NRDC

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for adult literacy and numeracy

Research Report

Improving the literacy and numeracy
of disaffected young people in custody
and in the community

Summary interim report of the first
18 months of the study

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background to research and rationale

The Moser report (DfEE, 1999) stated that too many adults were not functionally literate and had problems with numeracy, which cramped their lives and undermined national productivity. Moser made wide-ranging recommendations which are now having a major impact on adult basic skills.

Younger people (16 to 20-year olds) were seen as a particular priority and this is endorsed by the criminal justice system since recent Home Office statistics show that young men aged between 10 and 20 commit 42 per cent of all indictable offences (Kurtz, A. 2002 What works for delinquency, Journal of Forensic Psychiatry, 33, p 672). Offenders have also been identified as a group requiring attention 'as a matter of urgency' (**Skills for Life**: The national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills, focus on delivery to 2007, DfES, 2003) because their numeracy and literacy skills are under-developed compared with those of their peers.

One of the measures being explored to reduce youth offending is the provision of education and training. The purpose of this study is therefore twofold:

■ To explore ways of improving the literacy and numeracy skills of young offenders with under-developed basic skills.
■ To see what impact literacy and numeracy have on economic activity and offending over time.

In this interim report we provide snapshots of basic skills issues for this group, both in community and secure settings. Understanding these issues is likely to be the key to engineering long-term positive outcomes.

1.2 Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the co-operation of all those in the research sites. We are indebted to them all, young people, teachers, assistants and managers for their generosity, patience and wisdom.

We would like to thank Liz Lawson and colleagues at the Offenders' Learning and Skills Unit (OLSU) and Robert Newman, Maggie Blyth and colleagues at the Youth Justice Board for help in selecting research sites and for keeping us informed about national developments.

We would also like to thank Donna Joseph, Rachel Emslie-Henry and the Lancaster team of ethnographers for invaluable help with data collection.

1.3 Peer review

The report was read and peer-reviewed by Carol Woods, Fiona Cameron and Diane Beck.

2. The main findings so far

2.1 Sample profile

The context

So far, 199 young people have participated in the study: 91 in the community and 108 in custody. The average age of the young people is 17, and they range from 15 to 18 years old. All have been convicted of an offence and are under an order, either in the community or the secure estate. Most are male (96 per cent) and white (93 per cent), although this ethnic mix will change as we process the data from London. They are much more likely than the average young person of this age to be living on their own, or with a single parent, and to have been in care.

Fuller details of the young people's backgrounds are available in the full Interim report, section 5, available from NRDC.

Literacy and numeracy skills

We defined under-developed basic skills as a score at Level 1 or below on the Basic Skills Agency (BSA) initial assessment. About two-thirds of the juvenile offenders we screened met this criterion. For both literacy and numeracy, the majority (47 per cent) were scoring at entry level 3, followed by Entry Level 2 (27 per cent). A minority (12 per cent) were at Entry Level 1.

Despite the fact that the initial assessment is a fairly crude test, it showed reasonable reliability and validity in that it was highly predictive of performance four or five months later. Young people's estimates of how easy they found reading and writing agreed well with their performance on the BSA test, although this was slightly less true for numeracy. Literacy difficulties included both spelling and comprehension. Items that young people found most difficult in numeracy included subtraction of 3-digit numbers, measure, fractions, decimals, percentages, volume, area, perimeter and reading graphs and timetables .

More details of this analysis are available in section 5 of the full interim report.

2.2 Attitudes towards education

Previous experience of education

For a significant proportion of these young people, experience of school had been very negative. Forty per cent rated their experience of school as 'awful', while others mainly enjoyed its social dimension. Problems seemed to surface at secondary school, as a result of which young people began to truant. Almost 90 per cent reported having being absent from school at least once a week. Two-thirds had left school before the statutory leaving age, either because they were excluded or because they just stopped going.

Many young people (69 per cent) had received some education/training since school and this was perceived more positively. What they liked about post-16 provision was the more relaxed, flexible, 'grown-up' atmosphere, the shorter lesson span and the fact that tutors generally treated them with greater respect. Some of these young people found it difficult to sit in one place, doing the same thing for too long.

Further details about attitudes to school and school backgrounds can be found in sections 4 and 5 of the full interim report.

Attitudes to current learning experiences
Education and training varied across the different research contexts. In some cases, education classes were interwoven with work experience or vocational training. In others, education classes were offered on their own. In the community, education was normally mixed with work experience but this was not an option in secure environments.

