



National Research and Development Centre  
for adult literacy and numeracy

# Research Summary

## Community-focused provision in adult literacy, numeracy and language: an exploratory study

### Synopsis

This was a six-month study which investigated community-focused provision for the teaching of adult literacy, numeracy and language, a form of provision that may complement traditional provision and that may be particularly useful for reaching priority groups of learners identified in the **Skills for Life** strategy. The study's aim was to add to relevant previous research by conducting case studies of providers in England thought to be taking a community-focused approach.

After an initial consultation period that established if the concept of community-focused provision was meaningful, case studies were selected on the basis of their answers to a set of screening questions identifying them as likely to be taking a community-focused approach and so as to be representative of different kinds of providers in different parts of England.

### Key Points

- It was found that the providers studied did all believe that their provision was distinctive in a way that was captured by the concept of community-focused provision.
- Community-focused providers understood their work in relation to three main issues: vision, development and delivery. The third of these could be understood further in terms of a holistic view of learning, concern about learning situations, quality, integrating basic skills without making them too apparent, and achievement and progression.

- Funding emerged as absolutely critical for community-focused provision and in particular, the funding of development work. Core, long-term funding for community-focused provision was often identified as being difficult to obtain. Areas not covered by other funding streams concerned with regeneration, appeared to suffer and there were gaps in provision according to level of need and whether an area qualified for a particular type of funding.
- The general conclusion of the project is that community-focused provision is an appropriate and reasonably robust concept for understanding one way of meeting the needs of adult literacy, numeracy or ESOL learners. Issues that may be helpful for understanding community-focused provision have been identified.
- A systematic literature search was carried out and identified over 70 studies or reports that had a bearing on community-focused provision of adult literacy, numeracy and language. The search strategy combined four courses of action to gather relevant literature and to evaluate its relevance and relative significance to the literature review and research project.
- In order to realise community-focused provision, development work was vital. In practical terms, development meant staff whose job included going beyond the organisation, networking with community groups and organisations, talking to people who might be interested in attending provision, putting on taster courses that reflected their interests, and ensuring that provision continued to meet those interests but also challenged learners to move on. The more that learners were hard-to-reach, the more necessary was development.

## Background and rationale of research

The starting point for the study was that community-focused provision is under-conceptualised, under-researched and possibly insufficiently appreciated in the current policy context. The study therefore aimed to add to current understanding by searching for, and building on, relevant previous research and then conducting case studies of providers in England thought to be taking a community-focused approach.

## Main elements of research

The study was collaborative, carried out by a project team in which two University researchers worked with three practitioner-researchers whose immediate experience included national policy analysis, direction of a large-scale literacy partnership and LEA planning of adult and community education. All members of the team had professional experience of community or family literacy and four of the five had worked as basic skills tutors. The study began by consulting agencies and individuals in England (and Scotland) to determine whether the concept of community-focused provision was meaningful, whether practitioners, policymakers and researchers thought it was worth studying, and whether they could point to cases in England that might be studied. The consultation established that the concept was meaningful and that the research could be taken further.

A sample of 11 providers was then chosen for case studies on the basis of their answers to a set of screening questions identifying them as likely to be taking a community-focused approach and so as to be representative of different kinds of providers (LEAs, voluntary organisations, partnerships) in different parts of England (North, Midlands, South, South East, South West). The research team visited providers, interviewed the relevant director or strategic manager, interviewed a related provider in the area, interviewed at least one learner and, where possible, conducted brief observations of provision.

A data archive of some 50,000 words was prepared. Analysis was carried out by examining data for themes and issues that had been expected on the basis of the initial conceptualisation of community-focused provision. In addition, several issues and themes that had not been expected were noted and incorporated into a revised understanding. The coding scheme for data analysis was developed and revised collaboratively by the team and applied to all the case studies. Codes were organised into four clusters for purposes of reporting.

## Research team

### Co-directors

Peter Hannon and Kate Pahl

### Consultants

Viv Bird, Carol Taylor and Carrie Birch

## References and further reading

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## Contact for further information:

Kate Pahl  
The School of Education  
The Education Building  
388 Glossop Road  
Sheffield S10 2JA

Telephone: 0114 222 2000  
email: k.pahl@sheffield.ac.uk



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Publications  
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email: publications@nrdc.org.uk