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## Research report



### Relating adults' lives and learning: participation and engagement in different settings

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Literacy Research Centre, Lancaster University  
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## Preface

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This paper is one of the reports from the Adult Learners' Lives project, a major NRDC research study carried out by members of the Lancaster Literacy Research Centre. The overall aim of the project has been to develop understandings of the relationships between learners' lives and the literacy, language and numeracy (LLN) learning in which they are engaged, and to draw out the implications for the *Skills for Life* strategy. Starting from the perspectives of the adult learners the project focused on issues around motivation, participation, persistence and engagement. It complements other research from the NRDC which approaches these issues with different methodologies, such as the quantitative cohort studies and the effective practice studies, and work which focuses primarily on provision itself or on the *Skills for Life* infrastructure.

The first year of the Adult Learners' Lives project concentrated on college environments. Working with teacher-researchers enabled the research to be embedded in real classrooms and ensured that it had an impact on practice. In the second year of the project we worked in other sites with learners in what has been referred to by others as provision for the 'hard to reach'. This included a drug support and aftercare centre, a young homeless scheme and a domestic violence project. We also maintained contact with 53 learners who represent the longitudinal cohort of the study. Working collaboratively with practitioners in each of the sites, we explored participation and engagement with learners who frequently have issues in their lives that impact upon learning.

Overall, 282 people participated in the research, 134 were students and the remainder tutors, managers and support workers. The project's electronic database consists of 403 files, which include 198 recorded interviews. Where we worked in depth with people in learning programmes, this ranged from carrying out several interviews over a six-month period to keeping in touch with the person and their learning for more than two years.

The project was rooted in an approach which sees LLN as social practices. They are activities which people carry out and which relate to and are shaped by all the other activities they engage in throughout their lives, rather than just as skills or cognitive attributes which they 'have' or do not have. (See Barton, Hamilton & Ivanič, 2000, and Barton, 2006, for further details.) This has implications for the way we approach research. We seek to observe people engaging in LLN practices, within the frame of their lives and sociocultural contexts, and to listen to what they have to say about these practices and the meanings that they have in their lives. This broader view of LLN has been essential when trying to understand people's participation in learning in diverse settings.

People are involved in many different activities and these change over time. Different approaches to studying them reveal different facets and relationships, deepening our understandings. We have therefore combined methods of data collection, and have been developing responsive ways of gaining insights into people's meanings and experiences. These include observation, in-depth and repeated interviews, group work, photography and video. The rigour in this approach is in the richness of the data, in the level of detail and in the range of sources of data.

Throughout this research we have tried to respect the interests and agendas of all those

involved and to be responsive to their concerns. We have negotiated the way the research would be carried out and what its main focus would be in each site. We have sought to find ways of working collaboratively in data collection and interpretation, and to communicate with participants about the results of the research and how they can best be disseminated. This is particularly important when working with groups which include people who have experienced marginalisation throughout their lives. We have done our best to represent people's voices fairly and in consultation with them; this is not an evaluation of them, nor of the programmes they are participating in.

The project has been embedded in a coherent strategy of communication and impact which aims to have a direct effect on practice. There is growing evidence that practitioners are most likely to draw upon research findings which resonate with their own experience (Rickinson, 2005) and our own work supports this. Throughout the project we have disseminated emergent findings from our work, first locally, and then regionally and nationally, in formal and informal ways.

This paper needs to be understood in the context of other NRDC reports. Three reviews were important starting points: *Adult ESOL pedagogy: a review of research* by David Barton and Kathy Pitt (2003); *Models of adult learning: a literature review* by Karin Tusting and David Barton (2003); and *Understanding the Relationship between Learning and Teaching: A review of the contribution of Applied Linguistics* by Roz Ivanič and Ming-i Lydia Tseng (2005). Another report describes some of the practitioner research: *Listening to learners: practitioner research on the adult learners' lives project* by Dianne Beck et al. (2004). This work also links with *English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) - case studies of provision, learners' needs and resources: research report* by Celia Roberts et al. (2004). And it is complemented by a simultaneously-published report relating learning and teaching: *Linking learning and everyday life: a social perspective on adult language, literacy and numeracy classes* by Roz Ivanič et al. (2006). This will be followed by a report on practitioner development through involvement in research. Work is continuing with the preparation of practitioner guides based on the project and by making the Adult Learners' Lives data available as part of the NRDC research resource.

The project has been directed by David Barton and Roz Ivanič, with full-time researchers Yvon Appleby, Rachel Hodge and Karin Tusting, and the support of practitioner-researchers in different sites, including, particularly, Dianne Beck, Gill Burgess, Kath Gilbert, Russ Hudson, and Carol Woods.

## Peer review

This report was read and peer reviewed by: Carol Taylor, Basic Skills Agency; John Vorhaus, NRDC, Institute of Education, University of London; Olivia Sagan, University of Luton; Dave Baker, NRDC, Institute of Education, University of London; Alexandra Kendall, University of Wolverhampton; Majorie Hallsworth, Mid-Cheshire College; Isabella Jobson, Adult Learning Inspectorate; Carol Woods, Researcher; Linda Jackson, Consultant; Mary Rhind, Highland Adult Literacies, Scotland; Nancy Gidley, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.

# 1. Introduction

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Issues of engagement and participation are central to language, literacy and numeracy work in the range of settings in which it is delivered. The *Skills for Life* strategy identified a number of priority groups, including unemployed people and benefit claimants, prisoners and those supervised in the community, and other groups at risk of social exclusion. This has led to an increase in the number of settings in which literacy, language and numeracy (LLN) programmes are being delivered. They are being delivered by LLN specialists working in partnership with community workers, by community workers themselves, or through other means such as learndirect, a government-funded distance learning initiative. It is therefore very important to understand the characteristics of these contexts and the ways in which they differ from college provision.

Much of the initial focus of strategy has been on college and other large providers. However, in recent years there has been a strong strand of work in community and other settings working with people who have been referred to in public discussion as 'hard-to-reach'. This has been supported by the Adult and Community Learning Fund, as reviewed in McMeeking et al. (2002) and Sampson et al. (2004). In terms of research there is a small literature on community-based provision. Bird & Akerman (2005) provide a recent position paper and Hannon et al. (2003) include a literature review. Our study makes a distinctive contribution to the existing literature in the field, as described in section 7.1, in drawing together this work, in providing detail and, crucially, in understanding provision from the perspective of the learners.

The focus of this paper is on issues of engagement and participation for learners in these settings, issues which are central to learning. Engagement is concerned with purposes, why people come, and participation is concerned with the practices they engage in while they are there. The paper reports on the parts of the work of the Adult Learners' Lives project which address these issues. We have disseminated emergent findings from this work, firstly locally, and then regionally and nationally, in formal and informal ways. This report is shaped in part by these conversations around the meanings of our research findings.<sup>1</sup>

## Key findings

- Many people brought highly-developed skills and competences. These included literacies unrelated to the curriculum, such as song writing or poetry.
- The majority of people we spoke to across the different forms of provision and had had very negative experiences of education and authority figures.
- People carried histories of violence and trauma that were not always open and visible. Experiences of living with ill health both in the past and present were common. Many had been bullied at school.

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<sup>1</sup> We would like particularly to acknowledge the participants in our workshops at the November 2004 Skills for Life conferences; the Literacy Research Centre Discussion Group, Lancaster; and representatives at each of our individual research sites, whose various responses have been invaluable in writing this report.

- People had different reasons for being involved with these settings; for some it was about safety and survival; others came with more specific learning goals.
- People experienced a range of barriers on engaging in learning, including physical, mental, social and emotional constraints. Social circumstances meant that many experienced turbulence and unpredictable change in their lives.
- Feelings and emotions shaped people's experiences of learning; for some this made engagement, particularly in more formal, structured learning very difficult; other people talked about formal learning provision as a safe haven from other overwhelming issues in their lives.
- Many people talked in different ways about seeing themselves as having been outside a world of 'normality', for example very young people forced to live independently due to family breakdown and becoming drug dependent. Feeling very different had put people off participating in learning in the past.
- People had a range of common aspirations to most people, such as a safe, settled life, a good home, good family relationships, good work, good health.
- People needed to feel it was the 'right time' for them to engage in learning and change in their lives; this was something they had to identify for themselves.
- People had many roles, responsibilities and commitments; they had shifting priorities and circumstances which led to dipping in and out of learning. Often immediate concerns had to take priority over formal learning. Goals were flexible and changed as circumstances changed, sometimes very unpredictably.

#### **Some key issues for policy and provision**

- Provision needs to recognise and respond to people's practical constraints.
- What is funded and what is not funded can have a significant impact on possibilities for engaging in learning, such as travel and childcare
- LLN provision needs to be funded to work within the principal purposes of these settings.
- LLN tutors need support and training to equip them to work in specific community settings; they need time and space to be flexible and reflective practitioners.
- Teaching needs to take advantage of people's existing skills, competences, passions and talents.
- Funding affects learners in seemingly random ways; often the most vulnerable learners end up with the most insecure provision.



## 2. Research settings and methods

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For this study we selected a number of settings in north-west England where literacy and numeracy learning was happening, in a variety of ways, ranging from provided educational programmes by college-based specialists, through to informal learning by participation in the activities of the organisation. The aim was to have a set of contrasting sites in terms of learners and the forms of provision. From the most formal to the least formal, these were:

**Falcon House in Lancaster**, a drug and alcohol support centre which offered clients both one-to-one support and a group-based Structured Day Programme, the educational activities of which included literacy, communications and IT, and distance literacy and numeracy courses delivered through a partnership with the local learndirect centre.

**The Big Issue in Liverpool**, an organisation for the homeless which offered educational provision including literacy, numeracy and IT.

**Nightsafe in Blackburn**, a shelter for young homeless people, and the associated day centre Fusebox, which had always offered informal educational provision on a needs-driven basis and was in the process of introducing more structured programmes including literacy and numeracy.

**Midway Tenants' Association in Liverpool**, run by volunteers, which supported people on a disadvantaged estate. Through the association, volunteers were encouraged to develop their skills, both through participation in the association's everyday activities, and through attending college programmes where appropriate.

**Chrysalis, a domestic violence support group in Liverpool**, which as part of its activities supported women's attendance at college and other courses.

