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Adult literacy and numeracy, social capital, learner identities and self-confidence

Lyn Tett and Kathy Maclachlan

Abstract

This paper explores the interconnections between literacies learning, self-confidence, identity as a learner and social capital. It draws from a two-phased study of over six hundred literacy and numeracy learners in Scotland that examined various aspects of their learning experiences and their perceptions of the impact that learning had on their lives. It reports on the changes in social capital and self-confidence experienced by learners between the two phases and explores the complex connectedness between engagement in learning and the development of self-confidence, an increasingly positive identity as a learner, and enhanced social capital. It argues that the increases in social activity and networking reported on by learners had been developed through being at the centre of a range of new networks in relation to their tutors, other staff and fellow students that in turn have led to more engagement locally. Learning and its benefits are dynamic and a number of positive changes in learners lives are illustrated to show the impact of participation in literacies learning.

Keywords

Adult literacy and numeracy, social capital, learner identities, self-confidence

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Introduction

This paper explores the interconnections between literacies learning, self-confidence, learner identities and social capital. It draws from a two-phased study of over six hundred literacy and numeracy learners in Scotland that examined various aspects of their learning experiences and their perceptions of the impact that learning had on their lives. Participants were drawn from nine areas representing Scotland's geographical diversity who had taken part in programmes in over a 100 different institutions including Further Education colleges, community, work, and prison based tuition. All participants had chosen to participate in the programmes on a voluntary basis. The overall aim of the research was to evaluate the Scottish Adult Literacy and Numeracy Strategy and the detailed findings are reported in Tett et al, 2006. This paper reports on changes in the levels of confidence and social capital of the learners between the two phases of the research and discusses the complex connectedness between engagement in learning and the development of self-confidence, an increasingly positive learner identity, and greater social capital in this large sample of learners.

Methodology

Face-to-face interviews lasting around one hour, using a structured questionnaire, were conducted with 613 learners in their place of tuition between September 2003 and April 2004. The questions were designed to ascertain demographic information; learners' pathways into adult literacy and numeracy (ALN); any barriers to entry; experiences of learning, teaching and the curriculum; guidance received at entry, during and at the end of the programme; the effect of participation on their personal, family, public, education and

working lives, degree of satisfaction with the quality of learning programmes; views of how provision can be improved; the 'social capital' of the learner; and an assessment of 'self-confidence'. The instruments used for assessing these latter two aspects are detailed later in the paper. A mixture of closed and open questions was used to enable the views of learners to be captured. The qualitative data derived from the open questions were analysed for 200 of the learner sample. Cases were selected using a stratified random procedure to ensure that the sample included learners from all the areas involved in the research and the demographic profile of the qualitative sample closely matched that of the total sample.

After an interval of around one year, learners were re-interviewed between September 2004 and April 2005. Three hundred and ninety three learners were interviewed a second time representing 64% of the original sample. The focus of this interview was on changes since the first interview, so generally the same questions were asked, enabling differences in learners' social capital and self-confidence and the effect of participation on their lives to be assessed. As in the first interview, the questions were both closed and open and the sample of 200 learners (just over 50%) whose open questions were analysed was drawn from people that had taken part in both rounds of interviews. The methodology was designed to access the 'distance travelled' by the respondents between the interviews, based on their perceptions of the impacts of their participation in ALN.

The closed quantitative data was coded and analysed using SPSS. Analysis that involved comparing responses between the first and second round of interviews to establish whether a change had taken place in the intervening period was tested for significance using a matched pairs procedure coupled with a sign test. Significance is at the 1% level unless otherwise stated. The open qualitative data was analysed using the database *Filemaker*. Responses based on the interviewers' notes and extracts from mini-disc recordings were

copied into the database, codified and examined under a number of thematic headings. This method provided an analysis using an *a priori* systematic conceptual framework as well as a flexible grounded approach for probing emergent issues. It also enabled the extraction of quotations that aptly captured relevant concerns. These are included below to illustrate examples of changes in the learners' own words.

In this paper we explore changes in social capital and self-confidence reported by learners between the two interviews and the effects on their identities as learners but first we discuss the concept of social capital.

Social Capital and Identity as a Learner

There are a number of different types of capital that impact on people's life chances and trajectories. Portes (1998: 7) differentiates three types thus: 'whereas economic capital is in people's bank accounts and human capital is in their heads, social capital inheres in the structure of their relationships'. A number of researchers have argued that participation in post-compulsory education is a means of generating social capital because it impacts on relationships (Baron et al, 2000; Field, 2005; Schuller et al, 2004) but there are different ways of understanding the term. For example, in the work of Bourdieu (1997) social capital is part of the explanation of the persistence of class inequalities that are based on and sustain the unequal resources of economic and cultural capital where these three capitals interpenetrate and reinforce each other to 'normalise' inequalities in structures and networks. Coleman (1994) analyses social capital's links with 'human capital' and argues the importance of the former for generating the latter through facilitating collective aims. The work of Putnam (1993, 2000) emphasises the combined effect of trust, networks and norms of reciprocity in creating strong communities so he regards social capital as the ability to do

things collectively. Both Coleman and Putnam see trust and reciprocity as arising from the activities that create social capital and as contributing to social capital in their own right (see Croll, 2004: 403).

