

effective learning for adults with learning difficulties

RESEARCH SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

This action research project was funded by Learning Connections to develop and explore the potential for enhancing literacies learning for adults with learning difficulties by engaging with their systems of care and/or support¹. A key aim of the project was to facilitate ways in which carers and support workers could work effectively with adult literacies tutors to establish learning opportunities in the everyday lives of people with learning difficulties. The project was led by Alastair Wilson and Katie Hunter of the Applied Educational Research Centre, University of Strathclyde in the period March 2006-April 2007.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE PROJECT

The developmental aspect of the project was led by the project researcher and was committed to working with tutors to facilitate the following:

- > Identifying and recruiting learners to the project.
- > Identifying and engaging with carers/support workers and where appropriate securing the support of their employers.
- > Producing a summary of each learner's learning history to provide a base-line for design of a learning programme and for the measurement of progress.
- > Agreement of a programme of learning with the learner(s), carer(s) and tutor(s).
- > Engaging with learners' carers and/or support workers and raising their awareness of literacies needs and issues.
- > Provide care/support workers with techniques to support and reinforce learning.
- > Monitoring learner progress with learners and carers, gathering and analysing data, feeding findings back into project development.

The research dimension of the project ran in parallel with this process and had three primary aims:

1. To explore the extent to which literacies learning for adults with learning difficulties can be improved by engaging with their systems of care and/or support.
2. To examine the impact of this process on their everyday lives.
3. To disseminate the emerging findings of this work effectively to a varied audience.

ACTION RESEARCH

A key feature of this project was the way in which its development evolved into an action research project. The researcher played a crucial role not only in contacting and recruiting participants, both tutors and learners, but also, crucially, in shaping their understanding and participation in the project. The researcher acted as a catalyst in terms of encouraging and facilitating tutors' effective contact with participants and their carers/support workers. Throughout the course of the project the researcher provided ongoing feedback to tutors, and facilitated meetings between support workers, tutors and a range of other relevant people necessary to progress the aims of the project. In the early stages of the project a virtual research environment (VRE) was constructed to facilitate the work of the project. This virtual space was accessible via the web to all tutors participating in the project and contained a variety of tools such as chat/discussion areas, a file store, an announcement function and a group email address. The space was made available to tutors as a means of contacting and discussing ideas with the researcher. In addition it provided a means for tutors to record their experiences and share them with others.

¹ Effectively a social practice approach

RESEARCH METHODS

Phase one

The research was carried out in two phases. In the first phase the researchers made contact with a range of tutors identified through a combination of approaches. Some tutors responded to a Learning Connections invitation to participate in the project while others were identified by the researchers from a range of community based literacies projects and one FE college. The researcher described the aims of the project to tutors and the nature of engagement their participation would require. Those tutors willing to participate were then asked to identify and contact potential learners and their carers/support workers. Where learners were interested the researcher made contact with them, described the purpose of the project and what form their participation might take. In parallel with this process the researcher contacted carers/support workers again describing the aims of the project and their potential roles within it. From an initial 12 learners 9 were identified for more intensive support and research.

The action research nature of this project depended on the work of the researcher to facilitate tutors, learners, carers and support workers working effectively together in a range of different contexts. This report illustrates the key barriers that were faced in this process, the ways in which they were addressed and the resulting impact on learners' literacies development.

