

*Whose skills? Whose life?*

**“Skills for Life”  
in the context of informal learning**

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## Who is this report for?

This report is written for anyone working in the context of informal learning with adults who may be deemed to have “Basic Skills Needs” and thus be included in the priority target groups for *Skills for Life*.<sup>1</sup>

In posing the question, “Whose Skills?” I argue that instead of looking for skill deficits, or “Basic Skills Needs” and offering remedies, we might focus on the skills we need if we want to develop more inclusive practices. In posing the question “Whose life?” I am inviting you to question the gate-keeping practices that make life so difficult for people who are deemed to lack “Basic Skills” in English or Maths.

## What’s in it?

The research on which this paper is based was conducted for **talent Central**, funded by the Central London Learning and Skills Council (LSC), during 2003.<sup>2</sup> The voluntary sector in central London provides all kinds of informal learning activities for the particular groups of socially excluded adults who are identified in the *Skills for Life* strategy. So talent Central commissioned this research to investigate the training needs of voluntary sector staff and volunteers whose work includes the provision of learning opportunities for Language, Literacy or Numeracy. A formal report was submitted to the LSC in December 2003. This paper is written in a less formal style and poses more questions under the following headings:

1. Research questions: who asks what, and why?
2. Methodology: how did I conduct the research?
3. Social and Deficit models of “Basic Skills Needs”: *Skills for Life* or Skills for Inclusion?
4. The voluntary sector context: how can support for “Basic Skills” meet other needs?
5. Engagement and motivation: who needs *Basic Skills Awareness*?
6. Assessing needs and setting goals: screening for inclusion or exclusion?
7. Supporting individual progression: what skills do we have and what do we need?
8. Embedding basic skills in practice: strategies for inclusion in everyday life
9. Summary/Conclusions
10. Notes (with web links) and acknowledgements

## 1. Research Questions: who asks what, and why?

For an understanding of the barriers to learning, particularly among refugees, migrant and homeless adults, those affected by mental illness, drugs, imprisonment or poverty, there is a wealth of expertise in the voluntary sector. The central question for the research sponsors was how to build on this expertise to include support for the *Skills for Life* strategy? To explore this question, I asked:

- How are staff and volunteers currently supporting clients who need help with language, literacy or numeracy?
- What skills and qualifications do these workers have, and what do they need, in order to enhance the quality of teaching/learning support in voluntary sector contexts?
- To what extent does the new qualifications framework meet the training and development needs of staff and volunteers working in the sector?
- What structures and processes are needed for delivering appropriate training?

Having worked as a literacy teacher and manager for over 20 years, my own interests informed the way I approached these questions, the “convenience sample” of people and organisations I contacted, and the questions I asked. While investigating training needs in relation to *Skills for Life*, I wanted to question the assumptions about “Basic Skills Needs” that are embedded in this particular policy initiative. So I also asked:

- To what extent does the implementation of *Skills for Life* propagate a deficit model of “Basic Skills Needs”?
- What happens when people are “screened” for Basic Skills Needs and “referred” to Basic Skills provision?
- What skills and understanding do “front line” workers need in order to work from a social model of participation and inclusion?
- Can “Skills for Inclusion” be developed as part of “Basic Skills Awareness” and alongside the notion of “Embedding Basic Skills in Informal Learning”?

## 2. Methodology: how did I conduct the research?

**Scope:** The research was conducted on a part-time basis (2 days per week) between February and July 2003, with a “convenience sample” of voluntary organisations spanning the seven London Boroughs covered by the Central London Learning & Skills Council (LSC).

These voluntary organisations generally get their core funding through trusts and charities. But the bulk of their revenue funding comes from local, national or European government sources. This is often through contracts with LSCs and other agencies, to provide training and education, either directly or through Local Authorities and colleges.

Research Methods included:

**Meetings and interviews** with key informants from regional and national organisations and from each of the 7 Central London boroughs. These were tape-recorded and transcribed.

**Reading:** Adult Learning Plans, Project Reports, Curriculum Documents, Quality Frameworks and Qualifications Audits.

**Action Research:** Three pilot workshops were held in 3 different venues and attended by a total of around 50 participants from the voluntary sector who contributed to the research through their engagement in activities, discussion and feedback.

**A Database** of Central London voluntary organisations where there is an interest in training for Basic Skills provision was compiled. This information can be used to target publicity for training courses and events for voluntary sector staff and volunteers.

Extracts from the transcripts included in this report are taken from interviews and from workshop discussions. The authors of these quotes are not identified because, although permission was given to record, I have not had the opportunity to get back to people with the selected quotes. Reference to their job role, or the type of organisation they work in, is only included where I felt this would not compromise their anonymity.

### **3. Social and Deficit models of “Basic Skills Needs”: *Skills for Life or Skills for Inclusion?***

In this section, I explain how my approach to the research is informed by a concern to distinguish between social and deficit models of *Basic Skills Needs*. This distinction is often illustrated with reference to physical (dis)abilities. If a damaged hip joint prevents me from getting on a bus, then who is responsible? If the problem is seen as an individual deficit, then I might have to think about remedial surgery, physiotherapy or crutches. If the problem is seen as socially constructed, then we can look at the design of the bus, or at the ways in which bus conductors might be trained to assist passengers with a range of physical abilities. In the same way, we can look at the demand for *Basic Skills* as a series of socially constructed obstacles that can be challenged, removed or got around in a number of different ways

The *Skills for Life* policy agenda aims to equip individuals to meet the demands of employers, welfare agencies and education providers for competence in language, literacy and numeracy. Screening tests in colleges, job centres, libraries, hostels and drop-in centres, are used to identify people with *Basic Skills Needs* and prescribe appropriate remedies. This sets up a deficit model with a focus on what people can't do, and on the negative consequences of this deficit for individuals and for the wider society. Of course there must be opportunities for everyone to learn to speak, read and write in English at any age, and to use maths when they want and need to. And we must train specialist teachers who can ensure that people who have failed to acquire these *Basic*

*Skills* after ten years of compulsory schooling, don't just get more of the same. But, for those adults and young people who don't want to struggle with literacy or numeracy at this point in their lives, a social model enables us to explore other opportunities for learning and social engagement.

Youth and community workers, mentors, counsellors and learning coaches, project managers or tenants' liaison officers already have a wide range of skills and knowledge to draw upon. Rather than training these workers to teach Basic Skills, can we help them identify opportunities and strategies for including people in the everyday language, literacy and numeracy *practices* that go on in the context of informal learning activities? Working with a social model means looking at the *uses* of language, literacy and numeracy that effectively exclude people from jobs, courses or other activities. If it would be impossible to function in a particular context without the required level of skill, then it may be appropriate to refer individuals for specialist tuition, or to support learners with developing the skills they need in the context of other activities. But it's also important to ask:

- why does this person need to speak, read or write in English, or use numbers in this particular situation?
- if somebody doesn't have these skills, how can we help them around this obstacle to get them where they want to go?

In the course of this research I included questions about the skills and understanding needed to work within a social model, which I refer to as "Skills for Inclusion"<sup>3</sup>. The pilot workshops provided the opportunity to explore the potential for developing these *Skills for Inclusion* in the context of "Basic Skills Awareness" and "Embedding Basic Skills in Informal Learning".

#### **4. The voluntary sector context: how can support for "Basic Skills" meet other needs?**

In a government review of the role of the voluntary sector in service delivery, voluntary and community organisations are credited with a range of specialised skills and services which enable them to provide, "access to the wider community without institutional baggage".

This review, produced for HM Treasury, suggests that the voluntary and community sector is particularly well placed to deliver services to vulnerable and socially excluded adults because they can demonstrate

*"...freedom and flexibility from institutional pressures. The sector can offer responsive services which are user-centred as they are not driven by budgets and targets within the public sector. At best they can be flexible and innovative rather than prescriptive"*<sup>4</sup>

When voluntary sector activities are funded through government departments, however, this flexibility is inevitably compromised by the measures that are used to judge the cost-effectiveness of public sector provision.