For our purposes we needed an operationalisable concept of social capital so we adapted a definition mainly derived from Putnam and further developed by adult educationalists (see Baron, et al, 2000, Schuller et al, 2004, Field, 2005; Balatti et al, 2006). This definition was: 'Social capital is the networks, together with shared norms, values and social trust that facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit, within and between groups'. We used this definition because, as Croll suggests, 'the central idea underlying social capital is that social relationships and the personal networks which they create are a resource which can be used to generate outcomes which are valued' (2004:398).

However, research has highlighted problems with the 'dark side' of these beneficially supportive arrangements (Baron, et al, 2000; Croll, 2004, Schuller et al, 2004, Field, 2005,). For what were constructed as mutually reinforcing ties, have also been recognised as potentially binding shackles in some circumstances for some groups in society. For example, when incomers to an established community are excluded from its networks or when the dominant norms of a group make education seem to be 'not for them' (McGivney, 2001). Researchers have also highlighted the difficulty in isolating social capital as a prime determinant of change because it is so inextricably woven in a complex nexus of other socio-economic factors that individually and collectively impact on the lives of adults.

Nevertheless, there appears to be a broad acceptance of an association between participation in structured learning, and changes in the nature of the connections that learners have with networks that lead to more involvement in society and the building of trust

(Balatti et al, 2006). The combined effect of trust, networks, norms and reciprocity can also create a stronger sense of personal and social efficacy because people are able to call on greater sources of support in their lives (McKenzie and Harpham, 2006).

There are two main types of social capital: bonding, i.e. 'links between like-minded people' and bridging, i.e. 'the building of connections between heterogeneous groups' (Baron, et al, 2000:10). Both are highly normative in that they are constructed around commonalities that link people together so where bonding capital is high but the norms of the community are not associated with participation in education, then the normative pull of non-participation will be strong, and the pressure to conform, equally so. However, those who do participate can build bridging social capital because people make contact with others who are different in outlook, interests, education and social circles.

Research also suggests that developing an identity as a learner is shaped by the complex interaction of a number of factors that relate to the social, because learning is essentially a social activity. These include past learning experiences and the mediating effect of family influences upon them (Rees *et al.*, 2000), as well as the norms and values of the social networks that individuals belong to (Gallacher and Crossan, 2000; Crowther et al, 2001). These are the networks, associated norms, and levels of trust that are the basic building blocks of social capital (Putnam, 1993; Baron *et al.*, 2000; Schuller *et al*, 2004). As Field suggests, 'social capital is important for learning, and learning is important for social capital' (Field, 2005:110). Identity is neither fixed nor static and Vincent argues 'for an understanding of identity as fluid, not fixed; multiple, not single; and transforming, not static' (2003:5). She cites Hall's observation that;

Cultural identities come from somewhere and have histories. But...far from being eternally fixed in some essentialist past, they are subject to the continual play of history, culture and power...identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past (1993:394).

We are assigned identities by powerful others, but we also create our own sense of self, through or despite others' constructions of ourselves. But for many ALN learners the powerful force of their ascribed identities as non-capable learners during their schooling, blocks the possibility of them creating an alternative image of themselves as capable, competent learners (see Balatti et al, 2006; Ivanic et al, 2006). What we mean by learner identity, or more accurately identity as a learner, is the conscious recognition of our ability to learn, i.e. belief in our competence in structured, or 'learning-conscious' learning (Rogers 2003, p27). Rogers distinguishes this from acquisitional, or 'task-conscious' learning (p16), the everyday learning that we unavoidable engage in through living in and enacting with the world around us. He maintains, however, that many adults with negative experiences of compulsory education struggle to marry their construction of themselves as capable 'task-conscious' learners with their sense of self as able learners in structured educational contexts. For though adults may recognise their competence in relation to the acquisitional learning that they regularly encounter, their perceptions and experience of education inhibit the transfer of this positive self-construct in formalised learning contexts. They revert to constructing themselves as *not* able, *not* competent, because this is how the educational world has hitherto labelled them and because they equate learning primarily with formal education. They have negative or at best fragile identities as learners. It is this conception of learner identity that we draw upon in this paper.

The precise nature of the interconnectedness of social capital and learner identity is not easily isolated from a range of other determinants of learning but we hypothesised that the acquisition of a stronger learner identity, developed from a positive learning experience, has a catalytic role in building learners' confidence and social capital. This research, therefore, sought to explore potential links between social capital, ALN learning and learner identity in those learners participating in the study. It was also mindful of the fact that a disproportionately high percentage of literacy learners belong to communities that experience socio-economic marginalisation (Scottish Executive, 2001) where levels of participation in structured learning remain persistently low (Aldridge and Tuckett, 2005). However, these participants had engaged in learning, had begun to construct the bridge between different communities, and so it examined the impact that this had on their social capital.