Rachel Hodge worked in the Blackburn sites, Yvon Appleby in the Liverpool sites and Karin Tusting in the Lancaster site. Research participants in all of these settings were from organisations who had profiles defined as 'priority groups' in the *Skills for Life* strategy. Based on earlier experience in college settings, we knew that gaining good research access to sites such as these can often be difficult. We invested a great deal of time in building up good relationships with people in the sites, explaining our approach to research, and negotiating how it would be carried out and what the focus would be. This enabled a degree of trust to be built up which is crucial for successful research relationships.

We gradually got to know and understand each of the research sites and the kinds of literacy and numeracy learning that was taking place. We interviewed staff and service users, both informally, recorded through field notes, and using more formal semi-structured interviews, audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed. This involved regular visits (20–25 visits per site over the course of the year), over 50 formally-recorded interviews, and many more informal conversations recorded in field notes. We developed other methods as appropriate to the settings, in dialogue with participants. At the homeless shelter, for example, Rachel Hodge worked with Gilly Kelly, a storyteller and dramatist, to develop a photo project in which young people took photographs of places and activities in their everyday lives and wrote and spoke



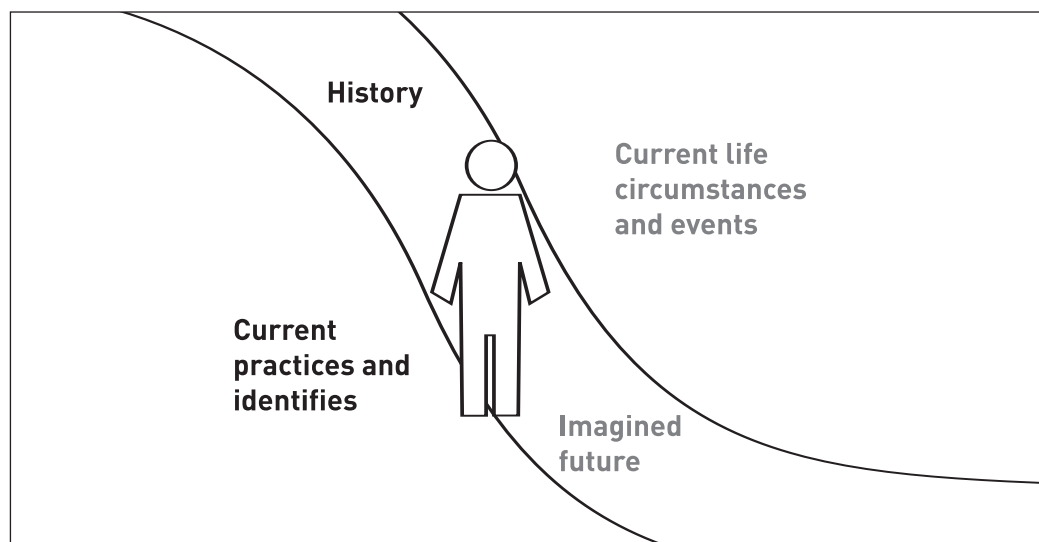
about the meanings of these photographs for them. These were then used as the basis for group discussion, individual interviews and a display. At the tenants' association, Yvon Appleby worked in collaboration with Jason, one of the longitudinal participants in the research, who wrote a brief history of the association, kept a log of the drop-in sessions, photographed the office and collected documents and forms.

In representing other people's lives we were trying to understand their perspectives. We were not attempting to evaluate what was going on, but to make sense of it and to report on their perspectives. In each of the sites, initial analyses and individual reports were taken back to research participants, both learners and practitioners for discussion and feedback. This helped develop the analysis, tested the local validity of the research and enabled participants to draw on it in developing their own practices. (We refer to people attending formal courses as *learners*, whilst respecting the fact that much of their learning takes place outside such courses.)

As we have outlined above, this approach to research relies on developing detailed local understandings in collaboration with research participants. Therefore, we first produced detailed reports on each of these sites which were fed back to the sites and discussed with participants. These have acted as background papers in preparing this report. Understanding the specific sites was an important step in making sense of the data. In this paper we bring together our principal findings across these different sites. There are two distinct aspects to the analysis. First, we describe the characteristics of people's lives in these settings, and how these characteristics influence and shape the learning in which they participate. We provide profiles of four individuals to give a sense of the kind of data the analysis is based on. The following section shows how these aspects of people's lives affected their learning. Secondly, we examine the dynamics of the individual sites, their distinct purposes and the patterns of participation and we show how aspects of people's lives shape the provision. The final section relates our work to the broader literature on community provision and outlines implications for policy and practice. In this work there is an implicit comparison with college sites; another paper from our project (Ivanič et al. 2005) focuses more on the dynamics of teaching and learning in college settings.

### 3. People's lives: what do people bring to learning settings?

We will describe what people bring to the settings under four headings: their history, their current identities, their current life circumstances, and their imagined futures. We find it very useful to think of people's lives in terms of these four aspects in order to navigate through complex data and to draw out significant themes, and we explain each aspect in more detail in the sections below. This provides a framework for understanding how to link literacy and numeracy learning to people's lives. Figure 1 illustrates these four aspects in a simple manner, the idea being that each person has a particular combination of practices and identities, with a history behind them and an imagined future towards which they are travelling, situated within a set of current life circumstances and events.



**Figure 1.** Four aspects crucial for linking learning and lives.

We want to emphasise these four aspects of life: the importance of individual histories; how people have their own 'ways of being', the cluster of social, psychological and affective factors which make up their identities; the significance of factors they may have little control over; and the importance of people's plans and how they see future possibilities. Of course, these four areas overlap and interact. People's current practices are shaped by their life history; people's purposes and goals are influenced by their current circumstances. Nevertheless, distinguishing between these four areas helps us understand engagement, participation and learning. The four aspects can be expressed in chronological terms: what has happened in people's pasts, who they are now, what is happening in their lives now, and where they want to go.

To give a sense of the rich data that has generated these findings, one of the people we worked with will be profiled under each heading. The profiles are based on field notes written at the end of data collection. While each of the four people, Sophie, Caroline, Jason and Steve, has been selected to illustrate one of these four areas, their profiles also demonstrate the ways these interact. Of course, any representation of individuals is a partial and selective picture of who they are. In these profiles, our selection has been guided by drawing out those

aspects of people's lives which seem to us particularly relevant for our concerns in this paper, around the relationships between life and learning and, to reiterate, these descriptions draw upon the full range of data which we have collected.

### 3.1 History

**Sophie**, 18, was a regular attender at Nightsafe, the shelter for young homeless people. She had had an unsettled family situation as her mother, a teacher, was drug and alcohol dependent. She is very bright but hated school, often absconded, and was expelled as a result of repeated assault and arson offences. She eventually became homeless at age 15 and as a result underachieved in her GCSE exams. Due to the difficulty of studying whilst homeless and coping with substance misuse, she has dipped in and out of college. She had to give up her most recent course, in landscape gardening, when she became pregnant.

For some time she lived in the Nightsafe hostel and came to Fusebox, the associated day centre, every day for somewhere to go, to meet friends, chill and get help, support and food. She says she learns things at the day centre without realising it. She likes creative and practical activities, but prefers not to attend drugs/alcohol advice sessions and finds the basic skills stuff boring and easy. However, for a while new funding rules meant that she was not supposed to stay or eat at the centre unless she agreed to take part in the education sessions provided, until these rules were re-negotiated.

Sophie is a reader, and her favourite author is Virginia Andrews (who writes in graphic detail about child abuse), saying: *'Like it's like real life... I can relate to the people, like the stuff that's going on.'* She likes to write Haiku poetry in English and in French, and freer style poetry, especially when she is going through a bad patch.

Sophie guards her privacy well and it is not easy to know what is dream and what is reality in her life. She showed Rachel one poem about anorexia which she said she had written for a friend but which was clearly related to herself.

Towards the end of the study Sophie had just had a baby girl, was in much better health, and was moving on from a mother-and-baby unit to her sister's for a while, and wanted to find her own flat. She was determined to go back to college, take her GCSEs and A levels and eventually study veterinary medicine or psychology. The staff were all hoping that she would be able to manage to look after her baby with continuing support, but they were also worried about her.

These notes show how people are bringing their whole history with them when they enter these community settings. Each person has a distinct and individual history, but there are patterns in the lives of the learners we worked with in community settings which have particular impacts on their learning and which give rise to common themes.

As we have already noted, any profile is a partial picture of people, who are whole and complex individuals. People come with a wide range of backgrounds and histories, and generalisations about trends can be misleading if they are thought to apply to everyone's particular history. Nevertheless, common patterns of socially-organised inequalities have been documented. Large-scale cohort studies (e.g. Bynner and Parsons 1997, 2001)

demonstrate how literacy and numeracy difficulties correlate closely with measures of social exclusion such as unemployment, poverty, poor health, and overcrowded housing conditions. Most of the people we worked with in these community settings had lived their lives at the sharp end of such social inequalities and this is reflected in some common patterns in the histories they carried with them. We identify two areas where their histories affected their learning in formal situations: extreme histories of pain, trauma, violence and ill-health, and negative previous experiences of education and of authority.

### **Histories of pain, trauma, violence and ill-health**

Many of the people we worked with had come from unsettled and shifting family backgrounds, which often included violence and physical or mental abuse. This was particularly true of the young people at the homeless shelter, most of whom had had periods of living in care. It was also true of the women at the domestic violence support group. Where people had experienced periods of homelessness, this was often associated with incidents of violence, particularly if they had spent time in hostels. Drug and alcohol misuse and associated health and social problems were common, most obviously in the drug and alcohol support centre data, but also in the homeless shelter, the domestic violence support group and Big Issue work where alcohol and drugs were often described by people as being part of their coping strategies for survival. Where people were bringing histories involving pain, trauma, violence and ill-health, these could form significant barriers to engagement in learning, which we explore in more detail below.

### **Negative previous experiences of education and of authority**

Like Sophie, many people had very negative previous experiences of education. They reported extensive physical and emotional bullying, both from teachers and from other pupils. Experiences of humiliation were described, like those of Steve, profiled below, who was expected to read aloud in English classes despite finding this very difficult because of dyslexia, which was not diagnosed until after he left school. Many people felt they had been positioned as 'thick' or as 'failures'. School work was described as 'too hard' or as 'boring'. Many had coped by skipping individual lessons, whole subjects or full days, or dropping out completely. Where people had come from difficult home situations, characterised by violence or abuse, this had often led to behaviour such as Sophie's assault and arson offences. This, in turn, had resulted in disciplinary action and eventually suspensions or exclusions. Where home situations were mobile and shifting, this had led to periods of discontinuous and interrupted schooling for some, which had caused further problems. People said they felt very different from other pupils who were not dealing with the same issues, and this feeling of not belonging also led to skipping school and spending time in situations where they felt more at ease, such as with groups of friends instead.

