning; there are diverse journeys and many of these are complicated and constrained. Different sorts of support are needed for different types of progression, which might involve going backwards in formal learning or work in response to other things going on in people's lives. For example, Sana moved from being a self-employed small business woman to staying at home to care for her baby. This could be seen as a regressive step but Sana was glad to be able to take time to do this.

There are also many examples in our data of people finding fulfilment and making a contribution to society through voluntary and community work or caring work. They view this as progression in terms of their lives. Examples of this include Jez working for the Children's Society, Jodie helping out with the Brownies and Rainbows, and Paula participating in a community leadership scheme.

We have seen the multiple resources and the transformative practice which many people engage in outside of formal education. However, by exploring transitions, turbulence and choice in people's lives we can see that people also face multiple constraints to their learning and progression. Though literacy learning is a key resource for progression, it is clear that structural, institutional and material conditions play a major part in shaping possibilities for turning LLN learning into progression which leads to social and economic capital. Young people's turbulent early years, people navigating life with marked learning difficulties, extreme poverty and asylums-seekers' dislocation are some examples of conditions which can seriously constrain progression for people on the margins. As Brandt says in relation to literacy 'recession, relocation, immigration, technological change, government retreat – all can and do condition the course by which literacy potential develops' (Brandt 1998 p.173). This study shows that this applies not just to literacy but to learning and life more broadly.

Taking a closer and longer view of progression from the learners' perspective can inform policy of incremental benefits, gains and constraints in people's lives. It is vital therefore to produce research that examines learning and lives over time, showing some of the more subtle and complex relationships that exist. Studies like this one, which shows the complexity of life and learning, provide a more finely grained understanding which can support learning delivery, teacher training and continuing professional development.

## **7.4 Recommendations for policy and practice**

Based on the findings there are key issues to address:

### **Acknowledging progression as social, broad and lifelong**

- The diverse and changing circumstances and environments of people's lives and learning over time will significantly and differently influence and impact on their learning choices, their learning experiences and their progression.
- LLN learning should be supported in a way which connects with broad progression in life and learning. It is important to acknowledge and value learners' wider skills, resources and interests and build on these in learning. Teachers need enough time e.g. in tutorials and class discussions, to find out about their students' learning and use of skills outside the classroom in order to integrate their interests and skills into relevant learning in the class and to be able to give appropriate advice for progression.
- There needs to be joined-up thinking; time for sharing of information and planning of coherent support strategies between different agencies in order to address the broader systemic and structural factors which impede learning and progression.

- Progression in terms of 'soft outcomes' needs to be recognised and recorded. There is a need to document steps in 'moving on' as well as test achievement and to count small steps, in real and holistic terms.

### **Promoting diverse pathways for learning**

- There need to be diverse pathways of learning for the most vulnerable cohorts of learners i.e. people who plateau at a low level, disenfranchised young people and people with marked learning disabilities. Some people need to be signposted to alternative progression routes rather than to discrete Skills for Life learning. The issue of developing alternative progression routes needs to be urgently addressed.
- There need to be coherent long-term progression routes for ESOL learners, across transition points such as from ESOL programmes to vocational programmes, with language support where necessary.
- There needs to be a coherent approach between the agencies and learning that people are in contact with. Advice and guidance for progression needs to be consistent and not conflicting. People need careful, consistent advice and support towards achievable steps and realistic goals.

### **Supporting learning**

- There is a need for more in-depth advice and guidance within the learning environment. Sufficient resources for effective tutorials and pastoral support are important particularly for those who have little other support in their lives.
- Support organisations which have regular contact with vulnerable young people in education need to keep in close touch with their learning, their issues and their achievements through regular contact with college tutors.

### **Supporting transitions**

- Supporting transitions, expertise, continuity and coherence are key. A more holistic approach is needed with attention to appropriate cultural information, e.g. job interview preparation, visits to institutions, workplaces, meeting a range of employers, etc.
- Colleges and other providers need to recognise that some people, and vulnerable young people in particular, will test the waters or face constraints which may mean they dip in and out of learning or relocate mid-course. Strategies are needed for learning and support organisations to maintain contact with those who move or do not complete, as well as flexible enrolment policy and careful support for re-entry and 'catch-up'.

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## Appendix 1: People over time (continued from Chapter 3)

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### Gina

Gina's first interview took place whilst she was participating in a Skills for Life Level 2 Interpreting Course in an Adult Education Centre.

#### Life

Gina is originally from the Sudan and her first language is Arabic. She feels that her participation in this course is 'a good example for the children.' She has five children ranging from in age from 11 to 19. She goes on to discuss how what she's learning is impacting on her life. She says: 'I find it very helpful because the picture is more clear about how to communicate with other people.' The focus of this course is to be able to help other people with life, as Gina says, 'if they need someone to translate for the others you can be, offer a great help to Social Services, GPs'.

During her third interview Gina explains how studying at her local Adult Education Centre fitted well with her family responsibilities. She says, 'from the \_\_\_ centre I could leave at 3.00 pm and run to get my daughter from primary school. Learning and exercise ... running, running, running and walking, it took me 30 minutes. I was so happy but now I'm doing nothing; just boring, just going shopping.' This has had a very negative impact on Gina's life. She says, 'because I'm a single parent I go to the Job Centre every six months to try and find a suitable job but they only have looking after children or babysitting as I can do that without qualifications but it's only £6 an hour. It's useless; it's nothing and living in this country is expensive.' Gina is now feeling very frustrated and continues saying, 'I'm very stressed – £200 living expenses a week ... and it's two years now since the interpreting qualification ran here. Two years of doing nothing...'

#### Experiences of learning

When interviewed for the first time Gina said, 'I like this course because I would like to gain more knowledge and to have my grasp about other countries and how to cover all the skills on life, and I like the sociability factor, to be more sociable is good.' Here Gina indicates three areas that are important to her learning process. Firstly, she has the desire to gain more subject knowledge, secondly, she wants to increase her understanding of cultures other than her own and thirdly she needs her learning to take place in a sociable environment. Gina goes on to say that the course 'encourages me to continue, to achieve and be qualified. It's very social; makes you proud of yourself.' This course and the learning ethos have proven motivational for Gina and she now felt 'very confident' and wanted to 'definitely continue with this course until to be qualified.'

A year later Gina had 'passed the first course with distinction credit at Level 2' so had made good progress but had not been able to enrol on the next level because she'd been away at the start of term and then found it wasn't running in her locality.

## Support

Gina's discussion of the ethos of this course as encouraging, social and building a sense of self-pride indicates both a supportive and motivational teaching approach and level of peer support.

During her third interview Gina says, '\_\_\_ is very good and I have her phone number but it's out of her hands.' Gina obviously appreciates the level of support she's received from her tutor but her tutor is unable to influence funding criteria and which courses can be run where.

## Choices

At this point Gina says, 'I would like to continue and won't give up until I reach my target to get diploma.'

When interviewed a year later Gina had been on holiday with her family and as a result had missed the start of the diploma course by six to seven weeks. It was also being run in a centre which was too far away from her home so she wouldn't have been able to enrol anyway. At this point she says, 'I would like to do the "Access to Diploma" but it needs to be near our home'. Here we are seeing that Gina's initial enthusiasm and motivation to progress with her learning have been constrained by both personal life commitments and systemic factors beyond her control, which have resulted in her not being able to follow her preferred progression route.

During her third interview a year later, Gina had still not been able to access her preferred course as it still wasn't running at her local Adult Education Centre. She had however taken a short course called 'Money Marks' for six months and says, 'I did gain some more knowledge, but the certificate is useless. I need a certificate to get a job in interpreting.' She had also tried a computing course but says, 'I found it not very interesting. I couldn't work in an office in front of a computer all day. This would be very boring!' What she really wants is, 'to continue with the Interpreting Diploma course but it's still running at \_\_\_, which is too far away for me. It's two buses so it takes too much time to get there and back as it starts at 10 a.m. and runs till 3 pm. I don't know why they moved it?' Gina is hugely frustrated at not being able to continue with her studies as this affects her employment opportunities. She says, 'I can use my car and get to appointments but need the qualification for the job. I did very, very well with the interpreting course'.

Gina has moved from being enthusiastic and motivated to becoming hugely frustrated because of the lack of appropriate progression opportunities in her local area, which have worked against her progressing with both continuing education and into meaningful employment. The positive momentum provided by appropriate learning opportunities has been stopped short creating a vacuum leading to a high level of boredom and frustration.

## Sophie

### Life

Sophie was 18 years old when we first met her at the Nightsafe hostel and Fusebox day centre for young homeless. She is from a middle class background. Her mother, who was a schoolteacher at the time, found it difficult to care for the family due to her drug habit. Sophie says:

‘... there was always food and shelter but that was all ... we had to wake ourselves up and look after ourselves ... do everything. When my sister left I started going off the rails ’cause I didn’t have my sister’s TLC [tender loving care].’

Things changed for Sophie a few months later as she found out she was pregnant. She felt unwell, weak and tired and seemed to still be struggling with substance misuse.

Later in her pregnancy Sophie went through a very bad patch. On one occasion she had to be hospitalised after falling over drunk in the street. She appeared to have become increasingly dependent on various substances such as glue and gas. In June Sophie was persuaded to move out of the Nightsafe hostel into a mother and baby unit. At first she found it hard to settle because of the rules and because they were helping to reduce her drug dependency. Soon she got used to it and her health improved markedly.

Sophie continued to do well and gave birth to a healthy baby girl. The staff were hoping that she would be able to look after her own baby with continuing support but they were also worried about her.

At the time of the PPA Project research in 2007 Sophie was 21, still struggling with substance misuse, living in a hostel for adult homeless people with her young child, was not in any education, employment or training and was too old to access support at Nightsafe.

### Experiences of learning

About school Sophie says:

‘I hated school sitting in the classrooms ... doing all that writing so boring ... teachers just left you to it ... only took any notice if you did something wrong. I hardly went to tell you the truth.’

Sophie eventually got barred from school for beating someone up, assaulting a teacher, for damage to teachers’ property and for arson. She lost her GCSE coursework after moving schools, lost momentum and got discouraged. She sat her GCSEs but did not achieve what she was capable of.

About college:

‘I did go to college but I was doing what I didn’t want to do: drama. The course was rubbish ... the tutors weren’t into it. Then I did landscape gardening [at another college]. I loved that but I had to stop because of health and safety

being pregnant.'

A youth worker said of Sophie:

'She does live in a world of dream and fantasy .... It's difficult to really get through to her. I can see her going to college eventually if she sticks it out in the mother and baby unit because you can get a lot of help there and opportunities for education with childcare support.'

Sophie says about integrated learning at Nightsafe:

'Everyone does drinking and drugs ... we know the dangers, we just choose to ignore it so we don't want to get drugs and alcohol education. I know I shouldn't smoke and drink now I'm pregnant ... I have cut down ...'

'You do learn some things but you don't realise it. I used to like embroidery and painting and cooking but the basic skills stuff is too easy for me.'

About personal literacy and learning she comments:

I'm never out of my room hardly ... I like being on my own sitting on my own reading rather than sitting downstairs with them lot arguing about what's on telly. I like Virginia Andrews, I've read nearly all of them. Like it's real life ... I can relate to the people who are in them, like the stuff that's going on.'

'Every now and again, say if I'm going through a bad patch I write poems and feel better about it.'

Sophie then told us she wrote Haiku poems and sometimes used to write them in French when she'd finished her French work in class.

'it's three-line poems ... first line five syllables, second line seven syllables, third line five syllables.... I didn't realise it would be more difficult 'cause in French the syllables are different, it was quite challenging.'

Sophie likes the library because it's nice and quiet there and she can access a computer:

'you can relax and concentrate. I use the computer to check emails, chatroom, games ... I've found out information about my family ... they were witches who's been tried and hung.'

## **Support**

Sophie gets a lot of support from her sister who lives nearby.

'My sister's my best friend, she's a good influence ... she's been supportive but she wished I'd waited longer [to have a baby] ..I think it's 'cause of what we went through.'

Sophie meets with her Connexions advisor regularly and saw him early in her pregnancy about resitting her GCSEs because she says she'd be too busy after the baby was born to do much.

Sophie likes coming to Fusebox and Nightsafe to meet her mates and have a laugh with them and to chill out and talk to the young Community Service Volunteer (CSV) workers. It is a place where she has access to safety, support, advice, integrated learning and shelter.

### **Choices**

There is a huge gap between the choices Sophie wants to make and her ability to make those choices, due to her being marked by her early years and her current situation.

'I think a lot about the future in my room planning what I'll do when I get my house ... I want to move away from Blackburn ... if you live here you end up getting involved in this ...[drugs]. I want [my baby] to have a good education. But I don't want it to be like it was for me always trying to please my parents.'

Despite all the barriers she faces, Sophie has clear if unrealistic goals related to her academic ability and interests.