With the exception of Schuller et al's studies (2004) much research on social capital and learning has looked at the impact of social capital on participation in learning (see Field 2005). It has evidenced the virtuous cycle whereby high social capital appears to encourage participation, which in turn enhances social capital and so on. From Coleman and Putnam's perspectives, this is not problematic, for they construct it as 'an entirely non-zero sum and [a] non-competitive commodity' (Croll, 2004:400). Bourdieu on the other hand, perceived it as excluding because, in a divided society, it operates to advantage those who have high social capital and hence increases the gap between the educationally rich and poor. Annual learning surveys provide consistent evidence of this wide and persisting learning divide in the UK (see e.g. Aldridge and Tuckett, 2005) whereby those who have most, continue to access more. They appear to confirm Bourdieu's more pessimistic view of the competitive operation of social capital, which offers little hope for those with fragile learner identities. However, if social capital is neither fixed nor immutable, then it is equally important that we

understand, not just how social capital affects learning, but how learning affects social capital. This study therefore aimed to examine the impact of learning and learner identity *on* social capital because the indices of success for Scotland's ALN policy (Scottish Executive, 2001) involve charting the impact of learning on the social worlds of the learners.

Measuring social capital

Social capital provided a relevant framework for analysis, as it was hypothesised that learners might increase their social capital as a result of participation in programmes. Strawn (2005: 551) has argued that the discourse of particular communities around education is an important component of social capital because it is a function of interpersonal interaction over time. Her research found that people living in communities where education is seen as a means of advancement are more likely to participate in formal learning programmes. Research also shows that engaging in social activity builds social capital through developing knowledge resources from opportunities for interactions with other members of the community (Putnam, 1993, 2000; Falk and Kilpatrick, 2000). So it was hypothesised that participating in ALN would build a discourse around education through bridging learners into different networks that would in turn lead to greater social capital.

Particular social capital indices were selected because they represented the defining characteristics of the concept identified in previous research (Murtagh, 2002, Tuijnman and Boudard, 2001, Halman, 2001, OECD, 2001, Baron, et al, 2000, Campbell et al, 1999, Bullen and Onyx, 1998). They included: identification with and attitudes towards the neighbourhood; social and civic engagement; feelings of safety and belonging; and social contacts and supportive networks. The questionnaire therefore sought to identify any associations between participation in ALN learning and these elements of social capital and

to consider how they might inform the enhancement of provision and impact on learners' identities. Learners were asked the same questions in the first and second rounds to highlight changes in their views about themselves, their communities and their networks.

Chart 1 shows the changes that learners reported between the first and second interviews. The percentages have been calculated for those people who responded.

Chart 1: Do learners go out regularly here

There was an increase in the number of learners who indicated they went out to pubs, clubs and/or the cinema (54% to 63%). The change was statistically significant for females (50% to 61%). Older learners showed a similar statistically significant increase in the numbers going out (49% to 60%). There was no significant change in learners going to meetings (35% to 36%) or engaging in voluntary work (29% to 30%). It would appear therefore that there had been an increase in social, but not civic, activity between the rounds.

Learners were then asked if they wanted to become more involved in local activities. Chart 2 shows that there has been an increase in people saying definitely no and also in those saying definitely yes. From the qualitative data reported on later, it appears that these changes were caused by learners becoming clearer about what they do, and do not, like to do with their lives.

Chart 2: Do learners want to become more involved in local activities here

Those learners not wanting to become more involved in local activities were asked why not. Reasons differed slightly between the two rounds as chart 3 indicates. Fewer cited lack of

skills and/or interest as determining factors whilst more referred to other interests and time limitations in round 2. This suggests that learners were increasingly involved in a wider range of activities than previously, and perceived their literacies difficulties as less of a barrier than hitherto.

Chart 3: Being involved in local activities here

The final question concerned learners' contact with other people as again research shows that being in social contact and accessing help when needed lead to positive social capital, through building both knowledge resources of who, when and where to go to for advice or resources and through being willing to act for the benefit of the community and its members (Campbell *et al*, 1999; Falk and Kilpatrick, 2000). Engagement in learning can in turn, lead to increased levels of social engagement, particularly for isolated and vulnerable adults (Field, 2005:108-9).

There was a significant (5% level) increase in the number of learners reporting that they could get help from friends and others around if needed. 88% and 93% of learners at the first and second interviews respectively noted being able to get help from friends and others in their locality. There was also a significant (5% level) increase among older learners noting this. 3% more also attested to meeting friends or family when out locally.

Learners were also asked about changes in the social environment of their programmes, i.e. their relationships with their tutor and others on the programme. They were overwhelmingly positive about the tutor with 89% reporting it was highly satisfactory, and only 3% reporting an unsatisfactory relationship (the remaining 8% said it was satisfactory). In the qualitative data learners participating in community-based provision reported on aspects of positive relations with their tutors. For example, tutors had 'helped me to be patient' and 'shown me

how to go about making job applications’, ‘they gave me the power to trust myself’, and, ‘I’ve learned a lot about myself and my ability because I was treated as an adult.’ They were also very positive about their relationships with fellow students with 81% reporting that this was great and only 4% saying it was unsatisfactory. In the qualitative data learners, particularly those in community-based group provision commented on these relationships. One said ‘the group helped me to meet different people socially and mix with them’ and another from a different group commented, ‘we made friends on the course, developed relationships in the group that helped with the learning process’. These aspects of the programmes provide evidence of the building of bridging social capital that we will return to later but first we explore the data related to changes in self-confidence.

