# NRDC

National Research and Development Centre
for adult literacy and numeracy

# Research report

## Learners' experience of work

David Barton, Karin Tusting, Rachel Hodge and Yvon Appleby
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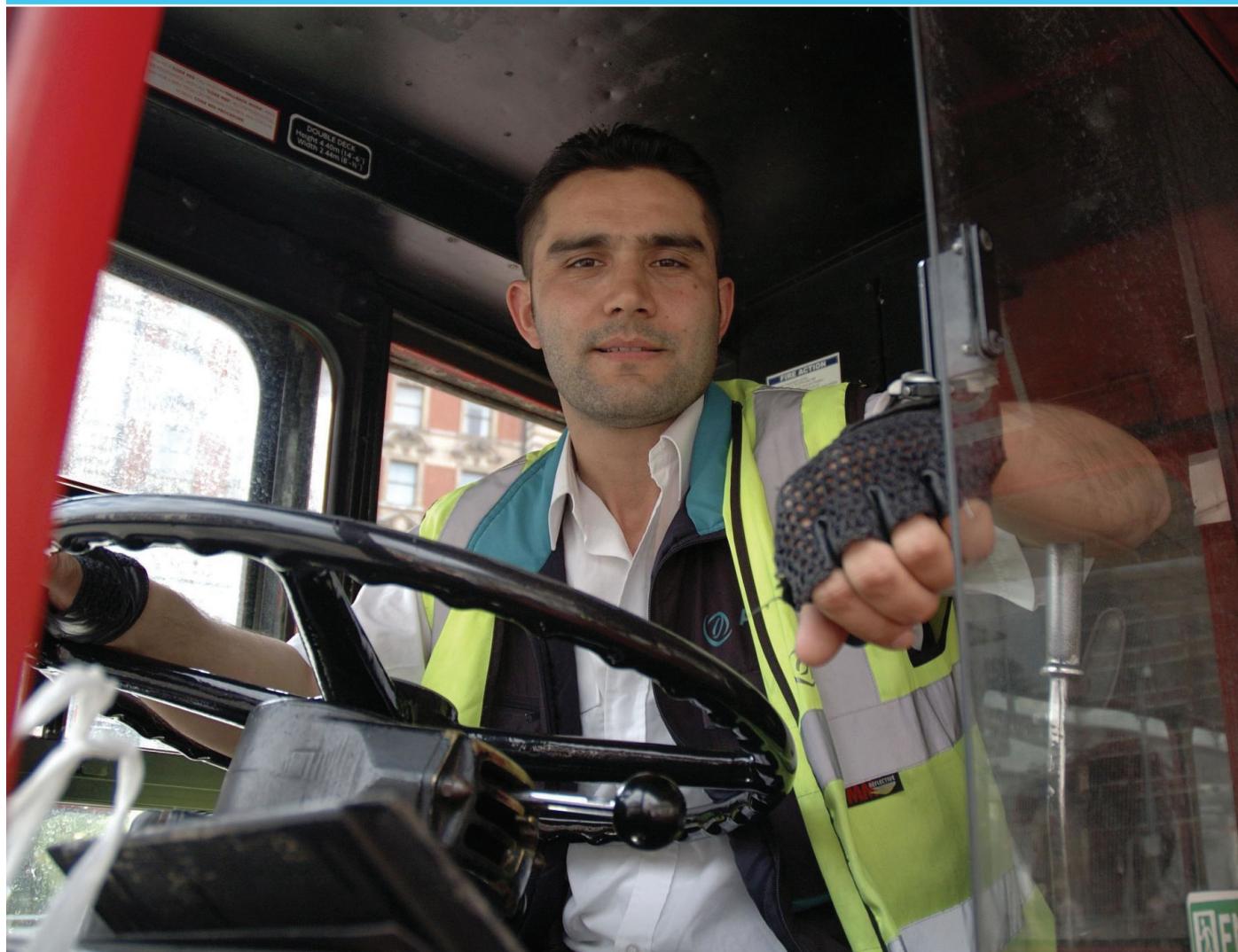
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**Peer review**

This report was peer reviewed by: Oonagh Gormley, City University, London; Ursula Howard, NRDC, Institute of Education, University of London; John Vorhaus, NRDC, Institute of Education, University of London.

# Executive summary

## Introduction

This report is concerned with the experiences of work reported by young people and adults who are on literacy, language, and numeracy courses. It makes a contribution to understanding the relationships between work, learning and lives through an understanding of the way in which decisions about work and learning are influenced by people's life histories, their current values and practices and their aspirations.

The report begins by examining the patterns of work which people reported. Secondly, it looks at the place of literacy, language, numeracy and IT in people's working lives, describing not only how people's perceived lack of skills held them back from taking on particular jobs or roles, but also how they developed their own strategies for succeeding in the workplace. People described changing literacy demands at work; the report examines how they coped with these changing demands and the sorts of learning this led to, including, particularly, changing uses of technology in the workplace.

It also explores issues around learning language in the workplace for non-English speakers, and how work can both contribute to and impede people's language development. It describes people's engagement in formal learning in their workplaces, alongside the learning they were doing outside work. It looks in details at how young people on an Entry to Employment programme experienced the uncertainty of the transition from education to employment and the role played by their learning programme in supporting them.

## Methodology

The data reported in this paper is drawn from a broader study, the Adult Learners' Lives project (Barton et al. 2006; Ivanic et al. 2006) which looked at college learning environments as well as provision for adults and young people who are often described as 'hard to reach', sites included Further Education colleges; a drug support and aftercare centre; a project for young homeless people and a domestic violence project. The researchers engaged with people over time, using a range of methods including repeated interviewing and participant observation in classes. This report is based on reanalysis of the transcripts of interviews with 134 students. Work was one of the topics which emerged from the data as having had a significant shaping influence on people's lives and their relationship to learning.

**Main findings**

- There was a wide variety in patterns of getting work, with a mixture of informal and formal ways, including starting on a voluntary basis and starting with casual work. Health issues, caring for others and practical concerns such as safety or distance got in the way of getting jobs. There were often gender expectations and expectations from people's families about the jobs they should or should not do, and at different times this supported or constrained people.

- People had held a variety of different jobs and there were complex patterns of progression. There was progression to other sorts of learning, other sorts of jobs, into and out of work, into and out of paid and voluntary work. Progression depended on many things going on in people's lives, including health, support for child care, and whether they had a right to remain in the country.

- Caring for others and voluntary work were significant parts of many people's lives and were counted as work by people. Work experience was valued as enabling people to see what they wanted to do and what they did not want to do.

- Issues of literacy, language and numeracy were mentioned in relation to getting jobs, and people avoided jobs where they thought they might experience difficulties. Where people experienced difficulties at work, this was often in relation to change in workplace practices, such as increasing accountability. People had strategies for managing difficulties, often drawing on networks of support.

- ESOL students generally valued work as an opportunity for practising English, although this was less possible where people worked in places where English was not the dominant language. On the other hand, work took time from more formal learning and limited the courses they could take.

- Informal learning on the job seemed to be as important as more formal training and qualifications. People valued NVQs, taking some which were directly work-related and others because they were available. People strongly identified knowing about IT as essential for the workplace. Workplace learning had different degrees of impact on the effectiveness of existing work, and it also opened up possibilities for different types of work, or for changes in everyday life outside work.

- The relationship between work and formal learning was not straightforward. As well as learning leading to work, the opposite was also true: stopping work sometimes gave people the opportunity to pursue more formal learning.

- People valued work as giving meaning and dignity; it was seen as 'good' in its own right, and not just for financial reasons. However, some people found work difficult and damaging to their health and it interfered with other responsibilities. Whilst people had clear ideas of what constituted a 'good job', this varied across people: for some it meant an office job, whilst others valued manual work as 'real work'.

- Provision for young people such as the Entry to Employment programme acted as a bridge into work for them; it gave them a space to develop in a period of uncertainty and transition in their lives; and such programmes acted as brokers, enabling young people to get experience of work.

# 1 Introduction

This report is concerned with the experiences of work reported by young people and adults on literacy, language, and numeracy courses. It makes a contribution to understanding the relationships between work, learning and lives. The research reported here complements, but is distinct from, two other traditions of research: studies of workplace learning and workplace ethnographies of literacy. The particular focus of this research is to look at people's experiences across time, to locate their experiences in broader aspects of their lives and to do this from the perspective of the learners themselves. We explore the links between work and literacy, language and numeracy and learning in their lives as a whole, not just in the workplace. We aim to get an understanding of how decisions about work and learning are influenced by the life histories that people bring with them, their current values and practices and their aspirations and perspectives related to their futures.

The data reported in this research report are drawn from a broader study of learners' lives.[1] This report describes the picture of work in people's lives that has emerged from detailed studies of peoples' lives in the Adult Learners' Lives project (Barton et al. 2006; Ivanic et al. 2006) which similarly argues the importance of understanding the role of literacy, language and numeracy education within a broader framework. This body of work links with case studies of ESOL learners reported in Roberts et al. (2004) and complements other NRDC research which approaches these issues with different methodologies; these include the quantitative cohort studies and the effective practice studies (Brooks et al. 2007, Grief et al. 2007, Coben et al. 2007, Mellar et al. 2007, Baynham et al. 2007), and work which focuses primarily on provision itself or evaluates the Skills for Life learning infrastructure.