Phase two

In the second phase of the project a number of qualitative approaches were employed to gain insight into learners' situations and their perceptions of their lives and learning. A similar approach was used with their tutors, carers and support workers. The researcher worked with each case study over the course of 8-12 months, visiting them in a number of different locations but primarily within their literacies class. It was crucial for the researcher to identify and establish trust

with learners and their carers/support workers in order to progress the aims of the project in a careful and sensitive way. The following approaches were used throughout the course of the project, playing a key role in its development and also providing a rich source of data:

- > **Interviews:** initial interviews were conducted with learners to gain insight into their learning history, interests and everyday activities. Similar use of interviews was made with learners' carers and support workers. Where learners were comfortable, this information was collated by the researcher and shared with tutors to assist in their planning with learners. This enabled the researcher and tutor to identify individuals to work with, in terms of linking with learners lives outside of their class. In addition to interviews the researcher maintained regular contact with carers and support workers by phone. Interviews were also conducted with tutors to gain insight into their perspectives and working situations and also to identify gaps in their knowledge of participants.
- > **Photography:** a number of the learners were given cameras and asked to take photos of their everyday activities over the course of 1-2 weeks. These photos were then used by the researcher as a basis for engaging learners in discussion about their everyday lives. This was particularly successful with several learners with communication difficulties and for whom an interview was inappropriate. In addition it allowed participants to engage with the researcher in a natural and fun way. This process was shared with tutors and in several cases blended with the work of tutors and was used as a basis for literacies development. Several support workers also found this process a useful way to engage with learners.

- > **Film work:** a key dimension of the project was the development of a DVD about the work of the project featuring the majority of learners. In the initial phase of the project this provided added interest for learners and in the course of its production was a useful tool for the researcher in terms of engaging with learners. Learners were invited to use camcorders to record aspects of their everyday lives and this footage was used by the researcher, in a similar way as the photographs, as a basis for engaging and developing discussion with learners.
- > **Analysis of key documents:** this involved attention to descriptive literature about specific projects that tutors and learners were engaged in. It also involved examining learners' plans. In particular some learners had produced substantial life plans with their carers as a basis for developing their daily activities.
- > The establishment of the VRE provided a means for tutors to contact and converse with both the researcher and fellow tutors. There was variation in tutors' interest and available time to make use of the VRE and some corresponded with the researcher using phone calls and email. Where the VRE was used, tutors felt it helpful and it contributed a different source of data for the researcher in terms of tutor diaries of particular sessions with learners.
- > **Observation:** this was used initially within literacies classes but later extended to other situations and events, in particular when opportunities arose for developing new learning opportunities for learners within other activities such as work placements.
- > **Joint meetings of tutors/researchers:** these were useful in developing the work of the project and in allowing tutors and the research team to exchange ideas and findings as the work progressed. Meetings were crucial in

the early stages of the project as participants needed to develop a joint understanding of the purposes and progress of the project.

- > The level of interaction made possible throughout this research by the VRE and other means was a valuable support to reflection on the experience and helped off-set the relative isolation felt by many tutors working in this area of literacies learning.
- > **Review of literature:** the research team carried out a review of the most recent research literature relevant to the work of this project. While this literature was limited there were a number of studies that illuminated the work of this project. The following section provides a summary of this work.

WHAT THE LITERATURE IS SAYING

- > There are now more people with learning difficulties living, with varying degrees of independence, within their local communities. It is clear that literacies can play a key role in helping these people both enjoy the pleasures of and cope with the demands of daily life. For people with disabilities the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills can have a substantial impact on an individual's active participation in society, personal empowerment and self advocacy (Van Kraayenoord; *et al* 2001).
- > There have been significant changes since people with learning difficulties were regarded as 'trainable not educable and incapable of acquiring such (reading, writing) skills' (see Bochner, *et al*; 2001 p.67 also Moni & Jobling, 2001). Young *et al* (2004) indicate that while adults with learning difficulties may make slower progress in learning new skills and tasks they can continue to learn, post schooling, in a number of key areas (reading, mathematics, self management). Similarly Moni & Jobling (2001) assert that when young adults with

Down's syndrome are provided with the right opportunities and appropriate teaching and learning strategies they will continue to develop and improve their language and literacies skills (Moni & Jobling, 2001, p.392).

