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Effective Learning for Adults with Learning Difficulties

Research Report

April 2007

A Research Report for Learning Connections,
Directorate of Lifelong Learning

by

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The views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and do not necessarily represent those of the Directorate or Scottish Ministers.

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BACKGROUND

This 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.

Thanks are due to the learners, their carers and supporters and to the literacies tutors, who participated in this project. All of them engaged willingly and enthusiastically despite the additional work the project entailed. It couldn't have happened without them.

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 the 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.
- Providing 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.

¹ Effectively a social practices approach.

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 it 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 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 and share their experiences with others.

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 literacy 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. Table 1 below presents a summary of the key relevant characteristics of these 9 **case studies**.

Table 1

Pseudonym	Age	Summary of adult literacies engagement	Weekly timetable	Living arrangements	Key people engaging with literacies project
Tom	31	Charity shop work experience placement run by local provider. Offering work experience and training in numeracy, literacies, communication skills, retailing skills, personal skills and health and safety in the work place.	Monday and Wednesday: Charity shop placement. Tuesday and Thursday: Working in recycling project run by same organisation. Rest of time is spent with parents.	Living with parents.	Project co-ordinator of charity shop. Parents supportive of research project.
Lesley	39	As above	Mondays: needlework project. Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays: charity shop. Thursdays: attends day services – delivers post between council offices and occasional literacies/ IT class.	Lives with mother	Literacies work led by tutor and project co-ordinator of charity shop.
Sally	44	Microwave cookery class integrates literacy and numeracy by looking at healthy eating, diet and nutrition as well as literacies skills needed to follow recipes.	Mondays: goes to a tutor for keyboard lessons. Tuesdays and Wednesdays: attends Community Education Centre, (Tuesdays for a microwave cookery class and Wednesdays for an adult literacy and numeracy class). Thursdays: goes to the hairdressers, has lunch and goes to the supermarket. Fridays: she goes to an art class. Saturdays: buys a magazine, goes to a local pub. Sundays: does arts and crafts in the house.	Supported accommodation	Literacies work led by tutor with engagement with a number of different support workers.
Ricky	28	Ricky attends community based adult literacies class where he is focusing on improving reading and writing skills.	Mondays and Tuesdays: College – Childcare & IT classes. Thursdays: adult literacies class. Fridays: community club. Also volunteer worker at local pub. Saturdays volunteers with a youth group.	Lives with parents	Tutor. Parent. Support worker based in community project.
Alison	39	Alison attends a café group at a community resource centre. The class allows participants to develop literacy and numeracy skills in a real setting.	Mondays am: time with support worker, Monday pm: music classes. Tuesdays: Music and computers at FE College; Wednesdays at day centre; Thursdays: adult literacies class; Fridays: Cookery class at FE College. She goes bowling once a week and to the cinema with staff from resource centre.	Lives with parent	Adult literacies tutor. Parent. Manager of local community resource centre and previously Alison's key worker.

Pseudonym	Age	Summary of adult literacies engagement	Weekly timetable	Living arrangements	Key people engaging with literacies project
Jack	51	Jack attends an adult literacies class situated in the same building as his community project. The class is intended for disabled people but not specifically adults with learning difficulties	Jack attends a local community project two days a week. This offers a mix of centre based activities and access to community resources. The remainder of the time he is at home.	Supported accommodation	Adult literacies tutor. Support worker. Carer. (tutor and key worker are paid full time members of staff in the same building)
Steve	31	Steve attends an adult literacies class situated in the same building as his community project. The class is intended for disabled people and not specifically adults with learning difficulties.	Monday: volunteer in shop mobility – local shopping centre. Tuesday and Wednesday: attends local community project. This offers a mix of centre based activities and access to community resources. Every second Thursday Steve goes out with a support worker and they go swimming and ten pin bowling. Friday: goes shopping with a support worker. Some Sundays he volunteers with a group of disabled children.	Lives with parent	Adult literacies tutor. Support worker. Parent. (tutor and key worker are paid full time members of staff in the same building)
Gerry	68	Previously had 1:1 with a literacies tutor one afternoon per week. Worked on writing his name and some numbers for making phone calls. Engaged in research project supported by support worker who had a background in adult education.	Monday & Tuesdays: at home. Wednesdays: Attends a day centre. Thursdays: 1:1 support with a support worker. Supported as volunteer in community centre in the morning then goes bowling pm. Friday pm: Literacies tutor session now ended.	Supported accommodation	Support worker with adult education background.
Frank	59	Attends literacies class at day centre. Work on reading comprehension and a number of learner centred tasks such as writing letters, dealing with writing tasks such as evaluation forms.	Mondays: attends day centre – group work with key worker. Leaves the centre for lunch and plays golf if the weather is good. Tuesdays: at home. Wednesdays: 8-12 works in local catering company, supported work place which is located in the day centre – goes swimming in the afternoon. Thursdays: attends day centre for his adult literacies class and then goes to the race track. Fridays: he works in a catering company 8am-2pm and again Saturday morning 8-9.30am.	Lives with twin brother in accommodation – receive support 2 afternoons a week.	Adult literacies tutor with support worker who is located within same building. Manager of part-time employment – catering company.

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 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 to 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.
- 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.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following review is based on a search and examination of recent literature specifically related to literacies development in adults with learning difficulties.²

Introduction

Over the past three decades the ideas of emphasizing inclusion (Nirje, 1985; Wolfensberger, 1972,) have gradually become realised in public policy and planning. A planned reduction in the number of people with learning difficulties living in long stay hospitals has been assisted by development projects such as the '*Changing Days*' project (Wertheimer, 1996) in England and the '*Ways to Work*' programme (Ritchie *et al.*, 1996) initiated in Scotland. Both of these programmes sought to shift traditional day services away from segregated provision towards services constructed around individual need, which, it is intended, permits people to become more active members of their local communities. More recently within Scotland the 'Same as You' (Scottish Executive, 2000) has built upon this progress emphasizing the need for people to have long term plans for their lives; supported by services, the introduction of the 'Change Fund' and easier access to direct payments. As a result of these ideas and initiatives 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 literacies and numeracy skills can have substantial impact on an individual's active participation in society, personal empowerment and self advocacy (Van Kraayenoord; *et al* 2001). For adults with learning difficulties access to literacy and numeracy learning is still relatively new. The 1992 Further & Higher Education (Scotland) Act placed an obligation on Further Education (FE) colleges to address the need of disabled students within each college's planning process and the Beattie Committee (Scottish Executive, 1999) further emphasised a policy of inclusiveness. In 2002 the implementation of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 (Part IV of the DDA) made it unlawful for providers of education to treat disabled learners less favourably on account of their disability. However Riddell *et al* (2001) have argued that such changes have not led to greater employment opportunities for people with learning difficulties, enhancing neither their human or social capital (p.51).