The first year of the Adult Learners' Lives project concentrated on college learning environments. Working with teacher researchers enabled the research to be embedded in real classrooms and ensured that it had an impact on practice. In the second year of the project we worked in other sites with learners in provision for adults and young people who are often described as 'hard to reach'. This included a drug support and aftercare centre, a project for young homeless people and a domestic violence project. We also maintained contact with 53 learners who represent the longitudinal cohort of the study. Working collaboratively with practitioners in each of the sites, we explored participation and engagement among learners who frequently have problems in their lives which impact upon their learning. The researchers engaged with people over time, using a range of methods

including repeated interviewing and participant observation in classes. The research was carried out with people on a range of literacy, ESOL and numeracy courses and in both classroom and community settings. Work was one of the topics which emerged from the data as having had a significant shaping influence on people's lives and their relationship to learning.

Two hundred and eighty-two people participated in the adult learners' lives research, 134 were students and the remainder tutors, managers and other support workers. The electronic database from the project consists of 403 data files, which include 198 recorded interviews. Where we worked in depth with people on learning programmes, this ranged from carrying out several interviews over a six-month period to keeping in touch with the person and their learning for more than two years. The research reported in this paper is based upon re-analysis of the transcripts of interviews with the 134 students, examining what they said about work.

In this report we first examine the patterns of working which people reported: how they went about getting and leaving work, and the different patterns of working demonstrated in their lives. We show the range of ways people got into work and the multiple reasons people left work. Few of the learners we worked with followed straightforward paths to particular jobs, and we describe the patterns in people's working lives. Many people were balancing paid work and caring responsibilities, and we explore the impact of this balancing act on working life. Voluntary work played an important role in the lives of some of the people we worked with, and often brought with it a range of benefits.

Secondly, we look at the place of literacy, language, numeracy and IT in people's working lives. We describe not only how people's perceived lack of skills held them back from taking on particular jobs or roles, but also how people developed their own strategies for succeeding in the workplace. Key amongst these strategies was the use of their networks of support; we describe the different ways people drew on these networks and the significant impact that losing these networks could have, for instance when people moved away. People described changing literacy demands at work; we examine how they coped with these changing demands and the sorts of learning this led to, including particularly, changing uses of technology in the workplace. We explore the particular issues around learning language in the workplace for non-English speakers, and how work can both contribute to and impede people's language development. We describe people's engagement in formal learning in their workplaces, alongside the learning people were doing outside work.

We also explore the different values people expressed about work. Most people valued work in itself, but for a range of reasons. There were also implicit hierarchies in what people told us about different types of jobs, and we describe the different notions of what a 'good' job consisted of. Local, cultural and family expectations about work shaped these value systems, and we look in particular at how work was gendered for many of our research participants. Work was not seen as an intrinsically good thing by everyone, and we go on to describe the negative connotations associated with work, and where these had come from in people's lives.

Young people moving from school or education into work are often in a particularly difficult period of uncertainty and transition. We explore in more detail how this was experienced by young people on an Entry to Employment programme. We describe the role played by the programme in supporting them, their diverse goals relating to work, the barriers they faced and the strategies they used to counter these, and the positive and negative impact work

experience had had for them. Finally, we draw out key points emergent from this work. Throughout this report, using pseudonyms, we look in detail at the experiences of particular individuals. By examining in detail the experiences of individuals in this way, we aim to develop a nuanced understanding of the range of experiences and possibilities related to work for learners of literacy, language and numeracy.

This work is intended to complement other studies of workplace learning. These include NRDC studies such as Wolf and Jenkins (2003), which summarises the literature on the benefits which employers derive from raising the basic skills levels of the workforce, and Wolf et al. (2004), which explores the effectiveness of workplace basic skills programmes. In relation to the broader field of workplace learning this current study responds to the need to better understand 'the reflexive ways in which people's lives are shaped, bounded or change direction as they engage with education, labour market and workplace' (Hodkinson et al. 2004: 8).

Another strand of evidence is provided by the detailed ethnographies of literacy in the workplace. Although such studies have not been common in the UK, a range of studies internationally (especially in the United States, Canada, Australia and South Africa) have examined workplaces, looking at what is actually going on in terms of people's literacy practices. See for example Gowen (1992), Hull (1997), Prinsloo and Breier (1996), and Belfiore et al. (2004).

# 2 Patterns of working

## 2.1 Getting work

There was a wide range of ways in which people got work, much broader than what is often assumed to be the 'default' process, that of following up a job advertisement. Many people obtained work through people they knew, friends and family, or informal contacts. One of the people in our study, Helen, did babysitting work locally as and when people asked for it. Another, Barbra, got into care work through knowing a manager of a care home and by doing residents' hair one day a week there; the manager told her she had 'a way with' elderly people and should consider care work. Max, another carer, first heard about jobs at a day centre through being keyholder for a meeting which met regularly at the day centre, as a result of which he got to know the staff there and the way things worked. Tommy got his caretaking job through attending the same IT courses as the existing caretaker. Working directly with family members was also a way in which people got into work. Jane used to go out cleaning with her grandmother as a child, and also helped out on the fields in the village. Jack worked on the family farm from his childhood onwards, eventually inheriting it. His wife was responsible for most of the books, letters and paperwork. Thomas worked with his wife running a pub. Anna and her husband ran a chip shop together. Isabel worked with her husband when he was self-employed, helping him to run the business. Faisullah's first job was in his family's furniture shop. Mohammed worked with his father on the family farm in his home country. Jason learned to work by 'hanging about' with his uncle who worked on the docks. Sameena assisted her husband with his jewellery business.

Getting jobs through official schemes was important for some learners. After having left her previous job through anxiety and depression, Elizabeth attended a scheme at the Job Centre, which got her two successful interviews. Jason went on a Youth Training Scheme (YTS) at 16 which got him work on a large construction site, where he learned scaffolding, paving and bricklaying by hanging about and making himself useful. Work experience schemes were another way people got into work. Mark started working as part of his college course, training to do building work. And some learners reported having got work through agencies. Tommy got agency work after being made redundant. David got his post as an au pair through an agency.

Some got paid employment starting on a casual basis and then moved into permanent employment. Jason 'hung about' firstly at the docks till he got work, and later on building sites learning more and earning more. Isabel started working at a day centre on a casual basis to help out, and eventually took on a more regular post. Max applied for a permanent post at a day centre, didn't get it, but was then given work on a casual basis; after working there for a while they then offered him a contract. Voluntary work also played an important

role in giving people ways into paid work, either by leading directly to a job, or by allowing people to develop their networks, practices and confidence in a safe environment. We will return to look at some of the benefits of voluntary work below.

Some jobs had ways of starting that were specific to the industry or type of work. Mark explained how as a brickie you start off by going round different building sites asking people for work, until you have built up a reputation locally and are in the networks, then you hear about work through them. Jack was born into farming, trained with his family and inherited the family tenanted farm. Thomas, a publican, bought a pub and built it up from a 'derelict shell'.

And some people had followed several of these paths for getting work at different points in their working lives. Katrina's story demonstrates examples of almost all of them. Though only in her early twenties, she has worked and trained in several different places. She began working in Saturday jobs. She obtained factory work through an agency for a short period of time. She then did an NVQ Level 1 on the New Deal programme while she was unemployed. A cousin who worked in childcare told her about the possibility of doing the NVQ Level 2 in childcare at a training agency; she signed up for this course, which included work experience at a nursery. The scheme finished before she completed her NVQ, so she continued working at the nursery in a voluntary capacity until she had completed it. She attended a training centre for support in applying for jobs, CV writing and interview techniques. Finally she did a trial six-week period at a private nursery and after-school club, leading to a job with one day a week at college working on an NVQ Level 2 in play work.

Wider political and economic changes affected people's work opportunities. David, from Hungary, was able to become a full-time student in Lancaster because Hungary had now joined the EU. The opportunities available to people in Liverpool for manufacturing or dock work had been sharply reduced in the past 30 years, which affected the possibilities open to people like Jason, Tommy and Harold, whose family and personal histories had been closely linked to these industries. The effects of the global situation applied particularly to the people in ESOL classes who were refugees or seeking asylum, whose whole lives had been framed within traumatic global political circumstances beyond their control, which brought them to the UK. Changes in these circumstances can make their asylum claims more or less likely to succeed and open up or close down possibilities for them to work.

This variety of ways of getting work has direct implications for the work which is done in provision which is focused around job seeking. Crucially, this includes how formal applications complement traditional more informal routes.

## 2.2 Leaving work

There was a variety of reasons for leaving different jobs. Occasionally this related to finding the job itself difficult, but more often this was because of other responsibilities, health-related reasons, reasons like safety and security to do with the conditions of work. Sometimes there were reasons beyond their control, such as when factories closed.

Many people had to leave work for health reasons. Jason couldn't work after a hit-and-run accident. Tommy had to stop doing agency work because of problems with his back, caused partly by years of manual work. Elizabeth had to leave through stress and anxiety, related to managing childcare and doing two jobs at once. Cheri also had to leave through stress and

anxiety, and was eventually diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Alan was hospitalised and Michael and Thomas were both signed off work with anxiety following what they called 'breakdowns'. Mark had to stop work temporarily after injuring his back, and was concerned about what would have happened if his back had been damaged more severely.

