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Original Citation

Crowther, Jim, Maclachlan, Kathy and Tett, Lyn (2010) Adult literacy, learning identities and pedagogic practice. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 29 (6). pp. 651-664. ISSN 0260-1370

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Published as: Crowther, J, Maclachlan, K. and Tett, L. (2010) 'Adult literacy, learning identities and pedagogic practice', *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 29: 6, 651 — 664

Adult literacy, learning identities and pedagogic practice

Authors: Jim Crowther, Kathy Maclachlan and Lyn Tett

Abstract

This article discusses the relationship between persistence in adult literacy and numeracy programs, changes in the participants' attitudes to engaging in learning and pedagogic practices using data from eight Scottish literacy education organizations. It argues that literacy learning can act as a resource that enables vulnerable adults to change their dispositions to learning, achieve their goals and make a transition towards their imagined futures. Pedagogic practices that operate from an approach that emphasized learners' strengths, rather than their deficits, and critically interrogated learners' experiences used as a resource for learning were the most successful in enabling this transition. Holistic provision that creates a supportive community of practice was found to be the most effective in bringing about the positive changes that learners identified they wished to make in their lives.

Introduction

This article draws on data from a research project that focused on participation in adult literacy and numeracy (ALN) education courses by those that were at risk of not completing their programmes (Maclachlan et al, 2008). It explores the relationship between persistence in the program, changes in the participants' attitudes to engaging in learning and the pedagogic practice of the organizations in which they participated. Since persistence in learning is a contested concept we begin with a brief review of the literature.

Persistence in Learning

Research in adult learning has long identified the difficulties that some groups of adults experience in engaging with and persisting in adult learning (see for example Gallacher & Crossan 2000; McGivney 2001; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). Studies with ALN learners have highlighted the specific issues that these adults encounter during their learning experiences (Barton et al 2007; Comings, 2009; Tett et al, 2006) many of which relate to difficult social and economic factors that they are more likely to encounter than the rest of the adult population. These studies show that ALN learners are disproportionately likely to come from areas of social deprivation and low income families, lead unstable, turbulent lives, experience ill health and cope with disabilities, all of which impact on their ability to sustain their engagement in learning programmes.

Persistence is, however, a contested concept that does not necessarily equate with completing a programme. Appleby's study (2003) charts the changes over the last two decades of both its meaning and significance for students and educational providers. From earlier simplistic notions of course completion or retention that reflected the perspectives of institutional providers, understandings of the concepts have shifted to include very different, less formalized criteria that reflect the perspectives of learners. As Reder (2009) and Barton et al (2007) highlight, this can mean dipping in and out of provision, with or without periods of self-study between formalized, institutionally provided courses. It can also mean the achievement of short-term specific goals that learners set for themselves and that frequently act as an initial motivational spur. Evidence from a series of research projects in the UK (Carpentieri, 2007:20) suggests that;

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Whereas retention is a provider-centered concept, persistence puts the learner at the centre of the equation - turning retention inside out...Whereas a provider-centered focus might see a non-continuing learner as dropping out, a learner-centered focus acknowledges that learners may be 'dipping out' for a while, generally because of other responsibilities...Inconsistent does not necessarily mean non-persistent. So, while from a provider's standpoint a learner may appear to be irregularly engaged in learning, from a learner's perspective periods of formal provision, sandwiched by breaks of self-directed study or just meeting the demands of life may be natural and rational elements in a lifelong learning journey.

Although learners' ability to engage and persist in programmes is strongly affected by personal and social factors, they are not the sole determinants of engagement and persistence. For example, Brooks (2007) highlighted particular pedagogical practices that impacted on progression such as working in pairs or small groups, providing immediate feedback, reciprocal teaching and encouraging fluent, oral reading. Barton et al (2007) and Appleby (2008) both highlight the positive effect of a social practices approach in encouraging engagement and persistence and Comings' (2009: 167) review of the research from the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) found that staff support which enabled learners to establish clear goals, encouraged persistence and that students who had identified an increase in self-efficacy, i.e. a feeling that they could reach their goals, were more likely to persist.

