

Moser Technical Implementation Group Adults with learning difficulties and/or disabilities

Pathways to competence

Basic skills for People with Learning Difficulties and/or disabilities

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Evidence was compiled through:

A focus group of staff from various colleges in London and South East England who are basic skills practitioners working with adults with a range of learning difficulties and disabilities.

A focus group of adults with learning difficulties from a day centre in Dorset, many of whom had additional disabilities (Report attached as Annex A)

Two workshops attended by a range of staff from sector colleges, specialist colleges, TECs, training providers, careers services and DfEE

In addition written evidence was received from:

- Rachel Bowers, College of West Anglia.
- Jenny Clift Harris, FEDA
- Jill Dowrick, Southgate College
- Maggie Greenwood, FEDA
- Isabella Jobsob, Canterbury College

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1. Basic skills for the 21st Century

- Communication is **the key** skill for the 21st Century. Expertise in encoding and decoding the written word may become less important as technologies develop, but a whole new range of skills will be required to communicate in an information and technology age. The capacity to gain access to and manage information and technology will become increasingly important. There will be a need to develop a wider range of oral presentational skills for different contexts such as video phones or video conferencing.
- Communicating verbally, in writing and through IT are different skills and are used for different purposes. The basic skills standards provided for consultation are more geared to the communication skills of the past than the future. The choice of the term 'literacy' rather than communications reflects this narrow and backward looking view.
- In terms of numeracy skills, it is likely that the skills will need to be applied in contexts of increasing complexity. Although, with the advent of developing technologies, the tools to help will also increase. In everyday lives, numeracy skills will be applied in more technologically driven environments, e.g. home financial management will be carried out 'on line.' This will demand different skills. For example, paying with cash is a concrete operation requiring only simple arithmetic skills, yet making payments 'on line' demands the ability to conceptualise abstractly and to monitor income and expenditure.

2. The impact of disabilities and learning difficulties on the acquisition of basic skills

- There are two direct ways in which disabilities and learning difficulties impact on the acquisition of basic skills. One is that the capacity to develop basic skills (and indeed in any skill) is limited by level of cognitive ability. The other is where individual disabilities require non standard means of access to basic skills. For example, assistive technology or Braille used to access the written word, the use of British Sign Language as the language of communication, or a voice synthesiser used in place of speech.
- The impact of disabilities and learning difficulties on the acquisition of basic skills **qualifications** based on the consultation standards would be to deny them access. The consultation standards are currently written in a way that would deny many disabled people access to qualifications. The language used in the standards includes words such as 'write,' 'read' and 'say.' To be made accessible, the standards need to include a statement that allows disabled people to achieve the same ends through alternative means.

- An indirect impact of disabilities and learning difficulties on the acquisition of basic skills is the capacity of staff to match each individual's particular learning and access requirements. Acquisition of basic skills will be limited unless staff are able to construct and deliver a curriculum for people with learning difficulties that is relevant to their lives. Staff also need the skills to adapt the curriculum so that it is accessible to people with particular disabilities.

3. What are basic skills for people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities?

- Basic skills are the same for everyone, but they vary in the level achievable by some people and the means by which others access and apply them.
- The proposed standards are narrow and do not include some essential basic skills for adult life, such as the use of IT, the skills required for self advocacy and the skills needed to use symbols and sign effectively, rather than words. The skills required for effective communication are far broader than finding the right words and using them appropriately. They include the self confidence and assertion to speak up and speak out.
- Basic skills and key skills are the same and the standards and specifications need to match. The current distinction is artificial and is unhelpful.
- The natural development of basic skills for all people is in context and functional (they are not developed and practised abstractly then applied in context). This is particularly important when learners have difficulties with generalisation.