There is thus a tension in the *Skills for Life* strategy, which is both committed to reaching vulnerable and socially excluded adults, but is also committed to meeting targets, linked to funding. This tension underpins a number of concerns discussed in this report.

The primary goal of all the projects encountered in the course of this research is to help socially excluded adults. The following table shows the kinds of needs that are highlighted in voluntary sector provision. The approach to employability in the homelessness sector, however, may be very different from the vocational training offered in a project whose primary goal is to get people into jobs. Of course, such problems are rarely seen or experienced in isolation, and the ways in which support is, or can be, provided for Literacy, ESOL or Numeracy cuts across these categories.

Target problems	Priority needs	Support for Basic Skills
Homelessness	Social engagement, self esteem, tenancy sustainment, meaningful occupations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Engagement and motivation</li> <li>▪ Assessing needs and setting goals</li> <li>• Supporting individual progression</li> <li>▪ Embedding Basic Skills in Practice</li> </ul>
Unemployment	Skills, qualifications, jobs, financial independence, continuing training	
Disaffected or criminal behaviour	Engagement, motivation, support and guidance, employability	
Addictions or Mental illness	Rehabilitation, self-esteem, behavioural change, 1:1 support, peer support	
Intellectual or physical impairment	Social engagement, supported training and employment, meaningful occupation	

Each of these four areas of potential “Support for Basic Skills” refers to the links that are being made between *Skills for Life* and work that is already going on in the voluntary sector. *Skills for Life* funding has encouraged voluntary organisations to:

- incorporate “Basic Skills Awareness” into the work of engaging and motivating socially excluded adults in meaningful social activity
- use the Basic Skills Agency’s “Fast Track” screening test to identify people with *Basic Skills Needs*
- seek training for their staff in teaching or providing learning support for *Basic Skills*
- express a keen interest in the notion of “Embedded Basic Skills”

The following four sections of this report look at each of these areas of work. For each topic I report on:

- What’s going on – in the projects and organisations I visited
- What can be done – to support skills for inclusion in this area

## 5. Engagement and motivation: who needs *Basic Skills Awareness*?

### What's going on?

#### An open door

Open-door and open-ended activities are offered in all kinds of locations from purpose built youth centres to old church crypts. These provide opportunities for socially excluded adults to discover new interests and to experience successful learning at their own pace in a supportive environment,

*It's offering them materials, offering a space, assistance when they need it, but also to stand back, not to invade their space or patronise.<sup>5</sup>*

Additional funds are often available to foster engagement and sustain motivation through material incentives like travel cards or luncheon vouchers and through extra pastoral support,

*They come here for social or recreational activities or support services. That's how we draw them in. But we do have an agenda of personal development. We want to try and help people move on if that's what they need. So this is a strong theme in what we do as well, which is the whole lifelong learning agenda.*

There is enormous potential for supporting language, literacy and number development through interests and activities that adults choose to engage in, particularly the use of ICT in community settings. UK On-line centres, located in libraries, community centres or a portakabin on a travellers' site, can draw homeless and migrant adults into informal learning through the offer of email as a permanent address. It seems that this form of engagement started in the commercial sector,

*When the Easy Internet cafes came out you could pay £1 for like 5 hours access. I guess they got people in who'd buy their coffee and they made their money in other ways. But there's a lot of homeless people who can pay £1 and sit in there all night, particularly in summer when they can sleep all day. So that got them off the streets and there were hundreds of homeless people using email and browsing the internet.*

The internet is thus seen as a key site for engaging potential learners and encouraging them to take up more challenging opportunities when they are ready,

*That's first stage internet, email, kind of informal learning, threshold learning and then hopefully getting people, if people want to, progressing onto more structured courses...*

## Working to targets

Where funding for such activities is related to *Skills for Life*, however, there is a tension between this open-ended approach and the pressure to meet quantitative targets. A local authority manager, while acknowledging a commitment to raising attainment levels in literacy and numeracy, also remarked that, "...working in local authorities, it's all about numbers". When asked what Basic Skills Awareness meant in the context of adult and community learning, she admitted that,

*Quite often – to be quite brutal, we have to collect data on Basic Skills learners and we also have to demonstrate progression. So for me it's about these front line people being able to recognise, being given the tools to help recognise when potential learners have Basic Skills needs or ESOL needs. That's what it means for me.*

Another local authority manager expressed her concern about this connotation of Basic Skills Awareness with rooting out sickness,

*It feels like how to spot leprosy at the early stages, and that's what I hate about it. I hate the idea that I'm having a conversation with you that isn't open because what you're actually being is "Basic Skills Aware" about me. And that makes me feel really uncomfortable about it.*

A community centre manager used a different image to express the same concern,

*You have a vision of people walking down the street and hooks appearing out of doorways and yanking them in... Sure everyone should know how to read and write and do things like that, but people can't be forced to do things that aren't relevant to what they want to do with their lives. They won't be dragged along by someone saying "You think you got away but we're still running after you".*

## Coercion

The distinction between private and public sector training agencies becomes blurred when, for example, New Deal provision is run by limited companies operating LSC contracts within voluntary organisations. Whether learners are coerced into Basic Skills classes through probation service orders or New Deal arrangements, there is a strong likelihood of a repetition of failure and renewed disaffection with educational activities. As one voluntary sector trainer remarked,

*...they make a noise and they're very destructive 'cause at the end of the day it's like, well I'm only here because I won't get paid.*

Some organisations have refused contracts that require compulsory attendance, where this is seen as going against the voluntary ethos of their organisation. Others offer separate classes for trainees attending under such contracts. These reluctant learners present a challenge to the most highly skilled and experienced teacher. And yet it appears that they are often taught by staff with little or no training for this work.

## What can be done?

In almost every organisation I visited, people said their staff needed training in Basic Skills Awareness. To address this need, the Basic Skills Agency<sup>6</sup> (BSA) has been running courses all over the country to raise “awareness” of,

*...the importance of literacy, language and numeracy skills as a means to active participation in community and economic life.<sup>7</sup>*

I have explained how pressure to meet *Skills for Life* targets has meant promoting “awareness” of individual deficit. However, the BSA resources can be used to combine elements of both the social and deficit models described earlier. Keeping both models in our heads means being prepared to offer appropriate kinds of help to individuals while questioning the social arrangements that demand these skills, and asking whose interests are served by these arrangements. An example of this dual approach was summed up for me in a conversation with a national development officer for the BSA. She felt that Basic Skills Awareness should address three questions:

- 1) Is what I'm doing actually putting up unnecessary barriers for people? Are there easier ways of saying things? Am I using methods that involve far more pen and paper and book stuff than you actually need?*
- 2) Are there coping strategies for this?*
- 3) Can I quickly show someone how to do it, and give them a reference sheet so they can do it again? Because they're not going to remember it again unless they've got a reference sheet to do it from. And tell them how they might pick up on that one later.*

In our pilot workshops for front-line staff in the voluntary sector we set out to explore the possibilities for emphasising a social model, as indicated in the workshop title “Basic Skills Awareness: what does this mean?”<sup>8</sup> The resources and activities that are commonly used for training literacy and numeracy teachers can also be used to challenge the assumption that living without Basic Skills means stumbling around in darkness and misery. For example, asking people to keep a log of the reading, writing and maths they have done over the last 24 hours can be used to convey the message “Look how many skills we take for granted!” In a deficit model of Basic Skills Awareness, this might support the idea that daily life is appallingly difficult for those who lack the skills to perform these tasks. When we set participants this task in our pilot workshops, however, we asked,

*... how you might have got around, avoided, or got help with any of these activities if you had needed to?*

The resulting discussion concluded with an explanation of the difference between a social and deficit model of Basic Skills Awareness, and the assertion that,

*How we define Basic Skills depends on the interests and purposes of those who define them.*

So what were the interests and purposes that would inform definitions of Basic Skills for the 24 voluntary sector staff who attended our Basic Skills Awareness workshops?<sup>9</sup>

A choice of two workshops had been offered in order to a) target different areas of interest and b) distinguish between a focus on advice and guidance and a focus on learning support. So the morning workshop was designed,

*“for people working in, or managing, advice, guidance, mentoring or support services for individuals in diverse voluntary sector settings”.*