Based on qualitative analysis of responses, attitudes to work experience and vocational training were generally positive. These were seen as preparation for employment, as something active and therefore not boring, and as more appropriate for their life stage. Aspects of the social environment - such as being able to 'make a brew', have a chat or let the radio play - were seen as characteristic of work rather than school and mentioned as important.

There was greater ambivalence about education, which is not surprising in the light of the young people's previous learning experiences. Discussion sessions (typically in drama and life skills classes) were valued, as were art and computing, getting one-to-one support and, for some, the opportunity to catch up on things missed at school or to obtain qualifications for future work or training.

Young people tended to be particularly critical of literacy and numeracy classes where they complained about too many worksheets, which were too easy and sometimes repeated (particularly in custodial settings). A common complaint was that they had 'finished with all that': they had left school and did not want to go back. When pressed on this point, they often said that they could do all the things they needed to do as an adult. It is not clear whether this was a defensive reaction, lack of knowledge of workplace demands or an accurate appraisal of how they will function at work. It had consequences in that many young people would not sign up to education classes in the community, and a lot of time was spent 'off task' in literacy and numeracy lessons in custody.

Further details about attitudes to current learning can be found in section 4 of the full interim report.

Qualifications
Two-thirds of the young people interviewed had left school with no qualifications or not knowing what qualifications they had obtained . To put this in context, the percentage of school leavers with no graded GCSEs in England is 6 per cent (DfES, 2003). Some of those who had taken GCSEs did not know their results because they had not gone to collect them. Many young people reported having gained some qualifications since school, but were not sure exactly what they were, 'something from YMCA – I've not looked at it yet'. In contrast, young people in custodial settings were almost invariably keen to gain qualifications. In both settings, the most highly valued qualifications were those directly related to practical activities that could be applied to obtaining employment.

Further details about qualifications can be found in section 4 of the full interim report.

Future aspirations
Optimistically, these young people wanted to get work and become financially independent. If

there is one thing that we need to listen to, it is this. For most young people, plans to study were closely related to a vocational career such as carpentry, or painting and decorating. Some careers, such as mechanic or chef, tended to be seen as unobtainable because of the necessity of going to college as part of the training. Learners were 'not keen on going to college – which you need to do to be a chef'.

Social networks were important to work history and future employment prospects. Young people tended to find work via family and friends, suggesting that many benefited from family support and that few tried more formal routes to employment or were less successful with them. This method of finding work may have contributed to the types of work experience the young people had had and to their future career aspirations. There may be a feeling of exclusion from other types of employment.

Further details can be obtained in section 4 of the full interim report.

2.3 Educational provision

Teacher/student relationships

As discussed above, many young people had negative feelings about school and also demonstrated these when we observed in classrooms. One in three students complained about the requirement to study English and maths: 'I am in f***ing prison, not primary school'. Almost invariably, teachers, vocational tutors and learning support assistants were supportive of their students, managing very challenging behaviour with sympathy and tact, and building self-confidence where they could.

Further details about these issues can be found in section 3 of the full interim report.

Current educational activities

Observation and conversations with teachers confirmed young people's reports that much of the work in literacy and numeracy classes involved completing worksheets. Whole-class elements were planned and delivered but, even with groups of six or eight, it was hard for the teacher to maintain control. In an example of a successful lesson of this kind, students were asked to argue whether a teacher acted reasonably or unreasonably in disciplining a naughty schoolboy. Successful whole-class discussions were also observed in drama and life skills classes. We conclude that this type of teaching can work, but not when the subject matter is seen as formal or school-like.

No matter how creative the teaching, worksheets are likely to be a feature of literacy and numeracy classes because of the variations in ability and the length of time each student attends the course. However, worksheets tended to be very skills-based and determined by a fairly formal curriculum and its accreditation requirements, with only superficial attempts at providing appropriate context. In custodial settings, practical activities described in the worksheets were usually omitted.

Further details of current activities can be found in section 3 of the full interim report.

Differentiation

The advantage of worksheets is that they allow each individual to work at their own pace and level, and in an area of interest. This was the major technique we observed for managing

differentiation and it worked best where there was a good match between the student's skill level, their motivation and the work set. Where the match was poor, an assessment offering immediate feedback was helpful, particularly when there was a supply teacher or teacher working one day a week who did not know the learners well. We only observed work selected to match the students' interests, rather than their level, in art lessons. Otherwise, the selection of materials was often driven by accreditation demands rather than individual student needs.

