

# Success factors in informal learning

**Young adults' experiences of literacy, language and numeracy**  
Interim findings from the YALP research project



This summary is based on the interim report covering the activities of the research project, *Success factors in informal learning: young adults' experiences of literacy, language and numeracy*, between August 2003 and April 2004.

This research is premised on YALP's experience and judgement, following previous research in 2002, that the range and quality of informal literacy, language and numeracy provision for young adults varies enormously. In our knowledge there is scant existing or current research in this area that can either inform the generation of criteria for successful practice in working with young adults on literacy, language and numeracy skills, or the development of practices, materials and policy in this area. The target group for the research project, young adults aged 16 to 25, is

also recognised as a priority group within the *Skills for Life* strategy.

## What are we finding out?

### Key questions:

- Can provision be categorised as formal, non-formal, or informal?
- Does an embedded approach work best with young adults, and what do we mean when we talk about 'embedded'?
- How are practitioners accrediting their work with young adults?
- Are youth work and teaching separate vocations?
- Is there a lack of teaching and learning resources for this cohort, or do practitioners just not know where to find them?
- So... what works?

The Young Adult Learners Partnership is a joint initiative between NIACE and The National Youth Agency.

### Informal and non-formal provision

It became apparent that the original research focus on informal education was problematic – very rarely were examples of provision found practising a textbook definition of 'informal education'. Indeed, theorists and researchers themselves are unable to agree on a common definition. The majority of provision fell somewhere along a continuum of formal, non-formal and informal education – a hybrid of approaches, balancing competing pressures. Provision of this type is usually within community venues – youth clubs, community and neighbourhood centres, or specially acquired shop units in town centres – rather than 'formal' educational environments such as schools or colleges. It is not delivered around an externally set curriculum and avoids the stereotypically hierarchical teacher/pupil relationship. However, much of this provision is accredited, or encourages the National Tests for its learners. It is clear that defining provision as 'informal', 'formal' or 'non-formal' masks intricacies of delivery and development – each project needs to be viewed outside set definitions, within its own context.

Project visits and interviews were structured around several key issues – how literacy, language and numeracy provision is being delivered, teaching and learning resources being used, assessment and accreditation, and staff training needs. We also wanted to explore young adults' barriers to learning and engagement, and crucially, what the 'critical success factors' are in developing literacy, language and numeracy provision for young adults.

### Literacy, language and numeracy delivery

The way in which literacy, language and numeracy is delivered in practice varied – there was a strong emphasis on embedding literacy and numeracy into

provision, but also an effort by many projects to emphasise the importance of 'basic skills' by making it explicit in individual sessions. This was far more common for literacy than numeracy, as numeracy still seems to hold negative connotations for both practitioners and learners. Similarly, practitioners were far less likely to talk about 'numeracy' with learners, tending instead to refer to it in other ways, such as 'budgeting'. Literacy and numeracy were commonly embedded into sessions such as 'shop and cook', life skills, sexual health, employability/job search and financial awareness. In these cases, the young adults involved were not always aware that they were working to improve their numeracy or literacy skills.

**“Overwhelmingly, providers are being creative, developing materials around young adults' interests.”**

A minority of projects were running discrete literacy and/or numeracy sessions, either in groups or as one-to-one sessions, sometimes with a mentor. These were often organised around a topic of interest to the group or individual – for example buying and running a car, working in the construction industry, or applying for a job – but the literacy or numeracy content was explicit throughout.

Several projects were taking a 'whole organisation' approach – staff were encouraged to ensure that literacy and numeracy ran through all their sessions, whether they deliver painting and decorating, motor mechanics or life skills. At the same time, for several sessions a week, young adults attend specific maths and English sessions.

The development of language skills often seemed to be overlooked – an

improvement in 'communication skills' was frequently seen as a by-product of other personal and social development activities, rather than an aim or goal in itself. It also proved very difficult to locate projects delivering ESOL to young adults in informal or non-formal settings. It appears this type of provision is located most commonly within FE colleges, as part of a broader post-16 remit.