I've thought about doing psychology, going back to study and like to do CSV Service for a while. For the career I want [vet] I'm going back to college next September straight into A levels ... I knew I wouldn't hack a job sitting in an office but if I'm a vet I'll be outside. I want to move into a village ... get my own surgery set up.'

## **Kathleen**

### **Life**

Kathleen is in her late thirties. She now lives in a care network for people with learning difficulties. Kathleen's family is very important to her and she keeps in regular touch with her older brothers and sister. Her mum and dad have both died in the past few years. She had a very difficult time straight after her mother died. She was emotionally very upset. She was living on her own in a mobile home which was not a successful arrangement and her brothers had to look after her for two months because help was not available for them.

Kathleen is much happier since moving into the care network. She has many more people around, friends, boyfriend and carers. She says she is able to laugh now because the people around her help her and make her feel a lot better. Her family say that she is a lot more confident and more assertive, and she says she is 'more happier than I've ever been'.

More recently Kathleen has struggled with a variety of health problems: eye operations and a heart condition caused her to be hospitalised several times. These episodes have knocked her confidence and made her feel very tired. This has resulted in her feeling 'scared' of having attacks again and feeling 'not up to' going to college. She does get out and about but says she needs to be careful of her health. She feels that being ill has held her back the most in life and the thing that has given her the most happiness and encouragement have been the celebrations each year of Christmas, her birthday and Easter.

## **Experiences of learning**

Kathleen left school at 15. College was initially suggested to her by one of the managers of the care network, to give her something else to focus on and get out of the flat. She was initially not keen to attend the ACL literacy class because she did not enjoy her first experience of adult education in an FE college finding it 'boring' and difficult to travel to.

She had a panic attack before her assessment interview but it went well and she started attending English and maths classes. In general, coming to college has made Kathleen 'happier, made me better, not sad ... I don't cry any more'.

Relationships with people in the class are the most important thing to her. She likes having people to work with one-to-one, because 'we have good fun, we have a laugh, have a good time'. She feels that one-to-one work helped her with her learning the most and was what made her feel the most confident as a learner. Looking back she says that she found maths very hard and that she enjoyed learning to write properly the most – writing stories with one-to-one help.

Kathleen says there are things she can do better now than when she first came to college, like money and reading and writing. For instance her carer was able to phone her up the night before and ask her to read a telephone number out over the phone. She enjoys reading newspapers and magazines and she and her carer go to the library regularly and choose books. She is now able to sign for benefits and can now write Christmas cards and birthday cards to friends and relatives.

## **Support**

Kathleen's mum used to look after her and was doing so before she died. Since then she has had a team of carers, one full-time. She has felt the most cared for in her life when she's been poorly by her carers and felt the least cared for at school saying that her own teacher, not all of them, was 'horrible'. She socialises with the carers – going to the pub, playing bingo and visiting her sister with a carer. She has also been on a caravan holiday with her carer. The manager of the care network meets her weekly to check her health and talk about how she is getting on.

In terms of support with her learning, it's clear that she has felt the most support from two particular tutors at the college who worked with her one-to-one and who she found 'very kind and helpful'. One of these tutors kept in touch with her after she left to encourage her to return to college.

## **Choices**

Kathleen says it was her mum who made the choice for her to go to the FE college after school. Her carers and the college helped her to make the choice of going to the Adult College. She is planning to go back to classes when she feels well and would like to try pottery. In general terms she does not know what she would like to do in the future. One day she would like to get a job, but doesn't really see the English and maths classes as being something that would help her with that. She is interested in doing more work one-to-one on her writing but says

she would need someone to come to her home as she does not feel ready to go back to college yet. More than anything she wants her health to improve: 'I'd like to do more ... All I want to do now is be sorted out and then ... hopefully.

## **Lisette**

### **Life**

Lisette was an 18-year-old high school student when she came from The Congo in 2002 to seek asylum in Britain. She came to Blackburn via Dover in May 2002, sent there by the authorities. Poor housing led to her move to the small town of Darwen from Blackburn where she suffered racial abuse. Money was tight so social activities were limited. She gets friendship and emotional support from the church she attends and African fellow asylum-seekers and refugees. She has had no contact at all with family and friends in The Congo.

Lisette began to suffer from loneliness, depression and severe anxiety when her friend was deported leaving her living alone and her asylum appeal was refused. Life became extremely distressing in late 2004 when Lisette had a final refusal of her appeal to remain in Britain. Her rights to any benefits, housing and education were removed and because she lost her entitlement, she dropped out of all learning activities.

This has resulted in her having to move residence five times and depending on the charity of church, friends and a distant cousin – not always feeling welcome but needing this charity to survive. The quality of learning experience and opportunity for progression has decreased the further away she has moved from a high quality FE-ESOL provision learning environment towards more 'ad hoc' mixed-level volunteer-run provision. She has felt forced to take on illegal work in order to survive – cleaning, ironically, for Manchester University. Lisette's health has been affected by her changing circumstances, firstly chronic back problems as a result of trauma in the Congo war, then chronic chest infections due to sometimes living in damp conditions in Britain. A common thread running through these past five years has been increasing degrees of anxiety, sleeplessness and depression which seems to have caused her to be passive and unable to fight her corner. Depression has also led to regression in spoken English and the need to depend on advocacy in offices in order to explain her situation.

More recently Lisette seemed much happier and less anxious. She had developed a better relationship with her cousin's family who she now lives with in London, she has a steady boyfriend and the possibility, though remote, of being assigned her own flat through a waiting list with a points system.

### **Experiences of learning**

Lisette's most positive experience of learning was when she was a full-time student on an Entry 1 ESOL class. She found the ESOL teacher was very good: 'knows how to teach'. She enjoyed the learning group, working in small groups and the friendship too. She said the teacher understood the problems they faced in their everyday lives and was very supportive. After that first year her experiences of learning have been very fragmented: not enough hours to make

any progress and not as well organised or of as good a quality as previously. She does feel she has made some progress but not quickly enough. For the first two years Lisette had very little practice speaking English outside the class. She made a marked improvement once she started working illegally as a cleaner, as English was the common language of communication. Outside of the class Lisette reads the local newspaper and occasionally visits the library to use email and read the BBC news on the internet. Her housemate used to help her access the Angola news sites but Lisette cannot manage this herself.

### **Support**

Lisette is shy but likeable so has always managed to find the emotional support she has so much needed:

‘life is different now ... because I can’t ... because in my country I stay with my parents when I came here you stay with friends ... no parents, no member family ... no, just yourself I can’t you know...’

‘I was happy because always somebody helped me like you, like teacher, like my African friends, my church.’

Support with social needs and survival such as food, shelter, money, legal assistance and emotional support has always had more priority than support with learning in Lisette’s life. Like the others, Lisette has had to depend completely on charity when not working illegally, mainly from other asylum-seekers who share the little benefits they have. The local church and asylum support team have provided food, shelter and have signposted her to networks of support when she has moved to another area. Lisette, like most asylum-seekers we met, whether Muslim or Christian, in their vulnerability and helplessness drew on their spiritual resources:

‘I don’t know...I just pray God...yeah’.

Legal support has been fragmented, poor and at a distance and Lisette feels completely let down by it. Despite the advocacy of charities and Refugee Action there seems to be no way of helping her to get her asylum appeal decision overturned or get any benefits, despite the fact that it is currently unsafe for anyone to be repatriated to The Congo. Advice and guidance regarding learning has also been very fragmented but this is mainly due to her lack of entitlement and frequent relocation.

### **Choices**

Lisette has had very little choice since living in Britain. She was sent to live in Blackburn though she knew no one there and there were no other Rwandan Congolese people living there. Poor housing and subsequent moves meant she could not afford to travel to the FE ESOL provision where she was settled. Fear of racism and poverty restricted her freedom of mobility and social activity. She has had no choice but to accept the charity of asylum-seeker friends. She ‘chose’ the illegal work option in order to ‘pay her way’. The termination of this work in turn led her to ‘choose’ to move in with her cousin in London, despite the fact that she felt unwelcome by his wife. She has recently made choices to find her own place to live but this is fraught with obstacles and she has been advised that it

will take her a long time on the points system to achieve this and she may not even be successful. In terms of learning choices, since losing her asylum appeal the only choice she has had is to accept learning as charity run by volunteers, which does not have a good route of progression as there is no system of formal assessment. Even her most recent and most personal 'choice' is being thwarted. She and her Congolese boyfriend want to get married but they have been advised that they will have to return to The Congo to marry and then come back to the UK, despite the fact that he has exceptional leave to remain and is working as a chef in London. Lisette's ultimate goal is to obtain the right to remain in Britain and do nursing training. Lisette has great regrets about not being able to take the courses she needs:

' yeah I regret because my idea ... my ambition was to learn English first, after that to go maybe university to do some course like nursing , you know ... but I couldn't have this choice....'

## **Amanda**

Amanda's interview took place whilst she was participating in a Family Learning follow-on Skills for Life programme at a Children's Centre in a rural area.

### **Life**

Amanda is a happily married woman in her mid 20s and has three 'mostly happy children!'. She says: 'I left school with absolutely nothing as in Maths or Literacy ... qualifications, and up until now haven't really needed them as ... I got married and had children'. Amanda had got married at 17 and had had her first baby at 18.

Amanda said that she 'did Literacy Level 2 a couple of years ago, and Numeracy Level 1 the year before' and that she had been back in adult learning for around three years.

When talking of her time at school Amanda says: ' you haven't got a clue what's round the corner, and it's ... you don't realise how it's going to affect you not, you know, achieving anything at that age.' When thinking back to her experience of maths at school she says, 'from what I can remember ... because I didn't know maths I used to sit and hide at the back of the classroom, and the children that did know 8 x 9 would shout the answer out, my teacher would be so, you know...asking them'.

Whilst participating in her Family Learning courses over the last three years Amanda and her family were made homeless. They had to live in emergency accommodation in another town whilst they got themselves back on their feet, which meant she had to make a huge effort to keep her children in the same primary school in order to limit the disruption to their lives and to continue with her own learning. She says, 'we were travelling from \_\_\_ for 2 years, and because I don't drive, and my husband was dropping me and my kids off, they were in school; I was in every day ... having to rely on friends'. This had been a very difficult time but now Amanda and her family had got accommodation back in the area.

## Experiences of learning

Amanda is currently working on her Level 2 Numeracy and has just retaken the test having failed it once. When talking about her learning experience as an adult she said:

‘I’ve really enjoyed it, doing it all ... I’ve learned so much. I just never ever thought that I would learn half the stuff that I have ... never thought I’d be able to go in a shop and know what 10 per cent off that dress was’.

This contrasts strongly with her experience of school where she says she ‘messed around ... I mean, I still struggle now to take things in but I think at school I just really struggled to, as long as anything was explained you could take it in and learn ... and because of that ... I lost interest quite easily.’ Amanda also went on to say that ‘plus when you’re that age well ... your future doesn’t exist!’.

Amanda was excited by her growing maths understanding. She says ‘it’s brilliant’ because when she’d started she said, ‘I did not have a clue’.

When talking about the learning environment she says she is very pleased with the shared motivation of her current class. She’d felt this hadn’t been the case ‘a couple of years ago’ as then ‘there was a bigger group of us and we kinda used to have a laugh, and used to get carried away ... and half your session would be gone’. With this group she says, ‘we save it till coffee time ... so just really work’.

Amanda had failed her Level 2 Numeracy the first time she’d taken it and this was a devastating experience for her. She described this ‘as a going over a cliff kinda feeling’. It had been a big knock to her confidence and she says, ‘what did me was I’ve been doing this maths thing for years now ... I put so much hard work into it ... why should I fail?’. Not only had this caused her huge disappointment and frustration, she also felt that she’d let other people down.

Amanda has a big problem with nerves when it comes to tests. She says, ‘we know we can do it, we sit in the class and we get them right, and you know, perhaps it’s just ... the time’s running out, or your nerves, or you’re just getting the wrong question’. Talking about the tests she goes on to describe her nervousness in more detail saying, ‘initially, you know, we’re doing this test so I had no sleep, and I think the last test I did before Christmas, I knew there was a test so I sat all morning with some of the maths’. Finally, when it came to the test itself she says, ‘it was just foreign. It sat in front of me and it was just in another language. I was absolutely drained in my head...’.

Having the Skills for Life certificates have been very important for Amanda as she came out of school with nothing. She says, ‘but at least, even just have the certificate there...it’s quite nice to have all that’.

## Support

Amanda feels that she owes a lot to the support she’s had from her ‘fantastic tutor’. She also felt that her tutor had ‘more patience with me than my teacher ever could of’. She goes on to say, ‘I think I’ve had loads of support ... all the support that’s possible, you know’. For Amanda the level of support she receives has been central to her successful return to learning, even in the face of the

devastating initial disappointment of failing a test. She says, 'I wouldn't have been able to do it without \_\_\_ seriously'.