Informal education

Especially in custody, young people did an impressive amount of reading and writing. 41 per cent of boys in custody read every day and a further 26 per cent read most days. Letters, magazines and newspapers were the most popular reading material but books, both factual and fiction, were also popular. In the community, only 25 per cent read every day and books were read by a fairly small minority. Similarly, all young people used maths in their everyday lives, particularly to do with money.

More detailed information on these issues can be found in section 5 of the full interim report.

Educational resources

Where teaching resources were available within the teaching room (for example, a range of sample lessons, dictionaries, maths text books), this was observed to be helpful. Computers were used to good effect in ICT sessions but we only once observed any cross-curricular use, despite the presence of computers in many of the teaching rooms. High-tech smart boards were available in the custodial settings but were not in use, probably because staff did not know how to operate them.

Staff training

The project has observed a range of difficulties in delivering staff training, some of which are already well known. Staff tend to work part-time and it can therefore be difficult to run training sessions to suit everyone. Staff are seldom paid to attend training sessions. In custodial settings, there is competition for a finite number of training days which have to be shared across a range of concerns, including discipline, equal opportunities, etc. A significant proportion of staff move around or work on a supply basis, so training is diluted.

There is considerable variety in what people already know, for example, whether they have received training in the Adult Core Curriculum, or in assessment procedures. In one setting, training had a low priority for some staff who took its provision as an opportunity to have a day off, reflecting a tradition that committed managers found hard to overcome. There was very little evidence of educational contractors having a development plan for staff training. Despite this, a core of teachers and tutors were extremely dedicated and creative in designing educational experiences and programmes for potentially reluctant students.

2.4 Learning outcomes

We currently have literacy and numeracy scores at two time points for 23 young people in the community and 35 in custody. None of those included in the analysis is part of a special intervention group but all should have received some education or training.

Looking at the progress made between these two assessments, the young people in the community made significant progress in numeracy but not literacy. The young people in custody made significant progress in literacy but not numeracy. Those in custody read significantly more than those in the community (e.g. 41 per cent of those in custody reported reading every day as opposed to 25 per cent in the community) and this may explain the greater literacy gains. It is possible that students in the community were more engaged in numeracy in everyday life but we do not have any evidence of this.

Further information can be found in section 5 of the full interim report.

3. Conclusions

3.1 Emerging recommendations for practitioners

Bearing in mind their school history and their generally negative experiences of school education, these young people may be extremely wary of formal education. A significant number feel they know everything they need to know, although it is unclear whether this is a defensive skin, ignorance of the demands of adult life, or an accurate appraisal of how they will function in the workplace. Successful basic skills tuition should address these issues as a priority because students will not otherwise be able to learn, no matter how well teachers teach.

Learning aims and objectives

■ Education departments need to reflect on their learning objectives for basic skills. These might be:
  • To improve learners' basic skills within a hierarchy of skills.
  • To allow learners to gain qualifications.
  • To target skills to meet learners' objectives.
  • To make learners feel positive about learning.
  • To prepare learners for the workplace.
  • To help learners find employment.

Arguably, all these objectives are desirable and teachers certainly strive to achieve them all. However, some inevitably come to the fore. The first two dominated the literacy and numeracy provision we observed, but a greater emphasis on the last two would also be helpful. There is some scope for this shift of emphasis within existing arrangements, but there are also curriculum and accreditation implications which may need to be addressed by policy makers.

■ If learners can be convinced that learning will be useful, educational barriers may be more easily overcome. One strategy might be to offer a clear rationale at the outset (one that makes sense to the learners) for the value and relevance of improving numeracy and literacy skills. For example, specific qualifications may be a requirement for future career aspirations. Involving students in tasks they feel are relevant may also demonstrate the value of learning certain skills (for example those related to some vocational tasks).

Curriculum content

■ Teachers benefit from the availability of well thought-out materials from Adult Skills for Life and PLUS programmes (the Youth Justice Board/DfES basic skills education strategy for juvenile offenders). However, these need to be selected to match learners' interests as well as to ensure curriculum coverage. Where no match exists, there is a range of useful websites that offer good materials and teachers may need to design their own resources.

■ Where materials suggest discussion or include practical work, this offers a valuable opportunity to make the work more relevant to the learner and these sorts of activities should be given high priority.

■ A significant motivating force for these young people is getting a job. Embedding basic skills within a vocational context will tend to be more appealing than a formal literacy or numeracy

curriculum. Exploring opportunities to embed skills in practical issues has great scope to improve learning.

Qualifications

■ Young people, particularly those in custodial settings, want to gain qualifications.

■ The most valued qualifications are those that are relevant to employment, either because they are needed to get onto a particular course or because they are vocational.