Previous research then provides insights into the complex mix of factors that impact on learner engagement and persistence in ALN. However, few studies have explored in depth how learners experience these factors and so this article presents research from

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eight Scottish organizations that provided literacy and numeracy education in order to investigate these issues. We argue that the meanings and processes of engaging and persisting in programmes must include first, an understanding of where learners have come from, in other words their autobiographical experiences, and second, their present experience in the program, particularly the pedagogic practices of tutors and other institutional factors within which the learning is contextualized.

Method

Eight case study organizations were selected for the study comprising a numeracy class, two communication skills classes for homeless adults who were recovering drug and alcohol users, literacy that was embedded within an 'Introduction to Care' course, a football group, a reading and writing group for disabled adults, basic skills for adults with learning difficulties, and an open access dedicated ALN programme.

These organizations exemplified three types of learning contexts: 1) dedicated, stand alone ALN provision, where adults come for around two hours per week tuition with the expressed purpose of enhancing their literacy or numeracy skills; 2) embedded provision where the literacy learning is amalgamated into courses related to particular interests, for example, football, and; 3) holistic support contexts where literacy learning, be it dedicated or embedded, formed one part of a network of support services or structured programmes available for vulnerable, 'at risk' adults. In this latter group many were homeless, living in temporary accommodation as a result of very varied circumstances and trying to regain a foothold back into 'normal' living.

The eight case-studies were a selected sample that was chosen using these four main criteria: that they were located in urban areas in the central belt of Scotland, where

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social and economic deprivation was most concentrated; that they embraced different types of provision (i.e. dedicated, embedded and holistic); that they worked with at least eight learners; and that they targeted 'at risk' learners, comprising those who had chaotic life styles, those who were working through social or vocational transitions, those for whom attaining their learning goals was problematic.

Observation sessions and interviews were conducted with one tutor from each project who had the main responsibility for the face-to-face teaching (8 in all) and 47 adult learners (6 learners from 7 of the projects and 5 from 1). The learners were an opportunistic sample comprising those that were willing and able to be interviewed from the program and who were broadly representative in terms of the age, 'race' and gender profile of the participating group. Learners' ages ranged from the early twenties to late fifties, and there was a slight gender imbalance in favor of males. Time spent in the program by participants ranged from six weeks to one year with the median being six months.

Three types of data were gathered from the projects. First, researchers observed two class sessions for two hours (six weeks apart) and recorded: the methods, types of materials and assessment strategies used; the student-tutor and student-student interactions; the learning support strategies used; the ethos and organization of the group. Second, tutors were interviewed about their approaches to teaching, learning and assessment through a joint reflection immediately after the observed sessions at which tutors were asked to articulate their thinking behind the approaches used and how they considered it contributed to the learners' persistence in their programmes. Finally learners were interviewed near the beginning of their courses and after completion of their learning programmes. Data were gathered from all these sources in order to

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identify the factors that might encourage engagement with and persistence in learning. The data from the observations and the interviews with the tutors were audio recorded, notes were made from these recordings and these were then entered into a database, transcribed and then analyzed using the software package 'File-Maker Pro'.

In this research we wished to explore the learner experiences that serve to mediate engagement and persistence in ALN. To achieve this a qualitative approach, which stems from the epistemological argument that human beings are individual interpreters of meaning, was adopted in which data were gathered from learners through semi-structured interviews. Moreover, as Wedin (2008) argues, we wanted to use a method that would examine the “perspectives and life conditions of the target groups [and] take local, everyday practices into consideration” (762) so the interviews with the learners used an autobiographical approach. Learners were asked to talk about their: individual life histories including key life events; the influence of key support/learning organizations on their lives; the circumstances in which they were currently situated and their imagined futures. We acknowledge that any autobiographical recounting is a construction rather than an objective, complete history (Gluck & Patai, 1991) and is a story whose telling is shaped by many factors, not the least of which is the relationship between the teller and the listener. Thus the recounting of the learners' histories was likely to be subject to purposeful and unplanned omissions, however, in spite of these challenges, we believe the information they gave, and the sense we made of it, provides insights into how their previous experiences influence their current views of their learning.

Using an open coding scheme (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), these interview data were first sorted chronologically to construct linear learning histories. Working then from the histories, emergent analytic topics became evident. Next, the data were coded by these

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themes and a secondary analysis was completed and independently checked by two researchers. The categories that emerged from this process were the impact of early school experiences, later traumas, the impact of experiences of marginalisation on learners' willingness to engage in ALN programmes and the affect of participation on their learning identities.