Peer support is also an important element of Amanda's learning process. She says, 'because some of us are good at certain points in maths and others aren't ... we've sat round the table and we've listened, and you can ask whether I got that one right and if somebody else hasn't, we've kinda discussed that question...and helped each other'.

Childcare has been another key support feature for Amanda. She says that, 'If I didn't have that then it would be a problem, but luckily I always have ... one of my best friends is a childminder'. Without the support of this friend it would have been very difficult for Amanda to continue with her learning.

### **Choices**

Amanda said that 'it got to the point where I just, I wanted to get, to have those [qualifications] behind me' so 'that's why I'm trying'. But she also recognises that it isn't always easy to keep motivated. She says, 'so many times I've thought "I'm quitting, I'm not doing it" ... and then you get motivated again'. Amanda is very motivated to get her Level 1 and Level 2 qualifications. She says of her current class, 'we've all been quite serious about the fact that we do want to pass'.

Although Amanda had suffered the huge disappointment of failing her Level 2 Numeracy she is now determined to get it and says, 'I'm not walking away without that certificate for me Level 2 ... and if I do fail, you know, I'll just do it again.' An important motivating factor for Amanda is that she doesn't want to let her family down. She says, 'when you've got your husband and your kids at home knowing you've done all this ... and then if you just quit ... it's like what a good example!'. She wants to be a good role model for her children, which has kept her going even when it's been very difficult.

When thinking about her future Amanda says, 'I've just started my NVQ 3 in childcare ... so I've got the placement all there and I go to college in \_\_\_ and I've been going there every couple of weeks'. She goes on to say, 'I think I've always, always wanted to be like a ... nursery assistant.'

The two key issues that Amanda feels could hold her back are 'either the childcare or where the, where the place is' because she doesn't drive and transport in the rural area where she lives is spread very thinly. She has persevered, even whilst being made homeless, to continue with her learning but has needed a high level of support from her tutor to progress and to stick with it, as well as a huge amount of personal determination. However, progression is still not straightforward as location of courses, lack of transport and continuing childcare are concerns.

### **Val**

Val's interview took place whilst she was participating in a Family Learning follow-on Skills for Life programme at a Children's Centre in a rural area.

## Life

Val is a middle-aged mother of five children all under the age of 12. She left school at 15 and says 'I never had GCSEs or A-levels or anything...which is why I come back to \_\_\_\_'. She has now passed her Level 1 Numeracy and is working on her Level 2.

Val likes to play darts and is very good at calculating the scores in her head. She compares this skill to what she's doing in class and it only goes wrong when she tries to write it down.

Some of Val's children have been diagnosed as dyslexic and are now getting extra support in school but as she says these are things we 'didn't know about years ago' and which is why she never had any help as a child.

Now Val feels 'I'd never go back to the way I was'. She is now helping her children and her children's friends with their maths and if something gets sent home from school that she doesn't understand she feels confident to go and ask the teacher how to do it.

## Experiences of learning

Val felt it was easier to learn this way 'because you don't mind keeping up with your children ... to see what they had to learn'. Val has difficulty with writing, which has always been an issue for her. She says, 'I'm not good with putting pen to paper. I'm one of these ones that do it all in their brain' but she is beginning to realise that 'if you don't write it down they can't check it' so she is working with her tutor to begin to overcome this difficulty (dyslexia). For Val learning as an adult is 'a lot easier this way than what it was when I was at school, because there was something like 30 odd children in the class ... and the teacher never had time to get around to all of them'. She finds 'the smaller the groups the better I find it is. But if I go past say like there's 10, forget it!'

For Val another important positive feature of her current learning environment is that 'it's more private here, it's more quieter and we've got facilities where we can turn around and make a drink and take it back to the room'. Val finds concentration difficult if the learning environment is too hectic so this is ideal for her. The being able 'to work it all out together' is also an important feature of this learning approach for Val. She says, 'in school you wouldn't be able to do that. You'd be given a certain amount of work on the board and they'd say, get on with that'.

Val had originally thought, 'it was going to be a lot stricter ... but it's not, it's kind of like ... it's not what you call easy but it's like a ... I can't put the words in place. It's like a happy little family.' This had been a huge culture shift compared to Val's earlier childhood learning experiences.

Home study is difficult for Val, and she says, 'I don't get to study at home with the kids ... the only time I do get to do it is on a Tuesday afternoon ... but I do manage it ... 11 o'clock at night sitting in bed with my paperwork ... it relaxes me before I go to sleep'. Val likes to read and she says she reads 'through the questions and as I go along I pick the answer' but her problem is when she tries

to write down the answer on paper the next day – she writes it down wrongly, which is really frustrating for her.

Val was feeling that the move from Level 1 Numeracy to Level 2 was a big jump and she felt ‘it was going to take a while’ to get this level. But she felt that ‘it would be easier by doing it in my own time instead of like back in the school time when you had to turn around and give it when the teacher wanted it done’. The fact that she could work at her own pace with her Family Learning tutor was both important and reassuring for her.

### **Support**

Val was very appreciative of the support of her tutor and felt that she wouldn’t have been able to do this ‘without her’. For Val, the small class size has been very important to her being able to learn, as is the tutor’s ability to ‘explain it better as well, and we can understand it a bit better’. The class size also affects peer support and Val feels that ‘when you’ve got the smaller groups you’re like put at a table and talking to each other and helping each other out. It’s easier; I find it a lot easier’.

This peer support element has extended beyond the class and Val says, ‘I know some of the girls and we all live close together and if we get stuck we can help each other out’.

The level of one-to-one support has been another key factor that has made this the best learning experience Val has ever had. She says, ‘it’s more of a one-to-one basis really ... I’ve learnt a lot more than what I did last ... than when I was younger’. She is very appreciative of her tutor’s ability to ‘be one of these ones which can pick you up ... she’s always cheerful ... she’s a good teacher actually. She got me through my Level 1’.

### **Choices**

Val said that ‘she’d needed to come back for what they [her children] are doing now.’ She had recognised that ‘it’s a lot different to what we’ve done before’ and that there was ‘an awful lot that I have forgotten and an awful lot I didn’t know.’ She was ‘glad’ to ‘come back and do maths again’ because she felt that she had ‘needed to do it ... for the children.’ Val was attending two or three courses at the Children’s Centre where the Family Learning programmes were being offered and was beginning to think she ‘wouldn’t mind trying literacy as well’. But this would depend on the day it’s on as she has childcare needs and has to fit her learning choices around the availability of free childcare, which can be an issue.

Val also says that another reason she has joined the courses is, ‘to get me out of the house ... I just have to get out once in a while’. She originally thought, ‘I’ll go along to see if I like it. And I came to one session once and carried on from there’.

When asked about her future plans Val said, ‘my project’s going to be my children at the moment ... I wouldn’t mind helping others but I think ... the way I look at it charity begins at home’. For Val progression is linked to her family priorities and gaining the skills to support her children.

When asked if there was anything that may stand in the way of her completing the course Val said, 'the only one is if they cut the courses'. Val was worried that, 'if they stop funding for the courses I'll go back to square one again. I'll have to try and start all over again somewhere else' and given her rural location, family commitments and lack of regular and reliable public transport this is a very real worry.

## **Martha**

Martha's interview took place whilst she was participating in a Family Learning 'Healthy Share' programme in an inner city primary school. This programme was designed to help people to support their children and to provide a first step back into a learning environment for themselves

### **Life**

Martha is a young mother in her 20s with two young children. She felt that her learning had made her more confident with handling life. Before participating in her health-focused Family Learning programme she had felt unconfident to deal with any health-related crises but now she said, 'I knew that I could cope with it on my own'. This was evidence of significant life progress for her.

When Martha was re-interviewed a year later she had moved on in her life and was now working part-time in a children's nursery. She said, 'that's new for me too and I think the course helped me to get the job'. So whilst Martha hadn't thought of going back to work at the time of her first interview she felt that the fact that she'd been doing the course had helped her to get the job when the opportunity came along.

When interviewed for the third time, over a year later, Martha was still doing her part-time supply cover at the nursery.

### **Experiences of learning**

Martha felt that one of the things she was learning through the course was that, 'it's making me do things with them [her children] and it's giving them ideas. They've got a lot more confidence and stuff now'. Not only was the course helping her to do things with her children, the knock-on effect was that she felt her children were being stimulated through her learning and becoming more confident. A key factor for Martha is that a course has to interest her. She says, 'If it didn't interest me I wouldn't do it'.

When interviewed a year later Martha said of her learning experience that 'it's not solely the learning but it motivated me to do things properly when we got home'. For Martha life and learning are intrinsically bound together and when interested, the one impacts on the other to produce improved quality of life.

Between her second and third interviews Martha had done a Glass Painting course for leisure and had also done Health and Safety and Food Hygiene courses for work.

## Support

During her third interview Martha reflected on her learning experiences over the previous three years and identified her tutor's support as key to her continued engagement with learning. She said: 'anything I did with \_\_\_\_ was good. She was a good person to talk to and you felt comfortable with her'. For Martha the ease of communication and approachability of her tutor was a highly important motivational factor. She also says that, 'it wasn't just us who did the work, she did a lot of work and always came in with interesting ideas'.

Again a well-prepared tutor with stimulating ideas was an important catalyst to Martha's progressing with her learning both for work and pleasure, indeed for life.

## Choices

When first interviewed Martha gave a number of reasons for joining this course. Firstly, she said she had joined because she had done the previous one and wanted to get 'further information and reinforce what I already knew about how the children can learn about day to day things rather than just their school work all the time'. Secondly, her two friends were also doing the course and finally because she felt that this course 'is helping them [her children] with learning about how the world goes round rather than more work'.

At this stage Martha was interested in doing a number of different follow-on courses. She was keen to do anything that would improve her computer skills or her practical abilities, such as plumbing or bricklaying, but she said, 'at the end of the day I will do anything that's free or nearly free because it's there and it's here'. She is keen to learn but can't afford to pay too much or travel too far for courses.

Between her first and second interview Martha had progressed on to a Level 2 Open College Network (OCN) accredited parenting qualification, and had completed the first module. She was hoping to move on to the next module in the new year although she still hadn't had the opportunity to a computer course yet as they hadn't been offered that locally. At this point she said, 'in the long term my aim is to get back into full-time work but I've now got a foot in the door, as I had no previous qualifications in the childcare area'.

During her final interview Martha said, 'I do need to renew my First Aid so will do that soon' but was feeling that there was nothing else she wanted to do at the moment. She did however say 'that's not to say I won't do something again in the future if I need to but at the moment my family is my priority'.

## Wendy

Wendy's interview took place whilst she was participating in a Family Learning 'Healthy Share' programme in an inner city primary school. This programme was designed to help people to support their children and to provide a first step back into a learning environment for themselves. The aim was that adults would not only learn in order to support their children but be encouraged to continue in learning for themselves in a broader sense.

## Life

Wendy is a young mum with two children.

When interviewed a year later Wendy had finished a Pregnancy Counselling course and was working as a volunteer one morning a week at a Pregnancy Counselling centre and was helping with life skills like, 'cooking in a Council Hostel for young mums building confidence'.

When we next talked to Wendy she had completed a 50-hour course on Post-abortion Counselling and she told us, 'I'm just beginning to do that now, as I've had to wait for a client who needed a counselling appointment during the day'. Also she had 'just got myself a part-time job as an exam invigilator at my son's school ... it's seasonal work and fits in with the children'. Wendy's priority is her family. She says:

'my children are 9 and 11 now. My son just started secondary school in September. He comes home from school and is exhausted with all the extra work, walking and PE and needs me here.'

## Experiences of learning

The subject matter was interesting and relevant for her and her family. She said 'the best thing so far has been the food. Mine are interested in anything to do with learning about food'. Wendy felt that the most important thing she was getting out of her learning experience was 'ideas, things to do with them [her children] ... learning with the children at home'.

Wendy's Pregnancy Counselling course was quite demanding. She was attending alternate Saturdays and Wednesday evenings as well as doing the course reading but she was enjoying it and even reading more than she needed to.

The fact that the Family Learning course was being run at her children's school was important for Wendy. She says, 'because we're so used to this school anyway we're not going on foreign territory as it were. We're confident to be in the school so it's easier for us to come to courses here'. She also felt that 'I'd probably be nervous. I wouldn't go to another course if it was outside the school, not yet'.

A year later Wendy was working towards her Level 2 accreditation on a Share and Parenting course. She said, 'I've got the learning bug because of the subject and I want to do another module'.

During her final interview Wendy told us that 'the main thing that keeps me going on a course is personal interest'. Because the Parenting course had closed down owing to lack of numbers enrolled she had signed up for some Arts and Crafts courses. She said, 'the art was really interesting and I very much enjoyed doing things I'd never done before. There was only one session that I wasn't interested in so I didn't go to that one.'

## Support

Wendy had done the previous course with the same tutor and said, 'she was very good with us'. She also felt that the support of her friends was important.

