

NIACE Research and Development



Key Findings



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Success factors in informal learning: young adults' experiences of literacy, language and numeracy

Abstract

This research and development project builds on previous research from the NIACE/NYA Young Adults Learning Partnership (Basic Skills Work with Young Adults, 2002), which showed that the range and quality of informal and non-formal literacy, language and numeracy provision for young adults (16-25) varied enormously, and pointed to a real need to develop practices, materials and policy. This NRDC (National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy) project aimed to explore the contribution of informal and non-formal education to the development of literacy, language and numeracy among young adults, through identifying and disseminating practices, materials and resources, developing a framework of critical success factors and consulting practitioners and learners on areas including accreditation, resources and professional development.

Research methodology:

- ❖ Desk based research involved a literature search and review exploring government policy in this area, and identifying key literature on social exclusion, informal learning and work with young adults. A mapping exercise was undertaken, through a postal questionnaire, telephone interviews and project visits. Thirteen case studies were produced highlighting examples of practice across England. Learners and practitioners were consulted throughout on a range of issues, including accreditation and teaching and learning resources.

Key Findings

The main conclusions of the project are:

- ❖ Addressing the needs presented by young adults' attitudes, goals and life experiences was far more influential in guiding learning programmes than funding or accreditation-related targets.
- ❖ Engaging young adults is an enduring issue of paramount importance to practitioners, and is often more pressing than the literacy, language and numeracy elements of provision.

- ❖ There is an ongoing debate about the benefits of making literacy, language and numeracy explicit in learning programmes rather than teaching by stealth.
- ❖ Across all sectors, embedding was widely believed to be the most effective approach in working with young adults.
- ❖ Practitioners concentrate most on literacy, with far less emphasis on numeracy. Oracy is often overlooked.
- ❖ There was a strong desire among practitioners to share experiences, but there was not necessarily a common understanding of terminology.
- ❖ Practitioners reported a lack of teaching and learning materials to support their literacy, language and numeracy work with young adults.
- ❖ However, there is not always an awareness of existing materials due to a lack of professional networks.
- ❖ Responses to accreditation, assessment and qualifications were mixed, with some practitioners believing them to be a motivational force for learners, whereas a minority saw them as an intrusion into an otherwise informal programme.
- ❖ Training and professional development for practitioners working to develop literacy, language and numeracy among young adults is an extremely emotive subject.
- ❖ Most practitioners have very little specific training in the teaching of literacy, language and numeracy.
- ❖ Personal qualities and attributes associated with effective youth work, such as patience and empathy, were considered essential; whereas literacy, language and numeracy training was seen as desirable, but hard to access and sometimes inappropriate to the cohort.

Recommendations

- ❖ It is critical to acknowledge the individual needs, hopes and experiences of young adults as distinct from other age groups. Similarly, practitioners and young adult learners would benefit from screening and assessment tools and teaching and learning materials created for and aimed at young adults, developed in consultation with practitioners and learners themselves.
- ❖ Professional development should reflect and respect the variety of roles practitioners play.

Output

- ❖ McNeil, B. and Smith, L. (2005) *Success factors in informal learning: young adults' experiences of literacy, language and numeracy*. Final report, NRDC: Leicester.
- ❖ McNeil, B. and Smith, L. (2004) *Success factors in informal learning: young adults' experiences of literacy, language and numeracy*. Online interim report, NRDC: Leicester.
- ❖ McNeil, B. *Young adults, basic skills and informal learning: a literature review*. NRDC: Leicester. For future publication.

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