Self-confidence

Findings from the research also showed an increase in self-confidence, which intertwines with enhanced social and communicative abilities and changes in learner identity. The literature demonstrates that confidence in one’s self in the social world, and confidence in one’s self as a learner interact together in complex ways and are both linked to prior experiences of learning and to social capital (Field, 2005; McGivney, 2001; Schuller et al, 2004). Research with adult returners to learning has shown that those who failed in school gain in confidence, particularly from later successful learning experiences (Hammond, 2004: 42). Hammond’s research found that confidence developed through learning was often accompanied by positive personal growth and openness to new ideas. Since growth in self-confidence is the most widely documented ‘soft’ outcome of learning, this research sought to measure changes in learners’ levels of confidence over time.

There have been many debates about what is meant by self-confidence so we reviewed the literature to decide what would be operationalisable. There seemed to be considerable consensus with Erwin and Kelly's (1985: 395) definition as 'assuredness in oneself and in one's capabilities'; Lawrence (1999: 92) as, 'confidence in abilities and confidence in personality' and Owens (1993: 289) as 'positive self-evaluation' so we decided to include both individual and social situations. There are a number of existing instruments for measuring self-confidence but the research team wanted a straightforward means of measuring change over time that would not be too intrusive into learners' lives and would be easily understood. We therefore devised a method that picked out relevant scenarios for the learners that were grounded in situations they would face in their everyday lives. As the scale was primarily derived to measure change over time *within* the respondents rather than as a means of comparison with other groups, it was designed to include elements of their lives in sufficient depth and variety to allow scores to be calculated. The scenarios asked how confident learners were when: meeting new people; making phone enquiries; joining a group of strangers; discussing things with officials; discussing things with a doctor; speaking up in a meeting; complaining about poor service; defending their position in an argument; agreeing within the family; and being interviewed. Responses to each scenario were allocated a score with 1 representing very uncomfortable and 4 very comfortable. Mean scores were computed for each of the 335 learners who completed all 10 of the elements of the self-confidence instrument in both rounds of interview. The higher the number the more confident learners were.

Chart 4: Average confidence level in 1st and 2nd interviews here

Chart 4 shows a marked shift to the right, i.e. more learners obtaining a higher overall confidence score in the second round than the first, and no learners in round two obtaining

the very low confidence scores that they had initially. There appears therefore to be a marked correlation between engagement in learning and increased confidence.

The responses to individual scenarios were analysed to see if there were statistically significant changes in individual elements between interviews. These are detailed below.

Making enquiries over the phone

Learners were significantly (5% level) more likely to indicate confidence in making telephone enquiries at their second interview than at their first. More learners indicated being 'very comfortable' making such enquires (24% to 27%) and fewer indicated being 'very uncomfortable' (17% to 12%). Analysing the data by gender showed that female learners were significantly more comfortable (1% level) (18% to 24%).

Joining in a group of strangers

Learners were significantly (5% level) more likely to indicate confidence in joining in with a group of strangers at their second interview than at their first (49% to 56%). More female learners indicated being either 'very comfortable or comfortable' (47% to 52%) at joining in with a group of strangers. Older learners also showed a significant (5% level) change in their comfort levels (50% to 55%).

Speaking up in a group or meeting

Learners were significantly more likely to indicate confidence in speaking up in a group or meeting at their second interview than at their first (54% to 62%).

Female responses showed a significant change (49% to 58%). There were also significant changes in responses for both younger and older learners (5% level) - younger learners (55% to 65%) and older learners (54% to 61%).

Being interviewed?

Learners were significantly (5% level) more likely to indicate comfort in being interviewed at their second interview than at their first (82% to 87%). Female responses displayed a significant change (77% to 86%), as did older learners, (81% to 86%).

So by the second interview statistically significant numbers of learners, particularly women and older learners, had become more confident about these scenarios and their overall confidence scores had increased. In other words, their belief in their social and communicative abilities had increased during their learning episodes.

Confidence, relationships and social engagement

So far we have shown that there were increases in those aspects of social capital that were about engaging in social activity and networking, particularly for those learners in community-based group settings. We have also shown that learners gained in self-confidence and in this section we link this quantitative data together with the qualitative data from 200 of the learners to examine the relationship between these and learner identity. Field (2005:19) suggests that interpersonal communications and connections are the core elements of social capital, and Norman and Hyland (2003: 269) have demonstrated the importance of social interaction as a factor in increasing confidence. Their study showed that 'although the individual learner can affect his/her own level of confidence, tutors, peers, mentors and workplace supervisors can help increase the learners' confidence by providing support, encouragement and constructive feedback' (p 270). Schuller et al's (2004) studies of the wider benefits of learning provide strong evidence of the impact of learning on social meta-competencies that equip people with the confidence and ability to develop their social

connections. The evidence from the confidence scales together with the increases in social capital indicates that the learners in this research experienced this same positive shift.