## Choices

Wendy was attending this course because she had done the previous one and enjoyed it. Also she wanted to do it because 'everyone else was doing it'.

At the same time as the 'Healthy Share' programme at a Pregnancy Counselling Centre, Wendy was also doing a Pregnancy Counselling course. The reason she gives for doing the two courses simultaneously is that 'this is for my children, that is something that I'm interested in for me'. Wendy was learning in different contexts for different reasons, for her children's benefit and her own.

When interviewed a year later Wendy said, 'I've just always been interested in parenting and would have come if nobody else had. I'm using it for the here and now. I don't have any long-term goal'.

When Wendy was interviewed for the third time she hadn't been able to finish the Parenting Programme. She said, 'it kind of fizzled out because we couldn't get any more people to join ... there weren't enough of us to run the rest of the modules, which was a shame'. Sadly, Wendy hadn't been able to follow one of her main learning interests for systemic reasons. She had however been able to do 'a couple of arts and crafts based courses and another course at the Pregnancy Counselling Centre'.

Wendy's choices need to dovetail with the demands of her family. When she discusses her future she says, 'I don't know whether I'd go into a counselling role full-time or not. I'd like to work with animals but I'll wait and see. The children still need me here at the moment as my husband works very long hours'. She finishes off by saying 'I still don't know what I want to be when I grow up!'.

## Jen

Jen's first interview took place whilst she was participating in a Skills for Life Level 1/2 Literacy course at an Adult Education Centre.

## Life

Jen has three young sons who are all at primary school and it was her desire to support them with their homework that had initially led her to join the literacy course.

When interviewed a year later Jen was at home concentrating on her family and not taking part in any courses as the time pressures of a young family had led to her giving up a full-time accountancy course she had enrolled on at a college. During her third interview, over a year later, Jen said, 'I've not continued with the volunteering at the school as I had to give that up when I was doing the accountancy and though I've put my name back on the list since, none has come up'.

## Experiences of learning

When interviewed for the first time Jen felt that not only was she growing in confidence and more able to support her sons through her learning, but also that she was, 'gaining more knowledge of different things' by being involved in the course. Jen also felt that being on the course had, 'taught me also the setting aside times for studying, which I never would do before'. So not only was Jen benefiting from the subject-specific course content, she was also learning how to study on her own at home.

A year later Jen said that she had passed her Level 2 Literacy and had progressed on 'to do a full-time accountancy course at \_\_\_ College' but had given that up 'because of juggling the kids. The course was fine but too demanding'.

When interviewed for a third time Jen had completed a Computer Literacy and Information Technology (CLAIT) course at her local library. This had been a taught course with different modules and exams to pass. It required a lot of independent working. Jen said, 'you had to do a lot of work on your own at home to cover all the work as the course was only one morning a week for 3.50 hours for 30 weeks, or something like that.'

There was a real sense that Jen had been making personal progress through her learning experiences. She had learnt how to organise her own study time at home during her first course, and whilst she was unable to manage this on the full-time accountancy course because of the constraints of family on her time, she was able to use what she'd learnt to good effect on the more flexible CLAIT course.

## Support

During her third interview Jen talked of the positive support she had received from her tutor whilst attending the CLAIT course. She said, 'there were about 12 of us in the class. The teacher was superb. If we had any difficulties she was fantastic at explaining things'. Given how nervous Jen was of computers during her first interview the level of support she had received had helped her to overcome these fears and to both enjoy and pass this course.

## Choices

Jen had joined the course in the first instance so that she would be better able to help her sons with their homework, but she goes on to say that she joined, 'also for myself; a bit of confidence'. When asked what she'd like to do next Jen said, 'well, I particularly like maths and I was thinking of doing something like accountancy or book-keeping' but she recognised that she should do something with computers because, 'I'm scared stiff of ... computers and I know I've got to ... do that because everything's using computers now'.

When interviewed a year later Jen had had to drop out of the accountancy course she'd enrolled on owing to the pressures of having to balance family commitments with studying full-time. Her learning choices had been constrained by life considerations. At this point she says, 'I'd like to go back to it but unless

something comes up during school hours it's not possible'. Jen also says that, 'before I started the course I was volunteering at my children's school so I'll go back to that as it fits in with the school holidays'. Jen's underpinning priority is that her, 'family has to come first' so her choices in life and learning are guided by this principle.

During her third interview Jen expresses frustration at not being able to continue with her computer studies. Having really enjoyed the CLAIT course she says:

'I would have liked to have continued but the funding stopped and the next level would have cost something like £270. The first level was much cheaper; we only had to pay something like £50–60, but because they [provider] lost the funding the cost jumped up.'

At this point Jen's progression choices were constrained by systemic factors that were out of her hands, whereas previously her choices had been constrained by her family commitments. When asked about her future plans she said, 'I really enjoyed the accountancy but it just didn't fit in with the kids. So hopefully I'll be able to go back to that at sometime in the future'. For Jen her ideal progression path had to take second place to her family commitments at this point in her life. Sadly, her alternative computer-based learning route had been constrained by systemic factors beyond her control; the transitory nature of funding streams and the impact of these on provision.

## Rose

Rose's first interview took place whilst she was participating in a Skills for Life Level 1/2 Literacy course at an Adult Education Centre.

### Life

Rose is a young single woman setting out on her post-school life path. During her first interview she said that she had gained a GCSE in English at school but says, 'I think when you stop using it, when you stop learning at school you just kind of forget everything'.

Interestingly Rose says, 'I think this adult education has improved my confidence because, I mean not in the way of learning but meeting people and starting new things'. She goes on to say that, 'one of the reasons I didn't start my gym course was, I was really nervous to meet new people but I thought to myself, 'if I've done this I can do that', and it's just you know, forward progression from there'. Rose's life journey has been strongly influenced by her adult learning experience, which has given her the confidence to take the life steps that she was too nervous and unconfident to take before. She says, 'it has just improved my confidence and brought me up to a level where I feel like I can then get a job'.

When interviewed a year later Rose had gained her Level 2 Literacy and her Level 2 Gym Instructor's qualifications and had started working in a gym and had moved on to vocational study at Level 3. She says, 'things are going really well because my confidence has improved a lot ... so I'm actually teaching myself now!'.

During her final interview, more than a year on, she had passed her Level 3 course and had continued to do continuous professional development courses as they came became available online. She was still working at the same gym but said, 'now I'm doing personal training as well since I passed the last course'. Interestingly, she was now back at the Adult Education Centre studying Chinese.

### **Experiences of learning**

When first interviewed Rose was participating in a Level 2 Literacy class, having previously passed her Level 1. She says of her learning, 'since starting I realised there was a lot of other things to learn and I enjoyed that learning so I wanted to continue it'. Rose's motivation was fuelled both by her growing desire to learn more and by her enjoyment of the learning process itself. When discussing her learning journey she says:

'I think you always need to keep on learning. It keeps your mind open, and when you keep using the things then you tend to remember them.'

For Rose the key element was not just the academic process of learning but this combined with the use of what she'd learnt. Her criticism of school-based learning was that once you left school it had no application and you forgot it. When discussing this in relation to her literacy learning she says, 'I'm more open to listening to people; the way they speak and the language that they use' and goes on to say, 'before if I noticed a word I didn't understand I would just skip past it and like, get the gist...whereas now I actually take a note of that in my mind and look it up later'. She goes on to say that she does the same thing with reading and as a result uses a dictionary much more. It's evident from her discussion that Rose is taking what she's learnt in the class and is using these techniques in her everyday life and has made them her own. Rose was also doing a Gym Instructor's course at college, requiring a lot of working at home. She says that, 'we've learnt some study skills and things as well, and how to revise, which was quite good for my exams I had to do for that course as well.' She says that her numeracy studies have also helped because, 'you have to use maths quite a bit as well in the gym and I've been doing the maths course and I completely hated maths before and I've started to like it now.' From this we can see that her Skills for Life studies were having a positive knock-on effect for her vocational course.

During her third interview, approximately three years later, Rose talked about the Chinese course she was now doing. She said, 'it's going quite slowly as it's only for two hours one evening a week. It's very difficult but also very good. The words are written in English letters with lines over them to let you know the tones'. Rose is now applying the learning techniques learnt whilst working on her literacy to her second-language learning and is enjoying the challenge. At this point Rose says, 'doing courses is an ongoing thing for me, as I like doing them'. Conscious learning has become an important part of her life and something that she wants to continue with.

## Support

Rose didn't say anything specific about the support she'd received but this was implicit in her positive feedback on her learning experiences.

## Choices

During her first interview Rose said, 'I mainly wanted to start doing literacy because when I started to live on my own I found writing letters to companies and places like that quite difficult'. For Rose, it was the change in her living circumstances that initiated her return to learning. At the same time as working on her literacy, Rose was doing a vocational course at a college, training to be a gym instructor. She said, 'well I can get a job in the gym with that but I want to go on and do a Personal Trainer course, which is one-on-one with the client and maybe I could do that course at the same time as working in the gym'. She says, 'I'm only at the beginning of the sports industry and I want to work my way up'. Thinking of the future Rose says, 'I've reached what I aimed to get with my maths and literacy but I don't like doing nothing so if I didn't get a job straight away I'd like to be just learning'. So, whilst she would really like to get work if this doesn't happen as quickly as hoped she will continue with her learning.

When interviewed for the second time a year later Rose had managed to get a job in a gym and things were going really well for her. She had now progressed on to a Level 3 Gym Instructor's course.

When Rose was interviewed again a year later she was doing a Chinese course at her Adult Education Centre. At this point she said, 'I've always wanted to do this as half of my family is Chinese and I'm hoping to go to China next year if we can afford it'.

## Kate

Kate's interview took place whilst she was participating in a Family Learning follow-on Skills for Life programme. She was quite nervous and had requested that her tutor be present at the interview for support.

## Life

Kate is 30-year-old single parent with two children: a 15-year-old son and a 7-year-old daughter. She had her first child when she was 15 so left school with no qualifications.

Her early experiences of school life were mixed. She says, 'I was pretty good in infant school' but then when she moved to secondary level that was when, 'things went a little bit wrong ... because my brother, both my brothers was going through that school and one of my brothers is a rogue so I got all the flack from him'. Because of Kate's family reputation in the school she felt she was never really given the chance to learn. She says, 'I didn't want to listen because all they had to say was bad things about me, who they didn't know very well, because of my brother'. This family reputation that had followed her positioned her in a negative light from the start of her secondary school career and she quickly came

to the conclusion that, 'I might as well be like him if they're going to treat me like that!'

Kate's re-entry into learning as an adult had been triggered by an ectopic pregnancy. She told us that 'the reason they put me into adult literacy with the children [Family Literacy] is because I had an ectopic pregnancy and I couldn't get out of the house or anything. So they thought it would be a good way of getting me to start mixing again and coming out of the house'. The awful trauma of the ectopic pregnancy and nearly losing her life had left Kate seriously weak and depressed and it was the encouragement to come into school and work alongside her youngest child that coaxed her out of the home and back into being able to face being social again. She 'decided I needed to get out of the house and start getting involved with my daughter a little bit more ... which has done me no end of favours because I'm out doing loads of stuff now.'

Kate has now been involved in going into school as a parent volunteer and has been working on making resources to support the children's learning.

She has had ongoing family health difficulties, as her 7-year-old daughter has been diagnosed with epilepsy, which has been very hard to manage at times. This is an ongoing life issue as she learns how to cope with this problem and with managing the medication and support needed both at home and in school.

Kate was very proud of her 15-year-old son who is doing very well at school and is a keen all-round sportsman.

She was indignant about the stereotypes that are portrayed of teenage mothers. She was passionate on this subject saying 'so they're teenaged mummies, they can't say that all of them ... they're not bringing kids up right or don't take their responsibilities properly because some people do.' Whilst she acknowledged that it wasn't easy she felt there were advantages because there was a long time to do things and she felt, 'as you're older, so you're prepared to learn a little bit more.'

### **Experiences of learning**

Learning has been a mixed experience for Kate. After a positive start in primary school she had a very negative secondary school experience and never felt she was given the opportunity to learn, coming as she did from a 'notorious' family. She feels 'they weren't prepared to give me a chance and show who I really was. I thought I might as well just play up'. There were however two subjects that she enjoyed, which were dance and French but she gave them up as she didn't like the teachers.

Kate felt that she was 'prepared to learn now' and was thrilled with getting her first ever qualification. She says 'passing my exam was great.'

She is really enjoying her adult learning experience. The small group with one-to-one support suits her really well as she says 'I tend to get distracted a lot' and this doesn't happen in a small group.

For Kate the fact that in her adult learning class she is 'not made out to look like ... some thick person or somebody who does disrupt the class' is really important to her. She really appreciates being able to ask her tutor questions and that her questions are taken seriously.

Kate feels that the way of working has 'eased' her into it. She says, 'I don't go up for my exam unless your [talking to tutor] 100 per cent sure that I'm going to do well'.