Acknowledgement of literacies

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). Furthermore there is increasing evidence that adults with learning difficulties can make significant progress in their learning post school. Reporting on a study of adults with Down's syndrome growing up in this period of rapid change, Bochner

² The terms 'mental retardation' 'cognitive impairment' and 'intellectual disability' were also included in the search process to draw upon more international sources.

et al (2001) asserted that participants aged in the 21-24 year range demonstrated more advanced skills than those that had only recently left school (p.87). All but one of the participants in the study achieved at least minimal reading skills (letter and word recognition). In addition the authors asserted that a number of learners enjoyed a variety of leisure pursuits such as reading, writing letters and using computers (p.87). Carr, (2000) interpreting data from a longitudinal study of adults with Down's syndrome commented how it was '*disappointing that in the nine years between the two test occasions the cohort has made so little academic progress*'. This Carr attributed to a lack of interest in academic skills displayed by centres which the 30 year old adults were attending (Carr, 2000. p.2).

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). This is echoed by Buckingham (2005) who commented that as adults with learning difficulties had a slower learning capacity, they should be given plenty of time in which to learn, limited time between teaching sessions and constant reinforcement (p.9). Buckingham developed this argument as a challenge to current Australian ACE (Adult Community Education) funding structures which resulted in providers delivering limited student contact hours. In addition to lack of sufficient time allowed for learning, Buckingham identified poor curriculum choice as a major barrier to learning experienced by people with learning difficulties.

Developing approaches to literacies

The literature remains less well developed in terms of research into approaches to developing literacies with adults with learning difficulties. In particular there is little research on strategies when working with adults with severe and profound learning difficulties. Vorhaus (2006) concludes that '*acknowledging, teaching and caring for profoundly disabled human beings*' are very closely related. Consequently the learning of these learners needs to be characterised by attention to their individual details and the individualised learning they require to prosper (p.326). A small number of studies focus specifically on particular approaches to developing literacy and numeracy. In a review of 128 studies on teaching reading to individuals with 'significant cognitive disabilities' Browder *et al* (2006) concluded that teaching learners with significant cognitive disabilities to read sight words³ using systematic prompting techniques was an effective intervention (p.400). Moni & Jobling (2000) reported on the findings of the 'Latch-On' programme to develop literacies in young adults with Down's syndrome. Under the guiding philosophy that 'learners learn language by using it often with

³ Sight words are defined as words that are immediately recognisable as whole words and do not require word analysis for recognition

others and by reflecting on its use' their programme used a variety of approaches to support learning. These included explicit teaching strategies; written, visual and oral scaffolding; guided speaking and discussion for reading, writing and viewing; short activities with a lot of repetition and joint construction of texts. A further key theme of the project was that activities would have a clear relevance to learners' lives outside the classroom and that learners had a clear understanding of this. In their initial analysis of the project the authors concluded that learners displayed significant progress in the development of their literacies skills. In addition, there appeared to be positive changes in their personal and social development, such as changes in their level of confidence and social skills (p.48).

Reporting on a study to develop phonics with a young man with Down's syndrome Morgan *et al* (2006) detailed the use of the 'Four Resources Model'. In this approach the authors built up a detailed knowledge of the learner's existing knowledge before developing phonics teaching and learning strategies that centred on his individual abilities, needs and interests (dogs, football and cooking). The study reported that the effectiveness of these strategies was dependent on the relevance to the learner of various factors such as text, resources, background knowledge and prior experience (p.57).

Literacies versus functional living skills

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. Morgan *et al* (2006) argue that while contemporary understandings of literacies acknowledge that learners need to engage with written text, oral and multimedia domains in a wide range of contexts and for different purposes (p.52), these aspects of literacies have been ignored in preference to teaching vocational and daily living skills. Limited research has explored the ways in which this broader interpretation of literacies may be developed and implemented. In a study of literacies acquisition by an adult with learning difficulties over a period of seven years Pershey & Gilbert (2002) made a number of key observations. Firstly they argued that the learner's literacies capabilities had '*..flourished under socially stimulating conditions*'. Secondly they reported that the learner demonstrated a number of traits established in the literature '*...motivation, symbolic awareness, metacognitive self monitoring and self direction of some of her learning*' viewed as necessary in the acquisition of literacies. Thirdly they advocated that an eclectic approach to instruction including whole-to-part and part to-whole strategies was successful for the learner. Finally, they detailed a range of ways in which the acquisition of literacies had a positive effect on the learner's life. These included the learner reporting how reading stories, poems and prayers for enjoyment had greatly enriched her life. Furthermore her ability to write notes to others was particularly important given the difficulties others experienced in trying to understand her speech (Pershey & Gilbert, 2002 p. 229).

These findings were similar to those of Young *et al* (2004) in a study of adults with intellectual disabilities in two community-based day programmes. Their study provided a range of recommendations including: that literacies programmes for adults with learning difficulties should build upon learners' strengths using strategies based on their interests, social contexts and needs; that the learning environment for such literacies activities should be based on all the activities that learners experienced in their daily activities rather than those specifically related to 'survival' and functional skills; that support staff should have access to training to ensure that literacies programmes and associated activities are developed to suit the profile of the learner. Similarly 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). Ryndak *et al*, (1999), drawing on research involving a 7-year case study with a young woman with moderate to severe learning difficulties advocated a change in emphasis from education as facilitating higher test scores to facilitating *'..success in life through the use of skills as and when they are needed.'* 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 **literacies** need provoking for that learner'*.

Engaging others in literacies development

To date the research literature addressing the engagement of parents/carers in the education of people with learning difficulties has tended to focus on the views of parents over other stakeholders (Dowrick, 2004). Hamre-Nietupski *et al* (1992) reported on the differences in emphasis on learning outcomes placed by parents according to the severity of their child's impairments. Parents of children with moderate disabilities rated functional life skills most highly while parents of children with more severe impairment rated friendship/social relationship skills as more important. In a survey of adult literacies provision for people with learning difficulties in Australia Van Kraayenoord (1992) argued for a team approach to literacies for people with learning difficulties that included involving speech therapist, occupational therapists, adult literacies tutors as well as caregivers and other therapists. However 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.