The afternoon workshop was designed,

*“for people who provide learning activities in the voluntary sector that are not primarily about language, literacy or numeracy.*

Most of the 24 participants chose to attend both sessions, and gave a number of reasons why they felt they needed to develop “Basic Skills Awareness”. Some were only too aware of the problem of engagement and motivation, but seemed to have little idea about what “basic Skills tutoring” might involve,

*... I’m hoping to set up outreach sort of Basic Skills tutoring in the hostel but it’s looking at creative ways we can do that that’s actually going to engage the residents... I need to know everything, anything!*

Some were concerned about the Basic Skills needed for particular kinds of work in which their clients were already employed,

*... we run a project where we employ New Deal trainees and they work as IT technicians and administrators... a number of people we assess do have basic skills needs and we’re just trying to work out the best way of actually addressing them...*

Some were already engaged in education and training, where skills in literacy and numeracy are related to the demands of particular qualifications,

*... with us taking on ... Foundation Modern Apprenticeships and Advanced Modern Apprenticeships, we’ve found that we’re going to need a lot more help with young people in getting their literacy and numeracy up to a level to cope with that...*

One participant described a very specific literacy need that he had identified among clients of the mental health project in which he was employed,

*There is a need where people can’t actually decipher a letter or something and it’s trying to make them aware of how to look at a letter and know whether it’s important or not...*

Most of our workshop participants already had ideas and expertise with regard to engagement and motivation among socially excluded adults and young people. Some wanted to learn how to teach language, literacy and numeracy skills, and they were directed to some of the training opportunities that will be discussed below. Those who have no interest in training to teach can support their clients through developing their own *Skills for Inclusion*, which should include:

- awareness of how it might feel to experience difficulty with reading or writing, or to be obliged to communicate in a language that is not your own

This can be promoted through a range of experiential exercises such as reading mirror writing, deciphering signs or codes, writing with the left hand or trying to learn another language. It can also be useful to attempt some of these tasks individually and some in small groups in order to appreciate the value of collaborative learning. Training materials for developing this awareness can be borrowed from the *talent* resource bank<sup>10</sup>

- awareness of ways in which to include those with diverse abilities in language and literacy in mixed group activities

In our workshops we practised the art of scribing for each other in an exercise that enables an “author” to express ideas in writing without needing to perform the technical task of transcription. This is one of the practical ways in which we can challenge the assumption that people need to “learn the basics” before they can function in a literate context. Sometimes referred to as a “Language Experience Approach” to reading and writing, this is an activity that always raises important issues for discussion about language and power, grammar and representation. Offering the role of author to someone who has difficulty producing readable text, and scribe to the person whose task is to represent the author’s ideas sets up a very different relationship to that suggested in approaches to remedying deficiencies of adults with *Basic Skills Needs*.

- awareness of the ingenious strategies adults devise to get around these obstacles and of when and how to support these

We often hear about adults who don’t know they have Basic Skills “needs” because they’ve developed effective “coping strategies”. A positive appraisal of the strategies that we all develop for “getting by” can be far more useful than trying to make people do the things they find most difficult.

- awareness of ways in which texts can be made more readable, spoken language more accessible and numbers explained

There are plenty of leaflets and guides to help you produce readable texts<sup>11</sup> but this kind of awareness is best developed through critical reflection on the purposes for which we produce or present written texts and numerical information.

Concerns raised about the kind of “awareness” that is driven by targets and funding streams are addressed in the following section.

## 6. Assessing needs and setting goals: screening for inclusion or exclusion?

### What's going on?

There is plenty of experience in the voluntary sector of identifying a wide range of goals and measuring progress towards milestones and targets. Solution-Focused Brief Therapy, for example, is used in projects for people living with drug or alcohol addictions. This involves training staff and volunteers in negotiating, and monitoring progress towards clearly defined and achievable goals. Off the Streets and Into Work (OSW), a consortium of over 20 London homelessness organisations developed an Individual Progression System (IPS)<sup>12</sup> to measure progress and development in “soft skills”.

*Lots of workers out there on the front line were saying look, we do so many other things. We don't just provide qualifications or guidance support, we actually build confidence, maybe give them the time to talk about stuff like drugs and alcohol and so on and often that is going to help someone in many other ways...*

The IPS provides a scoring system based on the extent to which a client agrees or disagrees with a series of statements like “I have somewhere to wash”, “I spend more than half my income on drugs” or “I often worry about my handwriting or spelling”. A problem with the use of self-assessment to monitor progress and achievement is that funding bodies may not understand how a growth of confidence and trust often leads to an increase in the disclosure of difficulties or “needs”. With IPS, for example,

*We have found that it goes down at first because people aren't honest, and then they're honest. So it goes down and then it goes up, but it's being used more and more and hopefully we'll see patterns and gaps. We use that in our learning projects and in guidance to see how people are moving in the harder to measure things.*

Thus recording progress through individual learning plans, such as IPS needs to be regularly reviewed and developed as users become more confident at identifying their own personal goals. This needs flexibility from funders to allow recognition of changing and developing progress and achievement, including the changing contexts in which language, literacy and number skills may be developed.

### Screening for *Basic Skills Needs*: what next?

While there are problems with measuring progress through self-assessment, the widespread use of Basic Skills screening and assessment is even more problematic for staff who don't have the knowledge or skills to offer appropriate follow-up,

*Recently we've implemented a system where, on entry to our hostel, they have to take a basic skills assessment test. What we do if they fail is a problem really...*

This hostel worker is referring to the Basic Skills Agency's "Fast Track" assessment, a questionnaire designed to "make an early identification of basic skills needs and to make referrals for further diagnostic assessment".<sup>13</sup>

In the course of our pilot workshops, we asked participants to conduct this screening test as interviewer and interviewee, either answering as themselves or in the role of a client they knew well. Most of them felt that the questions were insulting and could be very misleading. One said that she allows a "bog standard hour" to get anywhere in London, rather than calculating journey times. Another participant, when asked, "Do you think you could get a better job if you had some help with maths?" replied "No", and went on to say,

*'Cause if you get to the age of, like 35 to 40 and you've managed, like you get your benefits, you manage to cope going places by asking people, you manage to cope in shops by asking people, you've found coping mechanisms... and work might not be your priority. Your priority might be something completely different...*

The following exchange between two participants, who agreed to their conversation being recorded, suggests that they would be assessed as having Basic Skills Needs simply because they don't generally read newspapers, recipes or instructions for household appliances.

- A *And newspapers; I never buy them 'cause I haven't got the money. I just listen to the radio.*
- B *I don't buy newspapers; I never read magazines.... Ok. How often does a member of the family help you with reading instructions on medicine bottles or recipes or like household appliances?*
- A *Never*
- B *Although household appliances, for me, I don't even read them.*
- A *You just chuck it in the bin, don't you?*

One voluntary sector manager said that "Fast Track" had been used extensively in her organisation, but she had not looked at it until she attended the workshop. She now had serious doubts about using it in future.

As a tool for starting a conversation about language, literacy and numeracy practices, the Fast Track questionnaire can help to identify those who may want to take up an offer of tuition. In such cases, the next stage should be for diagnostic assessment by somebody with specialist knowledge in literacy, numeracy or ESOL<sup>14</sup>. However, it appears that the next stage of language, literacy and numeracy assessments is also being done by staff who rely on common sense understanding to decide on the most appropriate educational provision for their clients,

*Obviously, I'm not a basic skills teacher but, you know, if someone's got a few spelling mistakes then that's fine... if the presentation is good and they've got a handle on punctuation and capital letters and things like that... It's when there's multiple issues, it's like, OK you could benefit from Basic Skills.*

## **Assessment for inclusion or exclusion?**

The problem here is that such decisions often mean excluding people from a course or activity that they have chosen to join, and referring them to a Literacy, Numeracy or ESOL class instead. Given a skilled teacher and adequate specialist support, there is no reason for treating language and literacy skills as the first rung of a ladder that has to be climbed in a vertical direction. And it is likely that some people who are sent back to the bottom will be reluctant to begin the climb again.