For Kate, 'the only thing that makes it difficult to attend is if \_\_\_ has had a bad episode and then I can't come in'. She had ongoing concerns that her daughter's health situation could mean that she may have to miss lessons as sometimes she has to be up all night with her or occasionally take her into hospital and was worried that she may not always be able to phone and let people know immediately.

### **Support**

Kate's tutor was not only supporting her with her learning, often on a one-to-one basis, she was also helping her with family issues relating to her daughter's health. Kate said, 'we don't just learn. \_\_\_'s talked to me about epilepsy and you know, there's a whole field of things we talk about, not just literacy. She tells me who I need to go and talk to about learning difficulties that they think \_'s got.'

Kate's tutor was also carefully guiding her through her Skills for Life qualifications, providing a challenge but not pushing her to take the national tests until she was well prepared.

Kate felt she was getting good advice and lots of support. She said, 'you need somebody there to tell you that you're good enough ... you need people to back you all the time ... I need to be reassured quite a lot of the time'.

Kate was also very appreciative of the support she had received from her mother over the years.

As far as friends were concerned she felt, 'your friends give you the confidence but then they start letting you down'. So for Kate friends both acted as a support but on occasion they could hold her back.

### **Choices**

The main reason Kate gives for choosing to carry on with her learning is enjoyment. She says that she wouldn't have come back otherwise.

The main thing she identified as making the experience enjoyable was 'I felt comfortable being there' and this led her to making the decision to work on resources for school.

Another factor that was motivating Kate to continue with her studies was 'I just want to make my children proud of me ... and then hopefully they'll do a lot better at school because they can see that their mum's making an effort'.

Kate really wants to move on with her learning now. She says, 'I'm going to do numeracy and then I'm going to go to college and try and do psychology, criminal psychology'.

Kate recognises that 'until my children are out of school then I've got plenty of time to get a qualification haven't I? So criminal psychology because my brother's a criminal, so yeah, I think that would be a good one'.

She felt that her personal motivation had helped to keep her going and she felt that it would be good to have a friend to go on to college with, but acknowledged that 'I'll probably end up having to do it by myself anyway, which would probably be best for me'.

She did have worries that she might be penalised because of her daughter's health difficulties. She said, 'I'm willing to do the work ... or whatever but I might not always be able to make it'. So whilst Kate wants to continue to move on with courses she needs to know that the learning environment will take her circumstances into account.

## **Vicki**

Vicki's first interview took place whilst she was participating in a Skills for Life Level 1/2 Literacy course

### **Life**

Vicki is a retired Spanish woman who has lived in the UK for the majority of her adult life. Her children have jobs in the EU and she recognises that, 'because they have two languages they have a big advantage with work'. She never had time to study before as she had family responsibilities and was working. She says:

'Spanish is my first language although I've been here 31/32 years. I didn't have time to go to classes when the children were young and then I had to work, so I really want to achieve this now.'

Now that her circumstances have changed and she has had to take early retirement owing to illness she says, 'I was very ill and that motivated me to do something else to keep me informed'.

These life changes meant she now had time to do some of the things she'd always wanted to do. Because English is her second language she says, 'it's been quite frustrating for me not to be able to write proper letters or even thank you notes to friends as I'm a foreigner of course; English is my second language'. She also felt that she was struggling a bit more with her maths as she hadn't really done any maths since she left school and that was a long time ago.

Vicki felt that these were her first steps and that because she was now semi-retired she'd have more time to pursue learning because she was enjoying it.

Nearly a year later Vicki and her husband had been beset by a round of health problems, which had disrupted her return to learning. Having passed her Level 1 English she says, 'I failed my Level 2 I'm afraid. I don't think I was ready, but I'm still going to classes and will take it again. I haven't been to as many classes as possible because of illness, my own and my husbands'. By this stage Vicki was also studying for her Skills for Life maths but said, 'I'm continuing the maths but I haven't attended many because the class is on the day my husband goes into hospital'.

When Vicki was interviewed this year, almost two and a half years after the first interview she had suffered the loss of both her mother and brother and had to deal with her son's contracting a serious illness. As her son lives and works in Spain, this caused huge emotional and logistical stress. She did however manage to pass her Level 2 English and maths in the midst of all this upheaval. She had also continued on to do computer courses.

### **Experiences of learning**

When she returned to learning Vicki said she was 'extremely nervous because I didn't know what to expect and when you reach my age and you left school so many years ago you feel you're not going to be able to do what the youngsters do!'. This was a big issue for Vicki and she says that at first she 'was quite frozen up ... didn't know what to expect and ... was quite scared'. But the learning environment was such that she gradually began to grow in confidence. She talks particularly about how important both her peers and her tutor were in this confidence building. She mentions this on many occasions throughout the interview. She tells us that, 'it was very difficult for me to overcome that lack of confidence. Once I passed that I enjoyed it very much'.

Once she got through the confidence issue she found that she enjoyed the learning process and wanted to continue it. For Vicki the learning process seemed to have a snowball effect. The enjoyment factor increased her desire to learn and to go on to learn more.

During her second interview Vicki said that because English was a second language for her she felt the course was harder than for the others and that her tendency to panic sometimes affected her concentration.

By the time Vicki was interviewed for the third time she was comparing and contrasting her learning experiences over nearly three years. She felt that her computer course could have been structured better. She said that, 'I'd like to go a bit faster but because newcomers come into the group they have to bring the others up to the same standard and it feels a bit boring. They need to be at the same level or a bit higher to push you and stimulate you'. She compares this roll-on role-off approach unfavourably with the approach of her Skills for Life Literacy course where, 'we all knew what we wanted; all aiming at passing the exam and having fun together'.

She also says of her first class that she joined prior to the Level 1/2 Literacy course that, 'we were all foreigners but there was a huge difference in levels and I didn't enjoy that much. It's so much better when everybody's at the same level'.

Since Vicki has returned to learning post-retirement she has continued to be motivated even when health issues, either her own or her families, have meant that she's not been able to attend classes as regularly as she would have liked.

### **Support**

For Vicki the support of her tutor has been integral to her learning process. She acknowledges this on a number of occasions and says 'but thanks to \_\_\_ it gave me the confidence to, to be within the group, quite comfortable'. Vicki uses phrases like, 'I was quite scared but \_\_\_ helped me enormously and I'm feeling much more confident' to describe the support she's received and how that has been central to her growth in confidence.

The other important area of support for Vicki was that of her fellow students. She tells us 'that gave me confidence as well because I felt I was part of a group and joining in the others'.

Vicki sums up the support she has received from her tutor and fellow students when she says:

'they're lovely there. They really, really help me out. They helped with my illness. I was retired early for that and my mind wasn't ready for that. But now I can do things I've never been able to do because I was too busy with work.'

### **Choices**

When Vicki was first interviewed, her early retirement on health grounds had opened up the opportunity for her to return to learning for the first time since she'd left school. She had chosen the Skills for Life Literacy course in particular because she had wanted to improve her writing skills so that she could communicate with friends and family, as English was her second language. She had decided to do the maths as she hadn't done any since her school days.

During her first interview there were a number of things Vicki thought she would like to do. The first thing she talks about is perhaps being able to do some voluntary work with children, but that she thought would need better writing skills in case she had to write any reports. She also thought that she may even be able to teach Spanish, as the language seemed to be getting more popular but her first priority was to be able to 'follow more my English to learn more'.

Her immediate goal was to pass her Level 2 English as she already had the Level 1 and to continue with the maths although she felt that these were very much 'the first steps for me and I feel I can go much further and because I'm semi-retired ... I'll be able to have more time of course and as I enjoy it, I like learning.' At this point she muses on the possibility of being able to follow up her long love of history and her interest in other cultures but acknowledges that this may be a long way off.

After a year Vicki had been disappointed not to pass her Level 2 English, which was partly due to having been beset by personal and family illness. At this point her focus was on continuing with her aim of getting this qualification.

When Vicki was re-interviewed a year on, she was thrilled to be able to tell us that she had now passed her Level 2 Literacy and her maths. She was now doing a computer course as it was running at her local Adult and Community Education Centre. She then went on to say, 'it's a shame we can't carry on because I really enjoy it. I enjoy learning. \_\_\_ said the next step would be GCSE but they don't do it. Back in September I was really frustrated but at the moment I'm doing a computer course'. Vicki's ideal choice wasn't available at the centre she could access so rather than do nothing she had opted for the computer course. She had looked into doing a GCSE English course at her nearest FE college but there were a number of factors that militated against this being possible. Firstly she said, 'when I looked at \_\_\_ College for a GCSE course it was nearly £400. Unless you're 100 per cent sure you can attend all of it I was reluctant'. Given the serious health issues she and her family had faced over the last three years this was a realistic consideration. Secondly, the fact that she had to drive quite a distance to get to the college was a cause for concern. Finally, she was nervous that it would all be young people on a course in that kind of setting and that would be intimidating for her.

## Gayle

Gayle's first interview took place whilst she was participating in a Skills for Life Entry level 2/3 Numeracy class in an Adult Education Centre.

### Life

Gayle has a full-time job which requires, 'statistical work...we score \_\_\_ as part of my job with lots of statistics and numbers. It's very interesting'.

When reflecting on her experience she felt that she had missed out on maths earlier in life for a number of reasons. She says:

'when I was at school we were the first year to do the GCSEs and it was a complete shambles looking back on it now ... we had so many teachers that were reluctant to accept the new, they wanted to stay with O-levels and we had lots of problems with teachers' strikes, big classes and especially if you're not very good with your maths you don't feel able to speak up ... there were about 44 of us in the class so I didn't get much enjoyment out of it'.

It seems that Gayle's childhood experiences of maths were significantly affected by two key systemic factors: a change in examining structures at just the wrong time for her and class size decisions. Her experience was also affected by broader political struggles taking place at the time between the Government and Unions. On reflection Gayle felt that 'it's taken quite a long time to build up the confidence to actually come and do this because you just have the dread don't you that it's going to be like the class room'. She does however say, 'it wasn't all bad at school but looking back on it now I realise it was such a missed opportunity'.

When Gayle was interviewed for the final time she had changed her job and whilst she was, 'still working for the same company' she was 'working more in communication now'.

## Experiences of learning

When interviewed for the first time Gayle felt she was gaining ‘an awareness and confidence in maths, and just to feel, as well to feel confident with everyday maths. Not just work, and measuring things and just, you know general every day numbers’. Whilst she was working with numbers all the time she’d felt that there were gaps in her basic understanding and knowledge that needed to be worked on.

She goes on to contrast her adult learning experience with that of school. ‘There must be huge gaps in the education of maths; it’s either all or nothing isn’t it?’ She continues, ‘at school we didn’t learn ... practical maths like how to measure curtains and how to measure for a carpet, working out interest rates on your bank account, that sort of thing. We did Pythagoras’ theorem and triangles, which is fine but sometimes you feel that they should have ... about weights and volumes and things like that.’ It seems that for Gayle links hadn’t been made between maths and life in her experience of maths education and that this had left her lacking in confidence with maths on a day-to-day level even though she has a good understanding of more abstract mathematical concepts. She says, ‘at school it was taught ok but it wasn’t applied particularly well’. She goes on to say that, ‘coming back now I can see the difference it’s made’.

When re-interviewed a year later Gayle had, ‘just passed the Level 2 Numeracy last night’ and was thrilled with her achievement. She had ‘recently started an OU [Open University] course called “Open to Change” about managing change in the workplace, the home etc’. She had enjoyed her Adult Education learning experience very much and said, ‘I’ve enjoyed the maths so much; it’s got me back into learning again.’

During her final interview Gayle described her experience of learning with the OU. She says, ‘with the OU you just have to be disciplined. The materials are written in an easy format to understand so that’s not a problem’. Over the course of three years Gayle had progressed in her learning from a supported Adult Education context to that of working largely independently with the OU, a process which she had very much enjoyed and was in contrast to her negative school experience, particularly with maths.

## Support

Whilst Gayle doesn’t mention support specifically, it is implicit in her discussion of the Adult Education learning environment compared with her earlier school-based maths experience. Her discussion suggests a more supportive environment and appropriate level of subject support as well as a recognition of different ways of learning, as she says at one point, ‘I think really people have different learning styles don’t they these days especially? I mean I’m really good at things like art. So it’s all about strengths and weaknesses’.

When interviewed for the third time Gayle talked of the support she’d received from her OU tutor. She says, ‘I just need help with the layout of essays from the tutor’. She also said that, ‘the regular tutorials are very helpful’. So whilst Gayle has become a much more independent learner over the three years of this study,

tutor advice and support and peer interaction are an important part of her now undergraduate learning experience.

### Choices

During her first interview Gayle said she had chosen this course, 'because maths had never been my strongest subject. I use maths at work and always felt that I struggled with the basics'. She went on to say that she would like, 'to improve myself, to improve job prospects and just to be more confident around numbers'. When asked what she would like to do next Gayle had said, 'I'd like to get to Level 2. Yes, I would like to in the long term study at Open University level'. In the short term she want to progress through the Skills for Life levels and then to move on to undergraduate study.