- > As policy and planning for people with learning difficulties now seeks to emphasise engagement in employment and community based activities, the opportunities for people with learning difficulties to be exposed to learning new skills increases. The research literature supports the assertion that literacies development, when closely connected with the life of the learner, can play an important role in enabling them to realise such opportunities.
- > A key theme in the literature is the extent to which post-school education for adults with learning difficulties tends to focus almost exclusively on developing functional living skills. A tension seems to exist within the research literature between this focus and one which emphasises more formal literacies development.
- > In a one-year study of students with 'mild to moderate mental retardation' Hedrick *et al* (1999) argued that '*...the goal of their schooling may not have to center around social, vocational and daily living skills while limiting literacies instruction to a very basic set of skills...programmes for students...can be designed in a way that that balances necessary social skills/daily living skills with intensive and extensive literacies instruction.*' (p.237).
- > According to Ryndak *et al* literacies development could be affected positively by '*...immersing the learner in genuine opportunities to speak, listen, read and write in contexts that are real, of high interest and **literacy** need provoking for that learner*'.

- > Relatively little literature exists to inform on the engagement of carer and support worker specifically in literacies development. One study by Buckingham (2005) reported that tutors reported homework for learners was not always appropriate unless there was someone at the learner's home, hostel or residential unit to oversee it and that subsequently '*...almost all teachers that had tried homework had given up the practice.*' Pershey & Gilbert (2002) in advocating the potential of a whole-to-part and part-to whole approach made reference to the need for further research to explore how practical and efficient it would be for this approach to be adopted and used by care providers.

ENGAGING WITH LEARNERS

- > Planning a social practice model for learners with learning difficulties posed significant problems for tutors to address. The challenge of gaining sufficient understanding of learners' lives in order to begin to locate their learning more effectively was frustrated by a combination of factors:
 - Poor communication with carers/support workers was compounded by a lack of time to enable regular meetings/exchanges.
 - Issues about protecting learner confidentiality at times prevented support workers from working effectively with tutors.
 - Often learners had fragmented timetables which support workers were unable to accurately describe.
 - Learners were not often familiar or prepared for working in this way.
 - Tutors found engaging effectively with learners and their carers placed demands on their time which were difficult to accommodate in their normal class situations.

- > Tutors engaging with the project reported a number of organisational constraints that frustrated the development of their work. Primarily they were concerned about the extra time involved in realising a social practices approach and in particular engaging effectively with carers.
- > Tutors were often funded from a variety of sources which contributed to both insecurity and difficulty meeting the demands of different funding criteria.
- > Facilitated by the researcher, a number of tutors were able to address these difficulties and evolve new models of practice. Careful ethnographic work with learners facilitated a greater understanding on the part of tutors of their learners' needs and interests.
- > The way in which the researcher made further contacts was primarily through developing tutors' existing links (e.g. to a particular carer/support worker). Due to time constraints, not all links were explored and in many instances, (where learners went to FE college for example), the researcher was unable to develop collaborative work.
- > Where projects incorporated this approach, tutors, learners and support workers were able to work more effectively together and some tutors reported the exchange of ideas with support workers a satisfying and useful experience. It is clear that effective planning with learners is an ongoing and iterative process.

LOCATING LEARNING IN EVERYDAY LIFE

- > Engaging effectively with learners and being aware of how literacies could be more fully realised in their everyday lives challenged tutors to develop new ways of working.
- > Time had to be created to nurture relationships with a variety of carers and support workers often affiliated to a number of different organisations. While this often proved difficult, there were nevertheless opportunities for development. In particular when literacies could be more closely and explicitly linked to developing learners' independence tutors found a more positive basis on which to build collaborative working with carers and support workers.
- > The most positive experiences for learners seem to arise from instances where their learning could be developed within a network of different people all of whom were aware of their learning and the aspects of this which they were able to support.
- > Where tutors were successful in creating effective networks these seemed to rely heavily on the goodwill and personality of those involved. Formed on this basis and without organisational support, these networks were inherently fragile.
- > Learners appeared to benefit in a variety of ways as their learning became more firmly established beyond their immediate class work.