A related point is that many of these people had had negative experiences with authority throughout much of their lives. Encounters with authority at home, at school, through social services and through the criminal justice system had often involved sanctions and disciplinary procedures which were experienced by many as unjust impositions. This was especially true of those people who had come from family situations characterised by violence and mental or physical abuse, and for whom any authority tended to be met with deep distrust and wariness.

At the homeless shelter in particular, where they felt safe and valued, most of the young people displayed resentment of impersonal authority, rigidity and control, especially when this was seen to be displayed without respect and understanding. This was a recurrent problem for them, which they had experienced in many official and institutional contexts,

particularly the job centre, the police station and school. These people are dependent on the services and benefits associated with these settings, so cannot escape them, and often display levels of frustration and anger which colour their emotional experience. Similar feelings, although to a less extreme extent, were described by many at the drug and alcohol support centre, particularly by people who were there on drug treatment and testing orders, and who had to manage many contacts and appointments with various agencies, including probation, the community drug team, social services and the job centre (an issue which we will return to below).

### 3.2 Current practices and identities

**Caroline**, in her 40s, attends the Structured Day Programme at Falcon House regularly. She enjoyed school, was in the top class, and always got good reports, but got fed up with it in her last year, when she was doing exams and wanted to leave. By then she had started to go out and drink. She got married aged 20 and had two children. She trained and got a job as a secretary, but had to leave because of childcare requirements and thereafter only had what she calls *'daft jobs'*, like factory work. The family moved to a new area when their marriage ran into difficulties, but the problems continued and her husband eventually left. Caroline met someone else whom she married and had three children with, but he drank and was violent throughout the marriage and eventually they divorced.

After the divorce, Caroline says she had her worst time. She used to drop the kids off at school and then spend the day in a shelter on the local promenade. *'I used to drink all day in the shelters, bottles of cider. I was always pissed up, just going with anybody, messing about, a lot of that. And ended up in hospital, and at the police station.'* After a while, she noticed she was bruising very easily and bleeding a lot. She went to the doctor's, who referred her to the local alcohol detox unit. She has been in the detox unit about 20 times. At various times, her health has been very poor. She has been in short-term residential rehab, which was not successful for her, and longer-term structured residential in another part of the country. This was better for the four months she was there, but she had to face all the same issues when she returned home. She finds the programme at Falcon House much better, because she can carry on with support, rather than being just stuck at home. The structure and the activities give her something to think about other than drinking, and she says it has *'saved my life'*.

Caroline has always been interested in learning, and likes having something to do. She had previously tried going to college, but found this very difficult. She found the people there described lives that were very different from hers – *'people that are talking about their families, and going for meals, and golfing, and stuff like that'*. She couldn't say she had a problem with drink, because they didn't. College staff did ask her if she was drinking, and she said a bit, but didn't want to tell them she had a problem with it. As a result of feeling this pressure, she used to feel scared, so would take a bottle with her so that she could drink at college. She had also gone on courses at a local employment training centre, but had encountered similar difficulties, dealing with those she referred to as *'normal people'*. Despite these difficulties, she persevered and got her European Computer Driving Licence, but did not want to continue at college. At Falcon House, in contrast, she can come and learn without feeling under pressure about her drinking. If she has lapses and is drinking, people will understand why, she will not have to pretend she

has been ill. And because she feels secure, she no longer feels the need to drink. *'I don't drink when I come here. I don't want to'*.

Caroline came in to the centre every day when she could, doing courses in IT, art, creative writing, and music technology, and having acupuncture on a Friday. She also started doing learndirect courses there, including numeracy and IT. Eventually she would like to gain the qualifications needed to get back into office work. Despite her previous negative experience of college, once her confidence had developed, she felt able to sign up to do a course at a local community college. This was possible for her partly because the tutor would be someone she had already been working with in the Structured Day Programme and whom she knew and trusted, partly because a friend from the same programme would be going, and partly because the site felt different to her from the local FE college, particularly as it was not full of disruptive teenagers.

It is clear from this example that there were some aspects of how Caroline saw herself and how she led her life which were helping her make the changes she wanted to in her life, whilst others were creating barriers. People's current practices and identities are important in affecting how they approach formal learning. The skills, competences, passions and talents which people in this study had were either acknowledged and taken up in the learning situations or were ignored or unrecognised. At the same time, how people saw themselves and conducted their lives created conflicts and barriers with the educational opportunities they were offered.

#### **Skills, competences, passions and talents**

The first thing that people brought to learning as part of who they were was a wide variety of skills, competences, talents and passions, including literacies unrelated to the curriculum. At the drug and alcohol support centre, people shared their multiple skills, often supporting one another with practical activities such as fixing each other's cars, domestic appliances or computers, or engaging in complex negotiations with agencies like social services or probation. Many of them, too, enjoyed and became skilled in the creative arts activities offered as part of the Structured Day Programme, particularly visual arts, creative writing and music technology. Several people described this in terms of having discovered unexpected 'hidden talents', or passions and interests from earlier on in their lives which they felt had been set aside or even trampled on by everything else they were dealing with. This was particularly important in contributing to the development of people's self-esteem, by placing value on an aspect of themselves which had not been valued before.

At the tenants' association, volunteers used a range of LLN skills to carry out their support roles, including taking minutes, making fliers, gathering new information, keeping records, supporting people with form-filling, letter writing or finding out who to contact to make a complaint, and running a bonus ball/prize draw scheme around the estate (and organising a children's outing with the funds raised) which required extensive literacy and numeracy skills. While some of these had been taught through formal courses, most were acquired and passed on informally as volunteers participated in the association's activities.

People's skills and competences were often not reflected in the qualifications that they had. The majority of people we worked with in these settings had left school with no or very few qualifications (although this was not true of some clients at the drug and alcohol support centre who had qualifications up to degree level and beyond). However, this did not necessarily mean that they had no academic abilities. Sophie is a good example of this, with

her enjoyment of reading and of writing poetry – even in a foreign language – not being reflected in her current paper qualifications. The other young people at the homeless shelter had a range of literacy skills from minimal word recognition through to GCSE-level.

### **Conflict with discourses of education**

Part of people's identities and practices were the ways of talking and interacting (which we will call 'discourses') that they brought with them, which were shaped by their histories. Often, there were clashes between these different ways of talking and interacting in the settings. For instance, the discourse of young people at the homeless shelter was very different from the discourse of formal education, which in many ways was alien to them, and within which they had been positioned as failures. Staff drew on informal discourses when interacting with the young people. But this raised issues when the centre changed from being a 'drop-in' centre to being a 'centre for educational activities', when the 'activities' had to be re-framed if the service users were to accept them (discussed below). Given that many people had these negative associations with education, we found that learning and, particularly, participating in formal structured learning meant more to people than just acquiring new skills. It could mean entering a different culture or taking on a whole new identity, a process that could be experienced as difficult and sometimes even as dangerous. One client at the drug and alcohol support centre, who had attended university, described having lived two parallel lives associated with two different identities, his identity as a mature student and his identity as a drinker. This eventually became too difficult for him to sustain and he did not complete his degree.

### **Ways of structuring everyday life**

In addition to identities, people also brought with them habits and practices which challenged some of the assumptions of more structured provision. One important goal of the programme at the drug and alcohol support centre was to provide people with a regular routine in their day, to replace the habits associated with the addiction they were dealing with. Otherwise, clients described how they would have had an 'empty hole' in their lives which would have been hard to fill and, they felt, made it more likely for them to go back to using their substance of choice. Many attenders, especially those at the start of their involvement with the programme, said that they did not really care what the content of the educational provision was; the most important thing for them was that they had something positive to get up and out for each day. As one client explained:

It's something to get up out of bed for in the morning. I find I'm getting up in the morning and living a useful day. [...] By coming in every day it's getting me into a routine which I've not been in for a long time. And that's getting up in the morning, washing, shaving, dressing and getting out. So that when the time comes when hopefully I'll get back to work it's not going to be completely alien to me.

Service users spoke in very positive terms about the programme, explaining that it took time and support to introduce structure into lives which had previously often been very unstructured.

Similarly, the young people attending the homeless shelter had often come from unsettled and shifting home situations and unstable living conditions, and were dealing with unpredictable life events. Sustaining the regularity of going to college or engaging in a structured course with deadlines was hard to co-ordinate, and they would often 'dip in and out' of activities as these were feasible for them. Many of the women's lives at the domestic



violence support group had been structured around the imperatives of their own and their family's survival in violent relationships, which took priority over other activities and made regular attendance elsewhere difficult.

The practices people were bringing with them did not fit in well with the expectations of formal learning programmes. It is important to recognise, however, that an apparent lack of structure in people's lives, often described by outsiders as 'chaotic', is closely related to the life circumstances and events that they are dealing with on a daily basis. For many of the people we worked with, their lives were not so much chaotic as very complex. They were constantly juggling unpredictable demands which could make the introduction of learning activities on any regular basis difficult. This was particularly true where people's lives were regulated by several different systems of social support. (See the section on roles and responsibilities, below.)

### **Feelings of exclusion from so-called 'normal' culture**

People bring with them particular identities and cultures which shape their experience of learning. Caroline's experience of college representing a culture which excluded her is a common one, described by many of the people we worked with. Steve, profiled below, explained that *'a lot of people with drug problems have this thing about "normality" and what normality is and being part of it'*. At the drug and alcohol support centre, one of the most important benefits people identified was being with people who had been dealing with similar issues, rather than, as Caroline describes, having to hide what was going on or trying to explain it to people who did not understand.

The young people at the homeless shelter felt particularly marginalised by the difference between their lives and those of young college students. As a worker there told us,

If you look around nowadays it's very important for young people to be wearing the right clothes and look the part... you can't do that on £40s a week in your own little bedsit, kipping on someone else's floor. But when you go down to the college a lot of them live at home with parents who can afford to buy the latest stuff, they can afford to go out at weekends, they're taking driving lessons, going on holidays. They can get a part-time job at the weekends, go home and have their tea, they've got their own bed and their clothes get washed and ironed for them and if they haven't got money they can hopefully get some off their parents. Our young people, a lot of them have nowhere to live, no-one's washing their clothes, nobody's making their tea, you know. It does affect whether or not they attend training or work or education because they haven't got the confidence and they're struggling with their own mental health and they just feel down, feeling absolutely awful.