Others had had to leave work to care for others. Elizabeth stopped work partly because she felt she was not adequately supporting her daughter. Susan stopped working when she had her children and has done unpaid caring work for children, grandchildren and her husband ever since. Teresa had to give up working in a care home, which she enjoyed, because she couldn't do this and look after her children at the same time. Susanne has never worked outside of the home, having left school early to look after her brothers and sisters and care for the house for her mother. Later she cared for her father's house and after she was married looked after her three children. Sarah stopped doing voluntary work with the college, although she really enjoyed it, because she felt the hours of the work did not fit in with her children's school times and holidays. Alfonso wanted to work when he and the family came to England, but his wife got a full-time job and so he had to stay at home and take care of the children. Barbra had to leave work for a while to care for her sick father and for her children, who she brought up on her own. Isabel had to stop work to care for her elderly mother for a couple of years. Soraya did not pursue her desired career in psychology because she got married and had to care for her children, and now felt she could not do full-time study and go for her 'dream job' as a psychologist because she had to take care of her young family. Issues around caring responsibilities will be revisited later.

People also left work for reasons to do with the job itself, such as travelling distance or safety concerns. Katrina stopped working at the factory because of the difficulty and long hours involved in travelling there. Cheri gave up her job in a cinema after a hold-up made her and her partner concerned about safety there. Elizabeth didn't take a job she was offered with a rail company because she was concerned about safety on late-night shifts.

Although these were people in literacy, language and numeracy classes, none of them cited skills gaps as the principal or even as a significant contributing factor for the reasons they left work. However, this was important, below, in shaping what jobs they applied for, whether they took on new positions and how they dealt with change.

## 2.3 Patterns of work

Some of the people we spoke to, such as Jack, a farmer, or Mark, a bricklayer, had been in the same job or trade for the whole of their working lives. But this was not the norm. Other people held different types of jobs consecutively, were working on two or three jobs at once, or were balancing paid work and unpaid work.

Many people we spoke to had spent the majority of their working lives doing different types of manual work. Many people had worked in construction or manufacturing. Jason had worked on the docks and in scaffolding; Tommy had done factory work and welding; Susan and Jane had had a variety of factory jobs; Harold had worked on the docks; Faisullah had been a stonemason; Mohammed had done farming and cleaning; Mohan had worked in a clothing factory as a sewer, in a sealing job, and now in a sewing factory in Blackburn; Alfonso worked in an industrial laundry; David had been a joiner. Another common area was the hospitality industry. Sarah and Elizabeth had done pub work; Susan had done café and restaurant work;

Teresa had worked in different chip shops; Thomas had run a pub; Alfonso had worked in hotels.

Spending some time in care work was another common theme. Teresa had worked in about five chip shops and done other non-skilled work, and had worked as a care assistant in an elderly people's home. Patricia had worked in a range of low-skilled employment whilst learning English and was now looking after foster children in a care home. Maxine had done a variety of different jobs, including hotel and waitressing work and telephone sales, and was now working as a carer in a local residential college for young people with physical and/or learning difficulties. Others had spent most of their working life in retail and sales. Paula had worked making foodstuffs at home and then selling them, and had done secretarial and sales work with a mobile phone company; Jane had worked in supermarkets; Cheri had worked in electronics retail and in supermarkets; Elizabeth had worked in retail selling electronic goods.

Few people have followed a straightforward path of employment, progressing from low paid to higher paid work. Getting work, leaving work or needing to balance two or more jobs was not so much dependent on improving basic skills; it was more directly related to other life issues, such as a person's own health or their family's health or care, or the wider economic situation affecting people's job opportunities.

# 3 Paid and unpaid work

Paid employment is one kind of 'work' among many. It is clear that adults balance paid employment and unpaid work, including voluntary work and domestic caring responsibilities.

## 3.1 Caring work

A lot of people talked about doing paid work and caring work at the same time. Unpaid care work, such as looking after parents, siblings or children or doing community work, was often 'invisible' in the world of work. For instance, Elizabeth, whose husband had died in his thirties, had held down two jobs successfully for some time, while also caring for her children. Isabel, while doing casual work for the care services, was also caring for her elderly mother and helping her husband with his business. Paid work was sometimes in conflict with family responsibilities, particularly for sole parents, like Elizabeth, Sarah, Susanne and Teresa, who often had to fit in family around work and vice versa.

Others reported having to stop paid work to care for others. Susan gave up work to raise six children; she cared for her sick husband 24-hours a day in the year before he died, and now supported her grandson who had Attention Deficit Disorder. Paula, an ESOL learner, felt that caring for her son, who has suffered from depression, was more important to her than getting work. Teresa eventually had to give up work to care for her family. Ammara found work as a mobile hairdresser was incompatible with caring for her son. Instead, she took jobs in childcare which she found easier to fit around family life, prioritising her children over any paid work she might do. Susanne was never permitted to work at all; she had been forced by violent parents and later a violent husband to stay at home and maintain the house.

But some people found that other people's health problems led them into paid work in the first place. Jack started working full-time on the farm as a teenager; he had to take on more responsibility following an accident when his brother's foot was crushed with a bulldozer. This was when he left school for good. The death of Elizabeth's husband led her into doing part-time work to support her family.

Caring experiences were primarily gendered: they were reported mainly by women, although not completely so. Harold, an ex-dock worker whose working life is described more fully below, also cared for a disabled son; Alan and Jason cared for their elderly parents; Ashrad cared for his children while waiting for legal permission to work; Alfonso cared for his two young children full-time; Abdul cared for his children part-time whilst his wife attended ESOL classes.

This complex negotiation of their own and other people's needs has shaped many people's working lives. Barbra's story shows how she juggled paid work with unpaid caring and family work, and demonstrates the importance of other people's needs and demands in the paths she took, and did not take, throughout her working life.

Barbra started work as a Saturday girl in a hairdresser's when she was 14, shampooing, sweeping the floor, taking money and the like. This wasn't really her first choice of a job, but something her mother wanted her to do. Her mother was very dominant, and had wanted to go into hairdressing herself, but during the war they had to pay a premium to do it and her family couldn't afford it. So she encouraged Barbra to do it instead. The woman in charge thought she did very well, so indentured her. Barbra did three years as an apprentice hairdresser, going to college on day release to do Hair and Beauty. In her late teens and early twenties she also sang semi-professionally in a band, travelling around the area for gigs.

When she was 18, she passed the entrance exam to do nursing training at a local teaching hospital. By this time her parents had split up, and her dad told her that he didn't want her to do it, as it would have meant her moving out and he didn't feel he could cope without her. She had got as far as buying the uniform, but he threatened to harm himself if she went to college. She stayed with him instead and carried on as a hairdresser.

She spent the majority of her working life as a hairdresser, working in different salons around the area, and also doing a bit for herself. She got involved with social services and used to do one day a week at a local home for elderly people who had retired from the stage, doing 30 people's hair per visit. The manager told her she had 'a way' with elderly people and suggested she might consider care work, which took her fancy because of having considered nursing earlier on. So when a new day centre opened she applied for a post and got it, being one of only six successful applicants out of 400.

She has worked there ever since, taking breaks out to care for her father through emphysema, and deal with his significant demands (which were so great that her marriage broke up and she was left with two children to bring up on her own). But when she could, she came back to work at the day centre. She works 25 hours a week, and has at the same time brought up two children on her own and cared for elderly relatives.

She has some regrets about her working life. She feels that she should have taken time out when she was left with two children to bring up on her own: she should have stopped working and instead gone to college and used the time to do something for herself. She says it was very hard work, looking after the children and her father, and 'I should have treated myself a bit kinder'. Her dad could have helped her out financially, as he had had what she describes as a 'good job', as an engineer and foreman for ICI. She also has relatives who would have helped her out. But she says that she has always suffered from anxiety, as the result of a serious head injury suffered as a child, and this has stopped her doing a lot of things which would have been financially and creatively beneficial for her. Her coping strategy has been to pretend to the world that she is 'unsinkable', so she was not willing to ask for help to pursue the things that she wanted to do.

## 3.2 Voluntary work

Organised voluntary work brought with it many of the benefits associated with paid work, such as a sense of purpose and dignity. Harold expressed this well. He was made redundant at the age of 50 after working on the docks in Liverpool for 24 years. His son had a disability and while he was working he spent many years working with disabled groups. After being made redundant, he began to volunteer at the tenants' association. He also sat on a young offenders' board. He felt it important to make a contribution to his community, and had a real commitment to the area he lived in. He viewed this in some ways as more important than the commitment made to paid work:

> 'If I was working for money then obviously you're getting paid so your commitment is just like to one firm, but my commitment now is to quite a number of people in the community and it is rewarding itself in that way.'

He also made friends through his volunteer work, and has developed skills including computer skills and talking on the phone with officials.

Ammara, in addition to her paid childcare job, undertook voluntary work as a nursery nurse, working with children with behavioural difficulties, despite experiencing a struggle to balance work and other responsibilities. She said she had taken this on because she felt she had the skills to do a 'proper' job, working in a caring profession, and drawing on her skills and her background in social sciences to talk to the children about truancy and the importance of education. When her children were older, she hoped to be a child protection officer, and work in this field professionally. Until then, her voluntary work helped her to maintain her self-respect and feelings of being useful.

Voluntary work also brought the opportunity for people to develop their skills in a supportive environment. Javed, an ESOL learner from Pakistan who came to Britain with his family when he was aged 16, had done a range of different voluntary work. He felt a need to do something in his new country and to learn British language and culture. This gave him a sense of purpose. Working at a community centre and hospice helped him keep busy, and he felt he was doing something worthwhile by keeping elderly people and patients company. It expanded his social networks and led to an increased sense of integration and knowledge of British culture, as well as improving his own literacy. The work provided social and information networks that helped him integrate into a new society, as well as language and communicative opportunities. He was simultaneously doing work experience in a garage as part of his motor vehicle course and was looking forward to doing similar work in another garage and also applying to work as a volunteer with the police.

