

Summary

Learning journeys: learners' voices

**Learners' views on
progress and achievement
in literacy and numeracy**

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with Judith Edwards**

research report

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Introduction

This report describes the processes and findings of a North West Regional Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) research project. This was a collaborative research project, which carried out qualitative research into how learners view their own progress and achievement in the acquisition of literacy and numeracy. The research took place between November 2001 and June 2002 and the three major strands of the project were:

- to produce new knowledge about learners' perceptions of progress in literacy and numeracy
- to develop research instruments for involving literacy and numeracy learners
- to develop and trial an approach to collaborative practitioner research into literacy and numeracy issues.

Research theme and method

The research theme was selected in response to the growing national focus on achievement and progress in literacy and numeracy. Developments since the publication of the Moser report in 1999 have highlighted the need to understand more about success factors relating to learners' achievement and progress in basic skills. The importance of learners' voices has been increasingly recognised by organisations concerned with policy, funding, delivery and quality in literacy and numeracy provision. In spite of this, there is still little research that captures learners' perspectives on achievement and progress in these areas. This research aimed to add learners' voices into the debate about this important issue so that their views and experiences can inform the development of policy and practice.

The research adopted a qualitative approach and used individual and group semi-structured interview frameworks to interview 70 learners attending literacy and numeracy groups provided by eight adult education and FE institutions.

The learning journey metaphor approach

The project developed an innovatory method of including learners in research. A metaphor relating to travelling on a learning journey was used to facilitate discussion between learners and researchers. The metaphor aimed to generate a shared language and conceptual framework for the research interviews in order to provide more common starting points for the researchers and the learners. It also aimed to develop the skills needed for critical enquiry, reflection and analysis.

The learning journey sessions were an empowering experience for many learners as they developed their skills to reflect on and analyse critically elements of their current and past learning experiences. The most important aspects of the learning journey sessions were the profound impact they had on learners and the ways in which they influenced the learning process itself.

Key points

- The metaphor enriched learners' contributions to the research, as it was an effective stimulus for discussing learning experiences.
- The use of the metaphor empowered learners by using a common language and developing critical skills.
- The process inspired learners to think about their learning in more holistic, reflective and analytical ways, often influencing their aspirations and long-term aims.
- The metaphor demonstrated the benefits of a group approach to discussing learning experience and recognising progress and achievements as learners supported each other to articulate, compare and reflect on experiences and views.
- Researchers concluded that all learners could benefit from the opportunity to explore their learning in this way and planned to incorporate the learning journey approach into their teaching and learning practice.

What learners said

The research helped to bring learners' voices more to the fore. They shared their views and experiences of learning processes and talked about their reasons for joining classes, their aims and aspirations, how they planned their learning, what they achieved, how they evaluated this and how fast and how far they travelled. They reminded us about some issues we already knew and provided some fascinating new insights into their perspectives on learning processes and learning gain, which have implications for policy and practice.

Key points

- In exploring why people set out on their learning journeys we found that most of the adult learners had been considering joining classes for some time but had been inhibited for different reasons, including fear and personal circumstances.
- Diverse aims and aspirations were identified. These were usually expressed in terms of real life activities, although a small number talked about wanting to improve their spelling. They included improving employment performance or prospects, supporting children, progression to higher-level study and building confidence.
- Only a third of the learners interviewed had been closely involved in planning their learning. There was most satisfaction with progress where

learners were actively engaged with tutors in the processes of planning content and recognising learning gain.

- The journey metaphor, with its language of travel and movement, was particularly effective in unlocking the capacity of learners to discuss their views on the pace of their learning and progress. This is a fundamental question but one that we found was rarely discussed with learners in practice.
- Learning gain was defined in different ways. Most learners described learning gain in terms of what they could now do in their lives while a smaller number referred only to the technical skills they had acquired.
- Perhaps the most profound change for most learners interviewed was a massive enhancement of their confidence and self-esteem. This increased confidence had a significant impact on their learning achievements, attitudes to learning, aims and aspirations, ability to do real life activities and their social interactions with other people.
- Learners identified different ways of knowing how they had learned and expressed preferences for different levels of involvement in assessing their own achievements. They related progress to their ability to perform in real life contexts.
- Peer support was a significant factor in learning and achievement as the learners placed a great deal of value on collaborative peer assessment. Learners discussed how they used each other's skills and knowledge to support and validate their learning and to share successes, and identified the impact of being valued as an assessor on their own self-esteem and confidence.