One of the crucial ways the domestic violence support group offered support to women was in helping them to see that they were not alone in their experiences. For those who were attending college, while learning support was available for them, they found additional support was necessary to help them deal with their difficulties, which were largely invisible within the college system. Vendors at Big Issue told of the 'regular' lives they had had in the past, and the catalysts – illness, relationship breakdown, drug and alcohol addiction, leaving the armed forces - which had led to these lives 'falling apart'.

And while this distinction was not made in quite the same way at the tenants' association, the members were nevertheless proud that they were doing it for themselves, making a clear

distinction between those on the estate and those from the outside. They were guarding their independence fiercely and resisting outside interference wherever possible.

### 3.3 Life circumstances and events

**Jason** is just over 30 years old. He stopped attending school at the age of 12 and hung about the docks with older employed members of his family. After a YTS course on a building site he worked as a labourer and then as a container operator. He did jobs that did not require reading and writing. A hit-and-run accident left him unemployed and with depression. He has been unable to work since then.

Members of his local tenants' association persuaded Jason to have a go at learning. He started courses in computers, maths and family history. Although lacking in confidence Jason passed his national test in maths at level 2, travelled to Ireland with family members to research his family history and has undertaken several computer courses. He was positive about learning: *'It's learning anything, life is great, it's just learning and learning and learning. It's exciting'*. He enjoyed the challenge of learning new skills, and aspired to study to become a Blue Badge Guide, telling people about the history of his local area.

Jason used his new skills in his voluntary work at the tenants' association, helping to set up and run the computer and internet, as well as keeping the accounts. He also enrolled on a Tourism NVQ course. However, he was not able to start this as his drinking pattern of *'going on benders'* increased. He attended a computer course, as it was necessary for his work at the tenants' association, but he was not able to manage the regularity of other formal learning. In the last two years Jason has moved from being enthusiastic about learning, to habitually drinking and currently not engaging in organised learning activities. Although committed to the tenants' association, he has been unable to sustain his work with them because of his depression and drinking. The other members, who are dealing with issues in their own lives, understand this and he is welcome to participate again if and when he chooses to.

Jason appears in the college records as a 'non-attender'. But the tenants' association provide a non-judgmental learning environment where he can succeed over time with support, at the points in his life when he chooses to do so.

Jason's story shows the complex lives people led, the constraints on their lives, the many interacting roles and responsibilities they had and the many relationships which they were part of. External circumstances meant that many of the people lived what we refer to as turbulent lives (as discussed by Reder, 2004 in a US study), where they often described events they had little control over.

#### Multiple interacting constraints

People experienced multiple constraints when engaging with conventionally structured learning activities. These constraints were of different kinds: physical, social, emotional and practical. It was the interaction of these multiple constraints which constructed barriers for people. Having left school early, Jason was successfully employed for some time, initially through family contacts. At this point, the fact that he had not been at school since the age of 12 was not problematic for him. Nor was it seen as unusual or stigmatised by people in his

immediate social circle. It was after his accident, which caused physical constraints on his activities, that this aspect of his history became an issue, as he was no longer able to do manual work which did not require any reading and writing. At the same time, broader social constraints had a role to play in his opportunities, as local employment opportunities in general in the docks and construction trades where he had experience were dwindling. These factors contributed to the onset of depression, and in turn to him using alcohol as a coping strategy, both of which became constraints on his engagement. Despite these constraints, Jason found a route through the tenants' association which was positive for him for some time, supporting him to gain qualifications and skills which could assist him to move towards the sort of life and employment he was striving for.

Jason's hit-and-run accident shows the importance of unpredictable events in shaping people's lives. Where people are already managing multiple constraints, such an event can have more significant consequences than where people have fewer existing issues to deal with. Sophie's story gives another good example of this: her pregnancy forced her to give up a landscape gardening course. It also shows how such unpredictable events can have both negative and positive effects at different points: after having the baby Sophie moved to live in a more supportive environment with her sister and seemed to be doing well. Such unpredictable changes characterised the daily lives of many of the people we worked with. Events like sudden health problems, court decisions, family problems or housing difficulties could all lead to spiralling consequences, with people who had been very committed to learning suddenly finding it difficult or impossible. Practical issues, including financial ones, could prove severe barriers to learning: Caroline, profiled above, would have liked to come into the centre every day, but could only afford a bus pass on the first week of her fortnightly benefits payment.

### **Multiple roles and responsibilities**

People in these settings had multiple roles and responsibilities, many of which had to be prioritised over engaging with learning opportunities. People managing caring responsibilities, for a child, parent or sick partner, had to prioritise these, particularly where they had few financial or social resources to draw on. If your childcare is provided by a family member who falls ill or goes away suddenly, or you have no support and you cannot afford to pay for any, you have no choice but to stay with that child. On the other hand, responsibilities such as caring for a child or supporting your community also had the potential to act as 'pull' factors back into learning, where people perceived this learning as being something which could contribute to or offer support with fulfilling their responsibilities. At the tenants' association, volunteers were engaged in a range of commitments within their local community, and their engagement in learning was primarily in order to carry these out effectively and successfully.

Similarly, people who were involved with multiple agencies, such as the people on drug treatment and testing orders mentioned above, or many of the women at the domestic violence support group who were engaged with social services and the legal system, did not have a choice about many of the appointments they had to keep during the week. One of the women we worked with, Suzanne, was living alone with her daughter for the first time, with support from social services. She was involved in a complicated court case to retain custody of her daughter, which involved dealing with a range of professionals, among them psychologists, solicitors, social workers for herself and her daughter, support workers, NSPCC representatives and Sure Start co-ordinators. When appointments and arrangements with these people clashed with learning opportunities, it is clear that the learning

opportunities had to take second place.

### Relationships

The relationships that people had, both within and outside the community sites, had a significant impact on their engagement with learning. Being able to come in for ‘*a brew and a chat*’ was an important feature of the homeless shelter, the domestic violence support group, the drug and alcohol support centre and the tenants’ association. The relationships people build up at the drug and alcohol support centre, both with staff and with other clients, play a crucial part in supporting them. The range of services available to people interacted to form a climate in which learning could take place within a network of support. People talked about the importance of the staff being available to them all the time, the egalitarian relationships that were built up, which are described in more detail below, and, as has been mentioned already, the importance of being with other people with similar issues who understand what they are going through.

People also bring with them relationships from outside the setting. Some of these can have positive effects on their engagement in learning, and some can have the reverse. At the homeless shelter, the young people brought with them a complex social structure of relationships and identities. The presence or absence of particular groups of people shaped others’ willingness to engage with the activities that were offered. They appreciated being in a space with others who shared their experiences, such as homelessness, pregnancy or the drug culture. While they valued the positive support this offered, this could also have negative effects. As staff told us:

It does drag them down [group involvement]. One lad got a job and the others kept coming saying: Come on, let’s go - so he did and lost his job...All your friends don’t want to do things, and they just want to get wrecked every night. (Nightsafe worker)

Falling in with a peer group of like mind, which accentuates how they are feeling, as though there isn’t anything for them and that they are fairly worthless so they generally have a low opinion of themselves and their position... and that they expect almost nothing at all. (Connexions adviser - a one-to-one support worker for 13 to 19-year-olds addressing social and educational issues)

Jason found a great deal of support for his learning from the people in the tenants’ association, and this support was one of the things that made his engagement possible. However, he also had support of a different kind from friends he socialised with. When his depression worsened, this was the support he chose for a while, rather than that which related to learning activities.

This takes us to the final aspect of people’s lives, which is concerned with the crucial importance of people’s own purposes and desires in whether and when they choose to engage in organised learning activities.

## 3.4 Imagined futures

**Steve** is in his early 30s. He has negative memories of his secondary schooling, describing the teaching as having been authoritarian, clinical and abrupt. He has dyslexia but received no support for it at school, and remembers getting into trouble for his reactions

when people laughed at him reading aloud. He is very critical of *'old fashioned schoolteacher types'*, who feel that taking on a strict or authoritarian role is part of their job. In his experience of talking to people who have had problems with drugs and alcohol, they have often gone through an authoritarian kind of schooling. He frequently skipped school from the age of 13 and left officially at 16. He sat some exams but does not know the results. He worked as a joiner for a while, locally and in London.

By his early 20s, he had started dabbling in hard drugs with friends, which led to addiction. He rapidly lost interest in work and made money by other means. Finally, after stealing money he was sent to prison for three years. He maintained his habit in prison, so needed to 'score' straight after getting out. Within weeks he had committed another robbery and was sent down again, this time for five years. Steve says this was *'basically what saved my life, really; it changed things forever for me.'* He chose to spend this time getting himself sorted out, did some courses, and signed up for a residential rehab in the south of England.

When he came out of jail he went to London for a fresh start. He stayed clean there for a year, but had to come back suddenly when his mother fell ill. Soon he started using again. Then his girlfriend had a baby and they moved down to London, wanting to get back to the good work he had done before. But their drug use continued, he was arrested, and their son was taken away by social services and placed with his girlfriend's mother. Steve and his girlfriend returned to the local area to be close to their son; since when, ironically enough considering this is where he had always had problems before, he has *'got my shit together'*. He and his girlfriend have got married, they have had another baby, and he has got involved in setting up a group to support local people using drugs.

Steve's writing skills are poor, related to his dyslexia. However, he was very reluctant to engage with discrete literacy provision. This was not a priority in his life, he did not see any immediate use for it, and the strong negative associations he retained regarding 'study' from his school days made him unlikely to choose to spend his time in this way. He was, however, eager to engage with educational and support provision - which he perceived as being useful and productive for him. He finds the support he receives from the Structured Day Programme to be absolutely vital, because it is there whenever he needs it, and because it is a 'safe place' where he can engage in structured activities without risking bumping into old acquaintances.

He expresses his future goal as to have *'just a clean, healthy life really. The rest of it I'll make, and mould, and manufacture.... My goals are to just maintain what I'm doing, and try and achieve something, whatever it be, however small or big, to achieve something.'* By the end of our study he was working as a community research assistant for a local university.

Steve's sense of a possible future, of what he might become and how he could achieve it, was crucial to his engagement in learning. In this section we introduce the fourth component of people's lives which affects their learning. It is concerned with their purposes, aspirations, hopes and desires, and we refer to this as their imagined futures. People's imagined futures create and constrain what they see as possible. People's plans changed as they saw different possibilities for themselves, and the sites we worked in were important catalysts for this.