In order to explore this shift in more detail qualitative data from two hundred learners pertaining to the question 'what impact has your participation in the ALN programme had on your personal, work, family and community life' were further analysed. Clearly we are reporting on learners' own perceptions of the impact rather than an objective assessment. However, perceptions are crucial in building a picture of what is seen as important in people's lives. Confidence is a quite generalised concept, so the responses were analysed to identify 'confidence in what', i.e. how the respondents expected that their increased confidence would affect various aspects of their lives. The data show that increased self-confidence acted as a key to opening up a wide range of other changes that clustered into three broad groupings, - psychological, skills and activity related.

The *psychological* differences that learners spoke of included increased self-esteem, a growing sense of their potential, ability and achievements, (in other words, changed learner identity), more independence, being happier as a person, being more able to voice their own opinions, openly talking about their ALN difficulties, improved health and an enhanced awareness and understanding of aspects of the world around them. The number of learners citing enhanced confidence in their own abilities rose from 19% to 30% (38 to 46). For example:

- I believe in myself now that I can achieve things.
- It's boosted my confidence because I don't feel as thick as I did before
- I'm doing things I didn't think I was capable of doing.

- I can speak out more because I know I can be educated. It's made a difference to the way I feel about everything.
- I feel better, read books, have achieved that. It's given me plenty of confidence.
- I'm not 'crabbit' [bad tempered] anymore because ... I'm not avoiding problems - I'm tackling them head on.'
- I can get out of bed, take more care of myself and get a haircut
- I am now confident about sharing the fact that I had this problem and am seeking help

The confidence *to do things* related to skills that were both ALN specific and that had developed as a consequence of participants' enhanced ALN skills. One of the most evident differences in the learners between the interviews was a sense of their achievement in learning. They had come to recognise that they were capable learners; their learner identity had changed, had become more positive, and this confidence in learning had in turn affected other areas of their lives. 32% percent in the first interview referred to themselves as *beginning* to achieve things, however 48% in the second interview talked of their pride in what they *had* achieved. For example:

- I'm more confident in speaking to others so I'm not scared to go to interviews now
- It has helped me to use the computer and I need it for work. I can also interact with friends better because of the computer, because I know what they're talking about.
- I can tackle things like reading newspapers and books.'
- I will now fill in forms which before I would have left to my husband.
- I feel more confident in myself at work. I can also make enquiries over the phone, for example if the car insurance is due.

- I'm more confident particularly in shopping because I can work out percentage reductions
- All sorts of things are open to me now. My life would have been so different if I hadn't done this, and my children's lives would also have been different.

The third cluster of confidence indicators relates to a range of *activities* in learners' lives that they now participate in, or can do so with more confidence. Thirty-one percent of the learners (up 11%) talked of things they now do *because* of their enhanced literacies skills.

For example:

- I can help myself. I don't need to depend on others and have changed my mind to be very hopeful and helpful.
- I'm more confident approaching strangers for information',
- It's much easier to live, and I feel safer.
- If a conflict came up, I used to cry, but now I don't. At work I managed to say I didn't do something I was falsely accused of doing, and can stand up for myself.
- I don't need an interpreter when I go to the hospital

Twelve percent (up 3%) said that they socialised more than previously and were more comfortable doing so. They talked about meeting new friends, particularly from their programmes, going out with friends more, starting new leisure activities and not being afraid of meeting new people. They had grown in confidence and this was manifest in an increasingly positive sense of self and ability to tackle a whole range of things in their life, including learning.

Many learners' responses related to changes in the nature of familial relationships. These included relationships between parents and children (37% in both interviews), general relationships amongst family members (35% to 38%) between partners (9% to 6%) grandparents and their grandchildren (6% to 3%) and other relatives (6% to 8%). Although there was little quantitative difference in the volume of responses, there was a noticeable shift in emphasis in the comments. On the whole, learners in interview 2 were less tentative about changes in their families, and more specific about the precise nature of these changes. For example:

- There's no more fighting with my daughter when it's homework time because I can help her with it, which I couldn't do in the past.
- I'm helping the children with their homework, reading 'Harry Potter' to my son and helping my daughter who has learning difficulties.
- I'm a bit more patient with my Dad when we go out. I learned from seeing the patience of the tutors.
- It saves my wife doing everything all the time and I don't want to have to rely on her.

The responses to both rounds of interviews show the considerable impact that ALN learning has had on relationships and activities within the family. The greatest changes related to improved relationships, primarily between parents and children, with the main focus here being in parents' enhanced confidence and skills in supporting their children's education. This in turn gave them more in common to do together and to talk about, thus engendering all round better relationships.

Learners were positive about the likelihood of their ALN involvement improving their employment situation in both interviews. In the second interview 102 learners (51%) made

additional comments regarding their working lives that included improved job/promotional prospects and confidence to perform tasks at work. Moreover, it was clear from their comments that they regarded their ALN involvement as an important factor in this. For example:

- I am now working with a team of gardeners as a direct result of the college [FE] course.
- I have moved on to 2 more part-time jobs, helped by having more confidence.
- I am recently promoted, would not have been possible before, I would not even have thought of trying for it.
- I have more responsibility at work - it [ALN] has made work easier.
- I am more confident using the written work, write a lot more, which is required at work.
- I am more confident about filling in applications... my brother used to do it for me.