Summary

Adult education has, according to Clark (2006) been negligent in addressing disabled learners in various studies and research agendas. This seems to be particularly acute for adults with learning difficulties. However what can be surmised from the literature is that adults with learning difficulties can successfully participate in and benefit from literacies programmes throughout their lives and that this can facilitate their increased participation in many aspects of adult life including employment, education and their personal and emotional development. As policy and planning for people with learning difficulties now seeks to emphasise engagement in employment and community based activities there are increased opportunities for people with learning difficulties to be exposed to learning new skills. 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.

MAIN FINDINGS

Introduction

This section outlines key themes to emerge from in depth analysis of 9 case studies. (Table 1 above provides a summary of these case studies). The three subsections relate to: engaging with learners; locating learning in their everyday lives and sustaining this model of learning.

ENGAGING WITH LEARNERS

Planning learning with learners

In general tutors viewed planning learning with learners as a collaborative process. Tutors tried to identify and engage with what learners wanted to work on, where they used literacies and where there was potential for this to be developed. However there was variation in the extent to which these ideas were realisable for tutors working across different groups and organisations. The following sections highlight some of the key issues encountered by tutors in trying to plan effectively with learners.

Spectrum of learners

Tutors often were presented with learners who had been identified as a 'person with learning difficulties' without tutors having an understanding of the extent of their impairment. Where learners were able to communicate tutors found it easier to identify and gain an understanding of their interests outside of class. However, some learners had little experience or familiarity with exercising agency in this way and found participation initially difficult. In addition some participants were initially protective of different areas of their lives and were initially uncomfortable identifying and sharing their experiences. For example Gerry was reluctant for his key worker to see the folder which he had produced with his literacies tutor. Similarly Jack was protective of his reading time at home and was initially reluctant to make links between his class work and reading interests at home. Jack and Steve's tutor addressed this initial anxiety by trying to engage more with their interests:

I initially went into the learning sessions and started to have a look at the work that Jack and Steve had covered. It mainly seemed to be "King Street" books and exercises or puzzles such as word searches. Nothing that had any substance or relevance to their lives. Last week I began to talk to them about doing a project based on something they were interested in or had recently done such as a holiday. Steve seemed very unsure of the whole thing but admitted that he was sick of doing the King Street books. Jack also said he was bored of doing the King Street books and then started telling me about "Starlight Express" he had been to see and asked could he write about that. It was agreed last week that the learners "homework" would be to think of ideas for this week (extract from tutor notes).

Jack and Steve have gradually become more active in making decisions about the type of work they want to do in class and there is now ongoing discussion

about making connections between their work in class and their everyday lives. There is also evidence that they continue to think about this work between sessions and there is a greater commitment on the part of their tutor to engage with this, making their work relevant and useful. Jack and Steve now review their work at the end of each learning block and plan for the future sessions with their tutor. Their tutor anticipates that this process will get easier as they all become more familiar with this way of working.

Tutors experienced difficulties when learners had a level of impairment or communication difficulties that prevented them from engaging in open discussion about their lives. The ways in which tutors and their project managers addressed this issue varied. In one situation a tutor stated that within their project they would not be able to work with learners who were unable to articulate and express their learning goals. In contrast another literacies project specifically focused on adults with significant impairment. Alison's tutor initially found it difficult to communicate with her, her responses to direct questions would often be 'I don't know'. It was difficult for her tutor to make progress in determining what sort of things she was interested in and hence would like to do within the class. The challenge to Alison's tutor was to develop a more appropriate model of planning, both aware of and sensitive to Alison's situation:

What Alison is good at is communicating...she can be very good at organising herself into what she needs to do...she's quite good at ordering things like a camera and getting photos and she's good at symbols. So it's trying to convey her strengths, what she can do, what she's good at and then reinforce it and give her skills...to become more independent basically (interview with Alison's tutor).

As a means of engaging more effectively with Alison her tutor decided to move from using paper based materials and work folders to a more project focused approach. Planning became a process of engaging with and responding to Alison's needs and interests:

We then went on to a life story project. And it was basically looking at students' life histories; although we let the students decide whether they wanted to tell us a life story or just a story about themselves. So we used computers, photos and collages, names of student's family, things they liked doing, or important events in their life, or what they did during the week. So the students then presented, just before Christmas, and it seemed to work quite well, so they got quite professional, but also it was all their own work...so it was trying to do a project that was going to choose skills that they had, whether they could write or use a computer or not, as wide a range of skills as possible (interview with Alison's tutor).

Timetabled lives⁴

A further key difficulty frustrating planning with learners was the fact that learners often had busy, timetabled lives that reflected engagement with a range of different services, individuals and support workers. It could be difficult for a tutor to identify and understand what learners did during the week even when they had access to parents and support workers. While the majority of learners engaging with the research project would have been involved in person centred planning with their support workers, the extent to which such planning, or aspects of it, could be shared with tutors was limited. For example Frank began literacies classes after he expressed a desire to improve his reading and writing when developing person centred plans with his key worker at the day centre he regularly attends. Frank's plans were captured on a series of four montages depicting different aspects of his life and aspirations. Evidenced on the plans is a range of literacy and numeracy activities which the keyworker anticipated for Frank such as self travel, looking at shopping and money, all of which were intended to build upon Frank's independent living skills. Frank's keyworker approached community education, requested a tutor and after some time Frank was able to join a local literacies class. However while the keyworker and Frank discussed his life plans with the project researcher, the literacies tutor commented that she had never seen the plans and remained unaware of the extent to which these could have influenced planning with Frank.

Confidentiality

Planning learning often relied on tutors having adequate access to carers/support workers to help in this process. Where parents were the main carer this seems to have been a straightforward process limited only by parental interest and tutor time (see section below). However difficulties arose when carers were employees of service providers. Here carers were very conscious of client confidentiality and subsequently uneasy about divulging any personal information about learners to tutors:

It's confidentiality with everything with us. So I couldn't say "Jack done this", unless it's to do with their class or their group, the likes of the computer course I could say, "oh they've just done their computer course, they've done really well", but apart from that, no, we don't do anything like that [sharing information with tutor]. (interview with support worker).

Addressing this issue could involve seeking official permission from more senior staff:

I think to a certain extent, to do with this [sharing information], yeah, I think it would be a good thing. But I've always got to watch about letting anything out at all, 'cos if somebody else hears, then it's your job, so... it's a thin line isn't it? I

⁴. (This issue is addressed in more detail in the section below - 'Locating learning in everyday life').

mean most of the time I need to go through [name], because he is the manager (interview with support worker).