Gayle also felt that there should be more choices for older people, 'because there's a lot less emphasis to retire at 60 ... there should be more opportunities to change career for adults. All the emphasis seems to be on the younger people. What I'd like to do now is I'd like to get a degree or do an apprenticeship but do something with a practical outcome'. Gayle had looked into the financial implications for progressing beyond Level 2 and said, 'if I was going to do a GCSE or an A-Level I think I'd have to go and pay for it ... It's quite expensive to do A-Levels at the moment. I looked into it and its £270 almost'. Reflecting on this she felt that, 'there doesn't seem to be anything in place of that [Individual Learning Accounts] to try and encourage adults back into the system'. For Gayle the financial implications of progressing beyond Level 2 were having a constraining effect on her thinking.

When Gayle was interviewed a year later she said, 'the next progression would be to go on to GCSE but to find a class in the evening would be very difficult. I wouldn't mind paying if I could find a course in the evenings. I've looked into doing it through an education provider doing home study but it's very expensive, anywhere from £200–300.' She was however doing a short OU course at this point. So whilst her ideal progression choice wasn't open to her because of systemic and financial factors another opportunity had presented itself through the OU.

When interviewed for a third time Gayle had progressed on to 'an OU management course' but was changing direction 'to try and incorporate technology with that because I've changed my job'. For Gayle progression seems to have been organic in that whilst she has continued to progress with learning her changing life circumstances has influenced the direction that learning has taken.

On reflecting on her choices Gayle says, 'Part of it is personal; you've got to want to do it. After working 12 hours a day sometimes it's the last thing you want to do! Also it's a means to an end. An end goal in sight is really helpful'. For Gayle motivation is kept going by having an end goal. She also says, 'I get encouragement from work. I work for a big company and they're very willing to pay for work-related courses. If it wasn't for that I wouldn't be able to do it because it's very expensive'. So in Gayle's circumstances having a supportive employer is also a key factor in her progression, as she couldn't finance her study herself.

In her final analysis she says, 'A lot of it is a personal achievement feeling. At school you felt you'd failed for whatever reason. But when you start to achieve you feel good about yourself and it encourages you to go on'. For Gayle it is the growth in confidence, which comes from this sense of personal achievement that generates the motivation to continue, and this motivation has been encouraged by her supportive employment environment.

## **John**

John's first interview took place whilst he was participating in a Skills for Life Move On Level 1/2 Literacy course at an Adult Education Centre.

### **Life**

John has two sons and wants to be able to help them with their schoolwork.

After a year John had moved jobs and 'ended up being a 'dinner lady' for a year in a senior school' until he injured his back. At that point Ian and his wife decided to do a role swap and he says, 'I'm a househusband now so I've had a big change'. He wasn't doing any study at this point but says, 'I'm reading a lot and putting pen to paper and using emails a lot more than I was'. Ian also found that he was using the computer a lot more now that his lifestyle had changed.

When interviewed for a third time John had continued to have health problems and had had 'two more operations since'. He recounts that, 'life takes lots of twists and turns. We were very fortunate that my wife's a very clever lady and we were able to swap roles. But both my boys need help so I'm here for them.'

### **Experiences of learning**

John feels that the main thing he's gained from attending this course is, 'basically I think it's given me more confidence to try, to actually try to write a letter'. He also now feels that he has some understanding that 'there are different ways of learning'. John hadn't consciously related this to life outside the classroom but whilst discussing this he said, 'I just do things without realising it ... and then when I'm watching my boys and especially my younger one it hits home what I do here and it actually helps me work with him'. So John was finding his learning helpful with helping his sons. He was also finding that it was giving him the confidence to take the initiative in doing 'some proper homework together'.

However John felt that it would be helpful to be able to do a course where he could use the computers at home because he felt that, 'as a parent, like everybody else you have to grab time and it's evening times when they've gone to bed ... if I could just do something on the computer where my teacher could see the work that I've done and correct it then and there or send it back to me.' John felt that this would make learning easier for him because he said, 'I have to clock watch all the time because you've got to go off to work' and he found this frustrating. For John his family and work commitments meant that he was always feeling pressured in his learning experience.

During his second interview John told us that he had, 'passed the Level 1 and I was very pleased about that'. He had then gone on to do his Level 2 but had failed that, at which point he'd said, 'bugger that! I'd like to do it again but somewhere closer to home, but when is down to me.' He felt frustration at feedback not being available for the tests. He says, 'I'd like to know where I went wrong on Level 2 and where I did well on the Level 1; that would help me fill in the gaps'.

When interviewed for the third time John said 'not all of us have brilliant brains ... you've got to make the best of what there is and education has taught me that'.

### **Support**

For John the support of his peers had been important and he says that 'At \_\_\_\_ we all new each other and it was easier to go'.

### **Choices**

John's main reason for choosing to do this course is that, 'it helps me help them, when my boys come home from school'. John felt that he would 'like to go on' and said, 'I am going to do Level 2 and also maths Level 2'.

When interviewed a year later John had passed his Level 1 Literacy but then failed his Level 2 and felt discouraged and this combined with both a major change in his life circumstances and the lack of test feedback worked together to undermine his motivation. He was however feeling that now he had an understanding of 'how difficult it is to read and write I feel perhaps I could help other people like in some educational support role in a senior school but it's not easy to get into'. So John at this point was beginning to consider a new work direction based on his learning experiences.

When John was interviewed for a third time he was still feeling that he's like, 'to go back into education some time, as I'd still like to be able to support older children with learning, because of my difficulties I think I'd understand'. But he was also recognising that 'at 52 it's not so easy to go somewhere where no one knows you.' For John progression had become problematic on a number of counts: the psychological impact of failing a test with no feedback to build on, combined with a series of health problems, had prevented him from moving on in the way he had hoped up to this point in time. He had however been able to invest a lot of time in supporting his sons owing to his changed role.

## **Yasmin**

Yasmin's first interview took place whilst she was participating in a Skills for Life Move On Level 1/2 Literacy course at an Adult Education Centre.

## Life

Yasmin has a young son and English is her second language. She felt that what she was learning was helping her in her everyday life with things, 'like in my son ... I help him with his homework and there's like application forms and letters, different types of letters from companies'. She also felt that it was helping her with everyday activities 'like reading books and letters and watching TV'. Outside of the home she said, 'I help in the school as well, so in the school environment if you know lots of vocabulary and spelling you know, then it helps you a lot in the school setting'.

When interviewed for the third time Yasmin had been having 'problems with my health, with migraine' and this had affected her ability to do a lot of reading.

## Experiences of learning

Yasmin said, 'I'm getting more confidence in spelling and writing, and I think my grammar is also improving' and she also felt 'my understanding of some terms and some special phrases are getting better'. She had passed her Level 1 Literacy but now wanted to get her Level 2. She felt that the course had helped her understanding of different kinds of letters and said it was 'much easier than before'.

When interviewed a year later Yasmin had finished her Level 1 and Level 2 Literacy and was now doing her Level 2 Numeracy having passed her Level 1 in the interim. She was also now doing an IT course at the Adult Education Centre and said that it, 'is very useful for me as I'm not very fluent in computers and everywhere uses them, like in schools'.

During her third interview Yasmin said, 'I'm still doing computer courses. These have been ongoing so I'm moving on slowly.' She had been progressing through CLAIT courses and said 'it takes time and a lot of practice'. This course is 'only two hours a week so we need to do a lot of practice at home. Sometimes the teacher gives us exercises to do at home'.

## Support

During her third interview Yasmin was very appreciative of the support she'd received from her computer teacher. She says there's 'a very good teacher who tells us how to operate and helps us if we're stuck'.

## Choices

Yasmin gave two main reasons for choosing this course at this time. Firstly she said, 'I've done my course in Classroom Assistant Level 1 and I find writing, I've done lots of writing and I need I think more brushing up on language, on English language and more practice in spellings and grammar' and secondly, 'my son is 7 years old and I think he needs help with his homework'. Yasmin's motivation had been stimulated by both the requirements of her ongoing professional development and the needs of her family to do this course.

When asked about her future plans she said, 'I want to do my Level 2 Classroom Assistant's course in future but at the moment I will keep on coming until I'm more, I feel more confident'. Her main aim at this point in time was to build her confidence in the English language before moving on.

When Yasmin talked to us a year later she hadn't yet started her Level 2 Classroom Assistant's course as she'd wanted to 'pass this first' referring to her Level 2 Numeracy. She was, however, now hoping to be able to do it 'in September if it's local. It's difficult to go anywhere else because of school and picking my son up and no transport'. For Yasmin her progression is dependant on the location of courses. Whilst she is motivated to learn, she also has family commitments to take into consideration and the logistics of school hours to navigate. She goes on to say that, 'I was hoping to start an Access Course in January but it didn't run and there isn't a higher level literacy at the moment'. Yasmin was hitting the systemic progression barrier post Level 2, as her local Adult Education Centre wasn't funded for post Level 2 provision. So whilst she had made a huge amount of progress to date, progression routes were becoming more problematic.

When interviewed for the third time Yasmin had developed a migraine problem so hadn't gone on to do her Level 2 Classroom Assistant's course. She didn't think she'd be able to cope with the volume of reading required. There was however a continuing issue in that these courses were still not being run in her area. She said, 'I might do it in future if the courses are nearer home'. She was still hankering after doing a higher-level English course if it became available at her local Adult Education Centre. She made a very telling statement here saying that, '\_\_\_ is very good for people like us'. For an Asian woman with family commitments and no transport, the local Adult Education Centre was her lifeline to learning opportunities, but she was fast running out options having worked her way through a range of Level 2 courses.

## Jayne

Jayne's interview took place whilst she was participating in a Family Learning 'Healthy Share' programme in an inner city primary school. This programme was designed firstly, to help people to support their children and secondly, to provide a first step back into a learning environment for themselves. The aim was that adults would not only learn in order to support their children but be encouraged to continue in learning for themselves in a broader sense.

### Life

Jayne is a woman in her early thirties. She is a young mum who has had four children in seven years so life is very busy. She says that, 'being on any course makes you feel less like a mum, which I've been for nearly 11 years and you lose confidence as a mum'. She feels that, 'if you're a stay-at-home mum you do lose confidence because you're out of the general work place'.

When interviewed a year later Jayne said, 'I've moved into working at lunch times at the school'. She felt that this was 'a nice way to go back into work' because it fitted in with her family commitments.

The following year Jayne's circumstances had changed. Whilst she was still managing to keep her lunchtime supervisor role going at the school she says, 'life's changed now. My husband leaves for work at 6.30 am and doesn't get home till 18.30 so keeping up with the children takes all of my time so any courses would be out of the question'. Her youngest child is now six years old.

### **Experiences of learning**

Jayne is doing this course because, 'I think we all try and live healthy so I think that can help and reinforce, to get the children interested in healthy living'. For Jayne it is the being able to apply what she has been learning to her family's every day life that has made the learning relevant. She says, 'the thing about the balanced diet was really good and my eldest daughter really enjoyed going through all the leaflets organising her lunch box'. Whilst Jayne says, 'I've been getting lots of ideas of things to do with the kids' she acknowledges that 'I've not actually had the time'. But she's also realised that her children's learning in life doesn't always have to revolve around sitting down at a table doing set activities and that, 'as you're making tea you can talk to them about what you're doing'.

When talking of her own learning Jayne feels that 'going on courses makes you less of a mum and more of a real person, more of an adult in your own right ... you can be a woman as opposed to a mum'.

Importantly for Jayne, when reflecting on her learning experience after three years she says, 'it wasn't just for the learning, it was social, helped with your confidence; it was something for yourself'.

### **Support**

For Jayne being able to attend with her two friends and the mutual support and sociability that this provided was very important.

### **Choices**

The main reasons Jayne gives for choosing to carry on with her learning are firstly, she is interested and wants 'to carry on with a theme'. Secondly, she has got back into wanting to learn because she 'did the last course' and thirdly she enjoys the social experience of learning 'because \_\_\_ and \_\_\_ are also doing this course'.

Jayne also feels that as she isn't working because of her family commitments 'just to come on a course, it's not exactly work but it gives you confidence'. In the future she would like to go on to do a DIY course for women and also a basic computer course but is already signed up to do an Early Years First Aid course.

A year later Jayne was no longer attending courses but had taken on paid work in her children's school. This was a new direction for her. She said this change had come about because 'the head teacher approached me, and it fits in with the family well. I was doing voluntary work in the school before'. When asked about her future plans Jayne said, 'I'll play that by ear. I'm happy with things the way

they are at the moment but long term I'm not sure'. She had been approached by the school about taking a Teaching Assistant's post in the reception class but said, 'I didn't want full-time. I'm happy doing what I'm doing for the foreseeable future with a young family'.

