

Adult literacies in Scotland: is social practice being buried alive?

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Introduction

In Scotland adult literacies education is largely delivered through community education programmes with responsibility falling largely to local councils for its delivery. This provision is mostly organised through local council youth and community services, known as Community Learning and Development (CLD), with learning taking place in settings such as libraries and community centres. Scottish policy continues to pursue a 'social practice' approach to literacies learning, geared towards the needs of learners, their families and communities, with learning contextualised to suit individuals' goals through meaningful contexts. Ambitious targets have been set for adult literacies attainment in the understanding that they should be achieved by 2020 (Scottish Government, 2011). These sit alongside a broader aim to establish world class educational opportunities for adults, as set out in 'Adult Learning in Scotland - Statement of Ambition' (Scottish Government, 2014).

However, the financing of adult literacies learning provision is no longer ring-fenced, following changes in funding arrangements between the Scottish Government and Scottish local councils (Scottish Government, 2007). Local councils are also restructuring to accommodate financial challenges where adult literacies may be forced to compete for resources with sectors of compulsory education. These developments raise questions about how the capacity for the delivery of adult literacies has changed in the last ten years in terms of tutor and learner numbers. Related to this is a question about whether the capacity to sustain and develop social practice approaches has also been affected.

This paper will summarise briefly what is meant by a 'social practice' approach and associated policy development in the UK (Hamilton and Hillier, 2006; Tett et al, 2012). I then present and critique the 'midway report' relating to progress with Scotland's adult literacies strategy for 2020 (Education Scotland, 2015) and how this informed the design of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests aimed at obtaining more robust data relating to the capacity of adult literacies education in Scotland. Whilst the resulting

data was incomplete, it indicated strongly that there has been a significant decline in learner and tutor numbers across a wide range of Scottish Councils, raising two questions. In Scottish Councils that have protected adult literacies learning from austerity, what strategies were employed and could they inform leaderships in other Councils? Secondly, have significant falls in the delivery of adult literacies learning impacted a decline in expertise relating to social practice approaches, with consequences for programme quality?

Scotland, adult literacy and social practice

Scotland's adult literacy curriculum framework states:

'We are using a social practices account of adult literacy and numeracy...Rather than seeing literacy and numeracy as the decontextualised, mechanical manipulation of letters, words and figures this view shows that literacy and numeracy are located within social, emotional and linguistic contexts.'

Understanding literacies as social practices acknowledges that the use and meaning of literate practices depends on the context in which they are being used. For example, to read a newspaper not only requires the skills to decode symbols, but also the understanding of the conventions by which newspapers are organised and the politics or philosophy of the publisher, which in turn differ from the conventions of reading the information on a medicine bottle, or reading a football programme. This understanding informs a definition of literacy for adult learning that places emphasis on the contexts in which literacies are used, rather than functional skills, where literacy is defined as:

'The ability to read, write and use numbers, to handle information, express ideas and opinions, make decisions and solve problems, as *family members, workers, citizens and lifelong learners.*'

(Scottish Executive, 2001, p7, my italics)

The main implication for the practice of adult literacies learning is the expectation that delivery should be contextualised by tutors so that it suits the unique goals and

aspirations of each learner. This contrasts with the teaching of one size fits all programmes of learning, where all students study the same set of discrete and predefined skills (such as sentence construction, grammar and spelling) regardless of their life experience, interests or educational goals. The 'social practice' approach sits alongside the Scottish curriculum for adult literacy which is concerned with processes of learning rather than the specification of a set framework of content to be learned (Scottish Executive, 2005). This impacts how literacies learning is delivered, starting with how prospective learners are dealt with when they express an interest in classes, through to the arrangements for administering accredited literacy assessment.

The expectation is that new learners engage in informal conversation where they explain what they feel they want to learn and why, with no requirement for tutors to administer literacy or numeracy tests as diagnostic tools. Instead, the aim is to build dialogue between tutors and learner, allowing goals and aspirations to be identified and set out in a unique individual learning plan (ILP). The ILP represents the basis for an individualised curriculum which is referred to at a later date when the tutor and learner decide together whether goals have been met (Scottish Executive, 2005). There is no compulsion for learners to take part in formal accreditation, but for those who choose to do so, the Scottish Qualification Authority offers a testable definition of literacies as 'core skills', where, summative assessment is permitted through the building of a portfolio of evidence rather than sitting an examination. This allows learners to demonstrate literate skills within contexts that are meaningful to them, such as hobbies or workplace tasks.