ENGAGING WITH CARERS/SUPPORT WORKERS

It was important for tutors to establish contacts with key individuals who could facilitate understanding of learners' past learning experience, interests and current activities. As referred to above, learners were often attached to a number of different organisations providing their residential and community support. In seeking an individual to liaise with and establish the aims of the project, tutors and the researcher needed to draw from a variety of people, including parents, support workers and keyworkers, all of whom worked with learners in varying capacities across a range of different contexts. Opportunities to realise literacies development for learners in community activities, employment or work placements required tutors and the researcher to invest considerable time in identifying, making contact and developing ongoing communication with people who had frequent contact with and knowledge of participating learners.

Engaging with parents

Where learners were still living at home, engaging with parents at times provided a straightforward opportunity for tutors to establish contact and exchange information. However the effectiveness of input from parents was variable. Some parents embraced the ideas of the project and were keen to reinforce learning as best they could for learners at home. Others though found this more difficult and required substantial ongoing support. For many parents increasing their son or daughter's independence was of key importance and in trying to achieve this they had supported their involvement with a range of work placements and community based activities. As a result the majority of learners had full timetables (see section below) involving activities which some parents had little knowledge of. One key benefit of engaging with parents was that it enabled tutors and the researcher to gain an understanding of the learner and their activities, a process which issues of confidentiality (see section above) made problematic with other carers.

Engaging with support workers

Tutors engaged with carers and support workers in a variety of ways. For some tutors, carers and support workers were able to provide background information that assisted tutors in planning learning and engaging more closely with learner interests. In one case study the learner's support worker initially attended their literacies classes, supporting the tutor with a new group of learners of whom they had little background knowledge:

I think [support worker] also wanted to kind of steer me in the right direction because...she was the one that knew the background and she knew what folk were able to achieve and so on. She was really, really helpful and then of course when I started, I didn't know exactly how much to expect from people, and on occasions when we had time, she [support worker] would stay behind and I

would say “I didn’t want to push this with so and so” and she said “oh yes, yes you can” because I didn’t really know whether it was the right thing to do because I was new to working with adults and she would say “Och yes he can do that” or “She can do that” and that was good. (2nd interview with Gerry’ tutor)

In some of the case studies there was evidence of informal exchange between tutors and carers/support workers existing prior to the research project commencing. However, as referred to above, learners were often distributed across different organisations and their support workers were not always aware of what learners were doing at other times in the week. For example Gerry’s support worker, while responsible for contributing to his person centred planning, was unaware that he was learning to travel independently and was also attending an adult literacies class. Where good links between tutors and carers did exist these tended to have arisen from informal, rather than planned, meetings. Alison’s tutor benefited from a close working relationship with her former support worker and present manager of the resource centre organising her daily activities:

Well [name] is the manager of the centre, so he’s often around, and he’s filled in the background about [name of centre] which is the centre where Alison goes to each day to do her various activities, which has been good, because [name of centre] is quite a big place with a lot of clients, and people get lost, sometimes it’s quite difficult to understand exactly how it works, so [name] has been great at filling in the background, how it works, who the best people to contact are, and the best people to deal with a situation, if something arises. (1st interview with tutor, p.2)

In some instances, viewing the range of possible contacts as a network was useful for tutors and the researcher in identifying areas where people could collaborate. Creating informed networks strengthened the possibility of a consistent approach in how people worked with learners. Steve for example worked closely with his tutor and parent when learning about money and handling change. His tutor and support worker enabled him, by engaging with other people, to take the opportunity to pay for things at a café and his local gym.

Vignette illustrating engagement with tutor and support worker

The following vignette (1) presents an example of close working between tutor and support worker. In this situation the ‘support worker’ was a project co-ordinator of a local community based initiative aiming to prepare people with learning difficulties for work.

Vignette 1:

Tom attends two projects, one is a part-time work placement in a recycling plant and the second a similar position in a community based charity shop. The shop provides an opportunity for people with learning difficulties to gain work experience. Normally there are five people with learning difficulties working in the shop supported by the project co-ordinator. The shop provides trainees like Tom with experience in serving customers, money handling, health and safety and stock. It has a specific focus on developing literacy and numeracy skills in a practical context. The shop is supported by an adult literacies tutor based within a local FE college.

The research focused on the development of closer working between the adult literacies tutor, who visited the project for 2 hours a week, and the full time project co-ordinator who managed the shop. While the college had worked with the project for a number of years it was the new project co-ordinator that initiated a more collaborative form of working. The new project co-ordinator decided to change the image of the shop and the ways in which trainees participated within it:

They [trainees] didn't do very much, there was not much involvement with the trainees in the shop, they were very much service users coming to a day service ...there was not much going on ...they were just clock watching for break time, lunch time, break time, home time. (interview with project co-ordinator, p.2)

Both tutor and project co-ordinator started to look at what skills the trainees needed to participate more fully in the running of the shop. Initially they found it difficult to engage Tom in this process as he preferred to instruct rather than follow instructions or participate as a trainee. Tom liked to view himself as 'the boss' but nevertheless lacked confidence in learning certain new tasks. The tutor and project co-ordinator worked at increasing Tom's participation. Over a period of time they explored ways of engaging more effectively with Tom. They worked with Tom's view of himself as 'the boss', exploring with him what being a manager meant and the range of skills this entailed. This provided a means to interact with Tom and engage his interest. The tutor and co-ordinator then engaged Tom in literacies based activities such as producing sets of instructions for the tasks he enjoyed such as cleaning the windows and washing the floor:

Continued on next page



Tom was supported by the co-ordinator to produce these instructions using 'Boardmaker'. These were then used to help Tom and other trainees with this task.

Collaborating in this way enabled the tutor and project co-ordinator to work closely with Tom and involve him in activities he was interested in and enjoyed. As Tom's confidence increased the tutor and co-ordinator were able to introduce him to more complicated and challenging tasks such as serving customers in the shop and using the till.

Close working between the tutor and project co-ordinator ensured that Tom was given the opportunity to practise skills repeatedly in context. Further to this, the project co-ordinator also developed closer relationships with trainees and had stronger links with carers and support workers. For example with Tom this meant that the project co-ordinator developed effective contact with his parents and used a notebook to record different aspects of Tom's learning enabling others to view his progress.

Organisational factors which caused tension with this way of working largely rested with the tutor's college remit. The tutor's outreach work was funded on the basis that the 5 trainees on a Wednesday morning would work towards an accreditation in adult literacies. Whilst the tutor felt comfortable that the college materials could be sufficiently adapted for this group of learners, the process would have benefited from greater planning involving the co-ordinator and trainees. This was further frustrated by the fact that the tutor's formal commitments within FE made such innovative project work difficult. As focus from the college lessened the trainees and project manager started to develop their own materials (using digital camera) which evidenced and reasoned what they were doing. The college are currently looking to appoint someone to work in a more effective way with such outreach groups, however this is still under negotiation.