When Jayne was reflecting on her choices after three years she says, 'A lot of friends wanted to go back to work a few months after having a baby. Often this is because they feel suffocated and isolated when children are young so go back to work as much for the social [aspect] as the money. I didn't need this.' For Jayne both study and work came along at the right time and crucially for her, fitted in with her children's routines. She made choices as opportunities presented themselves within the domains she was participating in with her children. As she says, 'the lunchtime supervisor [post] fitted into the children's routine really well and came up at the right time. Before that I ran a Mother and Toddler Group, so I've never felt isolated at home with the children. Again the Share programme fitted in with the children's routine.'

## **Carmen**

Carmen's first interview took place whilst she was participating in a Skills for Life Level 2 Interpreting course.

### **Life**

Originally from Portugal, Carmen's first language is Portuguese. She says, 'I have been in this country for two years and this course, yes well, contributes with my English a lot and I have some information about things here; how the country works'. For Carmen a hugely important element of the course is the way it's helping her to understand not only the English language but how life works in England. Carmen is however living with the uncertainty of whether she will be granted a visa, which makes both life and follow-on decisions problematic.

When interviewed for the third time Carmen had gone from working part-time and studying to working full-time. She says, 'this year I work full-time so I rent a flat for myself and save some money.'

### **Experiences of learning**

When talking about her learning Carmen said, 'my English vocabulary is getting better and I have more confidence with speaking'. This confidence element was a very important feature of the learning experience in this course.

When re-interviewed a year later Carmen had finished the Level 2 Interpreting course, passed that and moved on to the next course: Access to Public Services, but had then had to do an advanced level English proficiency course before being able to move on to the diploma course. She was however feeling reasonably confident about this as she said, 'my teacher says I have a good chance to pass.' A year later Carmen was, 'still on my English course as a student at the moment because I didn't find anything else on the internet'.

## Support

It is evident when Carmen quotes her teacher as saying, 'I have a good chance to pass' that she has a rapport with her teacher and respects the advice she is given on when to go for exams.

## Choices

Carmen had joined this course because she wanted, 'to improve my English and also gain some confidence when I speak, and as an interpreter you should speak a lot so I thought this was a good idea for that'. In the future Carmen said, 'I wish to go also for the Diploma in Public Services and it depends on my visa to be referred so I don't know what I'll be able to do the course or not'. It is evident from this that uncertainty about her immigration status underpins any choices she would wish to make. So whilst her ideal is to progress on to the next level of interpreting qualifications, visa uncertainty hinders this progression.

A year later Carmen said, 'the next level is the Diploma but I need my English proficiency at advanced level, so I couldn't go on until I had it. This finishes in June, with a July exam'. Carmen's preferred choice had been held back because of the English language requirements. She says, 'I lost one year because I wasn't prepared for the level'. However, she was still hoping to progress on to the diploma the following autumn.

When interviewed for the third time Carmen said, 'I was planning to do the course this September ... but it was not on this year. I now have to do next year'. Carmen's choices had been severely constrained by systemic factors, which she was finding hugely frustrating. She says, 'It's out of my hands; I have to do what's best for my visa. This course [Public Service Interpreting] is a part-time course so I have to have my English course. It will take seven months to pass the English, the Cambridge Proficiency ... I could do them both together if they were on in the same place! But the PSI is only in London.' Carmen went on to say, 'If you want to work for the police or hospitals you need to have the PSI. The community qualification is only the first step. I've done some freelance work but can't make a career without more. You need the respectability for official jobs. To be taken seriously you need it.' For Carmen her choices in both life and learning were being seriously limited by regulations around visa applications and course availability and location.

## Mire

Mire's first interview took place whilst she was participating in a Skills for Life Level 2 Interpreting course.

## Life

Mire is originally from Iraq and her first language is Arabic. She has a university degree from her Iraq and tells us that 'in my country I was an Arabic teacher'. She completed four years of study but only has a certificate for three because she had to leave Iraq very quickly and had to leave everything behind so didn't get a certificate for her final year.

She has children who are at school so she needs to be able to fit any learning she does around her family priorities. When Mire talked about what she was getting from her learning she very much related this to the benefits for her life. She says, 'my English speaking's better because I can understand my children when they speak fast because they have English as a mother language. You know I can't get them what they want before because when they want something they speak quickly'.

Mire also feels that 'now I have more knowledge about the hospital, school, law and police'. Her improving English is also helping her to communicate with her neighbours who are English and with her children's school when she needs to talk to the head teacher about any problems with her children. It has also helped her to be able to communicate by phone with anyone such as the doctor.

A year later Mire was disappointed because the follow-on course she'd hoped to do hadn't run. She said, 'at the moment I'm at home. I miss it; this year I have nothing to do'. She was however still practicing the skills she'd acquired whilst on the course. She was trying to read at home and still felt that the course had helped both her and her family a lot because her 'husband had a problem and I interpreted for him'.

Long term she hoped to be able to work 'but at the moment every day or two the head teacher calls me and I have to go and talk to teachers!'. Supporting her children through school was Mire's continuing priority.

When we contacted Mire for a third time she had again been unable to continue with her study but this time because her father had been in hospital for five months. Mire said that 'this gave me experience a bit to help him with interpreting in the hospital'. Her father has to have another operation in February 2008.

Mire is worried that if she doesn't get out of the house more to use her English she will lose it. She thinks that, 'if I work I will be able to use my English'. She does however try to read a lot and to speak whenever she can.

### **Experiences of learning**

Being able to learn is important for Mire. She has completed degree level study in her country of origin in her first language.

Prior to coming on this 'Skills for Life' Interpreting course she had been on an earlier English course and it was the tutor from this course that had recommended the programme she's now on. Mire said her current course was 'a good course for me because it's in the mornings the children in the school'. She felt she was improving her English and extending her vocabulary. She also felt that her confidence was increasing with the course.

A year later Mire had finished her stage 1 and passed it but the follow-on course hadn't run so she was now feeling frustrated and bored being at home. She had taken an English language test at the same time but didn't pass that and was feeling a bit fed up about that.

This year family health issues had meant she couldn't pursue her interpreting interest but had enrolled on a web design course at her local Adult and Community Education Centre. She said, 'I really, really enjoy that. I've been working on that since September and will finish in April [2008]. It's only two hours a week but I have to practise at least four or five hours at home'.

### **Support**

Mire tells us that it was her previous English language tutor who had signposted her to the interpreting course and supported her with moving on.

When Mire didn't pass the English language certificate that she was taking at the same time as the interpreting course she says, 'I was fed up but I talked it through with \_\_\_ and she helped me. She helped us a lot'. Mire obviously felt able to approach her tutor and discuss issues with her and get meaningful feedback and support.

On more than one occasion she mentions 'us' in relation to both support as in the above quote but also in relation to her growth in confidence. Here she says, 'yes we feel more confident with this course, a lot'. There is a sense from this of a strong group identity and peer support here. This was definitely evident when interviewing the group on our first meeting.

### **Choices**

Mire had originally joined her course 'to help the people; I like to be interpreting, interpreter. Then the second thing I, the time, because I have family it's suitable for me if I work in the future as an interpreter'. Following this course she wanted to continue to the next stage the following September so that she could become an interpreter.

When we talked to Mire a year later her plans had been put on hold because the diploma course, which should have started in the January, was cancelled. She was feeling frustrated as she had been at home for almost a year because of this. She was however still planning to do an Access Course in preparation for the Diploma in Interpreting Course, hopefully in the next year. Long term she was thinking that she may look for a job once she had done the course.

When Mire talked to us this year she had been unable to do the course because her father had been in hospital for five months. She had enrolled on a web design course, which was only two hours a week with a lot of follow up work that could be done at home, and it was at her local Adult Education Centre. She said, 'I like web design very much but I don't think I could get work at that because there are companies that do it'. She also talks about whether there may be some way that she could teach Arabic in the UK. She asked the interviewer a lot of questions about work and from this discussion it was evident that she was desperate for information and direction as her first choice had seemed to have been closed off to her. It didn't seem that Mire had access to information, advice and guidance on meaningful way.

## Ferdinand

### Life

Ferdinand in his thirties, is from Angola and was studying in an Entry level 1 ESOL class when we interviewed him. He was separated from his parents at the age of 12 to enable him to continue his education while the war was going on. After finishing he was obliged to join the military. He studied topography for four years – making military maps but also took evening classes in tailoring and mechanics. A very traumatic time followed: fighting for different factions, interspersed with periods in prison and living in the woods for ten years. He had a dangerous journey to Britain through Zambia and Morocco. Initially in Britain he was basically happy and felt at peace. He was highly motivated to learn English in order to get work. However he soon felt that life became aimless especially in the college holidays. At first he had enough to survive on but that was all. He felt that his main barrier to integrating and independence was lack of money, not knowing the language and not being allowed to work and having to depend on other people, which he didn't feel right about.

His social life was very limited at first but he has gradually made more friends, joined a church and did casual work at an Asian supermarket. He used to be afraid of racism as people stared because there were so few black people at first. Ferdinand says it's difficult to have a girlfriend because you need money to buy food, clothes, presents and things. He has felt under great pressure from his family to help them financially though this is impossible for him. His parents were both sick and every bit he earned he sent home. Then his father died in 2006:

Oh it was, yeah it was very, very difficult time for me because ... but I had to think about you know. I no grow up with my father even my mama. When I left my parents I was only twelve years old. After that until now I haven't seen them again for 25 yrs just I was very, very sad to not see my father again.

He has had periods of feeling very low whilst waiting to hear about his appeal and in the time since he lost the appeal. He has had difficulty accessing effective legal support as his solicitor was in London and then just disappeared. In addition it was difficult to manage his appeal to remain in the UK and find out about his rights using English language with no access to an interpreter.

'They say just if you want to leave you have to contact the [unclear]. If you no want to leave you have to contact a solicitor to continue your case but if you continue your case, you can have nowhere to live, you have survive yourself. That is the difficulty very, very difficult.'

'Just I have accept it and try to live my life.'

### Experiences of learning

After passing Entry level 1 and then Entry level 3 Ferdinand lost his asylum appeal in 2004 and with it his entitlement to education. He tried to enrol at college that year and again the following year but they could not legally take him which was very hard for the teachers who knew him. For Entry level 3 Ferdinand changed to an evening class so that he could work, although this was illegal. He

now misses studying very much. He used to use the computers at the library to do homework and still goes to access email and the internet. He likes to read:

‘crime yeah sometime love stories, er the book of talking about the past and everything about around the world.’

### **Support**

Ferdinand gets his main support from his church friends and other African friends in a similar situation to himself:

‘Sometime they come to my house ... if you have ten pound, five pound, we give ... After we make some money we put in the bank. If one of us have some problem we know, if you no have that money to support your case we know where we can take it this money to give to that...’

‘I remember, last week we had a friend of ours just see who does not speak English and he received a phone call from his country. His father passed away, it was very sad for everyone ... Last Saturday we went to his house just we can get about a 100 pound we give to him, so he can ... Yeah he was so, so surprised because he was not expecting to get that kind of money .... Yes it help even if you have so many problems when they come to you, your friends they come to you, to help you, to stay with you, to talk to you, to give you something.

He has faced very sad times watching friends suffer especially his best friend in the Entry level 1 class, a young Afghan man who finally took his own life. At college he found the ESOL teachers to be very supportive not only with his learning but with any problems he had.

### **Choices**

Ferdinand never thought that one day he would come to England. All he wanted was a good education, a job and a quiet life. He says he doesn't like the supermarket work he is doing at all but he does it for the money. He wants to improve his English and then take a course to be a mechanic or an electrician and would pay if he was entitled to study.

‘If I have the money and I can stay here I am willing to pay because I want, I want to learn something. I have to, because for me it means so important to me. If I had the money I could pay just....’

The last time we met Ferdinand shared his dreams for the future:

‘Yeah everybody to have dreams, everybody dreaming in ten years time maybe. Oh what I can say? I need to, I want I would like to have good life not plenty of money but enough money....’

‘to enjoy the life ... a job. Get married ... have someone else in it with me either one kid or two kids ... because I very like children.’

He looked sad and shrugged his shoulders.

'you see you have to understand I have to believe that life is more the same yesterday or today maybe. And the future have to change I haven't to stay all of the time in that kind of life. Just that I believe that and believe in God one day that things have to change.'

# Appendix 2: Participatory mapping

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## Background

The tool of participatory mapping was first developed by the Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire (1968) in literacy programmes which engaged people in group reflection and radical activism related to the problems, power struggles and development of their communities. Robert Chambers (1992) then built on this methodology in order to develop participatory research in the field of development work. The Action Aid REFLECT literacy programme has used this type of methodology in literacy programmes in developing countries, and more recently in UK-based ESOL programmes with asylum-seekers and refugees in order to promote critical reflection and action (Cardiff et al 2007) – the idea of the river comes from this work (see next section).