Developing practitioner research

The project developed an approach to practitioner research that involved training tutors as researchers and supporting them to work collaboratively with peers from a range of institutions. This model is relatively uncommon in basic skills research and valuable lessons were learned about problematic issues and effective practice.

Key points

- Research training that is not linked to accreditation is still relatively rare. We found that it is a powerful form of staff development that has wider benefits for participants, institutions and learners.
- Most of the participating institutions, faced with many competing priorities, did not accord a high value to research. This affected the researchers' ability to commit to all aspects of the project.
- Well-structured training, which is supported by clear documentation to guide researchers through the process and is organised in stages to

enable researchers to reflect on their progress to date and prepare them for the next phase, was an effective model for this type of work.

- There was some tension between the project aims of training new researchers with those of producing meaningful, high quality research. Strategies were developed to address this and all researchers contributed to the overall picture of learners' views.
- The research had a powerful effect on the teaching and learning practices and experiences of those involved. Tutors were reminded of the importance of listening to the students they teach and the immense value of what they hear and became more reflective and analytical about the experiences and processes of teaching and learning.

Implications for policy and research practice

The research findings have implications for learners, practitioners, the institutions in which they work, policy-makers, funding bodies and the research community.

- The learning journey metaphor was an effective tool for supporting literacy and numeracy learners to participate in this research. It could now be tested with different groups of learners in different settings. This could include development of different metaphors to support new research questions or research in different settings.
- The researchers identified the value of the learning journey metaphor sessions for developing the skills needed for critical enquiry, reflection and analysis and for supporting learners to view their learning in a more holistic way. There is now a need to develop, disseminate and evaluate strategies for introducing this into teaching and learning practice.
- Tutors should take deliberate steps to try to develop equal working relationships with learners which recognise and value the strengths and knowledge each can bring to the process. This would include working with learners to identify their learning preferences, including pace, relationships with tutors and peers, measurement and feedback methods.
- Learners' confidence and skills to participate in learning processes develop as learning progresses. Learning programmes should develop these skills. The use of the learning journey metaphor could be one mechanism to do so.
- Learning programmes should include learning outcomes relating to learners' aims that are not specified in the national curricula. They should integrate learning aims relating to everyday life, personal and technical skills.
- Strategies for measuring and validating learning gain that reflect learners' ways of knowing should be developed and piloted then disseminated to the wider field. These would relate to use of learners' records, firmer self-

assessment processes, peer assessment and achievement in everyday life, and recognition of distance travelled.

- The above processes would take time and this would have to be acknowledged in funding allocation and individual tutor timetables. Tutor training would also be essential.
- The fact that many learners are deterred by, or do not seek qualifications, and have a range of different learning outcomes has implications for the setting and achievement of national targets.
- The findings had strong messages about the importance of learner involvement, learning approaches and negotiating and measuring learning outcomes. Local Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs) could work with other relevant agencies including the Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit (ABSSU) and the Basic Skills Agency (BSA) to support dissemination, for example by developing and funding training and other mechanisms to share good practice.
- Local LSCs could also take account of these research findings to inform their basic skills delivery plans and when they develop criteria for awarding funds such as Standards Funds and Local Initiative Funds.
- Further research is needed into the above areas, particularly the development, demonstration and validation of achievement of learning outcomes for real life and personal skills, the interplay between increased confidence and learning, and the roles, trust and dynamics of peer recognition of learning.

The Learning and Skills Development Agency funds annual research initiatives in each of the government regions. These projects are managed by the regional directors and developed and supported by the regional Learning and Skills Research Networks. The project described in this report was the North West LSDA regional project for 2001/2.

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The researchers were Val Moffatt of Blackburn College of FE; Sally Clunan of Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council; Pat Huxter, Carolyne Taylor and Penny Weatherall of Lakes College West Cumbria; Mandy Williams and Carol Woods of The Adult College, Lancaster; Andrea Cowton of Lancashire College; Dawn Hughes and Ann O'Connell of Sefton Learning Partnership; Elaine Edwards, Jane Lennard and Carole Wilshaw of Wirral Metropolitan College of FE.

A copy of the full report can be downloaded (free) from the Learning & Skills Development Agency website (www.lsda.org.uk/publications)