This issue came up in my visit to a project where formerly homeless people are offered accredited training in skills that enable them to run groups and workshops on topics of interest to other homeless and socially excluded groups. These “peer educators” are then supported in setting up and running workshops on topics such as gambling, drug and alcohol issues or filling in forms. The project director told me that people with literacy difficulties would not be accepted onto this programme as peer educators, but would be referred to provision elsewhere to address their literacy difficulties first.

*Most of our peer educators have... a low level of literacy. There have been a few people that have come who cannot write, and that became obvious when, at the end of the information session, we asked them to complete various forms. And I spoke to them about it and encouraged them to do basic literacy, basic skills training, as a pre-requisite to joining the programme. I've done that on three or four occasions.*

No evidence was available to show whether such people ever return after getting their literacy problem “fixed” in the way this practice suggests. When I questioned this, the project director attributed this particular form of exclusion to the insistence by the course tutor that peer educators must be able to write on a flip chart. It is easy for me to question this since I am physically unable to write on a flip chart, but have the confidence to ask somebody else to do it for me. This is an example of getting around the obstacle of literacy in *practice*, where the priority may not be to work on literacy *skills*, but on the *use* of other forms of communication.

## **What can be done?**

If social inclusion is our priority, then there are questions that should be asked before we start to assess the “needs” of socially marginalised or excluded adults. For “needs” are not a fixed set of attributes sitting inside individuals, waiting to be discovered. Beyond the basic need for food and shelter to ensure physical survival, we define other people’s needs in relation to our own values and purposes. Or we delegate these decisions to politicians, who allocate funds to meet some needs and not others. It’s then important for voluntary sector workers to consider some of the ways in which we are persuaded to confine our assessment of clients’ “needs” within the “realistic” constraints imposed by the current political agenda.

- Why, for example, does the government sponsor research that links Basic Skills deficit with crime, illness and poverty rather than research into the effects of art classes or musical activities on crime prevention?

- To what extent do we limit our assessment of “needs” to those for which we have already established provision (or for which funds are most readily available)?
- When we help clients to set reasonable and realistic goals, whose reason and whose reality are we imposing on other people’s hopes, dreams and aspirations?
- When we “refer” people to Basic Skills tuition, do we know what happens to them?
- Can we be sure that a Basic Skills class will help them to get to where they really want to go?
- Are there other ways to foster the diverse skills and talents to be found among adults who may not wish to spend any more time on the kind of learning that didn’t work for them at school?

I shall return to these questions in the final section of this report, where I look at ways of getting around the idea of Basic Skills teaching altogether and propose the alternative of developing *Skills for Inclusion* among voluntary sector staff. Asking these questions and suggesting alternatives does not, however, rule out the possibility that good quality tuition, a supportive learning environment or a happy coincidence of timing, opportunity and motivation can secure positive achievements in language, literacy and numeracy. In the following section I look at some of the conditions that contribute to such achievements for individuals. I explain the rationale for enhancing professional qualifications for teachers of adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL and look at attempts to support the voluntary sector in meeting Quality Assurance measures of the Adult Learning Inspectorate.

## **7. Supporting Individual Progression: what skills do we have and what do we need?**

### **What’s going on?**

In the education sector, “progression” tends to mean moving up through a hierarchical structure of courses and qualifications. In the voluntary sector “progression” is seen as a more horizontal movement along a continuum from isolation or exclusion to participation and inclusion. Some projects include staff teams with a variety of professional skills, including qualified teachers and support staff. For example, a project that brings in tutors from the local college to teach Basic Skills and other courses is able to integrate support for both forms of progression,

*We see ourselves as being different to colleges because of the extra support we offer. I interview the women when they first come, to assess their needs, and I also see them once or twice a year to help the students review progress and check that those who don’t ask for help are getting what they need. We also have a welfare worker. Her role is to help people move on and sort out the practical problems. We have had counselling but now we refer them to other agencies and focus on peer support here.*

Elsewhere, professional staff and volunteers work with individuals in a variety of roles, which are set out in the following chart. This is adapted from a table provided by an OSW trainer, who commented on the role of the Learning Coach that,

*Perhaps learning comes into it but it comes lower down after being able to get out of bed in the morning. I guess employability is about life skills as well...*

<i>LEARNING COACH</i>	<i>ADVICE/GUIDANCE WORKER</i>	<i>PROFESSIONAL MENTOR</i>	<i>VOLUNTEER MENTOR</i>
<i>Trained professional</i>			<i>Volunteer "buddy" recruited from many areas</i>
<i>Needs to have experienced the coaching process</i>	<i>No need to experience the process themselves</i>		
<i>Uses specific tools &amp; techniques to engage clients</i>	<i>Provides specific advice &amp; guidance in relation to career goals</i>	<i>Provides mix of counselling, advice &amp; guidance</i>	<i>Provides informal support &amp; guidance</i>
<i>Regular ½ hour meetings weekly</i>	<i>Regularity of 1 hour meetings agreed by worker and client</i>	<i>Regularity of 1 hour meetings agreed by mentor/mentee</i>	<i>Regularity of 2 hour meetings agreed by mentor/mentee</i>
<i>Short, focussed, structured on-site</i>	<i>Structured meetings on-site</i>		<i>Meet in more social context</i>
<i>Weekly evaluation</i>	<i>Monitoring by worker with client</i>	<i>Monitoring by mentor with mentee</i>	<i>Informal monitoring</i>

Inevitably, these 1:1 workers are asked to help their clients with tasks like filling in forms, writing letters, managing money or using the telephone. Of course, anyone who is able to speak, read, write and use a calculator can offer help with these tasks. But such requests can invite a variety of responses, each of which calls upon different skills, strategies or sources of information and support.

After *Basic Skills Awareness*, the training need that was most often mentioned among voluntary sector providers was for *Embedded Basic Skills*. For some managers, this means equipping their staff to help with the literacy and numeracy tasks that crop up along the way, whether they are offering courses, open-ended activities or 1:1 support and guidance. For others, it can mean specifying a context for Basic Skills teaching, like "Money Management" or "Working in the NHS" to attract learners who,

*... would never come through the door if they thought they were doing Basic Skills*

Whatever incentives or attractions are used to lure adults and young people into learning, those who have failed to acquire Basic Skills despite ten years of compulsory schooling need some kind of assurance that *this* provision will succeed where full-time schooling has failed them. Key factors for success are the learner's motivation and the teacher's professional knowledge and expertise. The former can be fostered through the skills of voluntary sector workers while adult education teachers can provide the latter. Several voluntary sector managers, while acknowledging the need for teacher training, asserted the value of youth workers,

*...who can tune into young people and know them well enough to help them with the process of developing them...*

Similarly, the training manager in a homelessness organisation argued that

*Well it's more important that the person we recruit can get on with our clients than that they have any formal qualifications. They have to do the formal qualification, but we'll train them, and that's more important than having the qualification first.*

The need to recruit staff for the voluntary sector who can “tune in” to their client groups is crucial to the process of engagement and motivation. But an adult who may have had a raw deal from their initial education also deserves the benefit of the highest possible level of specialist expertise to optimise their chance of success. This is a powerful argument for linking funding for Basic Skills provision to national standards and subject specifications such as those currently applied by FENTO.<sup>15</sup> The standards and subject specifications for literacy, numeracy and ESOL at Level 4 are designed to ensure that teachers are equipped with knowledge, skills and understanding that will be most likely to enable their students to make significant progress towards their learning goals. This involves getting to grips with a substantial body of knowledge about their subject and about adult learning. It means understanding a range of teaching methods to suit diverse learning styles, applying these in the classroom and reflecting critically on classroom observations. There are no short cuts to achieving these standards and the current policy imperatives have resulted in a demand for training that far outweighs the available provision. This is why a lot of Basic Skills teaching is still being provided, both in colleges and in the voluntary sector by teachers who may lack the experience and qualifications needed for this work.

Meanwhile, however, the Common Inspection Framework used by the Adult Learning Inspectorate<sup>16</sup> provides for a relatively open-ended and flexible approach to the translation of an individual's interests and aspirations into achievable goals within the constraints of a particular programme.