The proportion of those also reporting an increase in their confidence in themselves as workers had risen from 13% to 26%.

One hundred and thirty-two learners (66%) from the first round of interviews spoke about the impact of ALN involvement on their educational aspirations. At this stage the overwhelming majority of informants were keen to continue with some form of education after their ALN course. For example:

- At some point in the future [I] will do something but not sure yet what.
- I'm much more positive about doing further courses.
- I intend to go back and finish the classroom assistant course.

- Would also like to learn basic accountancy skills to help with the Café project.

Learners have gone on to study a wide range of topics at various levels including computing/IT, communications, social and health care and gardening. What comes across strongly from the learners was the importance of ALN in building their confidence in their learning potential and therefore self in general, and in providing them with positive educational experiences that encouraged them to undertake further study. In other words their learner identities had grown.

Confidence, developing trusting relationships and social engagement each comprise elements of social capital, and, as Field (2005) observes, they affect and are affected by learning. The evidence from this research suggests that the 'virtuous circle' of social capital is operating and affecting those who have engaged in learning. The testimonies of the learners indicates that the first step into this 'virtuous circle' is the change in their learner identity; their newly found realisation that they are not, as the world had hitherto labelled them, - 'thick' or 'stupid', but are in fact, capable, competent learners. They had consequently grown in confidence and it was impacting on familial, social and work relationships, which in turn was adding to learners' social capital. The data also show that learning produces multiple outcomes, some of which are anticipated, and others that are not, which collectively also have had a positive impact on the participants' identities as learners.

We suggest that these outcomes are partly attributable to particular approaches to learning in ALN that places the participant at the centre of practice where learning activities are chosen or adapted to learners' individual goals, personal interests or immediate lives (see Balatti et al, 2006; Ivanic et al, 2006; Tett, Hamilton and Hillier, 2006). In addition a major part of providing successful learning opportunities was through tutors 'creating a supportive

atmosphere where learners were treated with respect and equality within relationships of warmth and trust in the classroom' (Ivanic et al, 2006:41). This also enabled learners to gain access to the networks of their tutors and other staff and to network with fellow students, many of whom came from different neighbourhoods, as the quotes cited earlier confirm. As Balatti et al argue:

The interaction that occurred in these networks produced the resources, that is knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs that led to social capital outcomes and/or human capital outcomes, such as literacy and numeracy skills and the more elusive intrapersonal skills and attributes, for example, confidence and self esteem (2006: 7).

These important interactions acted as bridging capital breaking down the insularity of learners' own local networks and creating new friendships and linkages with fellow students, tutors and the wider world.

As Balatti et al found:

For a number of students, the relationships they had with their tutors were perhaps the most significant factor affecting social capital outcomes. It was through these relationships that many participants redefined their connection with educational institutions, redefined their relationships with other adults in authority positions, and for some, redefined themselves as capable learners' (2006: 33).

Having an adult relationship with a tutor was important in overcoming the sense of inferiority experienced by those previously labelled as 'unsuccessful learners' as it changed their learner identity, and for some therefore, their lives.

Conclusion

This research has confirmed Balatti et al's (2006) conceptualisation that bridging social capital is developed through learners being at the centre of a range of new networks in relation to their tutors, other staff and fellow students. The data reported here show that learners were more likely to increase their contact with local people and go out regularly therefore indicating an increase in trust and more engagement in their local communities. Many participants reported that they came to their learning, tentative, apprehensive and with quite negative learning identities. The quantitative and qualitative data from the second round of interviews indicates that after their engagement with ALN, these learners were generally feeling and behaving differently. Their confidence had increased, their identities as learners had changed and their social capital had increased. Learning appears to have reduced the impact of the 'dark side' of social capital of being locked into networks that denigrate, rather than value, engaging in education and to have opened up a range of possibilities that were hitherto blocked for them, which in turn enabled them to accrue greater social, human and economic capital.

Learning and its benefits are dynamic in the sense that benefits gained in one domain such as education impact on functioning in other domains, such as family and community (see Bynner and Hammond, 2004: 161). So in reporting on learners' views, the research has shown that learning has brought about a number of positive changes in people's lives. These findings illustrate the impact that participation in ALN has on self-confidence, social capital and identity as a capable learner and show the importance of providing good quality teaching and learning in enabling these participants to sustain and progress in their learning.

Research has shown (e.g. Baron et al, 2000) that membership of networks and the ability to mobilise social capital also provides access to employment opportunities and enhances people's ability to do the job effectively. Therefore enhancing social capital through engagement in learning can increase economic and social activity leading to wider benefits for the individual, their community and society. This is particularly important in communities where people generally do not have educational aspirations because it is extremely difficult for an individual living in such locations to behave differently. In other words, the effect of education in raising people's sights is experienced more widely as a positive influence on the cultural norms that encourage others to do the same (see Schuller et al, 2004: 191).