There is a body of research demonstrating that social practice approaches serve to empower learners in the identification and achievement of their goals, with strong arguments that alternative skills-based methods for teaching literacies can be counter-productive (Crowther, Tett and Hamilton, 2001, Tett, Hamilton and Crowther, 2012, Ade-Ojo and Duckworth, 2015). There is also some evidence that adult learners prefer classes where literacies are contextualised meaningfully and appreciate tutors who incorporate these approaches (e.g. Coben et al, 2007). Though Scotland's policy explicitly supports a social practice model, delivery within community learning contexts is uneven (Tett and McLachlan, 2008). It is possible that austerity represents not only

the cut back of literacy learning opportunities for adults, but an accompanying decline in tutor knowledge and expertise in relation to social practice approaches to delivery.

Adult literacies in Scotland and austerity

Adult literacies learning in Scotland continues to be delivered through informal community settings such as libraries or community centres, mostly through local council youth and community services (Tett et al, 2012). In the 2000s, there was a planned increase in the financing of organised adult literacies programmes in Scotland, with corresponding developments in England and Wales (under the auspices of the Skills for Life initiative). However, following austerity government, programme expansion ceased in the UK.

In Scotland, the implementation of cuts to adult education budgets was further complicated by a change in the funding mechanism for adult literacies by the SNP led coalition government in 2007. Previously, the Scottish Government had channelled money earmarked specifically for adult literacies education via local councils, for distribution through local strategic partnerships. Following the *Concordat with Scottish Convention of Local Authorities (2007)*, under the guise of reducing bureaucracy, funding allocation for adult literacies was no longer protected. Though there remains a national target to 'Reduce the number of working age people with severe literacy and numeracy problems' (*ibid*) and councils must evidence how they are working to meet this aim, there is no legal requirement to deliver adult literacies learning as a service. This leaves the planning and delivery of adult literacies to the individual strategy of the thirty-two Scottish local councils, with the possibility of wide variances between them in terms of both funding and organisation of provision.

In 2016, it is not clear what the impact of austerity, along with lack of ring-fenced funding of adult literacies, has had on the service, both in terms of numbers of learners, or mode of delivery. Education Scotland has provided some indicative information following from two recent reports, both conducted via on-line surveys from self-selecting respondents. The '*Community Learning and Development (CLD) workforce survey*' (Education Scotland, 2015), did not demarcate adult literacies as a distinct area within CLD, or adult learning in general. 7000 workers were accounted for as being engaged with CLD,

however the survey was unable to determine what proportion of the overall workforce this figure represents, or to distinguish robustly how the workforce was spread between local council services and those offered by the third sector. However, of the local council departments that responded, 15% described adult learning as the main focus of their work, with a further 57% identifying adult learning as part of their work.

A second report (Education Scotland, 2015b) indicates progress made with respect to the Scottish Government's strategy for adult literacies until 2020 (Scottish Government, 2010). Referred to as the 'midway' report, it summarises the results of a self-selecting on-line survey of the adult literacies workforce in Scotland, which took place between March and May 2015. There were 228 participants, 174 (76%) from individuals and 54 (24%) on behalf of a group or organisation. Again, completeness is not claimed and there is no indication of what proportion of the whole is represented. Key points included how 74% of respondents identified '*employability*' as the primary focus for adult literacy learners with '*improving literacy*' (69%) coming second to this. When asked why respondents felt that access to literacies opportunities had changed in the previous five years, 37.7% indicated they felt that changes were due to *decreased funding whilst* 5.7% identified differences due to *funding increases*. Almost half of respondents (48%) stated they felt that the quality of learning and teaching had *improved* since 2010, however 62% felt that learners were not sufficiently involved in planning and improving local literacy services.