However, this was not always the case, and it depended on the type of voluntary work people were doing and how they were positioned in the role. Cordelia, who described herself as having learning difficulties, did voluntary work for a while but didn't enjoy it. She had worked at a charity sorting clothes, and felt this wasn't actually helping her to develop: 'it's not actually getting my brain to think, and I need to get my brain to have a look and get it working'. She moved on to doing a variety of different college courses, and for her, this was a much more fruitful path for development. Mo, on an Entry to Employment course, found his work experience in a charity shop demeaning, dirty, too basic and not related to his need to become familiar with mainstream retailing.

For some people, voluntary work was seen as a step towards paid employment. As we have seen above, Katrina's voluntary work at the nursery enabled her to complete her NVQ and eventually get work in a private nursery. Sarah left school and did a BTEC in care, then worked in pubs for four or five years, then signed up to do a college course in business administration and IT. While doing this, she worked on a voluntary basis at the college, feeling that this would be useful experience on her CV (and also giving her a crèche place). She was now training to be a teaching assistant, a job that would fit in with the children's school holidays.

But it is important to note that voluntary work was seen not only as a step towards paid employment, but as having value in its own right. For several people we have worked with, voluntary work brought the benefits outlined above but with more freedom and less responsibility than paid work, in cases where paid work was impossible. This was particularly important where people were dealing with mental and physical health issues which made paid work impossible at that time; for them engaging in voluntary work offered opportunities to participate in fulfilling activities, to create structure in their day and to develop social networks. Jason, Cheri and Sheena's stories are examples of this.

Jason became involved in voluntary work with a tenants' association after a hit-and-run accident made his previous work in a variety of manual jobs impossible. The accident also contributed to him developing depression and a problem with drinking. Working at the tenants' association gave him structure, friends and a sense of purpose. The association supported him to go to college and to develop his skills by engaging in useful activities. They were flexible enough to continue to support him through his difficult times, a level of support which would probably have been unsustainable in paid employment.

Cheri had worked in a greengrocer shop, a computer shop, two electrical warehouse shops, as a telephone canvasser selling ad space for the local newspaper, at a cinema in the box office and as an usherette, and in her local supermarket. She was now a voluntary student rep at the college. This gave her a great deal of pride, and was a responsibility that she felt she could manage, while a paid job would have been very difficult for her given her mental health difficulties. She felt she was able to do this work because of the support she got and the knowledge that if it got too much she could stop, whereas her bipolar disorder made it virtually impossible for her to do paid work. Sheena worked as a volunteer at a shelter for young homeless people, having come from that background herself. She felt that her issues around authority and accountability would make paid work impossible for her. Volunteering at the shelter enabled her to give back to the place that she felt had saved her life, by supporting her through her most difficult times.

Volunteer work was also important for people who could not get paid work for legal reasons, which applied particularly to ESOL learners who were seeking asylum or refugee status, such as Javed, above, and Joelle, who got voluntary work with a theatre company to practise her English and meet new people.

It is clear from the discussion above that voluntary and caring work are significant parts of many of these people's lives. They also bring important social and community benefits that are often invisible. It is therefore important to broaden notions of what people's 'working lives' can mean, and to make sure that voluntary and caring work are included in notions of productive activity in society.

# 4 Work and literacy, language, numeracy and IT

## 4.1 Choosing jobs

Some people had deliberately avoided particular types of work because of the literacy and numeracy demands attached. Javed postponed volunteering with the police until his literacy skills improved, because he felt 'in a good job you need reading and writing'. Elizabeth felt she could have become a manager, but worried about her spelling and felt this would have been made an issue of by competitive male colleagues. Susanne was unable to read or write and was uncertain what work she could do. Maxine had always chosen jobs which in her view did not involve reading and writing, principally bar, hotel and restaurant work, and care work. Where there was some reading and writing involved she developed strategies for dealing with it. Cordelia said that she wasn't working because of her dyslexia and learning disabilities. Thomas felt he created his pub work around what he could and couldn't do. Ethel initially turned down the first job she was offered, at a dry cleaners, because she was worried about writing down people's names and addresses wrongly – though ironically enough, it was this degree of honesty that got her the job in the end!

An example of the interaction of literacy and jobs is shown in Jane's self-consciousness about her spelling skills which shaped her whole work history, as in the profile below.

Jane left school at 15. She couldn't read until she was 11, when a teacher realised that she was struggling with paperwork. She has always been self-conscious about her spelling, and used to avoid anything that involved reading and writing. Her grandmother used to take her out on cleaning jobs, and occasionally she would be asked to get involved with 'paperwork' – at which point she would 'quickly make an excuse and go out in the garden'. She was also working in the fields from the age of 9 years old, and so missed a lot of school.

She has always chosen jobs which did not involve much reading and writing, and has refused promotion several times because she did not want people to find out she couldn't spell. She would have liked to have been a hairdresser but at the time it didn't pay enough money and her grandmother (who she was living with) couldn't afford to keep her, and she was also worried that it might involve writing down people's names and she didn't want to get that wrong. She swore she would never work in a factory but ended up doing this for some time, because it did not involve spelling. She was offered a supervisor's job but turned it down, because of the reading, writing and mathematics involved. She was also offered a bookkeeping job – she had thought it was a factory job she was applying for but ended up being offered work in the office, and so she didn't turn up for it. She has also worked as a cleaner, which she hated,

thinking she was capable of 'more than this'. She was then offered a till job in a shop but was worried about the spelling that might be involved, and so took a shelf-stacker's job instead. She has worked in a nursing home as a carer. She used to manage the reading and writing involved in that by copying down what had been written previously. By this stage, she was a bit older and had more confidence, so was able to ask colleagues how to spell words – she wasn't afraid of doing this because 'they normally are hard words in medical sort of things, so they wouldn't think anything'. In previous jobs, she would have just avoided spelling anything. So she always ended up doing physical jobs, but an injury meant that she was now unable to do that sort of work.

She started attending literacy classes in her late forties. She regrets not coming to classes earlier and feels this has held her back in her career, saying that it has really affected her whole life. She has been doing jobs she has not enjoyed, and has earned a lot less money than she felt she could have done if she had been able to spell. Also, she feels that if she had felt able to take on the office work which was offered to her, she would have picked up other things, like working on computers, as she went along, which would have opened up even more possibilities for her. She said she put on a front that she was happy, but really there were things she wanted to do that she wasn't doing, like travel more and feel independent enough to go for any job, which made her feel inadequate and unhappy. She would like to do English GCSE eventually and go for what she sees as a 'good' job. For the moment she feels:

> 'I'm not doing anything because I'm still not at the level I would need to be, I would need exams, now, to get a job, so I've still got a while to go.'

Some people had experienced intimidation and lack of confidence related to literacy in the workplace. Elizabeth felt intimidated by her male colleagues in one of her sales jobs. She felt that they were the ones who got sent on training courses more often and were more likely to be promoted into management, even though their sales figures were often not as good as the women's. She felt that she could have become a manager, but was worried that her spelling would have made her an easy target for competitive male colleagues and she did not apply for promotion.

There were examples of literacy and numeracy tests serving as gatekeepers for particular jobs. We met Helen in a spelling class, but she had already successfully achieved a degree in history and was hoping to do a postgraduate teacher training course. However, she had failed the English test now required of all secondary school teachers. She had dyslexia, and had tutor support and special exam conditions throughout her education. However, this support was not permitted for the teacher training test. She was determined to become a teacher and spent a year developing spelling strategies. She was hoping that this would enable her to pass the test under the conditions specified and continue along her desired career path.

This is one example of lack of support for a specific disability related to literacy. There were several cases where this had affected the work choices available to people. Both Jodie and Cordelia had problems doing work experience, where there was no support for or understanding of their learning disabilities among the other staff. Cordelia now felt that she couldn't work, because of her learning disabilities. She felt that as someone with a learning disability she was unable to work, and that no one in a pet shop, her ideal job, would ever consider employing her. Maxine had good support for her dyslexia at school and was

predicted good grades, until she reached her GCSE year when she moved to a school with no support and ended up leaving with no qualifications and taking jobs that didn't require qualifications. Susan's deafness was not picked up until after school, limiting her access to education. Barbra felt that the anxiety she has suffered and the interruption to her education as a result of her head injury as a child affected her life chances, and that without the anxiety she might have done work that fulfilled her creative leanings more.

Some, like Jane, felt they had been 'stuck' in doing only manual jobs because they were trying to avoid literacy and numeracy demands; but this characterised surprisingly few of the people we spoke to. As we have already seen in several of the sections above, issues around the sorts of jobs that were available, the sorts of contacts people had, their other familial and social responsibilities, and their physical and mental health capacities were perceived as having a more significant shaping role in their work histories.

## 4.2 Strategies for managing the literacy, language and numeracy demands of work

Often people were managing their working lives well. They went for jobs they could do and were skilled in, which sometimes happened not to involve much reading and writing, but this wasn't always the deciding factor. People used a variety of strategies to succeed at work. Maxine, a young woman with dyslexia, learned scripts by heart rather than reading them out, enabling her to take on a job in a call centre. She was now working for an NVQ in care while she worked in a care home, and exploring the possibilities for doing her assessments using audio cassette recording. Anna, a beginner ESOL learner from China who owned a fish and chip takeaway with her husband, came to an ESOL workshop to support her learning. She made sure that among the first things she learned were the frequently-ordered items on the menu, and spent time practising 'pie and chips', 'sausage and chips' and 'fish and chips'. Then she learned how to talk to her customers about the weather.