### **Engagement in learning driven by broader life purposes**

We found that the different individuals we worked with had many and varied reasons for engaging in educational provision. These could be very different in the different sites. People

attending the drug and alcohol support centre were for the most part engaged in a process of transition, and this shaped their relationship to learning. Where literacy and numeracy learning were seen as important or useful to them and their goals, as with Caroline above, who wanted eventually to get back into office work, they were taken up. For other people, introducing structure of any kind was perceived by them to be useful for their development, and so for a while they attended all the courses that were offered, but with quite a different motivation. Recognition of the diversity of things that people want from engaging in learning is crucial when working in these settings.

### **‘Conventional’ long-term aspirations**

Nearly everyone we talked to described their long-term aspirations in conventional terms: a settled home, a family, a good job, happy relationships - although these aspirations were often held in tension with the concept of ‘normality’ in a culture which, they felt, excluded ‘people like us’, as mentioned above. At the homeless shelter, all but one of the interviewees cited these as being their significant goals in life. But these longer-term goals often took a secondary place to more immediate and urgent priorities. At the homeless shelter, for instance, the principal purpose for many was immediate survival. Most of them in the medium term wanted to train and to prepare themselves for work, and most of them had dipped in and out of vocational study and training at college or with other providers. However, most have found this difficult to sustain, experiencing difficulties related to unstable living arrangements, drug use, and all sorts of more immediate priorities linked to their current circumstances that we have described above.

### **Purposes and desires change over time**

People’s purposes and desires are not fixed, but change over time. As people’s life circumstances changed, the relative priority of their goals could shift rapidly, and the place of literacy and numeracy learning within these could shift too. At the Big Issue, survival was the vendors’ major concern, and this meant different things to different people: a hostel bed, money for drugs or alcohol, clean needles or a chance to attend a detox programme. Learning came secondary to these issues. People’s purposes and desires could also change as a result of the learning and support activities they were engaging with in these settings. As they built up confidence and self-esteem, they might begin to consider options which they did not feel were open to them before, like Caroline, who ended up attending a mainstream college class only months after explaining to us how she did not think she would ever go back to college.

### **The search for wellbeing**

One constant, however, was the search for *wellbeing* which shaped people’s choices. The young people at the homeless shelter were looking for a place to stay where they felt happy, safe and settled. They often moved around a lot to escape shifting relationships, noise, disruption and violence. But this mobility was not in itself their goal, but was a function of their search for settledness and wellbeing. Safety and happiness had a much greater priority for them than formal learning achievements. Where engaging in learning challenged their safety and happiness, it was not taken up. This included examples we came across where attending college became very uncomfortable, or when learning activities offered at the centre were perceived as being too formal, school-like and off-putting. When a woman attending an assertiveness training course run by the domestic violence support group felt she had exposed too much of her personal history at the first session, she was too uncomfortable to return the following week.

## 4. How lives shaped learning

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The above characteristics combine to shape people's responses to and feelings about participating in formal learning. There were common factors influencing choices and ability to participate.

### **Reluctance to access mainstream provision**

A key point to recognise is that in these settings, people were for the most part unwilling and unlikely to access mainstream college provision, or indeed community provision which appeared similar to mainstream college provision. Negative previous experiences of education and negative experiences with authority meant that what they perceived as hierarchical formal learning environments were very off-putting. Feelings of exclusion from so-called 'normal' culture made it very challenging for many to contemplate participating in college activities or taking on a new identity as a college student. Mainstream college provision is normally provided on a regular daily or weekly basis, and this could be problematic for people whose lives were not structured in this regular way, or who were dealing with a range of unpredictable life circumstances and events which might have to be prioritised over learning. These difficulties were reinforced where people were in relationships, whether with partners, family members, friends or peer groups, which were not supportive of learning.

This is not to say that people in these groups would never access mainstream college provision. Some clients of the drug and alcohol support centre day programme went on to mainstream courses at the local community college, including Caroline, profiled earlier, who only a few months earlier had explained how unlikely she felt it was that she would ever attend college. In 2004, 12 clients went on to college and this was seen by the support centre as a significant achievement. This was in a setting where support was available for moving on to mainstream courses, and where the same teachers from the college were teaching the mainstream and the community classes, so clients felt supported by the existing positive relationships they had built up. Some of the mainstream classes were even running on the same site, making the step that much easier to take. The college principal was supportive in continuing this community provision, even when the numbers were low, which paid off in the long run both in terms of people's progress. Brian, another client, is a good example of this progression. He went from doing a creative writing class as part of the Structured Day Programme, to an evening creative writing class with the same tutor on the same site which was part of the mainstream provision. He then took an introductory counselling course on the main site and eventually a diploma course, which he considered vocational training as he planned to work as a counsellor himself eventually.

Accessing mainstream provision required support. As part of their core activities the domestic violence centre offered bridging support to women to attend college. This included childcare, financial support for travel and, most importantly, attending with other women for the first few sessions. At Nightsafe the Connexions adviser accompanied young people through the application process for college, but they did not have the resources to sustain this bridging support.

### **Emotional experiences influence learning**

People in these settings were regularly dealing with difficult or overwhelming mental, emotional and physical experiences in response to events in their lives which could



profoundly influence their whole learning experience. This could happen for a range of reasons: for instance, if elements of the learning environment recalled people's previous negative experiences of education or authority, or other traumatic or painful events from their histories; or if they brought with them difficult or challenging life circumstances and events. For more on this see Jenny Horsman's (2000) study in Canada where she identifies both the prevalence of trauma and violence in the lives of women attending literacy education, and the devastating impact these life experiences can have on people's learning.

The teachers and learning providers we worked with were sensitive to such issues and had developed ways of dealing with them in the classroom. This might mean being ready to change the lesson plan very quickly, in order directly to address the issue at hand. But equally, it might mean being prepared to sit outside with a cup of tea and give people some space, rather than launching straight into activities. Teachers with no experience in this area need to be provided with training which will give them confidence in making such decisions, an issue which we return to below.

### **'Dipping in and out'**

Many of the people in these sites 'dipped in and out' of learning. This was particularly true of people attending the homeless shelter who, as we have already mentioned, would often attend for a short period of time before other circumstances got in the way. While on college records this would appear as a 'drop out', within the context of that young person's life it wasn't necessarily failure. Attending college, even for a short time, could be a significant and important step for them, given the histories they were carrying with them, the circumstances they were dealing with and the multiple life goals they were addressing. This is well illustrated by a summary of a case history from the Connexions adviser at the homeless shelter:

One young person I was working with was a heroin addict. He had a lot of support from Fusebox. He had a really unsettled lifestyle but had some support from a 'leaving care' worker. He then got thrown out of his hostel and went to NACRO for training which didn't work out. But at that time he stopped being a heroin addict so he had moved a million miles because he was completely down and out when I first met him. He then managed to get his own flat, attended college for a while but something went wrong and he was asked to leave. Statistically he has not moved on and not achieved and on our system he is 19, still unemployed and failed. But I can see that a lot of input from a lot of people has achieved a lot in his case.

Where the experience of attending college was a positive one for people, it could challenge conceptions of a normality which excluded them or a new identity which they could not take on, and perhaps lead them to engage for longer the next time. But where the experience was negative, it could make them less likely to engage in the future. With this group in particular, having support and encouragement for small steps could make a big difference to their future choices within the context of their lives as a whole.

Another example is that of Jason, referred to earlier, who appeared in college records as a 'non-completer'. However, he had had a very positive experience of learning, had continued to engage in informal learning in the tenants' association and as a co-researcher, and made a significant contribution to the work of the association and to our research. His progression routes at the end of our study were unclear, as his return to drinking had led to difficulty in managing his learning and life. Nevertheless, the support from other volunteers at the

tenants' association was still open to him, and his positive experiences of and attitude to learning meant that it was entirely possible that he would return to it in the future, when the time was right for him.

### The 'right time'

This idea that learning opportunities needed to be made available at the 'right time' in a given individual's life if they were to be taken up effectively was a common one among the people we worked with. This 'right time' emerged from a combination of their life experiences, their purposes and goals and the priority of learning within them at this point, the support that was available for them for making potentially difficult changes, and the learning opportunities that they had access to. Sophie's immediate priority needs were for safety, support and company, rather than for formalised learning. While she had tried to engage in formal learning, this had been difficult for her to sustain whilst living with homelessness. She had clear life goals, but at the end of our study engaging in formal learning was not seen as a priority to help her to meet them. She needed ongoing support through her rapidly changing life circumstances, from people who were able to spend time with her, build trust and positive relationships and understand how she represented herself, her realities, her wants and her needs. With sensitivity, the supportive people in her life could encourage her to move towards her own 'right time' for learning; but this is essentially a subjective experience, so she is ultimately the only person who can really recognise and engage with it.

This interaction of history, circumstances and purposes meant that the relative priority of LLN learning – or indeed of learning in general – varied a great deal, both between people and over the course of any individual's life. Where these were not aligned, developing the motivation to engage in formal learning was less likely. Since Sophie's underachievement at school does not necessarily indicate basic skills needs, it is unlikely that literacy and numeracy learning will be her top priority when her 'right time' comes. Steve gives a different perspective of this, from someone who does have what would be classed as 'basic skills needs'. He explained how, despite having dyslexia and not feeling confident in writing, literacy learning was of very low priority for him in relation to his overall life goals, which had been first and foremost to get and stay clean, and secondly to '*make, mould and manufacture*' the other things that he wanted to achieve.

In summary, the characteristics of people's lives – the histories, their current identities and life circumstances, and the shifting goals and purposes they have for their futures – interact to shape their engagement in and experience of learning. In community settings such as these in particular, people are often unlikely or unwilling to access mainstream provision, especially if this resembles school. They may be dealing with difficult and overwhelming emotional and physical experiences, which may be relatively invisible to practitioners, but nevertheless shape the possibilities for their engagement in learning. They often 'dip in and out' of learning; from the perspective of provision this might be classed as failure, but within the context of their lives might be a very positive step. And for learning to be successful and positive, it had to be made available at the 'right time' for that individual, a subjective experience which emerges from the interaction of the characteristics they bring with them and the support and opportunities available to them at that point.

This takes us to the next aspect of the analysis: the ways in which people participated in the different sites we worked in. This then leads on to how characteristics of people's lives shaped the forms of provision to support people.