### **The Seven Questions in the Common Inspection Framework**

1. How well do learners achieve?
2. How effective are teaching, training and learning?
2. How are achievement and learning affected by resources?
3. How effective are the assessment and monitoring of learning?
4. How well do the programmes and courses meet the needs and interests of learners?
5. How well are learners guided and supported?
6. How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?

These questions can be interpreted broadly to encompass even the most open-ended approaches to informal learning. The framework is currently under review<sup>17</sup> but is being used to ensure the quality of educational provision in voluntary sector contexts through a number of local and national initiatives.

## Open College Credit Framework

The LOCN<sup>18</sup> Credit Framework, for example, is a Quality initiative to help voluntary organisations that provide education and training to secure their funding by meeting Quality Assurance requirements and by offering Open College accreditation. Adult and Community Learning managers and voluntary organisation staff in five boroughs have welcomed this initiative whole-heartedly, while others have expressed their reservations about open college accreditation. The main concern for those who are less enthusiastic is that spreading the net of accreditation ever more widely could lead to the erosion of funding for non-accredited learning. However, there is a general agreement that, wherever adult education and training is supposed to be going on, a commitment to Quality Assurance means making sure that learning activities are delivered and supported by people who understand how adults learn and what is needed to foster successful learning.

From a survey of 15 organisations in the LOCN Credit Framework, questionnaires from 70 respondents were made available to me in July 2003. These gave an idea of voluntary sector training needs in relation to the Common Inspection Framework. Among the 70 respondents there was a rich fund of skills and experience including professional qualifications in youth work, community leadership, sports instruction, drama and dance as well as degrees in psychology, graphic design, computer electronics and art. However, although most of the 70 respondents were currently teaching, only 12 had any kind of teaching qualification, and 6 of these only had Stage One qualifications. Staff delivering courses across all the subject areas including sports instruction, drama and electronics identified a need for training in Basic Skills teaching, as well as for working with students who have dyslexia, learning difficulties or disabilities.

The qualifications audit below was conducted by the manager of a project whose educational provision deploys its own staff, as well as those employed through a college. Like those responding to the LOCN questionnaires, many of the tutors had no teaching qualifications and yet this was not what they said they needed. Most of these tutors requested further training for working with students who have disabilities, two wanted help with giving progression advice, one wanted training in dealing with challenging behaviour, and one simply asked for "professional development". Their current qualifications include:

<i>Subject/s taught</i>	<i>How long?</i>	<i>Relevant training &amp; qualifications</i>
English, ESOL	1 year	C & G Stage 1
Beginners Creative Writing	6 months	MA; C&G 7407; Training on Challenging Behaviour
Creative Writing	6 months	BA, MA, PG Dip
CLAIT, IBT II, Web-site, DTP	4 years	MA
CLAIT	5 years	C&G 9202, C&G 9204, C&G Mentoring
Art & Design	18 months	BA Hons, PGCE, ATC
Photography	2½ years	BA
Creative & Supportive Workshop	18 months	TESOL; MA Integrative Arts, Psychotherapy

In response to such surveys, courses are being developed in colleges and professional development centres to include elements of literacy, numeracy or ESOL in generic training for qualifications like the City & Guilds Certificate in Further Education Teaching (7407). While qualifications are continually developed and revised, it is likely that the City & Guilds Stage 1 Certificate will continue to provide a widely-recognised first step towards a qualification for teaching all subjects in the post-16 sector.<sup>19</sup>

Hopefully, a wider range of such training opportunities, tailored for the voluntary sector context, will help to reverse a tendency observed among voluntary organisations who are abandoning the Basic Skills element of an integrated activity in response to funders' demands for specialist qualifications,

*Now of course with FENTO standards coming in everyone's panicking because if you want to do Basic Skills you have to do it whether it's 1:1, occasionally or as a discrete thing. So there are people running around writing Basic Skills out of their training packages if they don't have to do it. So if people who are teaching cooking as part of an engagement process are now getting rid of the bit that was about teaching Basic Skills, I think it's incredibly sad.*

When I raised this kind of problem in conversation with a national development worker, she conceded that,

*I think this is inevitable in the introductory phase, where the framework is imposed and a lot of people hate it. But it does make people think about what they're doing. And then a few years down the road when there's enough teachers at the right standard then it can be relaxed.*

Looking "a few years down the road", it's worth noting that much of FENTO's work is shortly to be handed over to a Lifelong Learning Sector Skills Council, which may lead to local and national changes in the implementation of standards for teachers working in different contexts.

### **College/voluntary sector partnerships**

While there is clearly a whole range of interesting and innovative teaching provided through partnerships between colleges and voluntary organisations, a number of problems were identified in meetings with managers from voluntary organisations who use tutors employed by a local college to meet education/training needs identified among centre users. It is likely that many of these criticisms would relate to college teachers who have not yet achieved Level 4 qualifications. These include complaints about rigid delivery styles and a limited curriculum. Other criticisms regarded lack of continuity with hourly paid tutors and bureaucratic management in Further Education.

Running concurrently with this research, another action research project, Making Links, has been addressing the need to improve the working relationships between Further Education Colleges and voluntary sector providers of education and training for homeless adults. The Making Links research included a survey of providers in both sectors, and concluded that,

*Generally, such problems were not identified where partnerships have been formalised and there is a process for shared learning. In two of the colleges interviewed, for example, tutors are recruited in part for their understanding of homelessness, training is routine and empathy for the client group is embedded in the delivery culture. (OSW, 2003)<sup>20</sup>*

The Making Links Project has developed good practice guidelines for partnership working, and OSW will continue to offer training for FE staff on issues arising for homeless learners.

## **What can be done?**

This section concludes with a review of some of the qualifications that are currently available for those engaged in teaching or supporting learners of language, literacy or numeracy in the voluntary sector. Since opportunities for training are changing all the time, readers are advised to contact their local college or professional development centre<sup>21</sup> for details of specific courses.

### **Training for Basic Skills Teaching and Learning Support in the voluntary sector**

The Level 2 Certificate in Adult Learner Support (City & Guilds 9295) has been designed specifically for the voluntary sector as part of the new qualifications framework for Basic Skills teaching<sup>22</sup>. The full award comprises 3 Units, but candidates wanting to progress beyond the first unit must be able to demonstrate their own proficiency in English and Maths before they can achieve Units 2 and 3. This currently means having a GCSE in these subjects or passing the National Literacy and Numeracy Tests at Level 2. While it may seem reasonable to expect people to be competent in the subjects they teach, we might want to pose questions about the level of proficiency in English needed by a Science graduate from Bangladesh who has volunteered to teach numeracy students using computer applications.

The Certificate in Learning Support is not a teaching qualification, and assumes that candidates will be working alongside qualified and experienced Basic Skills teachers. This is a problem at present since, as I have pointed out, there are significant numbers of staff employed to teach Basic Skills in the voluntary sector who have no teaching qualifications at all, let alone the Level 4 qualification required within the new framework. It was also a problem for home tuition projects, which are using this qualification to replace the Initial Certificate in Teaching Basic Skills (ESOL) for their volunteer ESOL tutors. Some of these projects offer the units in reverse order, so volunteers get some specialist ESOL training from the start, and in this context the boundary between teaching and learning support tends to be blurred.

However, Centres can register to deliver Unit One only, and this may provide a useful framework to support courses in Basic Skills Awareness. In this Unit, candidates have to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of “Adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL needs as defined in *Skills for Life*”<sup>23</sup>. But it is certainly possible to develop courses that include a *critical* “knowledge and understanding” in which people are

encouraged to question the basis of these statistics<sup>24</sup>, and consider alternative understandings of the social context of language, literacy or numeracy.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, a critical appraisal of the Fast Track screening questionnaire could include discussions about the way we think about clients' "needs" and how to meet them. Candidates for this Unit are also expected to conduct research within their own organisations, and to find out about local opportunities for developing language, literacy and numeracy skills. Critical reflections are recorded in a placement journal.