People drew on the structures, tools and resources available in the workplace for support, with technology being a particularly helpful resource. Elizabeth, who had dyslexia, used the frameworks of the computer system at work as a support to structure her activities, helping her to become a top saleswoman. When she moved to a similar job where there was less use of a computerised database system, she found the work more difficult as her existing strategies could not be used. Jack, a farmer, found that the introduction of increasingly computerised systems helped him to enter data about cows' feeding and milk yield statistics more effectively, because with the new system he just had to punch in the cow number and a lot of the information, like dates, came up automatically. He also appreciated increased use of the phone to order supplies; he stopped having to practise certain words in his spelling class, because nowadays his feed suppliers phoned him up whenever their automated systems told them he might be getting low and asked him if he was ready to re-order. We see here how technology in the workplace changes the demands on people in complex ways.

## 4.3 Networks of support

A particularly significant strategy people used to support their work was to draw on other people and social networks for support. Jane, mentioned above, become confident enough to ask colleagues for support in her spelling, helping her to deal with the writing demands of her care work. An overdeveloped focus on skills and individual learning overlooks the fact that

people often do their jobs with other people, and so can draw on each other's skills for help. We had several examples of people's partners assisting them with the paperwork aspects of their work, especially for the self-employed. Jack, a farmer, and Thomas, a publican, were both highly successful businessmen with dyslexia, who did very little reading and writing. They were both assisted by their wives in writing letters, setting up filing systems and dealing with paperwork demands. It was also normal practice for the self-employed in particular to draw on professional expertise, especially for specialist numeracy activities; Mark, the self-employed bricklayer, and Jack the farmer both talked about the role of accountants in running their businesses. People also learned informally from other people at work, like Helen, who had no specific training for her part-time job in a bookshop, but worked out how to use the stock-control system together with the other staff:

> 'You're always working with somebody that can show you things, and then if you find an easier way of doing it you can show them, and you just feed off each other.'

Where people move and lose their networks, as was the case particularly for several of the ESOL learners we worked with, they can experience isolation and disadvantage as well as loss of status and identity. For instance, Abdul was unable to work while waiting for a work permit. He spent time looking after his children, helping with their homework, reading, watching television, attending the BBC Learning Centre and working on his English. Nevertheless, he felt he was doing very little. He wanted to develop his level of English as quickly as possible so that he could get work as soon as he had a work permit. However, with few opportunities to speak English to people outside his ESOL class, he felt he did not get enough practice. This marginalisation, experienced by many newly-arrived ESOL learners, was compounded by the insufficient advice he received about job seeking and his lack of 'cultural knowledge' about the worlds of education and work and how best to access these.

Developing networks of support was important for many ESOL learners in order to help them find work in the first place. It is an issue for getting into work, as well as for support and learning once work is begun. We have examples of people using voluntary work and college, drawing on teachers and even researchers, to help build up their social networks and move on. Frederick, unable to work in England for legal reasons, enrolled in ESOL classes almost immediately on his arrival in Blackburn, despite finding it hard. This was a key place for him to make friends, as well as practising his English. Javed persisted in attempts to enrol in English classes as soon as possible, despite being turned away from college initially as he was considered to be too young. It was then his English teacher who put him in contact with a volunteer bureau, from where he obtained voluntary work at a community centre. When he moved to Blackburn from Preston, it was again his English teacher who became the key person in his quest to find work, putting him in touch with the volunteer bureau in Blackburn. The bureau regularly organises nights out and trips, and these have led to many new friendships for him with the other voluntary workers, expanding both his Asian and his British networks and leading to an increased sense of integration and knowledge of British culture. When he started doing a motor vehicle course, he continued to make Pakistani and English friends. Integrating into the two cultures is important for him, since he felt an outsider on two counts, both through language and through nationality.

Where people could work, it was a particularly useful means for them to build up their social networks. Alfonso, a very resourceful young man from the Caribbean, had been working in hotels since his teens. He had managed to teach himself not only English, German and French, but also the skills he needed to progress quickly in his hotel job. He came to England

with his British wife and their two young children. They had planned to both work part-time, but she found it easier to get work than he did, and he ended up at home caring for the children full-time. This made it very hard for him to meet people and to develop his English skills. He felt that he spent a whole year in the house and that the only thing he could do was to go to the shop on the corner. Eventually he and his wife agreed on a trial separation, and he began to work in a local laundry and to go to college, doing English and maths courses. This was the point at which things started to turn around for him: he made friends through work, his English improved rapidly and he began to look to the future, signing up for catering training. He was currently working as a chef, having gained his NVQ. Ammara was aware that being a housewife left her isolated socially, professionally and academically, as well as being detrimental to her language acquisition. Working and becoming part of social networks in the working world had an enormously beneficial effect on her English. Mahmood found that his job in a sewing factory had expanded his social network and helped him to integrate into British society. Socialising with colleagues at the weekend helped him feel part of the team and gave him a sense of inclusion.

A purely skills-based individualised notion of what is necessary to be good at your job overlooks the important role of these social networks for finding work and for developing social, literacy, language and numeracy skills.

## 4.4 Changing literacy, language and numeracy demands

Another aspect of the literacy demands people spoke about at work is the way they change over time. For many, this was driven by regulatory frameworks. Jack, the dairy farmer, has had to deal with the introduction of elaborate tracking systems for every cow; if any of this paperwork goes missing, his stock become worthless. Isabel, a worker at a day care centre, described in detail the constantly changing (and constantly increasing) nature of the forms they have to fill in for each of their clients, including care plans, risk assessments and review forms, some completed on a daily basis. Barbra explained how the requirements of care work have become more complex in themselves, as they are dealing with people with increasingly complex needs coming into day care, because of societal changes like increased social mobility of families and the closure of care homes.

Often these changes were examples of large-scale institutional changes, such as the increased focus on accountability in public services, or the increased concern with risk management partly driven by concerns about liability, being lived out in people's local realities. An interesting example of this came in the experiences of the tenants' association, where Harold and Jason were volunteer workers. The estate that they were responsible for shifted ownership, from being a council estate to being a council-supported housing association. Suddenly, tenants were having to deal with aspects of housing themselves, like gas checks and repairs, which up until that point the council had been responsible for. The tenants' association assisted people with this process, and it led to a great deal more paperwork responsibilities than they had previously had to cope with. At the same time, they were expected to be complying with increasing demands for formal accountability, such as minuting meetings and setting themselves up as a formal organisation with a chair and constitution. All of this changed the nature of the role and increased the literacy demands considerably, and the volunteers had to learn to manage all of this quickly.

### 4.5 IT in the workplace

The introduction of IT in the workplace was a change most people were concerned about in different ways. There was a strong perceived need to be proficient in IT, and an understanding that 'everyone' will need to be able to use computers eventually, whatever their job, which came through in widely varying different settings. This was a strong motivator for people to get involved in doing courses in the workplace. Mohammed saw going on computer courses as 'the key' to progressing to a good job.

> 'If you can speak English and you can't do work with computer, many job is cleaning and factory, and I not want that for the future.'

Lisette would like office work in which she can use the computer, and spends time in the BBC Learning Centre as well as at college working on her computing skills. Barbra, Isabel, and Anne all said that they were doing a course in basic skills and computing because they thought IT would be increasingly needed in their work: Barbra wanting to use the computer to help clients use email and find things on the internet, and work creatively with colour etc; Anne seeing computing skills as another 'string to her bow' she could use if she was looking for another job; Isabel believing that eventually all the information they hold would be computerised.

### 4.6 Language and work

For people learning English as a second language, work had both positive and negative effects on their learning and language acquisition. On the positive side, work gave people opportunities for communicative practice, for using English in less restrictive settings than that of the classroom, both formally and informally. On the negative side, it could take time from more formal learning, and for some, limited opportunities for literacy development. Mahmood believed that his job in England had had a positive impact on his language, getting indirect language support from his work peers:

> 'And if I've got any problem with any word, pronunciation, they will help me'.

He was able to use informal English at work in a mostly friendly atmosphere, practising language structures he had studied in class while talking to his workmates. His boss encouraged him to attend English classes, allowing him to prioritise classes if they clashed with overtime requirements. However, he also felt that his job placed limitations on his language progress, by decreasing the time available for formal English lessons, and for practising his reading and writing, which were weak. Javed reported that most of his development in oral English came from the considerable time he spent interacting with other people whilst doing his many voluntary jobs, including a reciprocal informal arrangement with a university student who wanted to learn Urdu, who helped him both with his English language and his integration into English culture.

Some of the people interviewed were working in settings where the dominant language was not English, and this could take away opportunities to practise English. Iqbal, from Pakistan, had an extremely high level of education, with two degrees, one in Urdu and one in political science, coming in the top three of his college class in the Urdu degree. After a period of casual work he worked in a school as an Urdu teacher. When outside influences meant he had

to leave Pakistan, he came to England to be with his wife. He got a job as a packer at a computer firm, which had a strong Urdu/Punjabi influence. He rarely had the chance to use his oral English to speak to customers; the only language skill he was able to use at work was reading, since he had to read orders to complete his duties. This lack of opportunity to practise led to feelings of shame and embarrassment when using English at work and in daily life. He had already started looking for new jobs in what he called 'a proper English environment'. Once he found that, he planned to pursue his longer-term ambition, to become an Urdu teacher. Javed explicitly preferred not to work in places with other Pakistanis or Indian people where Urdu was the main language, because he wanted to develop his English language and his knowledge of British culture.