In this article we draw on the data derived from the first learner interviews to explore these themes with a particular focus on the relationship between engagement and persistence in ALN programmes and learners' identities. Then we draw on the data from the observations, the tutor interviews and the second learner interviews to explore the pedagogy and practices that contributed to learners being able to persist in achieving their learning goals and make the changes in their lives that mattered to them.

Learner identities and engaging in learning

In this section we review the autobiographical experiences of the learners using the lens of learner identity to explore their engagement in learning. The role of learning in (re) shaping identities has made an important contribution to research on engagement and persistence in adult education (see Field & Malcolm, 2003; Gallacher et al, 2002; Morgan-Klein & Osborne 2007; Schuller et al 2004; Wojecki, 2007). Although there is much debate around the concept of identity (Chappell et al 2003), there is nonetheless common agreement that adult learning can have a significant role in the formation and re-formation of the identities of learners and consequently of their ability to persist in reaching their learning goals. This is because, as Schuller et al argue:

Learning [is] a process whereby people build up – consciously or not – their assets in the shape of human, social and identity capital, and then benefit

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from the returns on the investment in the shape of better health, stronger social networks, enhanced family life, and so on (2004: 13).

Morgan-Klein and Osborne (2007) summarize these dual aspects of identity in saying that it:

represents a resource that individuals can continually draw upon when engaging in learning. At the same time, increased identity capital may also be an *outcome* of engagement in learning (p 16) (original emphasis).

So identities feed into, and are fed by, learning experiences, and both are strongly influenced by the social networks that people belong to, where there is a sense of shared experiences and values amongst network members. Some networks, for a range of very different reasons, may share a positive disposition towards learning, whereas others may share a negative inclination as a result of past educational experiences.

Poor experiences of learning at school are particularly important in influencing this disposition towards engaging in learning and the task of overcoming this negativity should not be underestimated, for as Jonker (2005, p123) argues:

at the individual level, schooling can offer the confidence of becoming an educated, knowledgeable person. It can also saddle one for life with the feeling that one is doomed to fail. Schooling, in other words, is part of the complex process of shaping and reshaping the self.

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A large proportion of the learners in this study described negative experiences of initial education that had caused them to be reluctant to engage in learning. These fragile learner identities were forged from their early days for a range of different reasons.

One learner, for example, remembers finding it difficult at primary school. She was very slow at reading but did not feel that the teachers noticed and thought that they were "...more interested in the bright ones, the ones that could get on...They sort of just left me to one side... I tried to do my best, but I just felt that because I wasn't bright and I wasn't brainy that people just didn't want to know".

Many recalled memories of bullying and harassment that affected their ability to learn because they felt unsafe in learning environments that had alienated them, so they turned away from their schools either physically or psychologically. Bullying from teachers was a factor that shaped another learner's memories of education. "In English and Math classes if you got picked on by the teacher...and when you got it wrong - you got hit. So there was fear - no one would put up their hand unless you were 100% sure, and that marks you".

Traumatic experiences in educational environments were not the sole causes of school failure however. Many rejected schooling because they either did not recognize its value at the time or were raised in violent, unloving homes that were neglectful of their educational and social welfare. One learner's experience exemplifies this vividly.

My Mum left when I was 6 weeks old and my dad brought me up but he re-married and I wasn't treated well by my stepmother. I don't remember any happy

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times, birthdays, family times, holidays or even ordinary cuddles. There was just no discipline there so I ended up going off the rails and started drinking and then I started sniffing glue.

However, it would be wrong to assume that all the participants came to their learning with negative schooling experiences. Over a third of the learners in our study recalled their school days with pleasure and many of them achieved well academically. At some stage between school and the present however, many of their lives had gone into a downward spiral through alcohol, drugs, crime, abuse or a combination of these. For example a learner who was a recovering heroin user, told us; "I loved drugs but they took me to places I don't want to go back to, like getting food from bins and sleeping in the streets". He decided he could not go any lower and wanted to get off heroin so went on a methadone programme and from there, to his current recovery programme.

A phenomenon that several of these adults, recovering from addiction, depression or similar experiences commented on was the effect of these traumas on their skills and competencies. They had lost, albeit temporarily, some of the basic abilities that were previously second nature to them. For example, one said:

You don't realize that because of the drugs, it all goes. All the stuff you knew and just did like money, calculating and organizing, it all goes out of your mind and you have to start to learn it all, all over again.