The way in which projects utilised ICT fell into two categories – projects using ICT as a medium through which literacy and numeracy skills were developed; and projects developing ICT skills as the primary aim, with ICT being considered as a 'basic skill' in its own right. The projects using ICT as a medium said that, in general, computers and the internet were successful methods of developing numeracy and literacy, and also functioned as 'hooks' to attract young adults into provision.

### Accreditation/qualifications

A majority of projects were offering some form of accreditation or qualification to young adults involved. However, practitioners' feelings around incorporating these elements into provision vary. Accreditation and qualifications are often related to gaining certificates and can involve sitting some form of test or exam to achieve this. Practitioners vary in their perception of this as either a motivating factor or a barrier in itself ('it's more about engagement than formal outcomes', 'no expectation, so no failure'). Similarly, there are varying opinions on whether or not young adults value accreditation, qualifications and certification. There has been an increasing drive to accredit programmes, or to offer qualifications as a component, and this often features as part of organisational strategies, or areas for future development. Some practitioners see accrediting their programme as a sign of quality, or professionalism, whereas some see it as an unwelcome intrusion into what was

otherwise a more holistic and 'informal' programme.

There was a wide variety of accreditation and certification being offered – OCN units were most popular for their flexibility and wide range of subject areas. Some practitioners are using the National Tests, with mixed results.

For many, there is a real tension between hard and soft outcomes – their main aim being to engage with young people and motivate them to attend long-term, but also acknowledged that much of the funding in this area is target related – often targets mean accreditation.

The feelings of young adult learners around accreditation also vary – most see the end outcome of a certificate, or unit, as positive in relation to gaining employment, but are less willing to undertake the work that goes alongside. This is especially true of longer-term portfolio building. Tests and exams do seem to cause a degree of fear and panic. As a result, an up-front refusal to undertake any exam or test often follows. However, careful introduction and integration of an exam or test by practitioners into provision can result in young adult learners feeling confident to tackle it.

### Staff Training

The overwhelming majority of practitioners working in this area have very little specific literacy, language and numeracy training – most practitioners had undertaken a three day 'basic skills awareness' course. There was a strong feeling that the 'right' people to work with young adults are practitioners initially trained as youth workers. As one project manager said, 'I need staff with a gut instinct for working with kids on the edge'. There is a perception that practitioners trained originally as literacy, language and numeracy tutors might not have the 'ethos' of youth work, and might not be able to engage with young adults in the same way.



Recruitment of staff can prove problematic for project managers: qualified tutors working in colleges may not be willing to take on a more challenging cohort, and routes into training for existing staff are confusing and complicated. For managers and staff involved in delivery, there were sometimes concerns around academic capability (for staff, this was often due to a lack of confidence). In some cases, the literacy, language and numeracy levels of frontline staff. This was enhanced by a perception of youth work and literacy, language and numeracy teaching as a distinct vocations.

### Resources

The vast majority of practitioners have expressed a need for more resources (as one practitioner said, 'there's a void'), particularly resources specifically designed for use with this cohort. There is a general feeling that available resources are not appropriate for this age group ('an insult', 'school like', 'inappropriate'), either due to content or style, or the fact that many resources are designed around worksheets, which 'assume that the learner is willing to learn'. However, since many practitioners are working in contexts

where they do not have access to networks which publicise resources, it may be that they are unaware of resources that do exist. Emerging findings around the issues of teaching and learning resources centre around four main points – practitioners do not have the resources they require, practitioners are not always aware of what resources exist, the resources that practitioners are using are not always appropriate for the cohort and often assume a style of learning which is not the most effective for young adults.