Frustration was felt when work demands conflicted with the timetables of English classes. Frederick switched from a daytime English class to an evening one with fewer hours of English learning a week, so that he would be free to do casual work as and when this became available. But this work was very insecure and he ended up spending a lot of time sitting alone in his flat worrying. While the work gave him opportunities to practise his English, he got less time in his English class, making him feel more isolated than he did in his first year when he was in class during the day. And for some people, the demands of learning English conflicted with their desire to undertake vocational training, and they felt they had to choose between them. Although he felt stuck in his sewing job and wanted to move into the building trade, Mahmood felt that it would not be possible for him to pursue a vocational course while working all day and studying ESOL in the evening; in this sense, work could be seen as a barrier to his self-development.

Many ESOL learners had come to England bringing rich skills, experiences and a desire to work. However, they often ended up doing jobs in England that did not reflect their capabilities, partly because the language requirements of work limited their possibilities. This had a knock-on effect on self-esteem and confidence, as well as their perception of their place in society, having lost the status and identity they had in their home countries.

All of the ESOL learners interviewed expressed a degree of embarrassment and awkwardness around using English at work. Mahmood described minor confrontations when his work colleagues laughed at his mistakes. Abdul was a trained agronomist, and was highly motivated to learn English so that he could gain appropriate employment. Until that point, he would have been willing to take on any job as soon as he obtained a work permit. But he felt a loss of dignity having had to give up the status he had of a professional in his home country. Ammara's greatest frustration around work related to feeling that she was not being taken seriously in her professional environment because of her level of language. She arrived in England with a high level of education and a good level of written English. But her spoken English was less proficient, and she felt a lack of confidence when speaking, believing that her speaking 'imperfections' and limited vocabulary were a barrier to her professional development. She believed that this caused her to keep quiet at work rather than use her initiative. She was also less inclined to socialise with English colleagues.

There was no simple relationship in people's lives between literacy, language and numeracy skills, and employment success. While some people saw their levels of literacy as having had quite a significant impact on their job choices, others did not. Even where this was cited as a significant factor, it was often social factors, such as unequal workplace social relations or the lack of support for a specific disability, which meant that literacy played this causal role. We discovered many examples of people creatively using support strategies and drawing on

their social networks to be successful in their jobs. Particular challenges arose when the literacy demands of work changed quickly or increased, which was the case for many workers in our study; when this happened, existing strategies might not be adequate and new strategies might take time to develop, time which was often not taken into account by the people introducing the change. The relationship between language learning and work was also complex; while work could support people's development of English (and vice versa), it could also have detrimental effects; and people who were judged on their level of English alone were put in positions where they were not able to draw on the wealth of professional expertise they were bringing.

# 5 Relationships between work and organised learning

## 5.1 Learning at work

Learning at work didn't necessarily mean classes. As mentioned above, many people drew on their social networks at work to learn. But most people in the study also had experience of organised learning through the provision of some sort of courses through work, particularly NVQ courses. Katrina had done NVQ courses, Level 1 in computing and Level 2 in childcare, and was currently working on her NVQ play course. Sarah was doing a teaching assistant course. Helen had done a health and hygiene course, associated with working in the pub. Maxine was doing an NVQ now that she was in care work. Anne had done a variety of courses related to her work at the centre, including fire safety, handling and lifting, food hygiene and safety, and had been put forward for an NVQ in cleaning. Barbra went to college to do a hair and beauty course on day release, after having been taken on as a hairdresser's apprentice. While a care worker she had done courses towards NVQs in care work, including dementia awareness, health and safety, manual handling, food hygiene, and diversity awareness. Isabel had done extensive health and safety training, along with manual handling and moving courses, food and hygiene, and first aid courses. These had to be regularly updated because requirements kept changing.

Where people did classes, these didn't always directly relate to their work or work demands. Jack, the farmer, was sent to college to do agriculture on day release when he was 17. He found some of it useful, but much of it he knew already from having grown up on a farm.

> 'We're dealing with stock, and if you've been brought up with stock you tend to know if there's something wrong. And you pick things up as you go along, basically. It's experience with age, I suppose.'

He felt that it was more about his parents getting him off the farm to meet people than about what he would learn while he was there. He 'absconded' when it was time to take the exams. Max found some of the training courses in care a complete waste of time, such as the lifting and handling courses, where he was told not to do what he knew you have to do in order to preserve people's dignity. Abdul, an agronomist, was signposted from ESOL to a beginner's gardening course which bore no relevance at all to his desire to build on the agronomy degree he already had in order to improve his chances of employment in this field.

But being on a course which was not directly related to a particular field of employment did not necessarily matter. People were in workplace classes for a wide variety of reasons. For instance, in an IT and basic skills workplace class they talked about the possibilities of using

IT in the workplace, but also about the non-work-related possibilities: being able to use computers with their families; adding 'strings to their bow' which might be useful later on.

People did classes at work that they wouldn't necessarily have done otherwise, because they were available. Max, a care worker in a basic skills and IT class, is a particularly good example of this. He was not just inexperienced in using computers, in the past he had been fiercely against getting involved with anything to do with IT. He had seen friends who had become completely obsessed with their home computers and ended up 'in a world of their own'. He described himself as having a 'compulsive personality', and didn't want to risk this happening to him, so had deliberately avoided anything to do with computers up until this point. He would never have signed up for a course in IT outside the workplace.

> 'I'm 59 now and I've always ... said I don't need computers in my life ... but because of the circumstances, because it was at work, I had nothing to lose by taking the course and everything to gain. I don't particularly need computer skills in this job but I've realised that it would be useful, because I've seen other people doing it and you get a bit of a feeling [of] you know "I'm an idiot and I can't do that, I'm too old" ... you run yourself down a bit. But having done it, I've enjoyed it.'

## 5.2 Learning outside work

However, the relationships between learning and work are not just to do with the learning people do at work. We also have instances in our data of people who have been unable to get involved in organised learning because of work. When they have stopped working, whether for health reasons (for many) or simply at retirement, they have been able to engage in formal learning instead.

Michael is a good example of this. Despite having had negative experiences of schooling, he had always wanted to engage in learning.

> 'I'm fascinated in what's going on around us, and how things work. But for 30 years, I worked shifts. The job ran round the clock, so I couldn't be a regular attender at anything, because of the work.'

After he was signed off work for mental health reasons, he started coming to college to do courses in things he was interested in, including psychology, science, local history and counselling. He came to the literacy class where we met him after he had been struggling with note-taking for an A-level human physiology course. He gained a great deal of enjoyment from the learning, finding that having something to think about helped him with his stress and anxiety, and took a great deal of pride in achieving certificates, when he had previously always thought he was 'thick'.

Organised learning was seen by many people as a supportive and helpful activity, when legal and health problems made work impossible. Lisette, unable to work for legal reasons, became bored and lonely, and found attending college helped her to deal with this. Martina found that the ESOL class fulfilled a crucial social and emotional need, as well as a learning function, in 'trying to keep myself busy'. Cheri found the college a safe and supportive place. Coming to class (and using the bus to get there) was a huge challenge for her and she was proud to have achieved this, and also to be doing voluntary work as a student rep. Alan and

Thomas were recommended to come to college by their mental health support teams.

The relationship between work and organised learning is therefore not a straightforward one, and we identified a variety of different trajectories in addition to the simple one of learning leading to work or improved working conditions. For some people, it was only when work stopped that opportunities for organised learning opened up. For some, like Alan, it was even the damage caused by work that made this learning possible. Workplace learning not only helped people to do their existing jobs more effectively, but also opened up possibilities for different types of work, or for changes in everyday life outside work, even when the learning had little impact in the workplace.

# 6 Values and meanings around work

## 6.1 The status and value of different types of work

People valued work for many different reasons. Work offered financial independence, allowing them to come off benefits and provide for their families. Sarah was highly motivated to raise her family's standard of living. Where people were prevented from working, like Susanne whose family did not allow it, their independence was compromised. Frederick, unable to work legally, put a great deal of effort into getting casual, poorly paid, insecure building and painting work, paid cash in hand. This was very important to him, as it meant he was able to buy clothes he would not otherwise be able to afford, buy things for his friends' children which made him feel happy and to send money to his mother in Angola to help towards her medical bills. Being able to do at least something to care for his mother, even at such a distance, was vital to his sense of self-esteem as a son. Mahmood appreciated the money he made in his current job, spending half of it on daily living and saving the rest towards his future.

Some people expressed ideas about work which indicated that they thought of it as having the quality of being morally good, something that was good in itself and made you a better person for doing it. There was a status in staying in work; Tommy was very proud of only having spent 18 months of his life not working. Identification as being 'the sort of person who works' was expressed by Katrina and Mark. Katrina had a strong work ethic and saw a job as something that you do, and that you can develop within. She made the distinction between people that didn't try to gain work, like her friend Rose, and her. In all our communications Katrina always said 'not if I get a job, but when'. She was very determined that she wanted to work, especially after studying and achieving qualifications. Mark, a bricklayer, had been working consistently since he left school. He said:

> 'I always say to people, if I want to have a day off I can, but when it comes to it I'm the last person to take any time off. Even if it's snowing I'm like this, I'm going to work.'

