



National Research and Development Centre
for adult literacy and numeracy

Research Review

Literacy and numeracy for adults with disabilities and learning difficulties: a review and exploration

Synopsis

This exploratory project was designed to gain a detailed picture of literacy and numeracy provision for physically disabled adults with learning and communication difficulties. The aims of the project were: to supplement a recent US literature review on literacy and numeracy for adults with learning difficulties and to carry out a parallel review on literacy and numeracy provision for adults with physical disabilities and/or communication difficulties; to carry out observations of literacy and numeracy teaching and learning provision at Portland College, one of a small number of specialist colleges in England; and to use the outputs from both the literature review and the fieldwork to inform future practice and to develop hypotheses for further investigation.

Key Points

- ❑ The experiences of adult literacy and numeracy learners with physical impairments and of their tutors seem to have been overlooked by the research community. In the light of recent policy developments, legislation and initiatives affecting this group of learners, there is now a pressing need for research in the field.
- ❑ The new adult literacy and numeracy frameworks under **Skills for Life** had been introduced at the specialist college, but with limited impact so far on planning. Limited reference was found to these frameworks in relation to the specific literacy and numeracy targets identified in lesson plans and Individual Learning Plans, although most tutors spoke positively about their eventual effectiveness.

- ❑ All tutors had received recent literacy training via the Basic Skills Agency, but not all were being offered numeracy training, which was funded internally. However, the priority for the college was to enable those tutors who did not have qualified teacher status to gain qualifications. Training for team leaders and also for support staff would be advantageous.
- ❑ Literacy and numeracy was mainly embedded within the curriculum, with some discrete provision at certain levels. Every session observed at the college provided evidence of literacy and/or numeracy development. However, some learners' perceptions were that little or no literacy or numeracy took place, and others requested further provision.
- ❑ Tutors used initial assessment procedures to identify learners' literacy and numeracy needs, but there was no systematic structure for the ongoing identification of needs. The Databridge system was being used to identify targets and monitor learners' progress and not all staff were yet fully using this system.
- ❑ The majority of learners expressed positive views about their experiences at Portland College, and reported that the tutors were very supportive. They also identified several barriers to learning, including groups being too large and noisy. Some referred to previous tests and examinations taken, and certificates obtained, and noted their current absence.

Note: The first bullet point above refers to a finding from the literature review. The subsequent five points refer to findings from the fieldwork.

Background and rationale of research

Adult literacy and numeracy within the specific context of special educational needs has long been a neglected area. However, the **Skills for Life** strategy, (2001) highlighted the needs of such 'special populations' and brought the issues in this area to the forefront. There is, nevertheless, a risk that, in the urgency of considering mainstream adult literacy and numeracy, distinct populations might receive inadequate support. The project aimed to help avoid this by bringing pertinent information to the attention of literacy and numeracy practitioners.

Pedagogy associated with meeting complex learning needs, addressing literacy and numeracy development issues, relevance to life, and parity of opportunities relative to other learners are all issues that need to be developed. Although researchers at the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy in the USA have recently published a wide-ranging review of literacy and numeracy skills for adults with learning disabilities, there appeared to be no comparable literature review in the UK. Furthermore there was no systematic description of literacy and numeracy provision for either physically or learning disabled adults in the UK. This project carried out such a review and explored current provision in a specialist organisation.

Main elements of research

This research project consisted of two strands of research: a literature review covering research on literacy and numeracy for physically disabled adults with physical impairments; and research into literacy and numeracy provision at a specialist college.

To address the main research question, semi-structured interviews, focus groups and observations were conducted at Portland College, Nottinghamshire. Learners' views and tutors' views were explored. Interviews were conducted with 30 learners who spanned the full range of physical and learning disabilities at the college, including some with severe impairments requiring specialist communication equipment. Fieldworkers interviewed five learners from each of the five programme areas within the Learning and Skills Department and five learners from Level 1 of the Employment Department.

In addition, focus groups were facilitated in order to build on the findings. The groups were composed in such a way that learners who had been interviewed individually were not approached again. In-depth interviews were also conducted with tutors, representing all parts of the college.

Research team

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References and further reading

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