There is extensive research literature that demonstrates the link between low literacy and numeracy skills and economic and social status. Low skilled adults are more likely to be unemployed, living on low incomes, experiencing poor health and early morbidity (Bryner and Parsons, 2001; Hammond, 2004; Raudenbush and Kasim, 2003; Schuller *et al.*, 2004; Willms, 2003). There is also a strong relationship between educational inequality, income inequality and lack of social cohesion in terms of societal trust and community safety (Green et al. 2003) especially in communities where, 'education is simply not part of [their] value system and behaviour patterns' (McGivney, 2001: 25). Add to this the damaging experiences of education endured by many ALN students at school (Maclachlan & Tett 2005) and it is not surprising that they feel negatively about themselves as learners. Moreover, as Charlesworth (2000, 243-4) argues:

Being told that one is not clever is like being told that one is fat or ugly; it is not something about which one can achieve indifference because it is likely to play a deciding role in one's destiny, particularly in the possibility of a worthwhile life and

happiness. Thus we end up with people defined ... as 'useless', unable, stupid, lacking in the dignities given to the privileged

So the schooling system has effectively constructed negative, non-learner identities for many ALN participants. Furthermore, like any hegemonic relationship, this view of themselves as 'deficit' people is naturalised and unrecognised. Bourdieu (1990: 131) argues that 'agents, even the most disadvantaged, tend to perceive the world as natural and to find it surprisingly acceptable, especially when one looks at the situation of the dominated through the eyes of the dominant'. The 'natural' attitudes of the general population mean that many dominant 'agents' incorporate the discourse of deficit that pervades literacies into their own practices. Given these negative indicators any positive changes in outcomes for learners as a result of ALN participation will contribute to increasing social, human and economic capital. For the learners in this study, the dawning belief in themselves as capable learners appears to have triggered this array of positive outcomes.

We must also remember that neither adult education in general, nor ALN learning in particular, operate in a politically neutral vacuum, cushioned from the social and economic struggles for power that are enacted in the contexts in which learning is located. Cervero and Wilson (2001: 11) maintain that this 'requires us to recognise that adult learners exist in the structurally defined hierarchies of everyday life ... Thus they enter this process marked by their location within larger systems of power and privilege that have shaped their experience'. As Ecclestone argues we want an education that 'looks outwards to social change and genuine political consciousness' (2004: 131) and in recognising the importance of learners' emotional as well as cognitive changes we are emphasising their resilience and agency in bringing about change for themselves, their families and their communities.

It is our contention that the findings from this large scale research both confirm and develop those from studies of learning, social capital and learner identity we have cited above. And though we recognise that the conclusions are necessarily tentative given the limited time frame, we are nonetheless confident of the links it has established between a positive ALN learning experience and change in confidence, learner identity and social capital. We are however mindful of the fact that broader questions of the impact of socio-economic structures on disadvantaged communities cannot be properly addressed by a focus on individuals. If the social and economic conditions of communities remain the same then we cannot infer that social capital is being transformed in the long term except for particular individuals. However, illustrating how changes have occurred for these participants can further our understanding of the role that ALN learning can and should play in partnership with other social, economic and environmental development initiatives. We have long known that education cannot on its own affect large scale social transformation, but we have also long known that it is a necessary and pivotal component of such change. It causes adults to think and act differently, and this study has illustrated how a positive learning experience was the catalyst in enabling these participants to do just that.

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Chart 1 Do learners go out regularly