During austere times, it is perhaps unsurprising to learn that 'employability' is a major focus for learners who engage with literacies programmes. However, wider issues are at play. For example, it has been demonstrated that employability programmes which are instrumental in their design and enactment serve to 'churn' unemployed people around a system that fails both individuals and communities (Forster, 2015). What's more, in order to receive welfare payments, unemployed people in the UK must prove they are actively looking for work, evidenced by their engagement with an on-line 'JobCentrePlus' portal, under surveillance from the UK government's Department of Work and Pensions (Daily Record, 2015). Anecdotally, literacies workers know that some adult learners seek support so that they can manage these on-line administration tasks and so maintain their welfare payments. This makes 'job clubs' organised under

the guise of adult literacies learning less about assisting learners into work and more about alleviating individuals' anxiety over the possible seizure of their welfare benefits. The contents of the 'mid-way' report do not contradict this anecdotal information, but there can be no vigorous confirmation either. I attempted to reveal a fuller picture through the release of data via the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act (ICO, 2000), exercising the right of any citizen in the UK to request data relating to publically funded UK institutions.

Freedom of information request¹

Questions were designed with the aim of producing robust figures regarding numbers of adult literacy classes, learners and tutors for each nine years over a 2007-2015 time period. The time period was chosen to reveal the impact of the aforementioned *Concordat* upon the capacity to deliver adult literacies. Questions were also designed to reveal possible movement away from 'designated' literacies provision along the lines that I have described above, moving instead towards 'embedded' literacies classes such as 'job clubs' or 'employability classes'. For example, a 'job club' could be programmed as a literacies class, in the understanding that learners would be engaging with literacies learning in the 'embedded' context of job seeking, which can be contrasted with a 'designated' literacies class where learners have Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) geared towards their individual experiences, interests and goals. I therefore defined 'designated literacy class' within the FOI requests, somewhat long-windedly, as:

*'a timetabled session with learners for the tutoring/teaching of literacy or numeracy only i.e. **not** an employability or crafts class where literacies are embedded'*

Paired to this an 'adult literacy learner' was defined within the Freedom of Information requests as a person in attendance at a designated literacies class, typically working at SCQF Levels 1 - 3², whilst a 'designated literacy worker' was described as one who teaches or tutors such classes. With these definitions, the following three questions

¹ The data supplied in this section belongs to the public. Please contact the author for access to the original sources as supplied by local councils in Scotland.

² Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework (SCQF) Levels 1 – 3 are equivalent to 'Entry Level' in England or European Qualification Framework Level 1

were posed to all thirty-two local councils in Scotland, for each year in the period 2007-2015.

- 1) How many 'designated' literacy or numeracy classes were available?
- 2) How many adult literacies learners completed at least 6 hours of learning in one year in 'designated' literacy classes?
- 3) How many 'designated' literacy or numeracy tutor/workers were employed (full time equivalents)?

The same three questions were posed again, this time requesting equivalent data for 'Literacy embedded' classes. I defined 'Literacy embedded' as classes purposefully designed so that literacy learners may be encouraged to attend, where literacies learning has been embedded within a thematic area of study e.g. employability or arts and crafts. Information was requested about the titles of such classes and the numbers of each that had been programmed.

When analysing the returns from the FOI requests, typically Councils could not demarcate between 'designated' literacy classes and those where literacies had been embedded, such as 'job clubs' programmed for learners with literacy needs. Those who did demarcate reported potentially unreliable data. For example, Shetland Council reported 'mathematics for marine engineers' as an embedded literacy class. But from the title of the course, it seemed unlikely that it was intended for learners working on basic literacy and numeracy. For these reasons, from the FOI requests, no robust data was revealed about whether austerity had encouraged the programming of literacies classes with a greater focus upon learning employability skills.

However, sufficient data was supplied by Councils to indicate trends relating to the capacity to deliver literacies learning, with evidence of significant decline. This was indicated by changes in numbers of programmed classes and figures for numbers of learners and paid tutors.