The second unit, "Supporting Learners" introduces learning styles, resources, assessment and record keeping, although the kind of support envisaged at this level is mainly pastoral. For the third unit, candidates choose to learn about "the approaches teachers use" in one subject area: Literacy, Numeracy or ESOL. These units offer some In practice, these units can be used to offer front line staff strategies for supporting adults in approaching everyday language, literacy and numeracy tasks with some assurance of success.

The City & Guilds Level 3 Certificate in Adult Literacy (or Numeracy or ESOL) Subject Support is designed for people who are qualified to teach other subjects but want to integrate literacy and numeracy support in their courses. This would help to meet a need identified by the manager of a tenant support programme,

*...some people are going to courses and that and they come back and start addressing these fears and anxieties around attending courses because all of a sudden it creeps in, you know, the need for literacy skills.*

From September 2005, all teacher training for the Learning & Skills sector will include basic skills awareness. So trainee further and adult education teachers will learn how to develop more inclusive practices, and make their learning materials more widely accessible, whatever subject they teach<sup>26</sup>.

Since 2002, the talent projects<sup>27</sup> in London have been running generic City & Guilds 7407 teacher training courses with additional sessions on language, literacy and numeracy support for teachers working in the voluntary sector. There has been considerable interest and take up of these courses. However, one of the trainers identified a number of problems that had arisen for those teachers working in small organisations which could not provide the necessary structures and resources to meet quality standards. Managers in these organisations often underestimated the amount of time and resources needed to support candidates on teacher-training courses. As one teacher trainer remarked,

*Other than being given the time off for them to attend the course, I think there's not much awareness within the organisations that there's a lot of additional work required. It's not just the Wednesday afternoon slot... it's about what good quality teaching involves, and the quality assurance systems that need to be in place. The problem in some of these voluntary organisations is that they have a huge staff turnover... they're so busy dealing with the mess of people's lives and... they don't understand why training is so complicated.*

This points to a need for working in close partnerships with colleges that can provide the infrastructure to support teacher training. Links need to be made with managers to discuss the requirements of training, and follow up work carried out to support teachers in small organisations once the training is completed.

## **9. Embedding Basic Skills in Practice: strategies for inclusion in everyday life**

A number of models for college-voluntary sector partnerships have been explored and evaluated through the national *Developing Embedded Basic Skills* action research project. This action research initiative, managed by NIACE<sup>28</sup> and funded by ABSSU and the LSC, disseminated its findings during March 2003. The aims of the project were to support the development of effective models of embedded basic skills provision and to report on success factors and implications for funding, staff training and infrastructure. The published findings include a brief report from each of 31 projects, mainly in colleges, but including some in the voluntary sector. A key finding was the value of collaborative teaching in which subject teachers work together with a language, literacy or numeracy specialist to ensure that Basic Skills are embedded in ways that are appropriate and relevant for students with diverse abilities. The obvious cost implication of this double-staffing model probably explains why this important research finding has not been translated into policy and practice.

Where courses are funded through Learning and Skills Councils to include explicit Basic Skills teaching, then this teaching will generally have to be linked to the core curriculum with opportunities for accreditation in literacy, numeracy or ESOL as well as the possibility of achieving other qualifications and outcomes. If learners are going to benefit from this process, then teachers need to understand that using the curriculum as a framework for a negotiated learning programme means a lot more than just “ticking boxes”. As a national development worker explained,

*My fear with embedded Basic Skills is that it only gets called embedded when people don't know they're doing it and do it rather badly quite often. Some people do it very well. But generally it helps to be conscious of what you're doing if you're attempting to do it doesn't it. And just mapping what Basic Skills are happening achieves absolutely nothing. And I see people spending a lot of boring bureaucratic time mapping Basic Skills. What for? You're not teaching it. You're not influencing the way it's happening. You're just saying it is happening. What are you gaining for people's learning?*

The need for training in inclusive practices and embedding literacy, language and numeracy learning here is evident. The following account of a Job Skills workshop run by a youth worker poses interesting questions about the different kinds of expertise needed for this work,

*... while we're doing the cv skills I can see if they're writing proper English, how they've spelt it, things like that... if they're ringing up and applying for a job – what*

*they're going to say on the telephone, how they're going to say it, how they're going to greet the other person at the end of the line. We sort of do a bit of a personal thing, you know, how they're going to dress, what they're going to wear, how their hair is going to be. As long as it's clean and if it's a bloke that he's shaved, you know, presenting themselves.*

If this youth worker has developed a good relationship with a young person who would not go near a classroom, then helping him or her to write “proper English” can be treated as simply part of a process that includes advising on clothes to wear for an interview. An adult literacy teacher, equipped with the social, historical and grammatical knowledge about language that is now included in the professional curriculum at Level 4, might challenge this common-sense understanding of “proper English”. The teacher’s specialist knowledge could inform a more sustainable and empowering literacy learning programme. But this assumes an ability to engage and motivate the learner to embark on such a programme in the first place. Clearly both teachers and voluntary sector professionals would benefit from a greater mutual understanding of the theories and values, knowledge and expertise that each of them brings to the task of engaging socially excluded adults in learning.

Successful examples of embedding language, literacy and numeracy development in other learning activities can be found in both the education and voluntary sector. Some of these will not qualify for Basic Skills funding because practitioners are wary of aligning creative and innovative work with the Core Curriculum, achievement targets, and accountability measures. A senior manager expressed her concern about some excellent provision funded through a college,

*... a group of Bangladeshi women and they're teaching embroidery or they're involving them in story boards with their kids so they can tell them stories, and they're developing a whole range of language, they're making number games for their kids, “We don't do Basic Skills”. “Yes you do. I mean it's innovative the way you do it, but they say “We don't do Basic Skills”. Is this because they think that Basic Skills leads the agenda? So I think that's an important issue, how do we talk about it?*

But for those adults who want to pursue other interests before, or instead of, addressing Basic Skills difficulties, there are lessons to be learnt from a “community literacy” approach to Embedding Basic Skills in Informal Learning.

### **A community literacy approach to “Embedding Basic Skills”**

This is an approach that has proved successful in the context of community development in places like Egypt and Nepal through projects funded by the British government’s Department for International Development<sup>29</sup>. It appeared that the failure of mass literacy campaigns in these countries was due to the lack of opportunities for adults in rural areas to use their newly acquired literacy skills. So action research projects have been set up to support and develop existing literacy practices, and to find ways of including both literate and non-literate adults in these.

Such projects have shown that when adults are given the support they need to participate in literate activities, the overall levels of achievement are far greater than when the focus is on individual learning in a literacy class. This means treating literacy as a community resource, and not as something that needs to be put into people's heads. While the programme might eventually include different arrangements for literacy tuition, it also means finding ways to support and develop a variety of meaningful literate activities. This might include supporting the work of a village scribe, or public poetry readings, or adapting official forms, opening up public records and accounts for debate, producing wall newspapers, enhancing visual aspects of written text or adding sub-titles to popular films. In order to translate this into the context of a London voluntary sector project, it would be necessary to first identify the kinds of literacy and numeracy practices that go on anyway.

