

The impact of adult literacy and numeracy levels on small businesses in rural Lincolnshire and Rutland: a case study

Synopsis

This research examines relationships between rurality and the interest of employers in adult literacy and numeracy training for employees, in small businesses in rural areas of Lincolnshire and Rutland. We argue that existing literature on relationships between rurality and adult education tends to ignore crucial questions of individual and social identity in rural areas. We engage with recent work in cultural geography and the work of Pierre Bourdieu to explore connections between forms of conscious and habitual self-understanding (*habitus*) and the valuing (or not) of literacy and numeracy.

Key Points

- ❑ Concern for adult literacy and numeracy among senior personnel in rural small businesses is very limited.
- ❑ Employers believed employees have little interest in their own levels of literacy and numeracy. This lack of interest is linked to the nature of the rural economy and rural culture.
- ❑ Lack of interest in literacy and numeracy is linked to specifically rural kinds of coping. Older people understand themselves and are understood by others, to have managed with

low levels of literacy and numeracy for so long that training seems inappropriate.

- ❑ Employer and employees lack of interest in literacy and numeracy should be understood in relation to particular forms of rural masculinity and femininity.
- ❑ Employers suggested two contrasting solutions to rural social closeness and visibility: first, make literacy and numeracy training less visible by including it as part of other adult education; second, make adult literacy and numeracy more ordinary, more familiar rather than special or exceptional. Concern for adult literacy and numeracy among senior personnel in rural small businesses is very limited.
- ❑ Although business leaders argued they had little role to play in developing their employees' levels of literacy and numeracy, some interviewees recognised the negative effect on the business that underdeveloped literacy and numeracy levels may cause. These were expressed in connection to recruitment policies, health and safety concerns and the ability of employees to adapt to increasing levels of technology.

Background and rationale of research

We argue that *Skills for Life*: the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills (DfES, 2001) operates with an undeveloped geographical imagination and that research on relationships between rurality, adult literacy and numeracy and adult education more generally does not engage with important issues of individual and social identity. We engage with recent work in rural cultural geography on the social construction of rurality, masculinity, femininity and ageing to theorise relationships between rurality and self-identity. We also explore the implications of Pierre Bourdieu's work on relationships between 'habitus' and 'field' for a theorisation of self-identity. In particular we argue that it is not possible to understand ways in which adult literacy and numeracy are valued, or not valued, in rural small businesses without examining ways in which forms of identity are produced and reproduced. The importance of self and collective identity, in terms of motivation to engage with adult literacy and numeracy, are crucial in addressing the training needs of rural communities.

Main elements of research

Questionnaires were sent to 40 small businesses in each of the 10 Travel to Work Areas (TTWA) of Lincolnshire and Rutland: Louth, Skegness and Mablethorpe, Horncastle, Gainsborough, Lincoln, Sleaford, Grantham, Boston, Spalding and Holbeach, and Stamford. The businesses were 'small' in the sense of having less than 50 employees and they were all outside principal urban centres. In each of the TTWAs, the sample of businesses reflected the employment structure of Lincolnshire and Rutland, expressed through the Broad Industrial Groups, 1-9. Questionnaires were sent to each of the small businesses (400). We received 84 completed questionnaires; a response rate of 21 per cent. Through quantitative and qualitative analysis of the questionnaires, we identified a number of themes and selected 15 small businesses to interview in relation to these themes. Given the focus on conscious and non-conscious self-understanding, together with individual and social identity, the interviews were in-depth, semi-structured and tape-recorded; most were held at the small business so that particular work environments could prompt discussion.

Research team

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References and further reading

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