Learning environment/pedagogy

■ It is generally accepted as good practice to use different teaching methods within lessons: whole-class discussion, pair work, individual work, plenary sessions, showing of videos, use of computer programmes. This is likely to be particularly true for young people who dislike formal education and have a tendency to be restless in class.

■ In terms of whole-class sessions, discussions of topics of interest to the young people were observed to work well, especially when supported by some structure.

■ Learning needs to be fun. For some adult learners this may be an optional extra, but for these young people motivation is critical. Without it, they will not attend classes or will be distracted once there.

■ Learning environments that offer the sort of flexibility found in the workplace (being able to 'make a brew', have the radio playing, etc.) are particularly attractive to young people.

■ The need to recognise differences in levels of ability and in successful learning styles may well have implications for how teachers teach.

Staff training

■ Staff training should be a priority, especially for those who do not otherwise keep abreast of developments in teaching and learning for basic skills. There are many new developments – curriculum materials, teaching resources, computer learning packages, etc – that could support young adults' learning but not all staff know about them or have received training in using them.

3.2 Emerging recommendations for policy

Two main recommendations emerge for policy.

Taking the learners' values and culture into account

Policy actions need to do more to take learners' values and culture into account. This is a purely practical imperative. These young people do not respond well to a direct or imposed style of tuition. Their learning relies very heavily on their willingness and interest. Policymakers are aware of this but may need to go further in their thinking. It is not sufficient for adults, many of whom are far removed from youth culture, to imagine what might appeal to young people. Developments should be informed by young people's views and piloted with the young people themselves. A major consideration is that, for many, education should be tailored towards employment, and preferably embedded in a vocational context.

Training

The effectiveness of basic skills materials and innovations (the Adult Core Curriculum, *Skills for Life* materials, the PLUS programme) would be improved if all staff were trained in their correct use. Achieving this aim will mean requiring employers to ensure regular funded training for all staff. The training systems used will need to be designed to ensure that such training is valued highly by participants. Good communication with those responsible for implementing policy at all levels is also to be encouraged in order to ensure that policy can work in practice.

3.3 Main elements of ongoing research

At this interim stage our report is largely descriptive. It is based on interviews with young people, the results of their literacy and numeracy assessments, our observations of provision and, more generally, our work with educators in the participating sites.

However, a range of research methods, both quantitative and qualitative, is being employed. This includes a descriptive element, a longitudinal element and an experimental/quasi-experimental design.

Data is being collected at two geographical sites with 14 community-based projects and two Young Offenders Institutions (YOIs). Initial interviews have been conducted with 199 young people and follow-up interviews with 95. We estimate that the final number of young people participating in the project will be around 400. Observations of 12 days of education and training provision have been conducted, with more currently underway.

Data will be drawn from government databases about offending history, uptake of benefits and, we hope, employment history. Pilot runs have been conducted but the first full search and retrieval operation will be carried out when we have completed the initial interviews with young people. The first sweep is planned for December 2004 and the second for December 2005.

Appendix. Research methods

This study employs a mixed-methods design, incorporating experimental, longitudinal and qualitative approaches. It is being conducted within three different youth justice contexts. The experimental design of the study seeks to establish intervention and control groups, with pre- and post-intervention tests of a range of measures. In some instances a waiting list control group is in place; in other cases we will compare young people across sites on the basis of the nature of the provision offered .

The longitudinal aspect of the study is characterised by pre- and post-intervention analysis of official benefit, employment and offending secondary data sets, with a yearly follow-up. A qualitative research strategy is in place comprising open-ended responses within the structured questionnaires, depth interviews and case studies identifying typical learning trajectories.

1   Design summary

Mixed methods: Youth justice contexts
- Young offenders who are being supervised within the community.
- Young offenders currently serving a sentence within the secure estate.
- Young people at risk of offending who attend specialised education and training provision.

Experimental design
- Control and intervention groups.
- Pre and post tests of measures.

Measures
- Time 1 and time 2 semi-structured questionnaires.
- Basic Skills Agency numeracy and literacy assessment.

Longitudinal analysis
- Data from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) at pre, post and one year after intervention.
- Data from Police national computer.

Qualitative methods
- Depth interviews recorded and transcribed verbatim.
- Sub-sample of case studies of learners' educational history.

Other data sources
- Specialised databases where applicable
- Attendance records.

Intervention-related
- Observations of sessions.
- Learner's individual learning plans.