One example of everyday language, literacy and numeracy practices that would provide a context for this kind of support is in the area of formulating project proposals and applying for funding. A Development Worker for a voluntary sector training partnership described the process of helping a local community leader to fit a proposed activity into the criteria for grant funding,

*I might say, well how can this be a training programme? Trying to fit things in. How can we argue that this is a training thing when it might not seem like a training thing. So it might mean constructing it so it's a series of things or just a one off or whatever. So a lot goes into designing that and getting it into the form.*

This is not the role of a teacher, whose job is to assess individual "needs", formulate learning goals and structure a programme to work towards them. It is the work of a literate community worker helping with the process of translation between the initiative of a local community activist and the bureaucratic language of grant application forms,

*I encouraged her to write what she could, and she come up with a brilliant thing, but it wasn't quite how it needed to be. So I said, I think we just need to change this bit, and she could see it with me, but I had to do that with her.*

When asked how much writing people were expected to do by themselves and how much help she gave them, the Development Worker explained,

*I'd probably do it for them – but I'd never do things without them here... After the first contact, if they're on email, I'll email them the criteria and the form and say "Don't fill it in, just have a look at it, or scribble all over them form, anything you can think of, make a big mess of it..." And then they will come here and we'll produce something. So they'll be next to me while we're doing it... What I'd normally do is show them key things and explain. You've got some numbers here and that means – how many people are going to come and that's a measure of success, and what will they have done by the end of it. And explain about targets without putting them off. And it's that kind of thing, trying to make it not too daunting, and not so horrible that it turns into something that they don't even want to do because they're going for a grant.*

The assumption behind a community literacy approach to Embedding Basic Skills is that helping adults in this way with the language, literacy and numeracy tasks that they really need to do may be a highly effective way of developing Basic Skills in a community. This assumption is supported by social theories of learning as well as by current research on local literacy practices.<sup>30</sup>

## **What can be done?**

The voluntary sector provides a space where a community literacy approach can offer creative and exciting opportunities to include those with diverse skills and abilities in the collective literacy and numeracy activities of a group or organisation. So this approach to supporting everyday uses of literacy and numeracy was introduced in our pilot workshop on Embedding Basic Skills in Informal Learning. Some participants found it difficult to think outside a deficit model of Basic Skills needs, for which they hoped there might be quick fix solutions. Others, particularly those with community and youth work backgrounds, were quick to come up with ideas for getting their clients more involved in activities like stock-taking, record-keeping, project finances, newsletters or annual reports.

So what does it mean to “get people involved” in these activities? In the voluntary sector context it means keeping Maths and English out of the classroom and treating activities in which literacy or numeracy skills are used in the same way we might approach a camping trip, mural painting or participation in a service users’ committee. The skills needed to ensure that everybody gets involved include the sensitivity to play down and make light of any obstacles and difficulties that prevent individuals from participating. This means being able to:

- recognise the skills and experience that each individual can contribute to the activity
- offer help and support where and when it’s needed to get a job done
- delegate financial and administrative tasks that need to be done within the organisation to service users, and organise groups to foster peer support

When individuals express the wish to develop their own skills in order to tackle these tasks without support, voluntary sector staff may want to seek guidance from a trained and experienced adult literacy/numeracy/ESOL teacher. The teacher can contribute an understanding of the staged acquisition of language, literacy or numerical concepts, of specific difficulties that are likely to be encountered and of ways in which tasks can be broken down to ensure successful accomplishments. However, there is a growing body of research to support the argument that people may learn best by collaborating with others to achieve practical tasks in the context of everyday life. What we need now is more research into how to foster such opportunities for collaborative work and learning.

\* \* \* \* \*

## 9. Summary/Conclusions

This research set out to investigate four questions posed by the research sponsors, to which I added four questions that reflect my own interest in the possibility of responding to the deficit model of *Skills for Life* with a social model for the voluntary sector. The following summary therefore addresses each of these eight questions in turn.

- 1) How are staff and volunteers currently supporting clients who need help with language, literacy or numeracy?

Voluntary sector staff work primarily with clients from the priority groups targeted for the attention of *Skills for Life* initiatives. Their work includes direct provision of basic skills classes taught by staff employed directly or through local colleges, and ad hoc support with practical literacy and numeracy tasks as they arise, either as part of their educational activities or in the course of their everyday lives.

- 2) What skills and qualifications do these workers have, and what do they need, in order to enhance the quality of teaching/learning support in voluntary sector contexts?

Qualifications audits show a wide variety of experience and diverse technical, professional and academic qualifications. Among those employed to teach Basic Skills, either directly or through college partnership arrangements, very few had specialist qualifications, and I did not come across any with the FENTO Level 4 teaching qualification for literacy or numeracy. When staff were invited to identify their own needs, however, there was more interest in gaining generic teaching qualifications, supplemented by short courses or workshops to focus on the learning needs of those with specific difficulties or (dis)abilities. There was also widespread interest in workshops on Basic Skills Awareness and Embedded Basic Skills. Among those who attended our pilot workshops on these topics, some were disappointed to find that the workshops didn't offer quick fix remedies or worksheets for them to use with their clients.

- 3) To what extent does the new qualifications framework meet the training and development needs of staff and volunteers working in the sector?

It was too early to assess the full impact of the New Qualifications Framework, but a number of problems were identified:

- some projects that were unable to accommodate the new qualifications requirements were reported to be “writing out” Basic Skills from funding proposals for learning programmes in which literacy and numeracy were embedded in other skills
- trainers report that voluntary organisations tend to underestimate the time and institutional support needed for staff embarking on teacher training courses at all levels

- there is a shortage of suitably qualified trainers to meet the demand for qualifications at all levels
  - staff and volunteers interested in the Level 2 Certificate in Learner Support are required to pass national tests in literacy and numeracy at level 2 before they can achieve the full award. This presented difficulties for speakers of other languages with skills in ICT and maths who had not met the required standard in written English
- 4) What structures and processes are needed for delivering appropriate training?
- The need for flexible structures for teacher training, with different points of entry and recognition of prior experience has been recognised by those planning courses in the new Professional Development Centres<sup>31</sup> and associated colleges.
  - Some organisations are developing their own processes for delivering the Level 2 Certificate in Learner Support (eg starting with Unit 3 to provide teaching strategies for ESOL home tutors; using elements of Unit 1 to support a critical appraisal of local Basic Skills provision).
5. To what extent does the implementation of *Skills for Life* propagate a deficit model of “Basic Skills Needs”?

*Skills for Life* is supported by statistics about “the impact of poor basic skills” and claims regarding the relationship between Basic Skills, employment and economic prosperity. These are presented as unquestionable “facts”, to support a crusading approach to rooting out individuals who can be identified as having “basic skills needs” (even if they were not aware of having such needs) and setting up remedial provision. It was quite clear from this research that there is pressure on adult education providers in both voluntary and statutory sectors to meet targets for numbers of adults recruited into Basic Skills classes. This pressure has resulted in the widespread use of the “Fast Track” screening questionnaire, which is designed to identify deficits in relation to particular uses of literacy and numeracy. Staff working in a UK-On Line Centre told me that adults wanting to learn about digital photography through Learndirect were obliged to go through a Basic Skills assessment and complete a literacy programme if they didn’t already have GCSE qualifications.<sup>32</sup> This is an example of the ways in which other skills and abilities, other needs, interests, desires or aspirations are ignored or marginalised through this focus on what people can’t do.

6. What happens when people are “screened” for Basic Skills Needs and “referred” to Basic Skills provision?

Wherever front-line staff told me that clients had been referred to Basic Skills provision, I asked if they knew what had happened to them after that. Few of them knew, and none of them could tell me of anyone who had progressed from a Basic Skills class onto other courses, activities or jobs. Particularly alarming was the extent to which staff working for private training companies operating within the voluntary sector are taking on assessment and teaching with little or no support and training for this work. These front-line staff are often given responsibility for working with the most vulnerable learners, those who are coerced through New Deal or Probation Orders into classes where they are likely to repeat their earlier experience of educational failure. Of course, there will always be some reluctant learners who can be motivated to learn and achieve success

where they failed before. This is why it is so important that those employed to teach in this area have the highest possible level of expertise.

7. What skills and understanding do “front line” workers need in order to work from a social model of participation and inclusion?

Working from a social model means starting from an assumption that obstacles to inclusion are produced and maintained to preserve the status quo in a stratified and inequitable social order. One way to challenge this inequality is to look for ways to dismantle these obstacles, or to look for creative ways to get around them. For those who really want to have another go at the literacy or numeracy skills that eluded them at school, such opportunities should be provided by highly qualified specialist teachers, equipped with strategies to ensure success. What front-line workers need to understand is that the literacy and numeracy skills identified by employers and educational gatekeepers as tokens for admission often have little to do with the skills needed to do the job or to learn other skills. If we assume that our job is not to “fix” a deficit, but to focus on strengths, interests and desires, then the skills needed are those of creating opportunities for clients to identify and develop things they *can* do. If clients don't like writing, can somebody write for them? If they need to do some arithmetic, can you show them how to use a calculator? If they need to understand written text, can you read it together? If access to work or further learning is dependent on written tests, can you negotiate exemption or appropriate forms of support?