Extract from 'My Older Brother Daryl'

" Daryl can do lots of things he couldn't do before! He can put 100 pegs in a board in less than ten minutes while in his seat with 95% accuracy. *But he cannot put coins in a vending machine.*

He can string beads in alternating colours and match them to a pattern on a card. *But he can't lace his shoes.*

He can sing the ABC's and tell me names of all the letters of the alphabet. *But he can't tell the gents from the ladies toilets when we go to McDonalds's.*

He can count to 100 by rote memory! *But he doesn't know how many pounds coins to give a checkout work for a £2.59 purchase."*

- Many adults with learning difficulties have had many years in school and beyond yet they are still unable to 'understand the letters of the alphabet.' In many instances continual emphasis on this formal side of literacy is unlikely to prove effective. However, the same adults can certainly continue to develop their creative and expressive abilities (e.g. by dictating and reading back their own stories). They have also often learned very effective means of either using the limited literacy they do have or finding alternative ways of functioning effectively without it. It is important that these skills should be recognised and built upon.
- For some people with learning difficulties and disabilities:
 - developing basic skills is about the development of coping strategies and self confidence rather than specific literacy or numeracy skills.
 - the development of verbal communication skills and increasing self-advocacy is a priority.
 - it is about maintaining existing skills or developing alternative skills rather than improving skills.
- Although the basic skills themselves are the same, individuals vary in their capacity to access them. This ability to access basic skills and the levels achieved are determined by the cognitive abilities of people who have learning difficulties. For people with physical disabilities, sensory impairments or specific learning difficulties the means of access is likely to be different. There may be a requirement for mediation to access basic skills. E.g. sign language communicator, talking calculator or IT.

4. Barriers to access to basic skills

- Narrow definitions of basic skills.
- For communication/literacy there are additional difficulties in access when the language used is not a person's first language e.g. EAL or BSL for deaf people. Similarly, some people have access only to some 'codes' e.g. of language, determined by social class.
- Inaccurate preconceptions about how learning takes place.
- Poor teaching, inappropriate expectations and staff who lack expertise and/or appropriate training or qualifications. In particular the lack of training in the specialist skills required to teach basic skills to people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities
- Failure to recognise the widely variable rate of progress made by individuals. Barriers can arise from the failure to set individualised

learning goals or to recognise these achievements as positive outcomes.

- Inappropriate learning materials.
- Basic skills being delivered as a separate course or programme. There are some cases where separate basic skills courses are an appropriate mode of delivery, for example, with people who have never been in formal education or who have been unsuccessful within it. The majority of people with learning difficulties need basic skills to be developed in a context which is relevant to the rest of their lives.
- Lack of contextualisation, relevance and flexibility.
- Learners' expectations which may be too high, too low or unrealistic
- Some learners feel that there is a strong stigma associated with their inability to read and write, and will use avoidance strategies to hide their difficulties. This barrier is reinforced by their assumption that lack of literacy skills equates with low levels of intelligence.
- For some learners, their failure to learn basic skills has led them to develop 'a phobia' about it. They are extremely reluctant to try to learn basic skills and any approach which they associate with previous failure will be rejected.
- Learner motivation.
- Difficulty in getting to classes. Transport is a major barrier.
- Frequency of classes.

5. What should the ideal arrangements for basic skills look like?

Standards

- The standards need to be the same for everyone but should be written to include alternative means of access for those whose disabilities or learning difficulties preclude them from 'speaking' 'listening' 'reading or 'writing.' Verbal communication will be accessible to many learners except those with severe cognitive impairments.
- The proposed standards for Entry level 1 in particular need to be rewritten at a lower level to ensure that they are accessible to more adults including people with learning difficulties. The alignment with the national curriculum does not provide a suitable starting point for many adults, who bring a different life experience to the acquisition of basic skills.

- In the standards the skills of speaking and listening need to be separated, in line with the expressive and receptive skills of writing and reading.