2   Youth justice contexts

This study is being conducted within three juvenile justice contexts:

- Young offenders supervised in the community, who have been sentenced and referred to one of 12, post-16 specialised Education and Training Projects, based in Youth Offending Teams across south Wales. These sites form both control and intervention groups.
- Young offenders in juvenile secure estate, who are held in one of two YOIs. One YOI forms both intervention and control groups and the other is an intervention site only.
- Socially excluded young people, who have offended, or who are at risk of offending, and who attending one of two vocational education and training sites in south London.

3   Sampling and selection

There were 199 young people participating in this study at the time of writing the Interim report with an estimated 160 more expected to take part. All the young people participating in the study were pre-selected in the sense that they were attending or detained within one of the 16 research sites. At the outset, three major eligibility criteria were identified. Young people must be:

- At or below level 1 of the National Standards for Adult Literacy and Numeracy.
- Aged 16 or over.
- A young offender, convicted of a criminal offence or at risk of offending and attending specialised provision.

4   Measures

Pre- and post-test assessment of literacy and numeracy levels
Pre- and post-test levels of literacy and numeracy are measured using the 2002 version of the BSA initial assessment. Levels are aligned with those for the National Standards for Adult Literacy and Numeracy from Entry Level to Level 1. To this end, each item is mapped to one of a range of criteria, specified at each level in the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Core Curriculum. Aimed at assessing basic skills post-16, it can be administered on an individual or group basis and takes 40 minutes to complete (20 minutes literacy and 20 minutes numeracy). A second parallel version of the assessment is included which can be used to measure changes over time.

Semi-structured questionnaires
Pre and post semi-structured questionnaires were developed by the research team to collect information on basic demographics; young people's attitudes to education, training and employment; their experiences of education, training and employment; and basic risk factors such as a history of exclusion, drug use, etc.

5   Experimental design

It was planned that all the young people participating in the study would be assessed at two time points. In each case, they would be interviewed by a researcher using the semi-structured questionnaires. If these were already completed, they would be collected in; otherwise they would be administered by a researcher. The second assessment would be planned for around 4 months later, with the interval varying according to the research site.

This would reflect the duration of the supported literacy and numeracy intervention developed by the research team and implemented in all the juvenile justice contexts.

6   Longitudinal analysis

All young people participating in the study were able to opt out of the longitudinal follow-up which required an additional consent form to be signed. This requested permission to access personal data held in government records about benefits, employment and offending.

The longitudinal data collection in these three areas relates to three NRDC research time points:

- Pre-intervention – the first wave of data collection is intended to cover the six-month period prior to the first round of assessments.
- Post-intervention – the second wave of data collection is intended to cover the period between the time one and time two assessments.
- One year follow-up – the third and final wave of data collection is intended to extend from the second assessment dates to one year later.

Longitudinal design time line
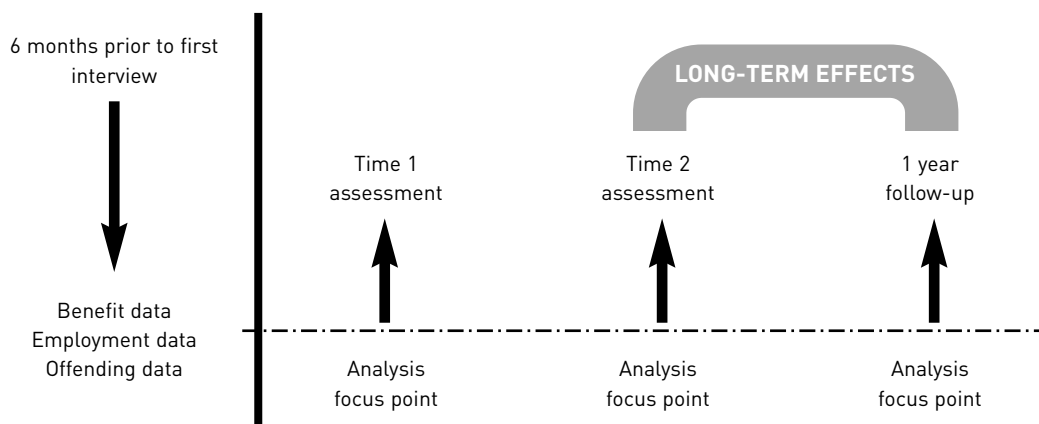
7   Qualitative approaches

The qualitative approaches included in the design of the study can be summarised as follows:

- Open-ended items in the semi-structured questionnaires conducted within the experimental aspect of the project pre- and post-intervention.
- Depth interviews with the young people across all the research sites.
- Case studies compiled for a sub-sample of the participants.
- Observations of both existing education and training provision and the supported intervention.

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