Another learner who was a highly successful business consultant whose company crashed on the stock market, lost everything, began drinking heavily and, in his words:

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.... went downhill very fast.... I suffered from depression, my health was bad and I did nothing apart from vegetate. I didn't read a paper or add 2 and 2 in eight years and was brain dead.

Recovering from addiction and its attendant problems does not, however, describe the life circumstances and practices of all learners in this study. Many were working, in stable relationships, bringing up children and living as ordinary members of their communities. Nevertheless, what most had in common was a turning point in their lives; they were working through some form of transition that had brought them into their ALN programme. For example, one learner who worked in an airport and came to realize that any career advancement would be dependent upon him improving his numeracy skills. His current job would not enable him to buy the house he wanted, so to make the change, he recognized he had to return to learning. Others were experiencing parenting difficulties and similarly recognized the role that learning could play in helping to negotiate them. Several of the learners were recent immigrants to Scotland and were adjusting to a new language, customs and the difficult path into employment, so came to learning to help them through this period of adjustment. Crises or transitions have long been recognized as significant triggers to engagement in learning (Cross 1981, McGivney 2001) and many of the learners' lives in the study fitted into this category. They envisaged and were using their learning as a means of enabling them to negotiate their transitions and assume a different identity; to come closer to being the person they aspired to be, - a good parent, addiction free, a worker and an independent adult.

The learners brought with them a very diverse range of past life experiences and current life circumstances. What bound them together in spite of this diversity were very fragile or negative senses of themselves as learners. And though the creation of this low

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learner identity had very different origins, its significance for the learning programme cannot be overemphasized. A second commonality amongst them was a marginalization from 'normal', mainstream society and the loss of self-esteem that this produced. At some stage in the past, their experiences of addiction, disability, immigration, worklessness etc. had caused them to identify themselves as other than 'normal' in the eyes of society and their engagement in learning was part of their efforts to counter both of these issues.

Barton and colleagues (2007) argue that someone who has experienced a lifelong history of problems with education and who is currently living in very difficult circumstances may not be in a position to imagine any sort of long term future, so engagement in learning may therefore seem pointless. This might lead to resistance to any sort of formal learning, or "alternatively to a 'compliant' attitude whereby they go along with any choice that is offered to them with little personal investment" (Barton et al, 2007, 24). Other research has shown that becoming a learner is the product of the complex interplay between the "social and economic structures that shape people's lives, the educational institutions which determine the processes of engagement with learning, and the learners themselves" (Crossan et al 2003: 58). Our data show that most of the projects we studied had gone to great lengths to assist the learners in actively and critically making informed choices about their lives and their learning. In order to explore this further we examine the pedagogy and practice that contributed to learners' persistence in learning and hence their ability to achieve the learning goals that matter to them.

Pedagogy and practice

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Belzer (2004: 42) has pointed out the importance of making visible the often-invisible role that prior experiences with school play in how adults perceive their current learning context, and Barton et al (2006: 24) highlight how learners' 'histories, their current identities and life circumstances, and the shifting goals and purposes they have for their future - interact to shape their engagement in and experience of learning.'. Similarly, Quigley (1997) has argued that encouraging learners and practitioners to pay close attention to, reflect on, and critique prior experiences with learning contexts can be important in facilitating better matches between learners and types of programmes. The majority of the projects had recognised the importance of learners' previous experiences in their construction of a positive learning environment. For example, learners and tutors spoke about the importance of easily accessible environments of the centers in which the classes took place, that would not deter, but would welcome and encourage tentative returners to education. One learner said:

It was easy to come along here as I just phoned up and then saw the organizer who asked me about what I could do. If it had been more difficult I don't think I would have come along (learner, case study (**CS**) 1).