Numbers of programmed classes

From examining the returns from the thirty-two councils, the count of numbers of designated literacy classes was a surprisingly unreliable indicator of literacies provision. For example, five councils which could not return this data included the largest urban populations of Glasgow and Edinburgh. More understandably, rural areas which had learners distributed over large geographical areas offered one-to-one learning with volunteer tutors. This more of delivered necessitated fewer programmed classes, making class number counts a less reliable indicator of capacity.

For the 25 councils that provided data for at least five of the most recent years (e.g. 2011-2015), only two showed an increase in numbers of programmed classes; Renfrewshire and Stirlingshire. The general pattern across many councils was to demonstrate a peak in numbers of programmed classes at some point in the period 2009-2012, followed by a decline of 25% or more after that. This was the case for Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire, East Ayrshire, Renfrewshire, Inverclyde, North Ayrshire, North Lanarkshire, South Ayrshire, South Lanarkshire, West Dunbartonshire and West Lothian. Others, including Eilean Siar, Dundee City, East Dunbartonshire, East Lothian, Falkirk and Orkney were either steady or fluctuating, with no obvious increase or decline.

Numbers of learners

Some doubt could also be cast over the data received for learner numbers, due to difficulties in determining how many sessions learners had attended. A bar of six hours of attendance was requested as a somewhat arbitrary indicator of persistence, aimed at removing data for learners who had dropped out after just one or two classes. Some of the Councils did not hold data about how many sessions individual learners had engaged with, allowing learners who had only attended only one session to be included in returned figures. Typically, Councils could not identify if individual learners were being counted more than once, for example, by attending two or three programmed classes.

Twenty-seven Councils supplied data regarding numbers of literacies learners, including Glasgow (but not Edinburgh). Of these only Shetland reported increases in numbers, with figures for Fife, Highland, Orkney and Renfrewshire holding steady. The

remaining twenty-two Councils all showed a peak in learner numbers in one of the years between 2008-2012, followed by declines of between 8% and 75% between the peak year and 2015. Nine Councils showed declines in learner numbers of 40%-70%. These included East Renfrewshire, Scottish Borders, Aberdeen City, East Lothian, Clackmannanshire, East Ayrshire, Moray and Dundee City. A further eleven councils reported declines of between 20-39%, including Glasgow where learner numbers have fallen by 28% since 2011.

Numbers of Tutors

Regarding paid literacy workers, again there were difficulties in identifying data with just fifteen councils returning useful information. Of these, some of the information required adjusting due to tutors being employed on a sessional basis. Another issue was identifying the 'literacies' element for tutors or community workers who undertook literacies learning as a fraction of a wider community education role. For this reason, the data cannot be used robustly to make comparisons between Councils, though it is a useful indicator of trends.

Only two Councils reported increases in designated literacies staff – Eilean Siar and Fife. A further four remained steady or reported small reductions in workforce. These were Highland, Moray and South Lanarkshire and South Ayrshire. The remaining nine showed decreases in numbers, some substantial. For example, Inverclyde has reduced from 9 full time equivalents in 2010/11 to 5.7 in 2014/15, with a corresponding drop in learner numbers over the same period.

Discussion

The data presented above indicates that in many Scottish Council areas there has been a significant decline in capacity to deliver literacies learning, since a peak in delivery around 2008-2012. Whilst Scottish policy towards adult literacies learning remains progressive, it is possible that the decline in the delivery indicated by this survey could also represent a loss in capacity and expertise to enact social practice approaches. Austerity is unlikely to be temporary and long term strategies are required to assist in protecting education for marginalised and excluded groups. The data presented here

gives some indication of local Councils that have been successful in protecting literacies education, in particular Fife Council which has stabilised class, learner and tutor numbers. This can be contrasted with Inverclyde, where there has been a steady decline in delivery since 2007. It seems that leaderships in some councils have developed strategies to protect adult literacies learning, whilst others have not. How leaderships and practitioners respond to austerity will continue to be of importance as austere times are set to continue.

This small project also revealed how the release of FOI data can prove to be more complex than first anticipated and there are limits to what can be usefully gleaned without more extensive research. However, in this case, it has been a useful tool to reveal worrying trends in the provision of an education service which serves groups of adults who cannot easily access the formal education system.

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