## Using participatory mapping in the progression project

The rationale for this was to involve people, particularly vulnerable young people, more equitably and enjoyably in the ‘interview’ process, to build rapport and to promote more careful reflection and discussion than can be achieved by just using a semi-structured interview. It is the discussion which emerges from the mapping rather than the map itself which is important.

Maps are flexible tools which can evolve whilst at the same time keeping careful focus on the areas of enquiry. We had the basic idea of a ‘river of life and learning’ to map people’s life and learning journeys, ups and downs and change over time. Mapping can be a very emotional process so it was important to develop a relationship of rapport and trust. A ‘wheel of support’ was used to depict people’s networks of support. These basic mapping ideas were used and adapted by each person in different ways according to their style and preferred way of communicating. In most cases individuals drew their own river map or time line and wheel of support during the guided conversation. The maps are not meant to be in any way a complete depiction of life history or networks of support. Rather they provide a focal point and a starting point for vulnerable young people to be able to talk in an informal, relaxed way, about their life and learning journeys, their support networks, and how their choices or lack of choices have been influenced along the way.

On the following pages we provide examples of maps drawn during the guided conversations. In a few cases individuals preferred the researcher to sketch the river map for them whilst they chatted, as Martina’s maps show. Libby’s river map depicts how she felt engulfed by the waves of life. Being a very creative person, Micky drew more direct representation of herself on her support networks map and of the supported housing where she lived to show how she was linked to people. Most respondents rated their support out of five but Mickey felt that support is complex and gave each type of support both a happy and an unhappy symbol to depict this reality in her life.

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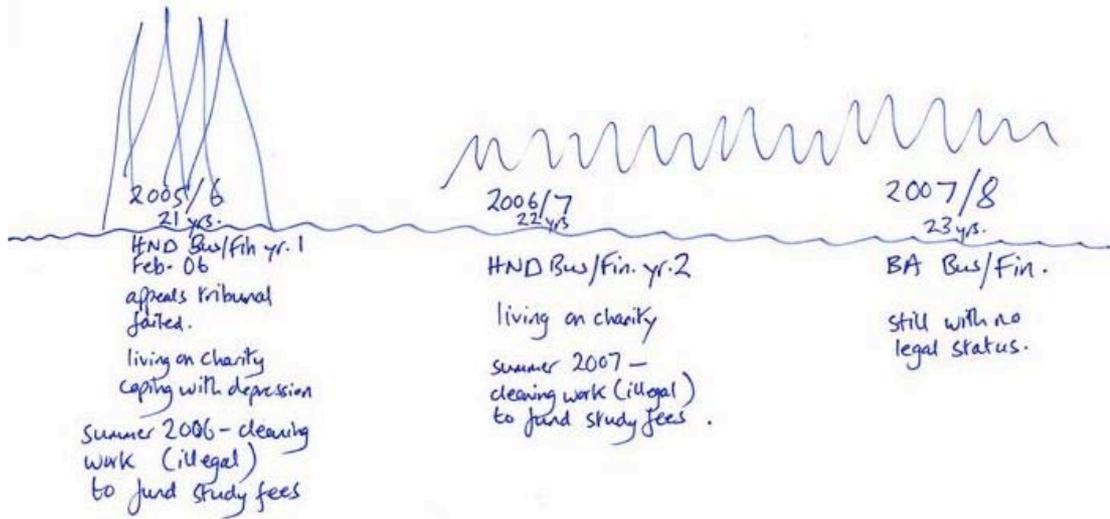
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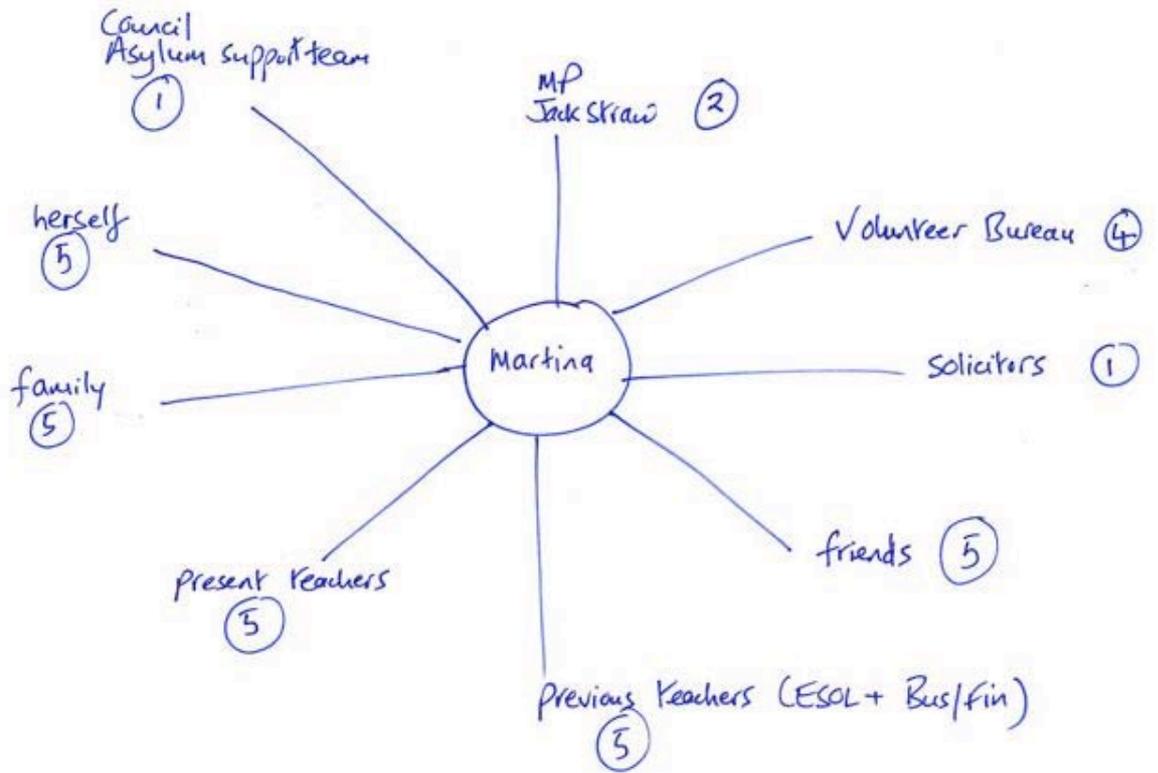
Freire, P. (1968) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Penguin Books.

## Participatory maps

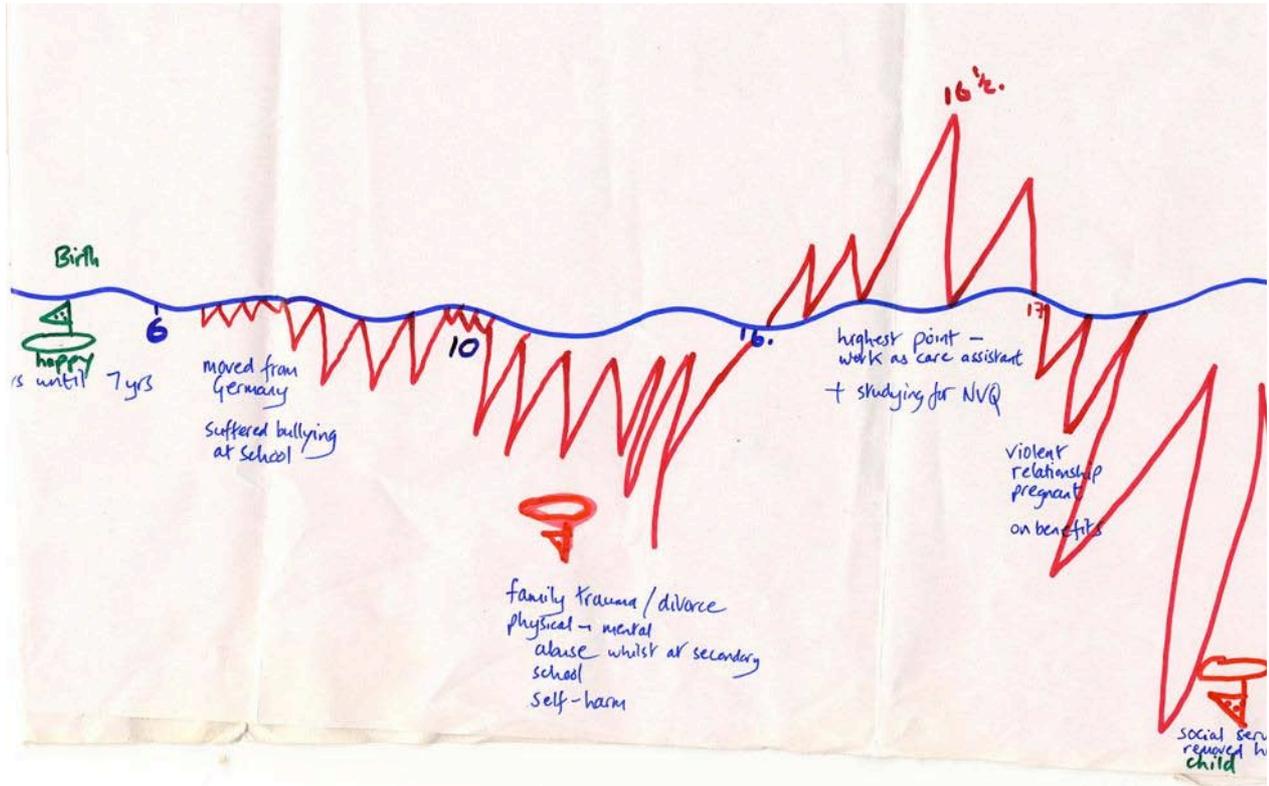
### Martina's river of life and learning



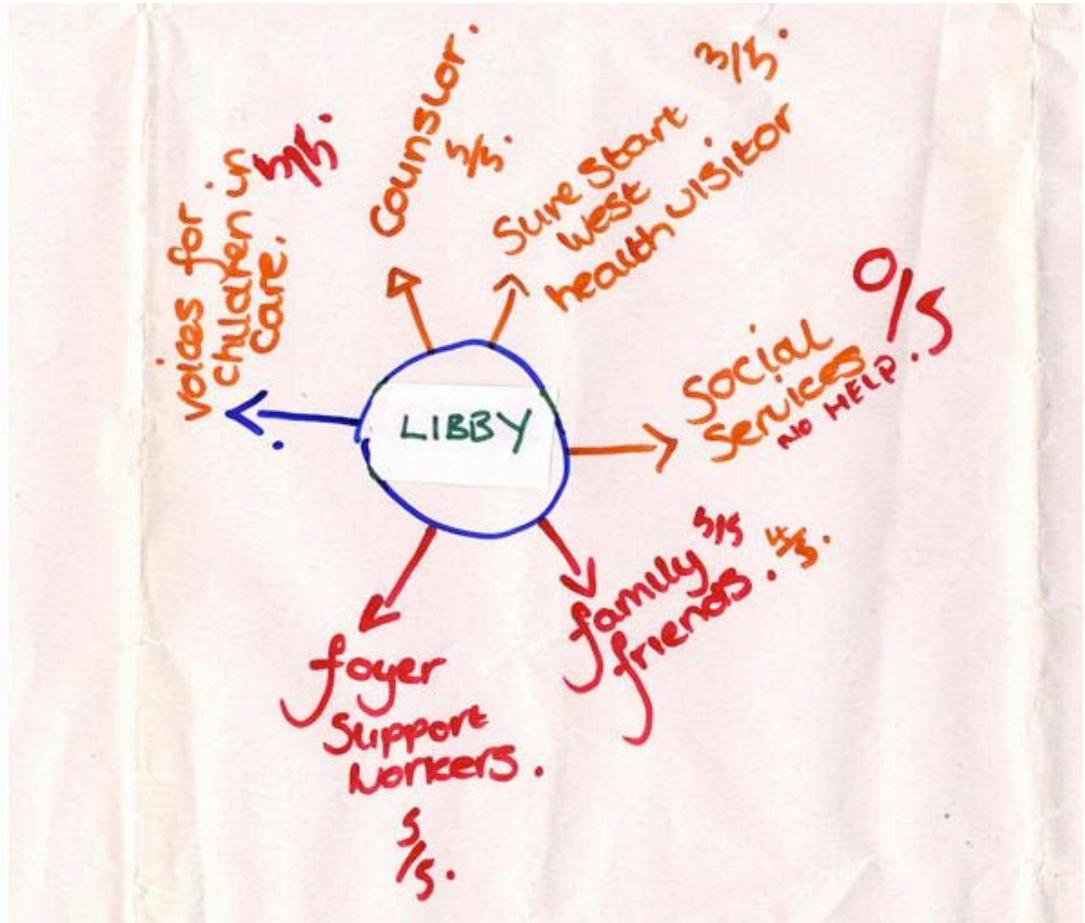
**Martina's wheel of support**



### Libby's river of life and learning



Libby's wheel of support



**Mickey's support networks**