## 5. What goes on in the sites

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Having described some common patterns in the lives of people we have worked with, we will now move on to describe and analyse the patterns of participation and engagement in learning that we observed in the different sites. We will draw out in particular how these patterns were fundamentally shaped by the characteristics of learners' lives described above. These sites were distinctive in their purposes, and yet we observed a range of similarities in the patterns of participation that emerged.

### 5.1 Purposes

Each site had a set of principal purposes which were not directly educational and which determined the patterns of participation there. These purposes shaped the priority and visibility of formal literacy and numeracy learning in these places, from an explicit role at the drug and alcohol support centre to a more indirect, though important one, at the domestic violence support group, where people were learning as it became necessary in carrying out their responsibilities.

The principal purpose of the programme at the drug and alcohol support centre was to offer support for drug and alcohol users and ex-users. People who had been given drug treatment and testing orders were obliged to have regular structured support. The centre offered a variety of approaches, including one-to-one support and a Structured Day Programme of activities. These included relapse prevention and harm minimisation support groups, complementary therapies, and educational courses provided by tutors from the local adult community college, such as music technology, art and *Skills for Life* which was taught by a literacy tutor. Once a week, staff from the local learndirect centre visited and supported people who were doing courses online, including literacy, numeracy, ICT and web design. After signing up for these, several clients also spent time at the learndirect centre in town. Again, engagement in learning was driven by the needs of the clients. The courses that had been put on as part of the day programme had been selected in consultation, and were chosen primarily because they were likely to be of interest to people attending the centre. While people were initially encouraged to attend all the courses to try them out, they were then free to choose which ones they continued to go to, in negotiation with staff. The principal priority was meeting their own particular needs and wants.

The Big Issue in Liverpool worked with people who were vendors of The Big Issue magazine. The principal purpose of the organisation is to provide opportunities for people facing homelessness to help themselves, first through selling the magazine, and secondly through empowering them to change their lives by supporting them around issues of housing, employment and education, developing self-esteem, self-confidence and independence. At the organisation's Liverpool base, training and education for vendors had for some years included literacy and numeracy, delivered in a flexible way responsive to vendors' needs. With the introduction of *Skills for Life* funding, discrete maths and English classes were offered, which included the incentive of an extra 15 magazines to sell. The organisation also offered music and IT classes.

At the homeless shelter, the principal purpose was to offer support to young homeless

people. The priority issue was ensuring their survival and wellbeing, making sure they had a safe place to come to and a safe place to live. Once this was established, staff worked with the young people on individual action plans, including addressing accommodation issues, drug and alcohol use, and planning for the future. These young people were learning all the time, but often this was not phrased in explicitly educational terms. For some young people, their action plan included engaging in formal learning, such as attending college; and educational activities formed part of what was going on at the day centre. But everything was framed in terms of meeting the particular needs of the young people involved, with learning being focused on to the extent that this was appropriate for these individuals.

The principal purpose of the tenants' association was to offer support to residents of the estate with practical issues, particularly relating to their housing. For volunteers, the association offered support with educational and development issues, which included both helping people to attend formal courses and supporting their learning through participation in the activities of the organisation.

The principal purpose of the domestic violence support group was to offer advice and support to women who were or had been victims of domestic and family violence, and to raise awareness of these issues in the community and in legislation. The organisation sought to be an alternative to official support services run by professionals, which the organiser, Jacqui, felt disempowered women. The organisation, run from a local church hall, offered drop-in support sessions and activities including an assertiveness training course, a men's stress management course and a telephone support and advice service. As part of their support activities, the domestic violence support group worked with women attending college, including those taking *Skills for Life* classes. Education and training were seen as part of the way women receiving support could develop their confidence and self-esteem, and the possibilities open to them for paid employment and new opportunities.

## 5.2 Patterns of participation

Staff and volunteers in all of these different community settings made it a priority to foster and develop a supportive, informal, relaxed atmosphere. They appreciated the issues that clients and service users might have with authority, structure and formality, already described, and worked to develop each site as a 'safe place' in which social interaction and developing mutually supportive relationships were as important as any more structured activity which might be going on. This was achieved through particular patterns of the use of space, the use of time and the interactions in the sites, which built up supportive and informal relationships between people.

### Use of space

In each of these sites, spaces were available both for structured activities and for less structured social interaction. At the drug and alcohol support centre, group activities took place in several rooms. A large room with a central table and chairs, decorated with clients' art works, was used for group discussions and activities not requiring the use of computers. The room behind this, of a similar size, was lined with broadband-equipped computers and mixing decks, and was used for music technology and IT classes and as a drop-in computer resource room. There were also local newspapers and information leaflets and the room also served as an informal space for people. The entry hall held a signing-in book and led onto the staff office, so had institutional functions, but also served as a place for people to wait, chat

and circulate. At the end of a corridor with one-to-one rooms and an office leading off it came a kitchen, where clients and staff made tea and coffee and chatted, and beyond this a small and comfortable room primarily used for complementary therapies.

The key place for informal interaction, though, was outside the centre itself, in a small space outside the back door leading onto the yard. A corrugated plastic roof offered some protection from the elements, and chairs were arranged in a small group. This was where people congregated for a cup of tea or coffee and often a smoke. Clients told us that one of the key supports that the centre offered was a space to come and “*have a brew and a fag*” and “*just have a chat and a laugh*” in a non-pressured environment. It was an egalitarian space, where community workers, tutors, management and administrative staff met on an equal footing with service users to talk about everyday life, and was therefore a key site for the development of informal patterns of interaction and positive relationships. Staff told us that some of their most important work was done in that small space outside the back door.

All of the other sites we worked in had similar spaces for unstructured social interaction. The day centre for young homeless people was housed in a converted electricity station. In a corner near the door were a sofa and some armchairs, where a few of the young people would normally be sitting relaxing, with a brew area on the other side of the entrance for making tea and coffee. The tables in the middle of the room were used both as a place for organised activities and as a space for sitting, chatting, drinking tea, eating lunch, playing games, and planning activities. The centre also had a kitchen at one end, office space at the other, along with a quiet room, toilets, showers and a store room; but most of the space was unstructured enough so that the young people could wander about in it and use it as they chose to.

The tenants’ association occupied in a first floor flat in a maisonette on the estate. It contained an office room with telephones and computer facilities, a bedroom with an internet computer and a kitchen. The kitchen was a crucial resource for the association: people were continually dropping in on an informal basis. Teas and coffees were constantly being produced and there would normally be people sitting on easy chairs in the office, discussing everyday activities. The domestic violence support group was based in a church hall, providing a safe and supportive environment both for women coming to the centre and for those who provide the service. It was in a single room, with a phone line and a computer available. When training events and meetings are not happening, the room functions as a drop-in when staff are available, and people sit around on easy chairs. The Big Issue is housed in a large building in Liverpool city centre. It contains a magazine collection point for vendors and offices downstairs. Upstairs is a computer suite, several classrooms, a kitchen, a music room and several training rooms. As at the drug and alcohol support centre, there is a space outside the door where smokers congregate and chat. The informal space here is the office, which is always open. At Training 2000, the young people congregate outside, if it is fine, or in the canteen and around the entrance and stairs in bad weather. All of these spaces for unstructured social interaction allow for the de-emphasis of the institutional identity of the sites and the development of informal interpersonal interactions and relationships.

Another key point is that in most of these settings, ownership of the space is visibly demonstrated by the use of clients’ own work in decorative wall displays. The homeless shelter is a particularly interesting example, showing a tension between the use of space to display ownership and the use of space to construct a particular atmosphere. When we began our work, the day centre was filled with artwork done by the young people: glass painting on

the windows, banners, collages from magazines up the stairs, artwork and posters. This produced a large, vibrant and colourful space, clearly marked as being owned by the young people themselves. But staff decided to redecorate to produce a calmer, more minimalist environment, partly because they were working with a particularly challenging group of young people at that time and felt that this would help to quieten the atmosphere. However, the young people rejected this new look and the staff realised the importance of the young people marking the space in their own style. Colourful and visually attractive advice and information leaflets on life issues produced by the young people themselves were made available, contrasting with rather duller-looking nationally produced ones, and locally-produced centre information such as a 'rules of the house' poster produced with a local community arts organisation were prominently displayed.

Finally, and significantly, attention was paid to security in all of the sites where this was an issue, an important part of constructing the various settings as 'safe places'. Access to the drug and alcohol support centre was through a locked door. Staff served as gatekeepers, and if people appeared to have been drinking or taking drugs they would be turned away. The tenants' association rooms were protected by a large steel door. Access to the church hall where the domestic violence support group was sited was used for many activities, making it possible for people to visit the organisation without making it obvious why they were there, and access to the hall was controlled through an intercom by the caretaker. Access to the upstairs space at The Big Issue is controlled through a security door, with notices on it warning that it is a drug-free space. Access to the day centre for young homeless was through a single door, which people who have been barred are not permitted to enter. This might not seem on the face of it to be an issue directly relevant to learning. But where people were living in circumstances in which they might be actively under threat, focusing on learning activities could only happen when they felt sure that the space they were in was secure and where learning would not be disrupted.

### **Use of time**

In similar ways to the existence of unstructured social space, unstructured social time was a common feature of all these settings. Time was made available in the social spaces just to chat and interact. Clients at the drug and alcohol support centre talked about the importance of having somewhere in their lives without pressure, where they could sit, chat, have a laugh and be peaceful without feeling pressured to do anything. Staff also saw this time as important and made it clear that some of their most important work happened during this time. Similarly, time spent chatting was an important element of what went on at the domestic violence support group, at the tenants' association and at The Big Issue.

Where the setting offered structured activities, these often had relaxed starting times. At the drug and alcohol support centre, though classes were advertised as starting at a particular time, they often began later, after people had come in, settled down and had a brew and a smoke. During this time, the class tutor would normally sit outside and talk to people, giving them the opportunity to assess the clients' current state of mind and their feelings, and to be responsive to that once the class began. At the homeless shelter, activities might be going on for some time in one corner of the space before the young people would express interest or feel ready to join in. The same was true on a longer-term basis, where people were not pressured to begin formal course-related activities straight away. Once these relationships were established, people were happier about focusing on learning activities where these were relevant to their own purposes.