Accessible environments were not just about the physical conditions and layout of buildings however, because good quality adult education often occurs in under-funded, very basic accommodation. For these learners, the notion of accessibility pertained to the human element, in other words, how welcoming and accepting the people involved in the projects were. For example:

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I met X and she offered me a cup of tea and I don't want to sound condescending, but here [at the center], there's a sea of happy faces. I wanted to get my head down, get out and move on in my life. X told me all about the place, and I started doing the course. That completely opened my eyes, and to other homeless people. They don't look down on you, and without sounding patronising it's so welcoming here. (CS 4)

However, for some of the learners, especially those with chaotic lifestyles, the step from non-engagement to participation in structured learning was too difficult to negotiate in one go. They needed sustained informal, 'drop in' tuition and guidance to gradually reintroduce them to the world of learning and to a sense of themselves as learners before they were ready to attempt it. The potentially lengthy lead in time needed to support these vulnerable adults into taking this step into structured learning should not be underestimated, and again, it was the human element that was the determining factor. For example one of the tutors who had been involved in such work said:

I spent two years at [project name] developing a relationship with these guys and it took me quite some months in the 'Drop In' facility just to get their confidence and trust and I think that goes a long way to them buying in to it, then going into class sessions, that we're doing now. We couldn't have done that in week one (tutor CS 4).

Once learners were engaged, the curriculum was planned to be as flexible as possible, and tutors and learners alike spoke of the importance of this flexibility, which appeared to be one of the determining factors in encouraging learners to persist in their learning.

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One tutor (CS 2) commented: “There is a lot of variety that she [the student] loves and which makes it really interesting and this helps keep her motivated. Also she is learning what she wants to learn”.

In some cases this flexibility was about negotiating individual work with learners and in others it was the group together that decided upon the topic of the session. For example, in the numeracy class it was observed that:

The provision and curriculum are very flexible and responsive to learners’ goals and interests. Each individual has their own goals and these are checked verbally at the beginning and end of the class. Not only is the content of the learning negotiated but also the way in which people learn best is taken into account so that some people have written examples, others verbal feedback and yet others use concrete materials such as rulers, or coins (class observation **(Obs)** CS1).

Both learners’ and tutors’ reflections confirmed the importance and the power of group work in building confidence and a positive learner identity; as the following comments illustrate:

The group work has helped me to get my confidence back and stay clean....
(learner, CS 7)

The whole group gets on well together and there are no cliques. It gives me a lot of support (learner, CS 7)

The ... class shows you a good way to put things across, and you don’t feel out of place. You’re in with the group so you get involved. When there’s 3 or 4 of us

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together in the group, you have to work out tasks, you're communicating with each other and it's very satisfying (learner, CS 4)

With this group we have done some pair and small group work but they actually prefer to work as a whole group. They know each other's strengths and weaknesses and are supportive of each other because they have faced the same homelessness and addiction issues (tutor, CS 4).

Our observations and interviews consistently highlighted the importance of the tutors' personalities and attributes in delivering ALN effectively. We observed tutors creating warm, welcoming and informal learning environments that would put learners at ease and therefore more engaged in the learning. For example the football class that combined discussion with literacy activities around football was held in the grounds of a football club and the observation notes describe:

A key factor in sustaining interest is the passion and humor of the tutors. The tutors are clearly animated by the sport, extremely knowledgeable, with a good sense of humor so that the atmosphere is both serious (about the sport) and light at the same time (conveyed by banter and jest). (Obs, CS 3)

Learners themselves frequently spoke of their appreciation for their tutors and the commitment and support they received from them. For example, one learner reflected:

I like the informal atmosphere – it makes me feel motivated that the tutors are working so hard to help me. I've already been able to write a letter ... and have

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had a good result from it. I feel it's the first time anyone's reacted to anything I've said...it made me feel fantastic, like winning the lottery (learner, CS2)

Participants in these projects had changed their dispositions to learning partly because of these positive tutor-learner relationships that could and were transforming the learners' identities. They had done this in part by changing "the relationship between a learner's personal identity, his or her material and cultural surroundings and dispositions to learning" (Hodkinson & Bloomer 2002: 38). The impact of the interaction with the tutor and other students had a significant impact on the social process of identity formation because it was sensitive to biographical narratives and cultural influences (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2000; Osborn et al, 2003). For example:

I'm more calm now and seeing different aspects of myself as well. ... I used to be 'loud and proud' when I first started the course, but now I'm quieter and let other people talk. What I used to think and what I think now are two different things (learner, CS 5)

The relationships that are formed with people, and the really comfortable environment that is created in the project, encourages the service users to persist. A key aspect of this is that people can be really honest about what the issues are for them and they know they are safe and it's a trusting place to be. (Tutor, CS 7)