As soon as he moved to Blackburn, Javed started looking for work in the town, explaining to his English teacher:

> 'I don't like going out playing all the time. I want to do some work.'

Related to this, working was valued for reasons of human dignity, development and confidence. Iqbal explained that work was important for him, but not the low-paid, insecure work he was doing. He was willing to pay for a teacher-training course, and work hard to achieve his teaching ambitions:

'because I have to do something to get a better future … because I feel satisfaction in my inner self'.

Work was valued also where it involved helping other people, both in work and outside work. Sarah, training as a teaching assistant, was looking forward to being able to draw on her knowledge to help her own children. Sameena was helping her husband with his family business. Max had come into care work late, following careers as a travel rep and a fish and chip shop owner. He said that the care work didn't feel like work, he loved to 'smooth the day for people', chat to his clients, get to know them and make them laugh. Javed enjoyed his voluntary work in a care home immensely, finding it rewarding and satisfying. He liked spending time with the people, because he realised that just by talking and listening to them you could make them happy and feel less alone:

'You feel very happy when you help someone … everybody says thank you very much for coming and helping us like this.'

Some people talked about the intrinsic pleasure of the process of their work, on emotional, mental and aesthetic levels. Faisullah had been a stonemason at home in Afghanistan, and the time he became most animated in interview was when talking about the beauty of the things he had made. Elizabeth enjoyed the mental stimulation of working, learning new things, gaining confidence and being sociable. Sameena, who had spent most of her adult life defined by her identity as a wife and mother working at home and helping her husband, felt a new kind satisfaction and growth in knowledge and self-confidence on starting her own women's clothing business.

Paid work provided an escape from family and potential domestic isolation. Maxine, at home with a small baby, looked forward to going back to work. Alfonso, as described above, found being at home full-time with the children very isolating and it was not until he started working that he began to build up social networks. Ammara explained how being a housewife could promote feelings of isolation; although she valued her role as a mother highly:

'you don't know about out in the world, you know inside the house, what is happening in the world'.

Abdul, at home with children because he was currently unable to work legally, missed the structure and the sociability of work, and was very focused on getting a job as soon as he got a work permit.

## 6.2 What jobs were valued?

Most people seemed to have a clear hierarchical value system around different types of jobs, valuing some things as 'good' jobs and other things as not 'good' jobs; like Iqbal, from Pakistan, who contrasted the casual jobs he did helping friends and family in a shop and a farm with the 'proper' job he had as an Urdu teacher. This well-paid, highly-respected work gave him feelings of superiority and respect, leading him to be motivated and to take pride in his work.

'I think that when you are a teacher, you have a full group of students and you feel something better than everyone.'

However, notions about what a 'good' job consisted of varied. For some, 'good' jobs were office work, in contrast to manual jobs. Tommy compared the hard factory work he normally did to the 'cushy' jobs others did, such as working in tourism and leisure. In contrast, David went so far as to say that he experienced humiliation when doing manual work:

'I am a joiner and when I worked … I felt humiliated sometimes when I was working on the floor with dirty jeans on. And the others, these people for whom I worked, they had a lot of money. And I felt that I could do something more than just working as a joiner.'

He was so determined not to spend the rest of his life doing this, he felt he had to leave the country to pursue other opportunities, because he couldn't face spending the rest of his life working as a joiner: 'I would be drunk every day for 10 years, as well as being wrecked.' Given the health problems that many learners had experienced related to manual work (an issue which is explored in more depth below), this distinction makes a lot of sense. As we have described above, some of the learners felt they were unable to go for the 'good' jobs because of the literacy and numeracy demands they entailed.

But for others, manual work was the 'real' work. They valued doing physical labour, working outdoors, or working with people rather than being 'stuck at a desk'. Alan worked in a workshop for people who had experienced mental illnesses, sticking prescription pads together. He was proud that he was the only one in the workshop who could do this job, because he was the only one prepared to stand up all morning, and spoke disparagingly of colleagues who just sat at a computer all day instead of doing the 'real work'. Isabel described herself as a 'hands-on person' who spent her whole life working with people. Mark enjoyed working outside as a bricklayer, rather than being stuck indoors. For these people, having chosen jobs which happened not to involve much literacy and numeracy was a positive choice, not a negative one. They were not in literacy, language, numeracy and IT classes in order to get into different types of work, but for other reasons.

A job with autonomy was expressed as a positive attribute by some. Mark liked not being tied to set hours or a set job, and being in control of when he wanted to work, although, as mentioned above, he described himself as someone who would never not work. Javed had been doing work experience at a garage, as part of his motor vehicle course. He found this very positive, because he was left on his own to get on with things and was able to use his own initiative and the knowledge he had gained from his course there, saying of his boss, 'he never really told us what to do and you have to find the work, you know, what you want to do there, so I really liked it'. Mahmood preferred the sewing job he had had in Afghanistan to the one he had found in England, because there, each worker had more of an influence in each part of the finished product: they were able to use their own initiative more and be more flexible. Although his current job was secure, he had to do the same thing all day which he found boring and unchallenging.

## 6.3 Family, gender and work

Family expectations and local traditions about what work was appropriate and what work was possible also played a role in the way different jobs were valued. On several occasions, people were criticised by their families for taking on jobs that the family felt were inappropriate, or were prevented from taking them on at all. Ammara had started a college degree when she got married, but her husband did not want her to continue studying as a married woman,

preventing her from completing a degree in social sciences that she had felt would lay the foundations for a future career as a lecturer. Instead, he encouraged her to take on a vocational course in hair and beauty, which he saw as a path more suitable to a person of her gender and religion, although she was still expected to postpone studying until her son was old enough to attend school. Mahmood's parents did not approve of his work as a sewer in a clothing factory, perceiving it as being a woman's job. They would have preferred him to go to college or to get a building job, and were pleased when he took on a sealing job, as this was a 'proper' man's job. Susanne was prevented from working at all by her family, who insisted she stay home and look after the house.

For the most part we still saw strongly gendered patterns of employment, with men doing outside, physical, heavy, dirty work – Jason in the building trade, Tommy welding and in factories, Mark bricklaying, David a joiner, Michael a factory processor, Faisullah a stonemason, Abdul an agronomist and Jack farming – and women doing inside, service industry and care work – Katrina in childcare, Sarah in pubs and working as a teaching assistant, Elizabeth on an assembly line and in retail, Cheri in retail, Maxine in a hotel and waitressing, Jane a carer and cleaner, Ethel a school cleaner, Barbra a hairdresser and carer, Joelle a nurse, and Isabel and Anne in care work. There were also locally gendered patterns of traditional work, with men in Liverpool, for instance, having worked on the docks and women in factories.

In contrast to this, there were also some examples of a move towards less traditional patterns of gendering in work: such as two men who had taken on care worker positions in their fifties, who both spoke about the amount that they had gained from doing this and the fact that this would not have been an option for them earlier on in their lives. Sameena's husband did everything possible to help her to start her business and bought her satellite navigation equipment to help her travel around the country to buyer outlets. We also saw examples of traditionally female low-status work, like cleaning or sewing, being available to male asylum seekers and being seen by them as better than nothing. Mahmood's sewing job gave him a sense of purpose and financial security, but he was still dissatisfied with it, perceiving it as a 'woman's job'. He would have preferred a building job, but thought that this would be difficult for him to achieve without experience.

## 6.4 What makes work difficult or problematic?

As well as having positive values attached to it, for many of the people we interviewed, work had developed very negative connotations. Many people had been damaged – physically, mentally or both – as a direct result of overwhelming work demands they had experienced. In some cases, this left people unable to work again. Alan, who had had what he describes as a 'nervous breakdown' in his early twenties related to overwork and was hospitalised for a long time, would constantly advise the researcher 'don't work too hard, love, look at what happened to me'. He also had burns on his hands from welding accidents. Mahmood described coming home from his hard sealing job exhausted, after spending all day moving and carrying things: 'I couldn't move when I got home, someone had to feed me.' Tommy's jobs were all physically hard, and he carried the marks of this on his body. He had badly cut his hand working at an ice-cream factory, years of heavy carrying and welding had damaged his back, and hearing loss from welding meant he needed to wear hearing aids. Cheri found the working conditions at the local supermarket too difficult to handle, where she experienced bullying, saying she felt she was treated like a skivvy. She ended up in hospital

with stress and depression, then collapsed after returning to work and was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Ethel suffered from arthritis and was in constant pain after many years of cleaning school floors. Anna often burned herself while learning to work in the chip shop, and the long hours and stress and anxiety led to chronic insomnia and exhaustion. Being 'too successful' could also contribute to health problems. Thomas worked as a successful publican for many years until the stress of handling the business became too much and he was signed off work with anxiety and depression. Elizabeth found trying to hold down two jobs and then perform as a top sales person very stressful, and ended up having to leave work through anxiety and depression.

A lot of people experienced conflict between work and other responsibilities and interests. We have already mentioned that many people were juggling paid work and family or other caring responsibilities, often feeling they had to short-change one or the other (or both). After a lifetime of working long hours in manual jobs, Tommy was now very happy to have part-time caretaking work, working mainly in the evenings, which enabled him to do classes during the day. He described having many hobbies and things that he liked to try (photography, sea fishing, astronomy and gardening) and he liked the freedom that part-time work gave him to pursue these. As long as could afford the expense of the equipment he said he would rather have the time.