Another time issue was making support available to people for as long as possible, within the resource constraints of the organisation. The homeless shelter offered 24-hour support for those young people who were staying in its emergency accommodation, and the day centre was available to young people on a drop-in basis during its opening hours. And many of the clients at the drug and alcohol support centre appreciated being able to come in for support whenever they needed to, in addition to their classes and appointments.

### Patterns of interaction

In all of these settings, the style of interaction was predominantly informal. Staff and clients addressed each other by first names. There were implicit and explicit ground rules about what sorts of interaction were appropriate. These differed from one setting to another; for instance, swearing was frowned upon at the homeless shelter, which had a younger clientele, but less so at the drug and alcohol support centre. But in all of them showing respect, by listening to one another and avoiding displays of anger or irritation, was important.

At the homeless shelter, an interesting manifestation of this informality was that care had to be taken to avoid presenting what was going on to people in a formal, structured way. When they had the day's programme displayed as a list of 'activities', some young people refused to be involved – '*we're not doing "activities" .*' When it was changed to be presented as 'what's happening today', there was much less resistance. This relates to the young people's previous negative experiences with structured education and with authority. As one staff member put it:

The way we work with them is like we never say: 'we're going to have a cooking session'. We might say: 'Do you fancy a barbecue?' Then we might joke about the crap in sausages and show them how to cook them.... They often have a mental block about instructions as they associate these with authority. They find authority difficult either because they have had bad memories of abuse of authority or the opposite – they have never ever been disciplined by anybody and have brought themselves up more or less.

The homeless centre's change of decor, mentioned earlier, was associated with a change in the name of the centre, from a 'drop-in centre' to an 'educationally-based day centre', related to new funding requirements. This led to a difficult period of adjustment. The manager told us:

It's better now but it's been a difficult time. The culture changed overnight because we not only changed the décor but also the language such as naming Fusebox 'educational activity centre' which sounds formal and you know these young people don't do 'education' so we've changed the words and we've not used the word 'education'...It's about words that people feel comfortable with.

In all of these settings, there was an attempt to develop relationships between staff and clients that were egalitarian, rather than authoritarian. This worked out differently in different places. The tenants' association saw themselves as representing the local voice against external officialdom, and there was already little social distance between volunteers and people coming to the centre. Similarly, the domestic violence support group was set up as a support service offered by people who had themselves had experience of domestic and family violence. The Big Issue and the drug and alcohol support centre were staffed by professionals in community work, which set up more distance between staff and clients; however, explicit attempts were made to minimise this. For instance, staff at the drug and alcohol support



centre made efforts to talk with clients about their own problems and current issues and seek advice from them, partly to challenge the idea that so-called 'normal' people don't have problems and to ensure that clients were themselves positioned as competent people with things to contribute. As one client told us,

I've found the staff very supportive, really. Wherever I've been before, there's been a very definite staff-client divide. But here, the staff tend to treat you like an individual rather than: 'Oh, an alcoholic, and all alcoholics are the same, and typical alcoholic, and ...' You know, we're all just treated like individuals, which is great.

At the homeless shelter, this development of egalitarian relationships was complicated somewhat by the difference in age between staff and young people. Here, the staff took on not only supportive but also disciplinary roles, for instance when the young people challenged the ground rules of interaction at the centre, or in discussions challenging aspects of their behaviour, such as gambling. They attempted to strike a careful balance between setting boundaries and maintaining positive relationships.

And as a result of building up this knowledge and understanding of people as individuals, staff were able to be responsive to people's immediate concerns and experiences, and the histories, events and circumstances that people were bringing with them to the setting. Where centres were offering structured learning activities, for instance at the drug and alcohol support centre, this might mean leaving an extra few minutes before starting an activity, to give people a chance to 'get their head together'; having extra breaks during activities; or people choosing not to participate that day, or to engage in peripheral ways, such as playing Solitaire during an IT or music technology class. Bertie, one of the clients, told us that the courses were great because of the lack of pressure associated with them. This seemed to be one of the few times and places in his life at that stage where this was the case, where he could unwind and forget about difficulties that he was currently facing. And from a programme of very fluctuating numbers attending formal provision, in one year 12 people went on to a mainstream college course who would have been unlikely, for all the reasons outlined, to have done so without this interim stage.

## 6. How lives shaped provision

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The features of provision identified above are shaped by the concern of all of the workers in these sites that what they provide should be driven by the needs of their clients, rather than solely by external targets. The informal patterns of participation and the building up of trusting and respectful relationships with people as individuals were central to the achievement of the principal purposes of the sites. This approach was necessary precisely because of everything that clients and service users were bringing with them from their lives.

With regard to learning, this approach implied that agendas for learning had to be flexible, and respond to the changing circumstances and needs of clients. The Connexions adviser at the homeless shelter explained how it was necessary in his view for all those supporting vulnerable young people to be prepared to 'go the extra mile' and to 'walk alongside' that young person for as long as it takes. Where the settings offered formal, structured learning, it was important that this was delivered in a flexible, responsive way. In many of the sites, the principal learning that was going on was happening informally, through participation; and this was true even when there was more structured learning also available. For instance, Steve explained to us how, although he was profoundly reluctant to attend dedicated literacy provision at the drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre, he was happy to be able to bring in a piece of writing he had to do for work and go through it with one of the centre staff.

A key issue, particularly in relation to literacy, numeracy and language learning, was that this localised, needs-driven approach could clash with the agendas and priorities of funders and institutions. For instance, there were instances where staff felt they were under pressure to persuade clients to undergo basic skills diagnostic testing. Where this was not a priority for the client concerned, where it evoked previous negative memories of testing, where it was inappropriate given their level of literacy, or where this was experienced as an institutional imposition before trusting relationships had been built up, this could be counter-productive, even leading to clients leaving the provision.

A related point is that some of the structures and frameworks of formal educational provision were inappropriate for the needs of this client group. At the drug and alcohol support centre, much of the formal literacy and numeracy provision clients were engaging in was offered by learndirect. In order for these courses to be funded, they had to be completed within a certain period of time. But as a result of all the issues raised earlier, particularly the turbulent unpredictability of the life events people were often dealing with and the fact that many did not lead lives structured around regular routines, clients would often start a course but not complete it within the specified period. This was demoralising for the client, who had again been positioned as a failure within the educational system, and for staff, who might have spent a long time supporting that client to be ready to try engaging in education again. Clients would then understandably be reluctant to try another learndirect course, as this had reinforced their negative experiences of education. This underlines the importance of considering carefully the sorts of timescales for learning which are realistic for different groups of people.

At The Big Issue, the initial impact of the *Skills for Life* strategy was perceived as a shift from a locally-produced, flexible literacy programme relating primarily to vendors' concerns, to one based on the national curriculum. Previously, literacy and numeracy had been embedded in a

wider essential skills curriculum that had fewer time constraints and assessment requirements, and a general approach described by the manager as 'a person-centred style of community education, looking at the whole person'. This was the approach that had worked best with this client group, and they were resisting a felt shift away from this towards a model structuring learning from the outside by means of the national curriculum and assessment framework.

The national teaching standards also had an impact on the provision at The Big Issue. The manager felt that the most important quality in the teachers they employed was the ability to work with this client group, rather than having a level 4 qualification, but this qualification was now becoming a requirement, limiting their already small potential pool of teachers. This is a particularly significant issue in these community settings, where provision is far more fragile than in a college setting, cover is not readily available, and unexpected difficulties such as having one person off sick can make the provision fall apart. We came across frequent examples of the impact of such funding and structural issues. For instance, as we started our work with Big Issue, the basic skills tutor – who had built up excellent relationships with clients and was rated very highly by the management – fell ill, and it proved impossible to replace her. Sustainability of provision is a very important issue in these settings.

In general terms, where LLN provision was happening in partnership between *Skills for Life* specialists and community staff, it was important for tutors coming in from college settings to understand and respect the importance of the patterns of interaction that were practised in the site. They were often quite different from those in colleges. Although there might be no visible, immediate outcomes of the relaxed social interaction that was central to all of these settings, it underpinned and made possible everything else that was going on. It helped when literacy and numeracy specialists understood the reasons for this and were able to participate in it. This also underlines the importance of community workers understanding clients' LLN needs.

## 7. Drawing the threads together

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There are specific implications of this work for the particular settings where the research was carried out and we have worked locally and regionally to have an effect on current practice and on training. Here, we draw out more general implications for research, practice and training, and for the development of the *Skills for Life* strategy. These have been developed in dialogue with participants in the research sites, with practitioners and policy makers who participated in our workshops at the annual *Skills for Life* conferences in 2004, and with members of the Adult Learners' Lives project advisory group.

### 7.1 Common understandings of learning in community settings

This work develops and extends conclusions from existing research in this field. A key initiative for work in community settings was the Adult and Community Learning Fund (ACLF). This was set up in 1998 to explore innovative ways to expand the provision of, and increase access to, local community-based learning opportunities. An evaluation was undertaken in 2002, part way through the ACLF programme (McMeeking et al. 2002), and a final report was produced in 2004 (Sampson et al. 2004). Many of the findings of these evaluations resonate with our own findings. Our research reinforces and pulls together the findings from these other studies and offers deeper understandings of the perspectives of learners which can be of value for practice and training.

The importance of building and maintaining positive relationships with learners and service users is a thread which runs through many of the findings of our research. The same is true of the ACLF work, which reflects the traditions and insights of community learning more generally. The ACLF reports found that the most successful way to attract people to participate in community-based learning was by word of mouth, particularly when outreach staff talking about the programmes were accompanied by successful learners acting as role models, and when they were building upon existing relationships with learners. The social atmosphere of the programme and the personal commitment of tutors were critical to learner retention, and 'taking the programme to the learners', holding sessions in safe, familiar and welcoming places, was important. The third element critical to learner retention was the quality and relevance of the learning programme, with the attention to relevance recalling the need for flexibility and responsiveness to learners' individual needs and circumstances found in our research. Attractive activities, such as using IT as a 'hook', targeting programmes on people's interests and contexts (such as football for young men), or working within the interests of existing groups, worked well to engage new learners.

Many of the ACLF learners were dealing with similar life circumstances and events to those in our research. The reports point out that the so-called 'hardest to reach' learners may often have a range of problems, including health, housing, finance, family and crime-related issues, which are more immediate than their basic skills needs. This parallels our findings on the turbulence of life experiences and the need to respond to learners' own purposes. It was also found to be necessary to address practical and financial barriers to learning, through providing for travel costs, materials and other necessary support (such as childcare and counselling, where appropriate). This 'holistic' approach to support is unusual in the post-16 learning and skills sector and does not continue when people enter mainstream learning

provision, but it resonates with the 'multidimensional' approach of many organisations in the voluntary and community sector.

