



Recently Completed Primary Research

Teaching, Learning and Assessment for Adults: Improving Foundation Skills

Janet Looney, 2008

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Economic Cooperation and Development, Paris, France

Designed to complement the International Adult Literacy Survey, this multicountry study looks at what's inside the "black box" of adult literacy, language, and numeracy classrooms in OECD countries, including England, France, the United States, and other countries: how teaching, learning, and both formative and summative assessment are organized. Funded by OECD and using data from national and international surveys plus case studies from OECD countries, this report describes the context of providing adults with services for building their "foundation" skills, as well as exemplary practices. While the first sections document much of what is known from large surveys about the prevalence of low-literacy skills and its economic impact, the later sections discuss the policy context of adult literacy provision, as well as the precarious working conditions of the mostly part-time teaching workforce. Of particular note is section II, an overview of the "steps of the learning process" gleaned from the international reviews and case studies of exemplary practice:

- *"Diagnosis of learning needs, and establishment of learners' motivations and goals;*
- *"The development of strong relationships within the classroom, and creation of 'safe' environments for learning;*
- *"The use of assessment to provide information on learning, and to be used as feedback by learners and instructors to modify teaching and learning activities;*
- *"A focus on building learner autonomy, including skills for self-assessment and for addressing the literacy and numeracy tasks of daily life independently; and*
- *"Tracking of learner progress towards goals and recognition of achievement."* (italics in the original, p. 91)

The five chapters focused on these steps include a wide variety of innovative strategies for supporting adult students' progress in foundation skill-building programs. The report concludes with seven policy recommendations for strengthening effective practice:



*Edited by Cristine Smith
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This study contributes to our understanding of how to support better teaching, learning, and assessment.

1. promoting debate about teaching, learning, and assessment
2. strengthening professionalism
3. using formative assessment as a framework for balancing structure and flexibility
4. using learner-centered approaches
5. diversifying and deepening approaches to evaluation
6. providing enough people, time and money for effective services
7. strengthening the knowledge base through research on priority areas such as classroom relationships, formative assessment, learner persistence, and e-based programs as a complement to traditional learning

By looking across country systems and programs, this study contributes to our understanding of how to support better teaching, learning, and assessment in adult education programs.

For the full report (available to subscribers and readers at subscribing institutions):
<http://lysander.sourceoecd.org/vl=1459382/cl=26/nw=1/rpsv/cgi-bin/fulltextew.pl?prpsv=/ij/oecdthemes/99980029/v2008n1/s1/p11.idx>

For the abstract: http://www.oecd.org/LongAbstract/0,3425,en_2649_201185_40026026_1_1_1_1,00.html

Illuminating Disadvantage: Profiling the Experiences of Adults with Entry Level Literacy or Numeracy over the Lifecourse

Samantha Parsons and John Bynner, November 2007

National Research and Development Center for Adult Literacy and Numeracy, England

One problem with most studies of adults is that they do not follow adults for long enough to gauge the relationship between literacy skills and other events in people's lives. However, the 1970 British birth cohort survey does just that. This is the second report about the birth cohort survey, funded by the National Research and Development Centre (NRDC) for Adult Literacy and Numeracy. The first report, *New Light on Literacy and Numeracy*, identified the relationship between poor basic literacy skills and multiple disadvantages in employment, health, and social inclusion. This second report focuses more specifically on the "trajectory of disadvantage" among those in the cohort at age 34 with the lowest-level skills. Looking closely at early educational experiences, family background and parental education, employment experience, and home and family life, the study finds that cohort members with Entry level skills (two lowest literacy and numeracy skills levels) were disadvantaged in

- early educational and socioeconomic support, with fewer parents reading to them as young children or expressing aspirations for high levels of schooling

- views of the compulsory education system, being “the most likely to be disillusioned with school, and the vast majority wanted to leave at the first opportunity” (p. 8), and more likely not to have qualifications
- occupational opportunities, being more likely to work in labor-intensive, low-skilled, and less secure jobs, less likely to receive work-based training, and less likely to be promoted on the job
- home and family life, so that more 34-year-old men with low literacy skills lived with their parents, and both men and women with low skills were more likely to live in rented or overcrowded accommodations, have been homeless, never have lived with a partner, and read less often to their own children. Women with low literacy skills were “twice as likely as women with [higher literacy skills] to have been a teenage mother and three times more likely to have 4+ children at age 34” (p. 10).

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The study concludes that “given the right circumstances and the motivation to succeed, adults who started their lives on the worst form of disadvantaged trajectory can, with proper support, transform their opportunities and ultimately their life chances. But the problem remains that such an achievement is still restricted to relatively small numbers, suggesting that a significant minority will continue to lead marginalized and unfulfilling lives. . . . [T]he problem is likely to come to a head when major lifecourse events in the family and the workplace present challenges that can no longer be met. This is likely to be the time of most difficulty for such adults, but it is also when motivation may be stimulated in the most effective way” (p. 80). The report ends with a recommendation that, for this reason, adult literacy and numeracy learning programs are an essential part of the educational system, not a short-term stop-gap response to educational needs.