It's quite time consuming to prepare the lesson and prepare the group work, and do the group thing, to communicate and talk to (carer) and (support worker). So that can be difficult if you're trying to do that with each student. In this group, 3 (learners) come from the same centre but somebody else comes from a different set up, and in other groups everyone comes from a different centre or a different place so potentially you could have 4 or 5 different sets of people to communicate with. But I think there are a lot of opportunities and it's (project) a great thing. It's not without its problems to work through and tackle but you get a great deal from it. (interview with tutor).

Ricky has attended an adult literacies class for the past two years. Ricky took his work seriously and was keen to work outside of his class and at home where he was supported by his mum. However the researcher recognised that the support Ricky required at home was becoming increasingly intensive, something which his mum felt unable to sustain. At this point the researcher worked with Ricky using photography as a means to help him describe and discuss his weekly activities. This process revealed a number of opportunities for Ricky's literacies development to be more closely embedded in his everyday activities. Ricky's mum suggested the researcher should contact key workers at the club Ricky attended on a Friday as they were able to source a range of social, sporting and educational activities for Ricky such as the literacies class and his participation in the Special Olympics. After working with Ricky and contacting his key worker the researcher was able to provide his tutor with more understanding of Ricky's weekly activities and subsequently identify ideas for further developing his literacies. Ricky's tutor built upon the photographic work he had done with the researcher to engage Ricky in writing a book, 'My Story', about aspects of his everyday life. This also enabled the tutor to make connections with Ricky's work experience in a local pub. Ricky's tutor developed activities such as role play which helped with his understanding of tasks and duties expected of him in his pub job.

The tutor also set up a meeting with Ricky's key worker to discuss Ricky's literacies class and since then the key worker has been helping with some of the 1:1 reinforcing work and also feeding back information to the tutor. Added to this Ricky's mum is still in contact with both. She reported that for the first time Ricky was able to read the letters in an eye test and it was the first time that the optician really had a good idea of Ricky's eye sight.

SUSTAINING A SOCIAL PRACTICES APPROACH

- > Tutors were concerned about the time demands of the project and felt best use of their limited time was made by focusing on specific reading and writing tasks such as paired reading. The role of the researcher was key in assisting the development, among tutors, of a broader engagement with literacies. Where tutor time was limited, the researcher was able to engage with carers/support workers and provide tutors with information about learners' activities/lives.
- > While the role of the researcher was crucial, there is considerable evidence to suggest that this model of working could be developed more widely. The researcher often negotiated difficulties at an individual participant level which could perhaps be addressed by key changes in policy at an organisational level.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

- > Providers of literacies programmes face challenges in addressing the ways in which literacies can be more effectively realised for adults with learning difficulties. These include creating learning opportunities that engage more fully with the lives of adults with learning difficulties, ensuring that tutors understand how this may be achieved and providing opportunities for greater continuity of learning.

- > Organisations providing care and daily activities for people need to be alerted to the potential role of literacies programmes in the lives of people with learning difficulties. In particular the ways in which an individual's literacies development can impact on their independence and general well-being.
- > Carers and support workers need to be aware of the ways in which they can nurture an individual's literacies development and have this established as a key aspect of their role.
- > Closer collaborative working between providers of literacies programmes and those providing care and support is essential to bring these strands of development together.
- > Realising effective literacies development for adults with learning difficulties clearly implies developing new ways of collaborative working. The evidence of this project suggests that this is a worthwhile objective and one that may perhaps be realised by a moderate amount of awareness raising, training and collaboration.
- > The findings of this project suggest that a development worker, engaging strategically with a number of different organisations and tutors would be able to support the broader development of this approach.



**The Scottish
Government**

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The full report, "Effective learning for Adults with Learning Difficulties", Summary of Findings and Research Summary are available at www.scotland.gov.uk

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