As in our study, many of the ACLF learners identified negative previous experiences of education and the ACLF evaluation report found that an informal style of delivery, which allowed learners to work at their own pace, and which, critically, was unlike school, was important. Many of the projects offered one-to-one support, enabling individualised provision appropriate to the particular learner involved. This links in with work on formal and informal learning, such as Colley et al. In earlier work we have discussed how people learn and how the term 'informal' is used in quite distinct ways (Tusting & Barton, 2003, Tusting, 2003).

The programmes helped to improve learners' basic skills, and in some cases also their practical skills, knowledge of where to get information, and ability to cope with problems. The final report of the ACLF programme refers to an 'encouraging' proportion of learners moving into mainstream education; further basic skills classes was the most common form of progression. There were also important 'soft' outcomes around personal development, such as learners' self-esteem, motivation, teamworking, timekeeping and ability to think for themselves. The reports recommend that innovative and effective ways of measuring such 'soft' outcomes of programmes be identified and disseminated, so that basic skills programmes which have these impacts on the 'hardest-to-reach learners' are not undervalued.

A particular problem experienced by many of the ACLF projects was in recruiting appropriately qualified staff, once the *Skills for Life* strategy had been launched. The projects needed to find people who had the appropriate skills and experience for working with this client group, or develop the training for existing staff, issues which we have also emphasised.

The point made above about the entirely conventional aspirations of supposedly disaffected people has also been made in a Prince's Trust report (Calder and Cope, 2003), based on interviews with 900 people from disadvantaged backgrounds. They found the aspirations of this group to be very similar to those of a control group: to have a family, an interesting job, and enough money to support their lifestyle; and to have a nice house, good friends and be in control of their own future. The issue for them was that of not knowing how to go about achieving these aspirations. Again, this reinforces some of our findings, described earlier.

Case study-based work with community providers also identified similar issues. This study found that community-based providers understood their work in terms of having a holistic view of learning, in which LLN were integrated without making them too apparent (Hannon et al 2003). Issues around the difficulty of obtaining funding for development work and core long-term funding were common. Reaching out to people through going out beyond the organisation, networking and talking to people, and putting on taster courses catering for people's existing interests were felt to be crucial for development.

Our work also relates to McGivney's (1999) study of informal learning in the community. She calls for community learning to be valued as an end in itself, not merely in terms of educational progression. She highlights the importance of good relationships, intermediaries between people and educational providers, flexible and responsive systems, provision which responds to people's existing interests and needs, and support mechanisms, with the most important factor being the key people involved in development work. She draws out other outcomes of engaging in community learning, such as increased self-esteem, greater personal autonomy and the development of personal, social and practical knowledge and

skills. She suggests that too much emphasis on educational progression may be counter-productive, undermining efforts to widen participation, particularly when working with disadvantaged groups, with whom raising confidence and aspirations can take a long time. Our work shows how confidence relates to engagement in learning and how it carries over to other settings (see also Eldred et al. *Catching confidence*).

McNeil and Smith's (2004) work assessing success factors of working with young people in informal learning also raises similar issues, including: the need for practitioners who understand the needs of working with this client group, and associated difficulties in recruiting appropriate staff; the importance of working with people's existing interests to promote engagement; the need for provision to be flexible, individualised and non-academic; and the importance of non-judgemental relationships, particularly of not being 'like teachers'.

Cieslik and Simpson (2004) have carried out research with young people on the importance of poor basic skills as a factor in the relative success or failure of their transitions into adulthood. They show how literacy and numeracy are only part of the story, drawing attention to the importance of the social relationships and networks people are involved in, to the resources they can access from their own particular life circumstances, and to their life projects and 'horizons for action', all of which mediate the impact of their level of basic skills on their lives. Their recommendations are similar to ours: that formal provision and learning opportunities overly focused on literacy and numeracy are unlikely to succeed without attention to the people attending, to their life projects and to how these are placed within complex circumstances.

Another overview drawing out similar issues is a paper from the National Literacy Trust (Bird & Akerman 2005). Following extensive consultation and surveying existing research, they suggest that successful literacy approaches need to draw upon a strategy which includes engaging individuals and building relationships, meeting learners' needs and interests, and working in partnership. These are all issues which our research has identified as being crucial.

Researching this issue from the point of view of learners rather than from that of provision offers a new perspective on certain issues. For instance, the ACLF evaluation report found that attracting and retaining learners was a major challenge. But we can see from some of the work described earlier that some of the learners who might have been seen to have 'dropped out' might actually have been involved in a 'dipping in and out' process, as they worked out how and where learning fitted into their lives, a much more positive interpretation.

## **7.2 Implications for practice and training**

There are clear implications for practice and training emerging from this research, particularly given that since the launch of the *Skills for Life* strategy there has been an increase in the numbers of LLN specialists working in partnership with voluntary and community organisations. Our findings are accessible to practitioners: they can see the implications of this work for their own practice. It is also clear from this work that it is vitally important that training be available in ways of working with these groups, as well as in subject knowledge. This means training *Skills for Life* specialists in the importance of spending time and energy in getting to know people as individuals, understanding their own purposes and circumstances, and developing dialogue about how and whether LLN learning

fit in with these. The importance and benefits of investing time in developing trusting relationships with people need to be recognised, and teaching methods used which make this integral to practice. Informal styles of working with people will probably be the most appropriate for this.

It is also important that tutors are supported to invest time and energy in developing an understanding of the purposes and practices of the voluntary and community settings in which they are working, and that where specific literacy, numeracy and language provision is introduced, this is done in dialogue with staff and service users, so that the way it is done is not detrimental to the setting's principal purposes. It needs to be recognised, for instance, that some of the most important work of the setting may be going on outside the officially structured time, and that informal social interaction which does not directly contribute to the achievement of institutional targets may nevertheless underlie and make possible everything else that goes on in that setting.

Tutor training needs to take account of the fact that there may be issues in people's lives such as violence which can remain invisible in the learning setting. The unpredictability of people's lives implies that teachers need to be prepared for the specifics of each learning situation in which they are working, and be equipped to be responsive to rapid and unexpected changes. There is likely to be an ongoing process of negotiation of learning around people's everyday survival needs. This requires teachers to be given support and encouragement to develop themselves as 'reflective practitioners'. As well as being able to work with the curriculum, they need to have the confidence to reflect on and respond appropriately and flexibly to the circumstances of the particular people they are working with. Training needs to be provided in appropriate responses to issues such as violence and trauma which may not be part of standard teacher training in literacy and numeracy. Horsman (2000) suggests a range of ways to redesign learning situations to take such issues into account, from a perspective which sees violence as a societal, rather than an individual phenomenon.

Finally, the primacy of people's own goals and purposes, which may or may not include literacy and numeracy learning at a specific point in their lives, implies that teachers need to have ways of recognising achievements within people's own agendas and purposes, in addition to the external forms of accreditation. This may involve the recognition of small steps, such as the introduction of a new routine into someone's day, and taking more account of 'soft outcomes', such as increased confidence.

### **7.3 Implications for policy and funding**

All of these implications for practice require that teachers and staff working in these settings be given the time and space to develop informal relationships with people and to reflect on their own settings. This requires an institutional infrastructure which enables tutors to invest this time and space.

However, staff reported that the principal challenges of delivering effective provision in these settings were related to the demands of the infrastructure. For example, staff were experiencing increasing accountability requirements which required a great deal of time to be spent on recording and reporting paperwork. This paperwork overload needs to be directly addressed, as it was endemic in the field and seems not the most effective use of staff time.



One crucial factor which we identified as contributing to this sense of overload was the constant need to apply for new funding. Much work in the voluntary and community sector is funded on a short-term basis. It is much easier to get money for specific, innovative, bounded 'projects' than to mainstream those projects on a longer-term basis once their success has been demonstrated. Staff, particularly at management level, were spending a great deal of their time applying for new funding to keep provision going, which took their energies away from fulfilling the main purposes of the organisation. The resultant insecurity could affect staff morale and cause people to leave, making it difficult to plan ahead. This is much more of an issue in community work than it is in colleges, where greater continuity can be presupposed. Literacy, numeracy and language provision in these settings is far more fragile than that in college settings anyway, since it cannot be the central purposes of many of these organisations in the way that it is in college. In practice it may be the responsibility of only one person, and we observed examples where that one person became ill and this affected the whole provision. For these various reasons we have a situation where the most vulnerable learners end up with the most insecure provision.

All of this implies that thought needs to be given to simplifying access to funding, and to making funding available to facilitate longer-term mainstreaming of successful projects. We emphasise this as it was one of the strongest responses to the findings of our work when we presented it to delegates at the national *Skills for Life* conferences. There are many aspects to this. Part of it would involve allowing funding for classes and groups with small numbers of people, and relaxing deadlines for course completion and the achievement of particular targets. The benefits of such changes might not be immediately visible but they are likely to have longer-term effects, in terms of encouraging people into structured learning rather than putting them off. Alongside this, it is crucial to formalise ways of recognising achievement in small steps and to accept 'softer' outcomes as important, in addition to having the national tests available. These achievements might need to be assessed internally, by staff and service users working together, but externally recognised in funding terms.

Of course these are difficult circumstances for LLN. In any community setting many changing factors interact, meaning there is no automatic recipe that can be followed for success in these settings. However, we do believe that the issues we have identified are central to understanding participation, engagement and progression. Working with learners and service users and trying to understand their own perspectives, we have found a great deal of engagement and participation in certain circumstances. This has been where people have become involved with community providers or organisations in which their purposes and agendas are addressed, when it has been at a time which is right for them, and in a place where they feel they are treated with respect. This demonstrates the central importance of understanding and respecting people's own purposes and agency. People in settings like these are not intrinsically 'hard to reach', they are very willing to engage if provision reaches out to become available to them, meets their needs and responds to them as individuals. Our work has been in settings which provide the most challenges to educators. However, we believe that the need to take account of learners' perspectives is crucial to issues of engagement in all adult LLN settings.

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This report shows how an understanding of language, literacy and numeracy as social practices can help practitioners to take account of learners' lives. It demonstrates how people's histories, current circumstances and imagined futures can shape their learning and affect their level of engagement. The study is based on the research of the Adult Learners' Lives project in community settings in Blackburn, Lancaster and Liverpool.

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