Another important dimension to this project was the tutor and project co-ordinator's attempts to extend this learning outside the shop. Again as the work developed, the project co-ordinator started to look for opportunities such as banking the shop takings or buying foodstuffs in the supermarket. Attempts had been made to engage carers or support staff in this work, however, the co-ordinator has found that challenging attitudes such as people holding a very fixed view of ability, provided too much demand on her limited time. For Tom there is now an opportunity for the co-ordinator to liaise more closely with the learning opportunities available to him within his work at the recycling plant.

Learner hesitation

As referred to above some learners were hesitant about sharing information about their class with their carers and support workers, preferring instead to keep their class activities separate from other areas of their lives. In this extract from her diary on the VRE, Jack and Steve's tutor describes how, even though they were making significant progress in class, Jack and Steve were still reserved in terms of sharing this with others:

Steve started typing and we made a deal that when I was with Jack, Steve would at least try and spell words on his own and I would help him with these when I came back over. The same deal has now been struck with Jack as well! Steve was fantastic and would try and spell any word, even ones he thought were impossible such as 'volunteer' or 'involved'. I moved between both learners which gave them time to work on their own. At the end of the session Steve said to me, "I could do this all day". I asked him what and he said, "write things on the computer about myself". I was really pleased!

They both did their work plans at the same time and I was again really pleased when Steve asked how to spell a word Jack said, "I can help" and promptly told him how to spell it- peer learning coming through! I tried to encourage both learners to talk about their project to anyone they came in to contact with between now and next week such as their carer or family members. They were both quite reluctant but I will keep working on this.

Overall I thought it was a really positive session. I noticed a difference with both learners. They seemed interested and a lot more motivated. It is difficult at times moving between the 2 learners but I think they need to get used to working independently sometimes. I also think it will take some time before they involve other people in what we are doing but I am going to keep reiterating it every week and we will see what happens.

ROLE OF PROJECT RESEARCHER

The project researcher played a crucial developmental role in realising the aims of this project. The following sections describe the ways in which the researcher was able to assist in the development of the project and how her work was effective in fostering a collaborative approach involving tutors, carers and support workers.

Establishing contacts

The initial challenge to the research involved contacting tutors, describing the aims of the project, raising awareness of a social practices approach to literacies and seeking their assistance in identifying possible participants. It was initially difficult for tutors and the researcher to reach a joint understanding as to the extent of the researcher's involvement. This situation arose as, for some tutors,

the developmental side of the project in terms of contacting participants and liaising with their carers and support workers placed demands on their time they were unable to meet. It took time for this to become apparent and for the researcher to recognise tasks that she could do to move the project forward. Once tutors identified possible participants the researcher met with them and their carers to describe the project and the form their participation may take. Some tutors had established contact with learner's carers and support workers prior to the research project commencing. In these cases the researcher focused on the development and strengthening of these relationships.

In general, parents or keyworkers were identified at this stage. However as the project proceeded the researcher felt it necessary to expand these contacts considerably to enable learners to engage more effectively. This involved contacting and arranging meetings with, for example, employers and other learning providers. At times it also meant identifying opportunities for learners and negotiating these with key individuals (see section below on locating learning). For example Steve's keyworker was seeking an opportunity for him to do a computer course. The researcher, having established knowledge of local opportunities was able to identify a possible IT class for Steve and working with his tutor facilitated his joining it. In addition the researcher facilitated meetings between his keyworker, tutor and a catering company manager that were necessary to establish opportunities for his learning within his part-time work.

Gaining understanding of learners' lives

The researcher facilitated tutors in gaining an understanding of learners' lives and how to engage with their existing uses of and needs for literacy and numeracy. A key aim of the initial phase of the research was to gain an understanding of each participant's background and present situation. Using an ethnographic approach, the researcher collated information about learners' background, learning histories and current activities. In some cases it was difficult to gain a full understanding of learners' day to day life in abstract conversation and a number of approaches were adopted to facilitate engagement with these learners. In addition to interviews learners were encouraged to take photographs or make short films about their lives (supported by carers) which were then used by the researcher as a basis for discussion. For some learners this process became integrated with the work of their tutors and support workers. Jack and Steve's tutor describes how this process facilitated her work:

Jack and Steve were telling me about their favourite [photograph], why it was their favourite and all about the people who appeared in them. I told them we could go to the ICT Suite and I could download the pictures so that they could type underneath them and they both seemed very pleased with that. We went along to the ICT suite and got started. No sooner had we started and they had both picked their favourite picture, than Jack said he wanted to do Starlight express instead. I was really pleased because this was the first time Jack had taken ownership of what he wanted to do. We copied a picture from the internet

and Jack started to think about what he wanted to write about. He started to type out some of his thoughts on the show (tutor diary extract from the VRE).

In two instances the use of photographs was expanded upon by both tutors and support workers as a technique to engage learners in further projects. Information from interviews with participants was similarly, (with participant consent) fed back to tutors were appropriate.

Facilitating communication

The researcher facilitated communication between tutors, carers and support workers on an ongoing basis. This enabled a closer understanding to emerge between parties and was in excess of what individual tutors, carers or support workers could have achieved working unassisted. Key aspects of this work involved regular meetings and phone calls with tutors, carers and support workers as well as encouraging tutors to make contributions to the VRE.

SUMMARY

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.

However, 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. Where projects incorporated this approach, tutors, learners and support workers were able to work more effectively together and some tutors reported exchanging 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

Developing a social practices approach for learners required adaptation for tutors and learners alike. Tutors had to become familiar with a new way of working which engaged more closely with the lives of their learners in order to understand and address their differing patterns of literacies understanding. Equally, they had to adapt to a way of working that expanded their learning activities beyond their time in class. The following sections draw attention to the barriers faced by tutors and learners in adapting to this model of working and indicate also the ways in which these barriers were addressed and significant progress was made.

Identifying learning opportunities

As referred to above the often heavily timetabled lives of people with learning difficulties proved a significant barrier to tutors in terms of trying to establish effective contacts and engage in collaborative work with other areas of learners' lives. Table 1 illustrates the timetable of organised activities which one learner, Ricky, took part in over the course of seven days:

Table 1

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Drama course in FE college	FE College (IT course)	Adult literacies class AM	FE college all day (Child care course)	Social group AM Pub work voluntary PM	Youth group volunteer work PM	At home – usually watches westerns with dad

To work effectively with Ricky his tutor needed to make contact with his carer before then beginning to engage with those aspects of his timetable that seemed most appropriate. Identifying and permeating the different contexts of learners' lives to see how they used literacies and the potential for its development, was at times a difficult process for the researcher. It was also one which tutors found particularly demanding in terms of time. The researcher's use of interviews, photography and film was shared with tutors and assisted them in identifying opportunities where learning could be realised in the everyday life of learners. While this helped established a baseline of information for tutors to work with it was also, crucially, an ongoing process.