Curriculum

- Basic skills need to be contextualised and developed through an individual approach with individual goals.
- Learning programmes need to be derived from an individual's needs rather than external standards. Standards should not be used as a substitute for the curriculum. The distortions which arise when this happens have been highlighted in the FEFC inspectorate report 'National awards for students with learning difficulties'. (1999)
- Effective practice in curriculum design and delivery has the following characteristics;
 - Identification of learners' needs in relation to their personal learning goals
 - Maximum opportunities for choice and differentiation
 - Negotiated individual learning opportunities
 - Learning in small manageable bites
 - Recognition and accommodation of individual learning styles
 - Relevant and meaningful skills developed in appropriate contexts
 - Clear progression routes
 - Recognition of all learning and achievement, however small
- Guidance is required on how to develop the underpinning skills of literacy and numeracy within practically based learning programmes.

Assessment

- A wide range of assessment methods need to be available in order to allow learners to evidence their skills. Tutors need to select the most appropriate method which is fit for purpose and match it to each particular situation.
- In order to be fit for purpose, the assessment method used must be capable of assessing the skills and/or knowledge related to an item, without expecting learners to be competent in another unrelated skill e.g. literacy skills when the skill assessed is about oral communication.
- Assessment opportunities should arise naturally from the process of developing and practising skills and evidence should be generated in the same way. This should avoid burdensome 'testing' and paper gathering activities.

Recognising Achievement

- Learners want to have their achievements recognised in the same way as other learners. They want certificates. An effective way of certification achievement when learners are not able to achieve a 'whole' unit is to provide an individual certificate which profiles achievement. The certificate specifies the 'subject area' and on the back is written the skills an individual has achieved. This provides a learner referenced, alternative approach which can be matched directly to an individuals' learning goals.

6. Quality of current provision

- Although there are examples of excellent practice there are also examples of poor and ineffective practice which can reinforce feelings of inadequacy and failure as they result in few signs of progress and achievement.

(refer to FEFC inspection reports and publications)

7. Quality of current learning materials including IT

- Although some good learning materials do exist for developing basic skills e.g. Equal People (OU), Spotlight on Learning: Basic Skills FEDA (1999), there is an over reliance on mass produced worksheets which often have limited relevance.
- A multi sensory approach to learning needs to take priority over the continued development of paper based learning materials. The emphasis needs to be on developing materials on CD ROM and making them available on the world wide web. The ideal would be to have quality assured materials directly downloadable from the internet.
- For people who have very low levels of skills there are very few materials which are age appropriate.
- There is a general lack of IT based learning materials suitable for developing adults' basic skills.
- In addition to adequate software and hardware there is a major need for more technical support for both general IT and assistive technology.
- The use of IT to support learning is greatly underdeveloped. Progress is inhibited by staffs lack of confidence and expertise in using IT. There is a need for investment in training to address this issue.

8. Current good practice

- Many good examples exist where adults with learning difficulties create their own publications such as autobiographical writings and self advocacy documents.
- Practical opportunities for basic skills development are offered through a variety of enterprises for example, running a site canteen, a stall at the local market and a health and fitness group. Real work environments used to learn practical vocational skills and the associated personal skills, and real living environment used to learn independent living skills.
- Self advocacy sessions enable learners to develop skills in communication and the self confidence and assertion to apply their skills.
- Oaklands College has received this year's Beacon Award for inclusive learning. The provision exemplifies what basic skills are for people with profound and multiple disabilities and how individual programmes can be developed and delivered to meet the needs identified.

9. The needs and wishes of learners, trainers and teachers

- Learners want the opportunity to be able to develop their basic skills.
- Learners wish to have the opportunity to progress at their own individual pace and level.
- Many learners want to gain independence skills.
- Learners want a choice of where and how they can learn.
- Some learners want to use computers because they find it easier and better than handwriting, they can practice at home on computers and because they believe it is the best way for them to learn.
- Many good teachers want to be able to devise individual learning programmes and not to be constrained by externally set criteria such as a syllabus or standards
- Learners and teachers want recognition for learners' successes, within a national framework.

As one adult with learning difficulties said of her certificates:
" they prove to other people what you can do and they boost your self esteem."

Another learner commented:

" you've worked hard, you've achieved something!"