For the full report: http://www.nrdc.org.uk/publications_details.asp?ID=125

Primary Research in Progress

Adult Literacy and Numeracy Development in Partnership: Social Capital Approaches

Stephen Black, Meadowbank, Australia

This two-year action research study addresses the research question: *What are the approaches (policy, partnerships, and pedagogy) to adult literacy development that deliberately draw on and build social capital?* Social capital is defined as the multilevel networks that facilitate cooperation between and among groups: “provider-learner, learner-learner, learner-community, provider-community and provider-organisations” (Project Purpose, NCVET Web site). With funding through the

This study addresses the question: What are the fiscal contributions of U.S. adults by their educational attainment?

National Centre for Vocational Education Research, this study will first conduct an environmental scan of literacy program collaborations in the health, justice, and finance sectors. This scan will describe and evaluate how literacy programs are currently engaging in collaborations with people and organizations in these three social service sectors. The researchers will use this scan to choose three literacy program collaborations that can be studied in more depth by action research teams trying to understand how these collaborations support effective language, literacy, and numeracy skills development inside and outside the classroom. The product of the study will be guidelines for new and innovative approaches to adult literacy delivery that draw on and build social capital. The study was begun in December 2006 and will be completed in December 2008.

For more information: <http://www.ncver.edu.au/teaching/projects/10395.html>

Secondary Research, Meta-Analyses and Research Reviews of Note

The Fiscal Consequences of Adult Educational Attainment

Ishwar Khatiwada, Joseph McLaughlin, and Andrew Sum with
Sheila Palma, December 2007
Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University,
Boston, Massachusetts

Another in a series of papers prepared for the National Commission on Adult Literacy, an initiative managed by the Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy, this study addresses the question: *What are the fiscal contributions of U.S. adults by their educational attainment?* While previous studies documented that better educated and more literate adults do better in the labor market than their less educated peers, this research investigates the fiscal impacts for federal, state, and local governments, using data from 2004–2005. Just as adults with more education have higher earnings, they also pay more taxes and receive fewer “cash transfers” (government assistance such as subsidies or food stamps): “Adults without high school diplomas/GED certificates received a mean annual level of transfers that was four times as high as those of their peers with a four-year or higher degree” (Exec. Summary, p. viii). Adults with more formal schooling have higher rates of home ownership and higher home values, which means higher property tax payments. When multiplied across the working lifetime, the study estimates that the net fiscal contributions of a U.S. adult with a master’s degree or higher can be well over \$1 million, while the average high school dropout was estimated to produce a net fiscal burden of \$33,000. The study concludes, “By strengthening the literacy/numeracy/writing

proficiencies, English-speaking and reading proficiencies, and educational attainment of participants, adult basic education programs can boost the fiscal position of national, state and local governments” depending on “their success in raising the employability and earnings of participants” (pp. 40– 41).

For the full report: <http://www.caalusa.org/content/fiscalimpact.pdf>

*Skills enable practices, and
practices build skills.*

Skills and Social Practices: Making Common Cause

Alix Green and Ursula Howard, December 2007

National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy, England

In the same way that literacy methodologists argue about the effectiveness of phonics approaches vs. whole-language or meaning-based approaches, there has been a debate in the literacy community about whether literacy instruction should focus on reading, writing, and numeracy skills that adults need or on the “social practices” of literacy in adults’ lives—the literacy events and demands that adults grapple with on a day-to-day basis. This thoughtful report addresses the dichotomy between skills versus social practices approaches to literacy and argues that it is a false dichotomy. Using literacy research from the United States and Great Britain and professional wisdom from England (which takes a skills-based approach in its national literacy program) and Scotland (which takes a social practices approach in its national program), the authors discuss the interrelationships between skills and practices. They conclude that “there is good reason for constructive interaction between social practices and skills-led approaches” to literacy instruction (p. 20). In other words, skills enable practices, and practices build skills. They maintain that policies that make use of this interaction should support a focus on three themes in any approach to literacy instruction:

1. *personalization* of teaching and support to the “whole learner”
2. individuals’ *capabilities*, the way they “deploy many different forms of knowledge, skills and competencies in their lives in interconnected ways” (p. 20), and
3. *persistence*, or helping the adult learner to “engage in literacy, numeracy and language as social practices in every context in which they want to communicate” (p. 20), rather than seeing persistence in terms of a program’s retention rates

The authors urge us to consider a field-wide dialogue toward making “common cause” to support both literacy skills and social practices.

For the full report: http://www.nrdc.org.uk/publications_details.asp?ID=120