Where people perceived their job as being of low status they did not value it and sought other things. For many of the ESOL learners we worked with, who were from professional backgrounds in their home countries, work offered a sense of pride, respect and the opportunity to use their time and energy usefully. But where people felt that they were overqualified for or dissatisfied with their current jobs, work could have the opposite effect, leading to feelings of depression and demotivation, as we have seen above in the discussion of language at work. Such marginalisation is often experienced by newly-arrived ESOL learners. It can be compounded by insufficient job seeking advice and the difficulty in gaining 'cultural knowledge' about the worlds of education and work and how best to access them.

People's complex values around work related to their backgrounds; positive and negative experiences of work; their interests; other life demands; and the expectations of family; and clearly illustrate the need for policy to take these factors into account when planning any initiatives which support people towards gaining work, staying in work and progressing. A skills-based approach is not sufficient in itself; people's individual histories, values and realities need to be understood.

# 7 Transitions of young people from school towards work: preparation for work

## 7.1 Transition and uncertainty

In examining the relations between work, learning and lives, it is worth focusing separately on the perspectives and experience of young people who have left school with no or few formal qualifications. In this section we concentrate on a group of young people interviewed and observed on an Entry to Employment programme. These young people were in a period of uncertainty and transition. Many of them had joined the programme because they were uncertain what they could do or what they wanted to do in the near future and one, Jez, was there as part of her young offenders' licence.[2]

The Entry to Employment programme provided a space for them to try out different areas of employment and generally gain more life skills and self-confidence or, in Jez's case, to achieve steps towards their goals, such as getting literacy and numeracy qualifications and 'getting sorted'. Most of them had few social networks in relation to finding employment. Dee and Jez were very self-confident and able learners but could not navigate school, Sameera and Jade both had unspecified learning difficulties. They and Mo had limited communication skills and very little self-confidence which constrained their opportunities for work. All of them lived within a context of social disadvantage. They could not move forward on their own and the young people's provision available to them served as a buffer, a bridge and a broker. Provision like this (and the shelter for young homeless people) provided space for them to go through a transition period and grow, whilst at the same time providing them with a range of learning opportunities. The Entry to Employment programme, for instance, helped them to understand the culture and accountability of the workplace, to gain work placements, to prepare CVs and to access work.

## 7.2 Short-term and long-term goals

Like the other people encountered during this project, this group had diverse as well as shared values and feelings related to work. None of them, apart from Jez, had high material or professional goals and all saw work in the context of a happy life and stable relationships, not as a separate entity. Some, like Jodie, saw work as providing enough money for a happy life and to afford holidays. Some had higher aspirations, like Mani who wanted eventually to succeed in management.

2 Whereby a young offender is released on license subject to supervision in the community.

The young people had diverse short-term and long-term goals in relation to work and learning. Dee was uncertain at this stage about what kind of work she wanted to do and would take anything available to earn money in the short term.

'I'm not sure, I've wanted to do one thing to another and everything I thought about I just keep changing my mind.'

On the other hand she showed a sense of perspective, motivation and confidence about the choices she would make in the long term:

'When I know what I want to do then I'll put my mind to it but at the moment I'm young, I've still got my life.'

Sameera wanted to stay on the programme until she got a job in administration and then never return to study. Darren wanted to stay and 'just get better and better' before moving on to work in a garage. Both they and Jodie wanted to have work placements whilst they were job seeking. Jez wanted to carry on with her part-time work with a children's rights organisation, go on to further and higher education in the medium term and secure an acting job in the longer term. She hoped to eventually make enough money to open an 'excellent children's home', so that children would have a much happier life there than she had experienced in care. Mani, when he was younger, dreamed of being a doctor but now he had clear short-term goals of working in a computer games or sports shop and what he felt was a realistic longer-term goal to a get a 'higher job' in management.

## 7.3 Barriers to finding work

Young people with few qualifications face particular barriers to finding work and several like Sameera, Dee and Mani expressed feelings of anxiety about finding work. Dee said it was depressing because there were no jobs available for those under 18 years except Modern Apprenticeships for which you needed five GCSEs. There was also the pressure to find a job before the competition from the annual wave of school leavers. Sameera, who had not been able to secure a work-experience placement, said worry about life in general and finding the right job distracted her when she was learning.

Though all of them were motivated to develop more skills and gain literacy and numeracy qualifications as they felt this would help their employment prospects, the reality seemed to be more stark for some of them and there were multiple factors which could impede finding and retaining work, including employers' values and the general socio-economic climate and labour market. Even when young people had achieved their NVQ, work placements often did not translate into paid work and then the options were not easy. Darren, and particularly Sameera, who had not managed to get one placement, were quite discouraged and worried.

## 7.4 Taking the initiative

Neither the support they got from the programme nor the multiple barriers they faced stopped them from taking their own initiative in relation to work and learning. Jez did some paid work for the children's rights service and did much more as a volunteer because she enjoyed it. The programme supported the young people with job seeking such as helping

them to prepare a CV and job search. But Dee was very proactive herself, going to the Job Centre on her day off from the programme, searching the internet and the local press and mobilising her friends to ask around about work opportunities on her behalf. Mani was now mainly taking the initiative himself in job seeking, drawing on resources in his local community. He took himself to the local 'Access Point', a learning, advice and information centre located in the local Asian residential community. There he got help with writing his CV and he could use the internet and the phone for job seeking. He had taken his CV round to many retail outlets in town. He seemed very confident about the future. Like many others reported, all the young people found local networks and community resources more accessible than larger organisations such as the Job Centres.

## 7.5 Issues related to work experience

Work experience and initial employment have shaped their choices for work along the way. Dee hated working in a bakery factory and vowed to return to study though family financial hardship and the need to work was threatening this. Mani found charity shop work unpleasant; it was embarrassing working with second-hand clothing and he wanted to move on from this. Jodie's placement in a day nursery affirmed her desire to work with children despite problems with that particular placement.

Work experience placements highlight the emotional stress for some of the young people finding themselves in a new culture and sometimes less than supportive context. Jodie, who had 'mild unspecified learning difficulties' and generally lacked self-confidence, said it was important to be able to read and write at work because she had to fill in record booklets for the mothers and she wanted to be able to read to the children. She couldn't do that and felt embarrassed. Both Jodie and Charlie found they became emotionally upset at work when faced with the suffering of elderly people and children. Jodie left her first placement at a home for the elderly after two days as she found it too upsetting to see the old people suffering. But she said she had learned useful things on the placement such as how to mix with a wide range of people.

The young people talked of what they had learned in paid work and on work experience both in terms of skills and in terms of their social development and their increased self-awareness. Dee and Mani mentioned learning to work with others and fit in with a new situation and set of rules. They learned what sort of work did and did not suit their temperament, sensitivities and interests.

The analysis suggests that any initiatives aimed at young people in transition need to have a better understanding and an ability to respond carefully to 'where young people are at': what their interests and potential are, what their diverse needs and goals are, and how ready they are to take steps related to work and learning. The research suggests that the most important function of programmes for young people at this crucial stage of transition is to provide a 'buffer', a supportive broad learning environment where young people have the time and space to grow, learn more about themselves, explore possibilities and gain the resources and confidence to take their place in society as young adults.

# 8 Conclusions

This paper has explored the experiences of work of people on literacy, language and numeracy programmes, covering getting work, patterns of working, the significance of literacy, language and numeracy, the relationship of work and formal and informal learning, and the value of work. A complex picture emerges with many individual differences between people. Nevertheless, the research highlights several key points.

- There was a wide variety in patterns of getting work, with a mixture of informal and formal ways, including starting on a voluntary basis and/or with casual work. Health issues, caring for others and practical concerns such as safety or distance got in the way of getting jobs. There were often gender expectations and expectations from people's families about the jobs they should or should not do, and at different times this supported or constrained people.
- People had held a variety of different jobs and there were complex patterns of progression. There was progression to other sorts of learning, other sorts of jobs, into and out of work, into and out of paid and voluntary work. Progression depended on many things going on in people's lives, including health, support for child care, and whether they had a right to remain in the country.
- Caring for others and voluntary work were significant parts of many people's lives and were counted as work by people. Work experience was valued as enabling people to see what they wanted to do and what they did not want to do.
- Issues of literacy, language and numeracy were mentioned in relation to getting jobs, and people avoided jobs where they thought they might experience difficulties. Where people experienced difficulties at work, this was often in relation to change in workplace practices, such as increasing accountability. People had strategies for managing difficulties, often drawing on networks of support.
- ESOL students generally valued work as an opportunity for practising English, although this was less possible where people worked in places where English was not the dominant language. On the other hand, work took time from more formal learning and limited the courses they could take.
- Informal learning on the job seemed to be as important as more formal training and qualifications. People valued NVQs, taking some which were directly work-related and others simply because they were available. People strongly identified knowing about IT as essential for the workplace. Workplace learning had different degrees of impact on the effectiveness of existing work, and it also opened up possibilities for different types of work, or for changes in everyday life outside work.
- The relationship between work and formal learning was not straightforward. As well as learning leading to work, the opposite was also true: stopping work sometimes gave people the opportunity to pursue more formal learning.
- People valued work as giving meaning and dignity; it was seen as 'good' in its own right, and

not just for financial reasons. However, some people found work difficult and damaging to their health and it interfered with other responsibilities. Whilst people had clear ideas of what constituted a 'good job', this varied across people: for some it meant an office job, whilst others valued manual work as 'real work'.

■ Provision for young people such as the Entry to Employment programme acted as a bridge into work for them; it gave them a space to develop in a period of uncertainty and transition in their lives; and such programmes acted as brokers, enabling young people to get experience of work.

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