Overwhelmingly, providers are being creative, developing materials around young adults' interests, using whatever comes to hand. More often than not, providers are using other materials/ vehicles for delivery, such as magazines, newspapers, the driving theory test, job application forms, websites to open email accounts, or even packaging from snacks that young adults have brought in with them.

### Engagement

Effectively engaging with the cohort – hard to reach young adults – is one of the enduring issues facing practitioners. Many projects aim to reach young adults not in education, employment or training. This cohort, by their very nature, are very difficult to find, let alone engage. A strong element of initial engagement is publicity and promotion, and practitioners frequently face problems in developing 'credible' publicity for young adults. A clear message emerged from the questionnaires and telephone interviews particularly, that the term 'basic skills' is a 'turn off' for young adults. If provision is marketed as such, this will often result in a very low turn out of young adults and poor retention. It is widely acknowledged that young adults respond well to 'hooks' in order to attract them to provision initially and to promote retention, since 'keeping them on board' is an on-going challenge. However, balancing these 'hooks' and related 'rewards' (such as computer

games, meals, sports wear and vouchers) with the learning element of the provision is a constant struggle, offsetting the competing pressures of sustained engagement with learning activities.

Practitioners mentioned many 'barriers' to engagement and learning experienced by the young adults, many of them effectively defining their approach to provision. These 'barriers' included chaotic lives, offending behaviour, low aspirations, lack of confidence, challenging behaviour, negative experiences of education and school, substance misuse (particularly cannabis), homelessness, the effects of third generation unemployment, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and 'undiagnosed' dyslexia. When practitioners were facing difficulties, they were ever more keen to share their experiences with others and to seek support. It was at times like these that a network or communication forum was most needed.

## Implications

The early indications from this research suggest that a key feature of literacy, language and numeracy provision for young adults is a learner centred approach – 'coming alongside' young adults and taking their interests and needs as a starting point. There is a clear recommendation from practitioners that provision is flexible, individualised and non-academic. Accreditation provokes a mixed response – for some groups, it acted as a motivating framework to provision; for others, it was a pressure with little meaning for the young adults involved. Literacy, language and numeracy provision for young adults, often delivered in conjunction with employability and life skills, is clearly high on the priority list for both practitioners and policy makers alike. Further research in this area can only increase our knowledge and lead to a framework for successful development.

## So what works?

Whilst there was a clear indication of multiple barriers and often enduring social exclusion facing a majority of the young adults involved in literacy, language and numeracy provision, there was also a clear indication of what works – strategies and approaches practitioners have found successful in their work in this area.

- a) **'Hooks'** – start by using young adults' interests and then progress on to wider issues; offer 'tangible' and quick prizes to reward attendance, behaviour, etc; ensure sessions are relevant to young adults' lives at that time, make provision 'useful'.
- b) **Pedagogy**: use 'non-academic' approaches; individualise programmes through non-generic teaching, retain as much of a one-to-one approach as possible; use learning style questionnaires and recognise that the dominant learning style for this client group is likely to be kinaesthetic.
- c) **Relationships**: maintain a non-judgemental attitude; 'not being like teachers', staff must be 'user-friendly'; interrupt the adult/child relationship – encourage young adults to 'teach' the practitioners.
- d) **Accreditation and outcomes**: recognise what accreditation/certification means to the group – it may be their number one reason for being there, or it may hold no meaning at all; gear sessions towards achieving a qualification if that's the (intended) end result; emphasising the importance of literacy, language and numeracy throughout all sessions can help overcome nerves and panic at the thought of tests or exams; help young adults recognise that certificates can be a 'passport to work'.
- e) **Engagement**: offer tailored provision; go with the young adult's communication style; start from the point the individual is at.
- f) **Literacy, language and numeracy**: ensure positive projection of literacy, language and numeracy – if tutor/youth worker dislikes 'basic skills', so will young adults; integrate – embed but don't disguise; highlight literacy, language and numeracy within sessions; use initial assessment and diagnostics to your advantage, in conjunction with other tools such as learning styles questionnaires and careers questionnaires; don't treat 'basic skills' as a bolt on – all staff and young adults must see that literacy, language and numeracy run through everything, 'not just on Thursday afternoons'.