8. Can “Skills for Inclusion” be developed as part of “Basic Skills Awareness” and alongside the notion of “Embedding Basic Skills in Informal Learning”?

In our pilot workshops we included activities to raise awareness of some of the skills involved in reading and writing that are taken for granted by those who acquired them in childhood. There are plenty of materials available to support this kind of training, and materials for learning some of the strategies we can use to help people develop language, literacy and numeracy skills.<sup>33</sup> But we also challenged the *Skills for Life* propaganda and introduced some strategies for collaborative reading, writing from dictation and identifying opportunities for including service users in the everyday literacy and numeracy practices that go on in our organisations. Evaluation of these workshops indicated that some participants were disappointed not to have been given the kind of “snake oil” remedies that they might have been looking for.<sup>34</sup> The majority, however, were open to the idea that Basic Skills Awareness can mean developing awareness of alternatives to the particular set of skills for a particular way of life represented in *Skills for Life*. Some were quick to come up with suggestions for activities they already do, like stocktaking, accounts and record-keeping, that their clients or service users could get involved in. Others offered ideas for extending such activities, like enhancing their newsletters with pictures and photographs, which would draw on a wider range of skills. These small sparks of enthusiasm and imagination confirmed my belief that there are already plenty of “skills for inclusion” to be found in the voluntary sector. What needs to be done now is to translate the lessons from initiatives like the Community Literacies Programme in Nepal to the UK context. This means embedding, sharing and developing everyday *uses* and *practices* of language, literacy and numeracy in the context of promoting democratic participation in a supported housing project, youth enterprise scheme, neighbourhood community centre or any other voluntary sector organisation.

## 9. Notes, Links and Acknowledgements

<sup>1</sup> Full details of the Skills for Life strategy can be obtained from the Adults Basic Skills Strategy Unit (ABSSU) at [www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus)

<sup>2</sup> talent (training adult literacy, esol & numeracy teachers) in central London was coordinated by Wendy Moss at the City Lit until the establishment of the Central London Skills for Life Professional Development Centre in 2004 [www.lsbu.ac.uk/llupluspdc](http://www.lsbu.ac.uk/llupluspdc)

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Sue Gardener for introducing this term into our conversation following her participation in an event “Positive action for social inclusion” organised by the London Skills Commission’s Framework for Regional Employment and Skills Action (FRESA) <http://www.fresa-london.org>

<sup>4</sup> HM Treasury (2002) *The role of the voluntary and community sector in service delivery: a cross cutting review* p.17, [www.hm-treasury.gov.uk](http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk)

<sup>5</sup> Direct quotes are only attributed where these are taken from public speeches or published documents. Most of the quotations cited in this report are drawn from tape-recorded interviews with individuals speaking from their broad experience in the field, rather than as representatives of their organisations.

<sup>6</sup> The Basic Skills Agency has developed the “Basic Skills Awareness Pack”, closely related to the *Skills for Life* strategy, which can be obtained for £5.50 + p&p from <http://www.basic-skills.co.uk>

<sup>7</sup> *City & Guilds, Level 2 Certificate for Adult Learner Support – Course handbook* <http://www.city-and-guilds.co.uk>

<sup>8</sup> I was supported in planning and delivering these workshops by two experienced tutor-trainers, Sophie Wellstood and Azumah Dennis, who are both familiar with current literacy teaching practice in voluntary and statutory sectors.

<sup>9</sup> Participants at the first workshop included 9 men and 15 women, mostly aged 25-40 and including 16 white and 8 black, mixed race or “other” ethnicity. All participants were paid staff in Charitable Trusts, Housing Associations, Local Authority Services or Multiple-funded training agencies

<sup>10</sup> [www.talent.ac.uk](http://www.talent.ac.uk)

<sup>11</sup> You can get a free guide from the Plain English Campaign <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk> or a free leaflet on Making Reading Easier from the Basic Skills Agency <http://www.basic-skills.co.uk>

<sup>12</sup> Since writing this report, OSW has developed the IPS system in the light of review and consultation with their member organisations. Details of the new system, called *The Employability Map*, can be found at [www.osw.org.uk/innovations/employabilitymap.asp](http://www.osw.org.uk/innovations/employabilitymap.asp).

<sup>13</sup> BSA Fast Track Assessment, Questionnaires and User Guide <http://www.basic-skills.co.uk>

<sup>14</sup> ESOL = English for Speakers of Other Languages

<sup>15</sup> FENTO = Further Education National Training Organisation <http://www.fento.org>

<sup>16</sup> Specific guidance for providers on inspection of literacy, numeracy and ESOL support can be found on the Adult Learning Inspectorate web site at [www.ali.gov.uk](http://www.ali.gov.uk)

<sup>17</sup> See <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/consultations/conDetails.cfm?consultationId=1264> for details of the DfES consultation, for which responses are sought by 31.1.05

<sup>18</sup> London Open College Network [www.locn.org.uk](http://www.locn.org.uk)

<sup>19</sup> The need for a variety of routes, recognising and building on teaching qualifications achieved in different contexts and in different stages of an individual career is recognised in a recent proposal from FENTO for “A license to practice” <http://www.fento.org>

<sup>20</sup> OSW Making Links Project (2003) *Engaging Homeless Learners: Research Into Effective Methods Of Learner Engagement* [www.osw.org.uk](http://www.osw.org.uk)

<sup>21</sup> In London this would be [www.talent.ac.uk](http://www.talent.ac.uk) or [www.lsbu.ac.uk/llupluspdc](http://www.lsbu.ac.uk/llupluspdc). For training provision elsewhere, try your local college or [www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus)

<sup>22</sup> The Skills for Life Teaching Qualifications Framework can be found on [www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus)

<sup>23</sup> From the 2004 Chief Examiner’s report (<http://www.basic-skills.org.uk>) it seems that marks are awarded to candidates who reproduce the “facts” and statistics about Basic Skills “needs” as represented on the Basic Skills Agency’s web site. (<http://www.basic-skills.co.uk>).

<sup>24</sup> Statistics used to support a deficit model of Basic Skills *needs* are derived from surveys like the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). For a critical analysis of this research, see Hamilton, Mary and Barton, David (2000) *The International Literacy Survey: What does it really measure?* *International Review of Education* (Vol. 46 No.5 pp 378-389)

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- <sup>25</sup> The social practice model of literacy is explained and illustrated in: David Barton; Mary Hamilton and Roz Ivanic (eds) (2000) *Situated Literacies: reading and writing in context*, London: Routledge. For details of current Research & Practice in Adult Literacy on this model see [www.literacy.lancaster.ac.uk/rapal](http://www.literacy.lancaster.ac.uk/rapal)
- <sup>26</sup> See [www.nrdc.ac.uk](http://www.nrdc.ac.uk) for FENTO/NRDC publication (2003) *Including Language, Literacy and Numeracy Learning in Post-16 Education*
- <sup>27</sup> Lists of courses available in London, and a materials pack for teacher-trainers, *Addressing language, literacy and numeracy on post-16 teacher-training courses* can be found on [www.talent.ac.uk](http://www.talent.ac.uk)
- <sup>28</sup> For more information, contact: [chris.taylor@niace.org.uk](mailto:chris.taylor@niace.org.uk)
- <sup>29</sup> You can find more about Community Literacies Programme in Nepal at <http://www.clpn.org>
- <sup>30</sup> Research papers from the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy can be obtained free of charge from <http://www.nrdc.org.uk>
- <sup>31</sup> see note 22 above
- <sup>32</sup> Policy and structures for both UK Online and Learndirect may have changed since this research was conducted. To find out more about UK Online centres at <http://www.ufi.com/ukol/> and about Learndirect at <http://www.learndirect.co.uk>
- <sup>33</sup> For advice on good resources, see note 21 above
- <sup>34</sup> Snake Oil has become a generic reference for quack remedies peddled by travelling salesmen in the USA, and features in the title of a book that criticizes some of the reading packages being used in North American schools: Larson, Joanne (ed) (2001) *Literacy as Snake Oil: Beyond the Quick Fix*, New York: Peter Lang

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