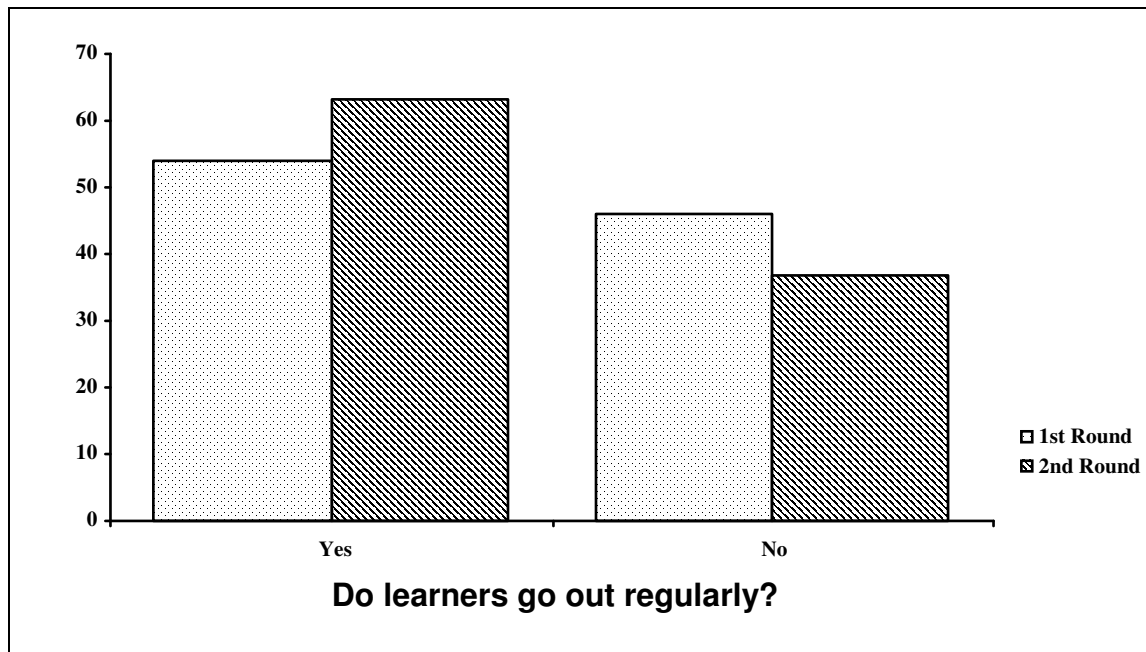


Chart 2: Do learners want to become more involved in local activities

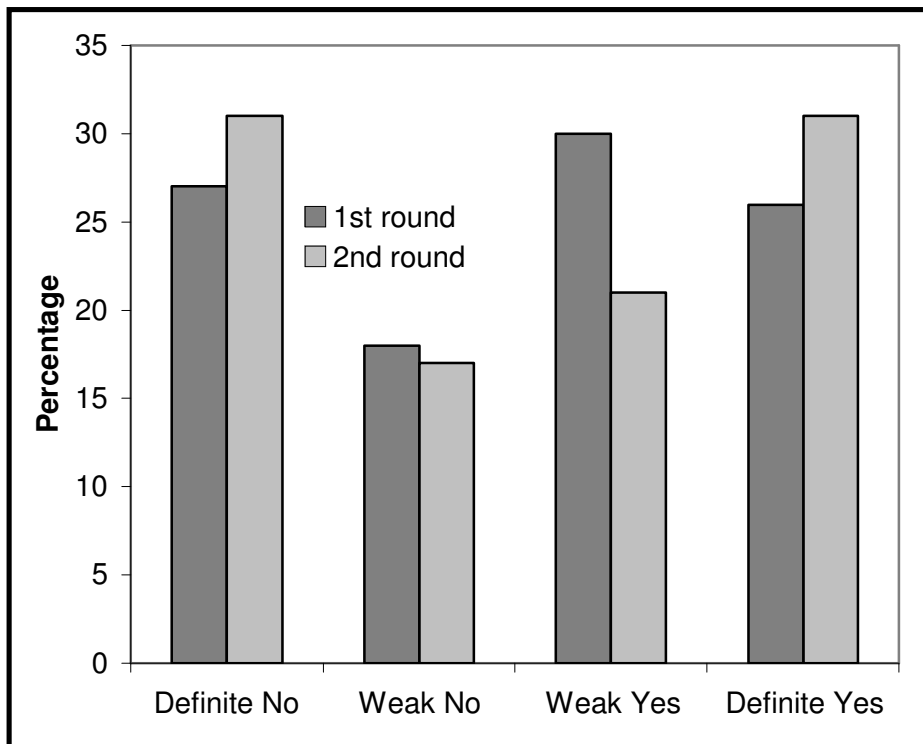


Chart 3 Being involved in local activities

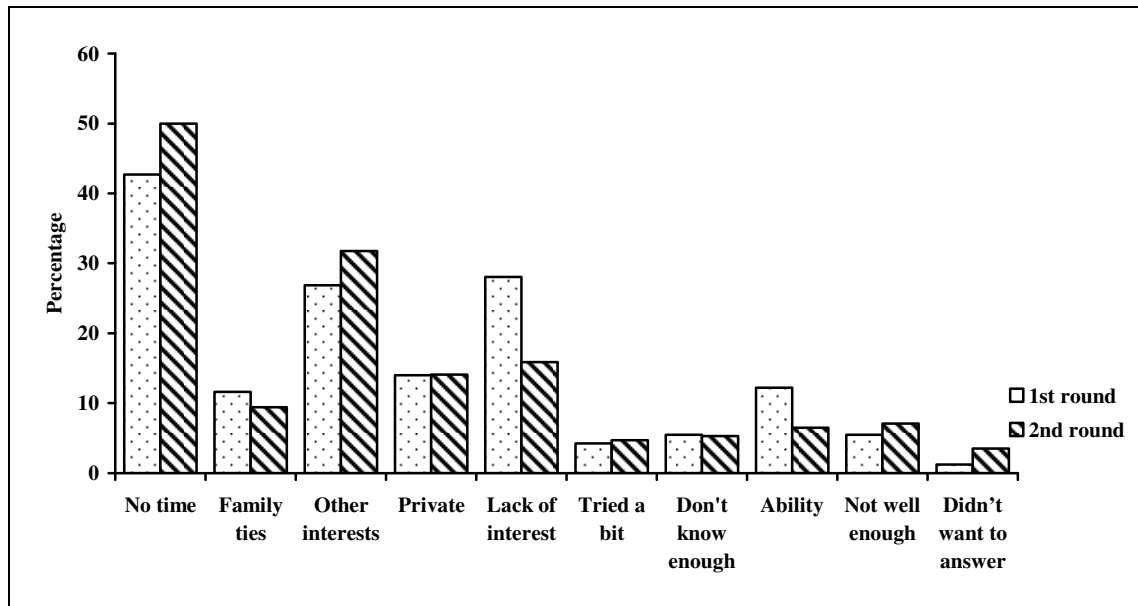


Chart 4 Average confidence Levels