The personal views of tutors also influenced their capacity to realise new ways of working. Some tutors were concerned by 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. This enabled tutors to evolve new ways of working permitting more broad location of learning in learners' everyday lives. For example Frank's

tutor initially used part of their weekly sessions to work through a series of 'readers' (reading and comprehension based resources). While the tutor was responsive to resources and opportunities provided by the learner and their circumstances, expanding the remit of their classes was difficult. Working with Frank's support worker and drawing on the researcher's time, the tutor was able to devise material more closely related to Frank and his everyday experience.

Linking literacies and independence

A key factor to emerge in the course of the research related to the ways in which literacies could become linked to developing increased independence for learners. Tutors were able to work more effectively with carers and support workers when links to independence were made more explicit. However the extent to which carers and support workers engaged with increasing learners' independence and furthermore linked this to literacies was very variable. Support workers worked in different ways with clients, with some promoting independence and others being more focused on getting tasks done for their clients. One of Gerry's support workers recognised the importance to Gerry of being able to write his own name in a variety of different situations such as signing his name at the bank or post office. However other support workers working with Gerry were unaware of this and frequently signed for things on his behalf.

For a number of support workers, attending literacies classes was regarded as simply another slot in a person's timetable. Part explanation for this lay in the fact that some support workers were unaware of the potential of their role in terms of working with learners' literacies development. Many felt this was specialised activity that needed professional input:

When I first spoke to [support worker] she said that she didn't do any literacy with Frank, but when we talked about it, I pointed out that she did a lot, such as producing laminated bus timetables, lists of shopping prices, person centred planning and discussing Frank's life and goals (extract from research notes).

Where effective relationships with support workers were fostered, the rate of change of support workers hindered continuity for tutors and learners:

I worked with her for a period of 12 months with 1 key worker and because I saw this key worker every week, it worked very, very well and things moved on at quite a speedy rate, but we've probably hit a slight blip in that she's now got different key workers who are equally supportive. But the fact that they're not coming every week means that I'm finding it quite a job actually managing to keep up and keep the continuity going (interview with tutor).

In general while literacies could easily be identified as a key factor in developing learner independence there was little recognition of this in planning by care organisations. In fact in one organisation a tutor cited the lack of opportunity to develop a social practices approach with learners as a key factor in their seeking

a new position. While it was identified that Gerry was, for example, eager to sign his own name or make a phone call to a friend there was little explicit recognition by his care organisation of the role a literacies tutor may play in Gerry achieving these goals. Interestingly two of the case studies, Jack and Steve, attended an adult literacies class for disabled people with a variety of different impairments. This class had a much more clear focus to “Promote personal independence in people with physical disabilities” (quote from project literature).

The following vignette (2) highlights the ways in which effective collaboration between tutor and support workers benefited the learning experience and ultimately independence of one learner:

Vignette 2:

Sally attends a local community education centre two half days per week. On Wednesday she attends a dedicated literacy and numeracy class and on Tuesday an integrated literacies and microwave cookery class. In the cookery class Sally's support worker initially attended the class in order to support Sally. This enabled Sally's tutor and support worker to work closely together. The support worker gained a good understanding of the aims of the class and was able to recognise opportunities to realise Sally's learning outside of the class. Sally was supported in these tasks by her support worker and her interest in losing weight added further motivation in terms of reading and understanding nutritional information on food packaging. Within class Sally and her tutor focused on the presentation of information. Sally contributed to producing resources for the class such as recipe layouts and flash cards. In this initial period both the tutor and support worker felt that Sally made excellent progress, she became interested in planning, shopping and preparing meals. Engaging more independently in these tasks allowed Sally to develop her literacies skills. The support worker was keen to develop Sally's overall independence and gradually withdrew her support as Sally gained confidence and also became a more independent traveller (to the class). This development, while initially viewed as positive, had the negative effect of weakening collaboration between Sally's tutor and support worker. Sally's support worker and tutor maintained contact however, and worked together in ensuring that Sally achieved her goals of healthy eating, a high fibre diet and weight loss.

This form of support was maintained for a period of approximately eighteen months after which Sally's support worker left. In the period that followed, Sally's tutor found it difficult to establish the same level of contact and support with Sally's new support workers. In an attempt to engage with her support workers Sally and her tutor developed work booklets about shopping, recipes she would like to try and a record of things she had cooked. Supported by the researcher a meeting was held between Sally, one of her new support workers and her tutor. This proved useful in clarifying the ways in which support workers could create opportunities (such as weekly menu planning, checking for healthy options on labels) for Sally to practise her literacies skills at home and in the supermarket. While these aims were realised her tutor felt that there remained opportunities for developing Sally's learning (building on her existing knowledge of healthy eating, planning and cooking independently at home) that could have benefited from further collaboration with her support workers. Sally was supported by a range of different people all of whom would have needed to have been aware of her learning aims/programme in order to best foster her progress and independence.

Building relationships

Establishing trust between tutors and learners and between tutors and carers/support workers was crucial to developing effective ways of working. For example Alison's carer was unhappy with changes to Alison's routine since the closure of her day centre and the establishment of more community based activities. She was concerned that Alison had now lost some of the personal relationships the centre had previously permitted:

Alison, and a lot of people like Alison they need that, they need a relationship with one person. I think that when the centre was centre based if you like, if Alison was stuck she knew who to go to. If there was something wrong with her, or you know, if she wasn't sure about something, she knew who to go to...she saw that person every day and spent time with that person. She needs to identify with somebody...I think she already has [identified with] with [tutor] (interview with carer).

The close working relationships which developed between Alison's carer, her tutor and support workers greatly relieved such anxieties. Alison's tutor now works closely with her mother, former support worker and keyworker. In particular regular contact with Alison's mother has enabled her tutor to maintain Alison's interest and expression outside of the class, reinforcing her learning:

I tend to phone [carer] each week. I've told [carer] exactly what we've been doing, to look for certain things and to ask Alison some leading questions to see if she can get a story out, and if she can't get the full story out then [carer] knows what we've done and when Alison's not forthcoming she can say "something about photos..?" and then the story will come out (interview with tutor).