Learning can also be viewed as participation in social practice whereby newcomers to a particular community are both absorbing, and being absorbed in, the 'culture of practice'. From this perspective significant learning is what changes the ability to engage in practice and to understand why it is done, so learning arises out of "the inherently

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socially negotiated character of meaning ... in, with, and arising from, the socially and culturally structured world” (Lave and Wenger 1991: 51). Such learning is not just the acquisition of memories, habits, and skills, but also the formation of an identity through participating in a new practice or community such that “we know who we are by what is familiar, understandable, usable, negotiable; we know who we are not by what is foreign, opaque, unwieldy, unproductive” (Wenger, 1998:153). For example:

Coming here helps me keep on going. I don't think I'm a failure any more.... It's making me feel good doing something I wanted to do for myself. If I don't come I could fall on my arse again. It's boosting my self-esteem, giving me more confidence and helping me know I can get a job (learner, CS 5)

I have improved on my old self where I was an angry wee man all the time and always fighting. I am getting better at walking away from things rather than trying to get fights started which I did when I was young but I have done all that now and I want to get on with my life (learner, CS 7)

In this place you're not just a disabled person here. You're respected as an ordinary person, as a human being (learner, CS 6).

The process of identity re-formation through engagement in a community of practice was most evident in organizations that provided holistic or 'wrap around' support for the learners that included, but was broader than, literacy learning. They provided a range of other opportunities for adults to participate in, and become absorbed into their community and its practices with support from staff that extended beyond the acquisition of literacy skills. What this illustrates is the importance and effectiveness of integrating ALN elements into all other aspects of provision and services that are also geared towards the achievement of learners' life goals. Advice workers, conversant with the

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ALN programmes, built on the newly acquired literacy skills that homeless adults had gained in helping them to apply for housing; rehabilitation workers were able to build on the oral competencies that they saw learners developing in classes, and workers in the centre for disabled adults encouraged management volunteers who were also learners to write up minutes of meetings. The skills, knowledge and understanding they had gained were immediately and practically helping them to deal with real, challenging tasks in their lives. Conversely, these achievements in form filling, orality and writing were fed back to the ALN tutors in a mutually re-enforcing cycle that undoubtedly enhanced persistence, progress and achievement.

In these circumstances, ALN was one aspect of the raft of provision on hand to help the adults achieve their life goals, for it was the life rather than the literacy goals that were the learners' prime motivational drivers. In the ALN classes they worked on their literacy skills (relevantly contextualized), and in the rest of their lives they practiced them in contexts that were meaningful. And what this exemplifies is the need to work in close partnership with other agencies that are also involved in the lives of learners. Such partnerships would enable professionals from different sectors to work together and create a holistic array of provision that would include ALN and that would have the capacity to offer learning opportunities and other life skills that would enable people to make the desired changes in their lives.

A final aspect of pedagogy and practice that we suggest is important in promoting positive change is that learners are not seen as passive recipients of teacher knowledge but rather as co-producers of meaning. This means that the learner is seen as a complex figure whose learning biography is fluid and subject to change. For example in the 'football group' it was observed that:

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The pedagogy is based on the Freirean principle of students 'saying their word' and using the generative themes of the sport for developing critical awareness and motivating students to read and write. (Obs, CS 3)

And a student from this group said:

I've managed to get along with a lot of people who support different football teams from me and I didn't think I'd be able to do this (learner, CS 3)

So it is important that in creating a positive educational experience, learners feel that their issues, circumstances and concerns are both openly acknowledged and valued, because in valuing these, they are also valued as people. For example:

At the classes, you feel at ease, you feel good. Most people's problems are worse than mine... No one throws stones at anyone else, - we're all in the same boat but for different reasons (learner, CS 4)

Discussion and Conclusion

This research has explored in depth how a small group of learners have experienced the complex mix of factors that impact on learner engagement and persistence in ALN. We have shown that changes in the self-efficacy of learners, defined by Bandura (1986) as the feeling of being able to accomplish learning objectives and learn to deal with negative emotional states associated with learning, had enabled them to change their dispositions to engaging in educational programmes. They had formed new identities as people that wanted to learn and they knew the steps they needed to take to achieve their learning goals. They were all experiencing some form of difficult life circumstances and were attempting to work through them in order to achieve their goals and make a

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transition towards their imagined futures. They saw their literacy learning as a resource that would help them to negotiate these transitions and achieve the changes in their lives to which they aspired. They had worked through many of their negative past experiences of education and were able to see themselves as potentially successful learners provided they had appropriate support.