# Case study

## SOVA Numeracy and Literacy Mentoring, Barnsley

SOVA Numeracy & Literacy Mentoring in Barnsley was established in 1997 and is funded by the Youth Justice Board. It is open to young adults who have had or are having contact with the Criminal Justice System, with many completing community-based interventions or being part of the Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme (ISSP). The scheme aims to help and support young adults, in particular young offenders and those at risk of offending, in improving their reading, writing and numeracy, and to reduce offending rates among participants.

SOVA works with a wide range of groups to offer support, including Barnsley Youth Offending Team, The Probation Service, drug & alcohol advice, and increasingly, local schools.

The SOVA Numeracy & Literacy tutor forms part of this support package. Participants initially work with the tutor and then are matched with a volunteer mentor. The scheme offers individualised one-to-one mentoring activities including using ICT to develop literacy and numeracy, visiting local libraries to select and review books, and linking with Sheffield College to provide distance learning opportunities.

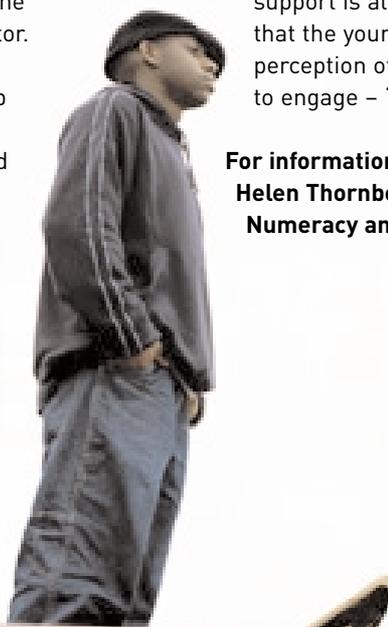
The scheme also encourages young adults to sit the **Skills for Life** National Tests. Where possible, those interested are matched with a volunteer mentor who also wants to sit the test. This allows the mentor and the young adult to 'teach each other', and interrupts the adult/child relationship that so many participants found difficult at school.

The numeracy and literacy support is centred on taking the young adults' interests as a starting point and resources are developed around this. However, staff often find themselves 'thinking on their feet' and need to be creative with materials originally created for older adult learners. They would like to see resources that are more 'applicable and appropriate to young adults' needs and interests'.

Although literacy and numeracy support is the main aim of the scheme, personal, and social skills development and support is also a key part. Staff at SOVA have found that the young adults' negative experiences and perception of education often create an unwillingness to engage – 'keeping them on board' is a major issue.

**For information, please contact**

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**This research project will end in December 2004 and will have run for 15 months. The work is divided into two phases. Phase One ran from August 2003, to April 2004.**

**What we have done so far:**

- Made contact with over 150 projects
- Undertaken over 30 visits to projects
- Produced an extensive literature review
- Presented workshops at three *Skills for Life* annual conferences
- Developed a web page
- Distributed over 300 questionnaires and analysed the responses
- Undertaken over 30 follow-up telephone interviews
- Published several articles, including in *Young People Now* and *Clued In*
- Set up an email discussion group with over 180 members

**What we will do next:**

- Develop the web page
- Draw together a panel of young adults and practitioners to review a range of teaching and learning materials, and report on their findings
- Produce a resources guide for practitioners together with this panel
- Produce quarterly newsletters
- Present workshops at a variety of conferences
- Undertake wide ranging consultation on the training needs of practitioners working in this area and respond to the findings

If you are working with young adults aged 16 to 25, delivering literacy, language and numeracy and wish to get involved with the research, or simply would like more information, please contact a member of the team:

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You can also visit our project website at <http://www.niace.org.uk/projects/successfactors>