Carers and support workers engaging with the research were eager to have some form of regular communication with tutors. In the course of the research Steve's carer and support worker were eager to have regular access to his tutor. In Steve's situation this was achieved as his support worker and tutor were located in the same centre he regularly attended. This enabled ease of contact between them:

That's another thing that's so good, because [tutor] is in the building and all, see if this was a group that was outwith, I wouldn't have the same rapport getting that information and being able to see her. She [tutor] comes down for her lunch sometimes, and just says, I need to see you for something, so we just kind of nab each other that way, which is good, otherwise I don't think you'd get on so well with how [Steve & Jack] are progressing. (interview with support worker, p.5)

Despite these opportunities to meet informally, Steve's support worker still felt that a regular meeting with his tutor was necessary to help them understand each other and share what was developing for Steve:

What I would find quite beneficial would be like having a wee meeting and arranging it with [tutor]. A day and a time that we could just be sitting and saying,

“Could you give me information about this?” or “How’s this?” So she [tutor] knows how it’s working out at home and all that, because I know more of that side, just with contact (interview with support worker).

Creating networks

Where tutors were restricted in terms of time the researcher identified opportunities for extending learning activities into learners’ everyday lives. Often this involved establishing contact and arranging meetings between several individuals. The following extract from research field notes illustrates how this realised increased opportunities for Frank:

Frank’s tutor said that she wished she had more time to sit with Frank, perhaps another hour in the week when she could sit and do paired reading with him:

I don’t feel I get enough time with Frank to really take his reading forward...I get a wee bit frustrated that we can’t spend longer doing that...From one week to the next, although he has the recall, the actual reading skills are not just coming on as quickly as I would have thought they would. (interview with tutor)

I suggested that we look at where Frank already does reading in the week and build upon this. One idea I’d thought of was the catering company which Frank works in and which is located in the same building as his class. Frank’s tutor managed to speak to his support worker about this and the next time I visited the day centre, the support worker had printed out a set of sandwich labels that the catering company use. Frank’s support worker, tutor, catering company manager, Frank and myself sat down after the class and we discussed possible ways that tasks within the company could be broken down so that all staff in the catering company could participate. I was able to give some useful examples from another project. Frank has been in the catering company since it started and the manager was receptive to the idea that they could look at everything afresh and see how Frank could use his literacies skills to a greater extent (extract from field notes).

Tutors were keen to develop networks where possible but maintaining these for a group of learners could be difficult. Although there was a lot of goodwill and enthusiasm from tutors to work in this way, for those on sessional work establishing more extensive contacts was a task largely completed in their own time:

Another challenge with working with Ricky and being part of the research programme is that it’s very time consuming and in order to make a difference it has to be quite detailed and quite well structured. And I find that I just don’t have enough time to do the job the best way I can. There isn’t really any answer to that, you’re either involved in the research project or you’re not. So I’ve just had to work around it, and when I see how Ricky has actually improved, when I see the difference it’s making in his life and how much he’s enjoying working and being part of the research project I think it’s worth it (interview with tutor).

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).

For Jack and Steve this process was less complicated as a large part of their time was spent in a community building which housed both the hub of their support work and their adult literacies class. Steve's support worker described how they were able to foster Jack's learning with regard to handling money outside of his class and engage others in the process:

I think it's still early days with Steve. When he goes to get his lunch, I try to always help with Steve, and he'll say to me, and I don't make a big deal of it, the cook will just say £2.47, and he'll get the pounds out, and then I can feel him staring at me and I'll talk to [cook], and I'll look at him out of the corner of my eye, and I can see him, it's as if he's like that to me, and I'll go "right Steve, count the money out" and I'll say "put it out on the counter and we'll count it out", and then I'll just talk away again and I won't make a big deal of it, so as I'm not staring at him, and he thinks "God, they're looking at me doing this" and he does it no problem (interview with support worker).

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.

The following vignette (3) illustrates the ways in which increased communication between tutor, carer and support worker (and involvement in the research) benefited one learner attending a community based adult literacies class.

Vignette 3:

Ricky has attended an adult literacies class for the past two years. He expressed a desire to learn to read and after an initial assessment, his tutor decided to start from scratch using a system of “dolch” words. Ricky took his work seriously and was keen to work outside of his class and at home. His tutor wrote to his mum to ask if she could help Ricky sound out words and also work with him to practise the Dolch words and help him recognise them in other contexts such as in TV guides, newspapers and cereal packets. In this initial period Ricky’s mum felt that his attention span was beginning to increase and both his mum and tutor felt that he was making significant progress. His speech in terms of sounding out words improved as did his ability to recognise commonly used words.

During this initial period 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. This was celebrated by all, and the tutor feels that Ricky is making such excellent progress because everyone is contributing and supporting him to achieve his goals. Whilst the tutor is highly encouraged by Ricky’s success she feels that this level of support requires effort beyond her preparation and contact time with learners. Engagement in the research has shaped a developmental aspect to this way of working which may not have been achieved if the researcher hadn’t been able to consult across agencies. This work could go even further by incorporating Ricky’s other activities such as those at the FE college but which in turn would involve even greater effort. Further to this, the literacies class has undergone several disrupting episodes such as changes in funding structure and the buildings where the class has been held. In order to continue working with Ricky, the tutor had to ensure he joined a new horticultural group.

Benefits to learners

The time involved in developing the contacts and developing an effective way of working with carers/support workers meant that significant benefit to learners from engaging with the project were perhaps only beginning to emerge in its later stages. Support workers and tutors reported a number of ways in which they felt a collaborative social practices approach was both benefiting learners directly and also expanding their opportunities to learn:

I think personally from the reading and writing that it just brought out much more confidence in Frank to even try new things...before Frank was actually quite quiet, kind of didn't really do too much to be honest and now he's just applied to do an SVQ2 at college which is obviously going to involve some writing. He's quite sure of himself and knows what to do, and won't sit back...he's quite definite that he wants to write stuff himself. We've filled in tons of job applications and disclosures, which can be quite time consuming but he does it all himself, I just help with spelling (interview with support worker).

Similarly Sally's tutor explained how involvement in the literacies class had developed Sally's knowledge and interest in healthy eating. She identified tangible benefits including Sally losing weight, becoming aware of healthy eating options and being able to join in discussion about healthy eating and dieting. The class also helps Sally with decision making and choice which her tutor encourages her to experiment with at home:

This week we made a fruit fool. Sally chose to add banana and apple to this dish. She also took home a selection of cereals to try along with the fool. She will report back on whether she liked this or not! She was a bit unsure about the contrasting textures but was keen to give it a try (interview with tutor)

As mentioned above Gerry gained great satisfaction from learning to sign his name and this allowed him to send out Christmas cards for the first time. He has also, according to his carers, grown in confidence and now offers to take notes for a community group he participates in when previously he would be careful not to let anyone see that he couldn't manage this task.