The practice that was most successful in helping learners to engage operated from a strengths, rather than a deficit, approach to literacy tuition since 'low literacy does not necessarily translate into incompetence; rather, a range of skills [such as social interactions] can be leveraged to meet needs competently' (Ozanne et al, 2005, p266).

Some research (e.g. Belzer, 2004, p57) has identified that past experience may impede the possibility of adult learning programmes fully maximizing the potential of learners because their negative experiences have not been discussed and critically interrogated. However, we found that these organizations, particularly those that offered 'wrap around' provision, had worked to help participants look with a conscious and critical eye at problematising their experience in order to use it for learning. This approach had enabled learners whose identities had been "wounded" (Wojecki, 2007 p171) through earlier educational and life experiences to be helped to "re-author their identities to learning" (op cit. p169) through particular kinds of pedagogical practice.

Research shows (e.g. Tett et al, 2006; Sfard & Prusak, 2005) that some level of struggle, uncertainty, identity conflict and denting of self-efficacy accompanies all transitions so this is not an easy process to go through. Furthermore, the outcomes of transitions cannot be predicted with absolute accuracy; they may lead to the desired endpoint or they may not. Some of these learners will attain their life and learning goals, and some

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may not. For many, the unsettled, often chaotic nature of their lives will militate against them attaining their imagined futures, but for all, the nature of the support that they receive through this change process will have an impact on their life and learning outcomes. The participants in the programmes we researched were all taking small and sometimes uncertain steps in an attempt to succeed in changing aspects of their lives for the better. Those who were most vulnerable to not completing their programmes and obtaining their desired goals tended to be those whose lives were most turbulent and chaotic. This meant that the transitions that they were working through were the largest and most difficult, and therefore the support that they needed in negotiating them was greater than those with more settled lives.

For even the most confident and able of adults, major change is often associated with a level of apprehension and uncertainty, but for many of the adults in this study who spoke of their low levels of self-efficacy, these apprehensions are magnified considerably. It is essential therefore that the learning environment does nothing to knock their already fragile confidence and does everything to build their self-esteem. This involves building on and extending the knowledge and skills that adults have, based on their needs, desires and interests as we have shown. It also involves seeing literacy as socially constructed, socially embedded and context dependent since this can help to “foster critical, agentic, social actors within the literacy classroom” (Ozanne et al, 2005, p 267).

This article has pointed to some of the pedagogical practices that contributed to the formation of a positive learning environment thus enabling learners to engage and persist in the achievement of their learning goals. However, the evidence from participants in this study indicates that sound pedagogical practices on their own are not enough to enable vulnerable adults to forge the identities to which they aspire. Our

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respondents spoke of the importance of supportive relationships between tutors and learners and amongst their peers where expertise and support were offered within reciprocal relationships through exchanges of skills and knowledge. The importance of these kinds of social interaction and support as factors in increasing confidence and self-belief should not be underestimated. For as Norman and Hyland (2003: 270) have demonstrated “although the individual learner can affect his/her own level of confidence, tutors, peers and mentors can help increase the learners’ confidence by providing support, encouragement and constructive feedback”.

Our research has shown that these types of relationships were much more likely to develop in those organizations that offered ‘wrap around’ support that in turn made it possible to help learners to negotiate their desired changes and achieve their goals. This holistic model created strong communities where the affinities between members, be they tutors or learners, helped them to continue to engage through difficult times when they might otherwise have lapsed, and in continuing to persist, they continued to attain. However, whilst this holistic model of working provides the most effective context for literacy learning for vulnerable adults it has both resource and organizational implications for the way that literacy learning is embedded in the work of organizations. It is costly due to the intensity of the provision, the need to work in partnership with a range of organizations and the attendant complexities of managing such integrated provision.

Our research is, however, limited due to its small sample and further longitudinal studies are required to explore the impact of engaging and persisting with ALN programmes over time. In particular investigation is needed into the nature of effective teaching and learning, not just for the most vulnerable of literacies learners, but for all adults who

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come to literacies learning in order to change aspects of their lives for the better particularly because research (Bynner and Parsons, 2006) has shown the high costs to productivity, community and family life of low levels of literacy.

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