10. Recommendations specific to this group

- Revise the **content** of the standards to reflect the increasingly technological age and the demands of the 21st Century.
- Revise the **level** of the standards so that Entry level 1 is recalibrated at a lower level.
- Revise the **definition** of basic skills so it is broader and it reflects the different ways in which people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities communicate.
- Provide statements within the standards to indicate that equivalent alternative skills are acceptable to give access to disabled people.
- Ensure that all people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who want to develop their skills have an entitlement and the opportunity to do so, irrespective of level of ability or geography.
- Ensure that guidance and training is provided on how to devise individual learning programmes. The guidance needs to indicate that programmes should be derived from an analysis of the skills and knowledge required by individuals, related to their lifestyles and developed in context.
- Ensure that training programmes for basic skills cover the particular needs of learners with disabilities and/or learning difficulties and include specialist training for staff working with these learners.
- Allocate resources to develop materials to fill the many gaps which exist. In particular, ensure that quality assured, multimedia materials are developed which meet the needs of adults with disabilities and/or learning difficulties, and make them available on the internet.
- Ensure that training is available for staff so they can develop materials and use IT as an effective tool for learning.
- Ensure that primary access requirements are met through the provision of transport, accessible learning environments and appropriate support.

Adult Basic Skills Students with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities

Call for Evidence:

Evidence from centre user's committee members: Neil, Victor, Pat, Sharon, Sandra, Malcolm, Helen, Michael and Rachel.

Stourcastle Centre, Dorset (day centre for people with learning difficulties)

Derived from a focus group held on 19 November 1999, with Sally Faraday, FEDA, contact 0171 840 5306.

What are basic skills for people with learning difficulties?

- Some people read books including library books, they read newspapers and write to friends. One person keeps a diary. Most people read their individual timetables.
- Some people use basic skills to answer letters, pay bills and write cheques.
- Most people can go shopping and buy things although they are not good with money.
- Some people use symbols as well as words as they are easier to understand.
- The users committee has an account and the treasure and committee members keep the accounts and write out cheques.
- Some people have hobbies and they read about their hobbies in books and magazines.
- Some people use computers and play computer games.
- Some people like telling and writing their own stories.
- Some people prefer to listen to story tapes.
- Younger people who have recently left school/college have their records of achievement.
- Most people think they need to read and write better so they can get a job.

What are the barriers to developing basic skills?

- There are no teachers to help centre users to develop their skills. There was a volunteer who worked with individuals but he left and has not been replaced.
- It is difficult to get to classes. All centre users agree that transport is the biggest barrier. Public transport is bad in the villages and social services transport is bad. It brings people in late and sometimes they have to leave early.
- Classes at college are a long way away and centre users can't get there.
- It is hard to find a quiet space at the centre to learn in.

What should the ideal basic skills arrangement look like?

- People want a choice of where they can learn. Some people want to learn at home, some want to go to college but most people want to have classes at the centre because it is more convenient.
- Most people want to have more opportunities to improve their basic skills, but some do not need to, as they are happy that they can read and write well enough.
- Most people want to use computers because they say that it's easier to use a computer than to write with a pen. Some people have computers at home and use them there. People agreed that using computers is the best way to learn.
- Some people didn't like going to college because they don't like the other people there. There have been problems and there is lots of swearing at college.
- Everyone agrees that they want certificates and certificates are important. They can help you to get a job but they are most important because:
“they prove to other people what you can do and they boost your self confidence.”
Some people have got certificates for reading and writing, basic food hygiene and cookery. People use their certificates at the centre where they make food to sell, to raise money for the centre.
- Some people can go to classes through the 'link scheme.' They go to a class with a co-student who helps them to get there and to learn. 25 people from the centre go to classes. They go to classes in art, cookery, walking, and learning symbols. There is a leaflet describing the link scheme.

- Speaking skills are important. Centre users need them at the centre, for the users committee and the People First (self-advocacy) group.
- Learning signs and symbols is important for some people who can't use words. The centre uses signs and symbols as well as words. A speech therapist helps people to speak and use signs and symbols.