The following extract from the researcher's fieldnotes describes the ways in which Jack and Steve have benefited from their literacies class and engagement in the research project:

Steve

Everyone comments on the increase in Steve's confidence. He makes eye contact with people instead of staring at the floor, he's also encouraged to walk more instead of using his wheelchair. When Steve first arrived at the project his mum said he couldn't read, however now he's reading books with support, retaining information and vocabulary between sessions. His mum said that rather than nag him to take out his reading he now instigates the practice. The coordinated approach to Steve's numeracy and money handling allows for the transfer of skills from classroom to real life. His tutor has spent time coaching Steve's support worker and mum how to facilitate manageable steps when supporting Steve. Engaging more professionals who work with Steve increases the opportunities that Steve has to realise skills outside the classroom. Steve is taking to the learner centred approach. Although in its early stages, this way of working might support Steve to actively engage and articulate choices about his life outside of the literacies class.

Jack

Again Jack's confidence has increased over the 3 years he's been at the project. Jack's support worker sees a difference in Jack over the last few months since his new tutor has taken over the class in that he's become more excited about his learning and also voicing more of an interest in the world around him. In particular using what he learns about latest football news from the papers to engage others in conversation:

Jack's been doing really well, but it's only the last few months he's been talking about the football and what's going on in the news, and he's got great views on different things, see like politics, just the difference in him...he'll come out with things and he must have been reading somewhere in a paper or on the news, or the politics programmes, and it's just wee things like that, that probably you wouldn't notice, but because I know he's never done any of that, never spoke out, now he's taking an interest, and it is with going to that wee group [group engaging with the project].
(interview with support worker)

Jack's support worker notices how much Jack initiates conversations now, and his tutor says he's always keen to stop her to discuss his work when he sees her outside the class. His support worker said she was really pleased to see him entering a computer class in another centre which wasn't for people with learning difficulties, and Jack quite happily chatted away to people.

Jack is gradually starting to take to the learner centred approach, coming up with ideas about writing stories. He asked if one of the stories he wrote could be published in the newsletter and this was a page of writing compared to the short poem he published previously. Jack's support worker supports him with further writing outside of the class such as typing up menus which he enjoys.

SUMMARY

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 how they could support aspects of learning.

Learners appeared to benefit in a variety of ways as their learning became more firmly established beyond their immediate class work.

SUSTAINING THE MODEL

Developing a social practices approach

As is illustrated in the sections above the work involved in developing a model of learning based on a social practices approach was not explicitly recognised in the remit of tutors or carers/support staff. The time involved in nurturing links between different agencies and sharing information highlighted the developmental nature of this way of working. While the researcher in this project was able to work across a range of learner activities and share information between tutors, carers and support workers it still took a considerable amount of effort to build an accurate picture of learners' lives. 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.

Tutors who were employed full-time as opposed to doing sessional work had perhaps more room for developing their work in this direction. However they tended to see their role more as developmental in terms of raising awareness with and training carers/support staff rather than working intensively with additional learners:

We're [tutors] pulled in a lot of directions, and I think I couldn't necessarily open up the service here to as many people as I would like to. For instance, I think for me to go out and train up carers and support workers to work in that way with their clients then, yeah, I would definitely do that, and I can definitely see the value of it, but I don't know if I could necessarily open up the service to anyone to come for a group every single week because I just don't think I've got the capacity, time-wise, to do it (interview with tutor).

Organisation constraints

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. In addition tutors were often funded from a variety of sources which contributed to both insecurity and difficulty meeting the demands of different funding criteria. Ricky's tutor (vignette 2) was funded on a project basis which in his case meant that the tutor had to, either run the same project again and change the learners, or alternatively develop a new project enabling her to keep the same learners. In order to maintain contact with Ricky and continue his progress, Ricky's tutor had to encourage him to enrol on a new horticultural project. Similarly vignette 1 above illustrated the tension experienced by Tom's tutor in trying to balance her role within FE while at the same time fostering learning in Tom's placement that was relevant to his everyday life. Tom's tutor was required to develop and deliver work material and lead people through an accredited course. In one instance this involved making use of existing FE literacies resources which then had to be adapted for use with

people with learning difficulties. Managing this while also realising connections with carers and relevance to learners' lives within a two-hour weekly slot was problematic. Joint planning of a more co-ordinated approach for these learners was difficult to realise given the tutor's remit and resources.

A further difficulty emphasised by tutors was that they could often feel isolated experiencing little contact with other tutors. Opportunities to exchange ideas and approaches were limited. For some engaging in the research project and having access to the VRE and meetings with other tutors was particularly helpful in developing their own practice.

As referred to in section one care organisations were particularly sensitive with regard to their client's confidentiality. At times this prevented discussion with tutors about opportunities to extend learning beyond the literacies class. One means to address this may be for tutors to have the opportunity to engage in person centred planning for people with learning difficulties.

Training for support workers/carers

Carers and support workers within the project reported the necessity of having access to tutors to discuss learners and, in particular, to seek confirmation of their role in assisting learning opportunities. While this may have involved only a few minutes of conversation it was difficult to realise for tutors often working with a large group of learners. Sally's support workers' formal remit was to ensure that she got to her literacies class safely and on time. Linking these staff more carefully into the aims of the class and supporting Sally outwith the class, required building better and ongoing communication. In addition support workers (who varied with different shifts) often held different perceptions of their role as support workers. In such situations training for carers/support workers could help nurture better understanding of the potential contribution of literacies to learners' lives, particularly aspects of their independence. This also needs to be reflected at a policy level within care organisations so that the role of carer/support worker can be formally recognised as one that encompasses assisting clients in everyday learning opportunities. Emphasising the link between literacies and independence may be crucial in this process.

CONCLUSION

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. However, 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. Firstly, providers of literacies programmes face challenges in terms of 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. Secondly, in parallel with these developments those 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 both 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. Thirdly, closer collaborative working between providers of literacies programmes and those providing care and support is essential to bring these strands of development together. In conclusion 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.

RELATED DOCUMENTS

This Report is a web only publication. It is available on the Scottish Executive Social Research website www.scotland.gov.uk and Adult Literacies Online: http://www.aloscotland.com/stellent/groups/public/documents/webpages/ALO_home.hcsp)

Learning Connections has published a Research Summary (8 pages) and a Summary of Findings (2 pages) on the same web-site.

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