2. REACHING THE MARGINALISED IN SCOTLAND

### 2.1 Professor Lyn Tett, Community Education and Lifelong Learning, University of Edinburgh

Lyn Tett is Professor of Community Education and Lifelong Learning and Director of Research in the School of Education, University of Edinburgh. Her research has focused particularly on the cultural and class factors that contribute to the literacy and numeracy difficulties experienced by adults and the forms of education and learning that are most effective in empowering individuals and communities experiencing educational disadvantage. Recent research projects include a range of studies for the Scottish Government on adult literacy and numeracy learners with a particular focus on participation and retention and on the role of formative assessment in learning.

The definition of adult literacy used in Scotland acknowledges its complexity:

- To be literate and numerate is not only to have the mechanical skills of encoding and decoding symbols but also the knowledge, skills and understanding that enable us to do what we want to do in our private, family, community and working lives;
- The key life areas and social contexts in which literacy and numeracy are used are important in deciding on what is to be learned;
- Literacy and numeracy skills are almost always employed for a purpose - such as making decisions or solving problems - and in a particular social context (Learning Connections, 2005: 13).

In addition many complex issues affect learning including the dominant attitudes prevailing in society about learning at the macro level, as well as the cognitive, the social and the emotional dimensions operating at the individual level (Illeris, 2002). Interventions that aim to promote initial participation and continuing retention in adult literacy provision should take cognizance of these dimensions for learners to have positive, successful learning experiences.

The tension field of learning

From Illeris, K. (2004) 'The three dimensions of learning' NIACE
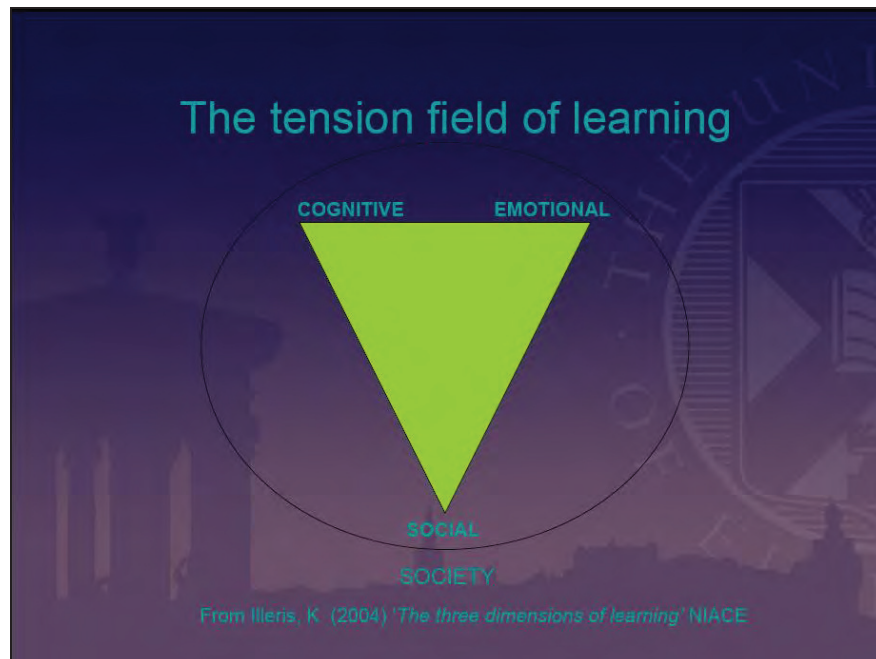
Living in poverty as a child and as an adult appears to have the biggest impact on poor literacy. Parsons and Bynner's (2008) analysis of the Scottish members of the 1970 British Cohort Study found that people with literacy difficulties as adults had a relatively disadvantaged home life in childhood. They were economically poor, had low education levels and little educational support from their parents and, as a result were less likely to have had help with reading and numbers at school. In addition this group had mainly left full-time education without qualifications and had not accessed further learning opportunities. This group was born in 1970 but the situation has not changed with the National Equality Panel Report (2010) finding that there is still a long tail of low achievement among school-leavers particularly low-income boys and Gypsy Travellers.

Another aspect is an individual's willingness to engage in education where poor experiences of school are particularly important in influencing a negative disposition towards learning. Adults interviewed in Maclachlan *et al*'s (2008) study of the persistence of vulnerable learners said:

> *The teachers 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 me best, but I just felt that because I wasn't bright and I wasn't brainy that people just didn't want to know.*

In English and Maths 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.

Participation in education is affected by the social networks that people belong to. If engaging in education is not a norm of your social group then participation can be difficult. However, a sense of shared experiences and values amongst class members can change this, as a student in Maclachlan *et al*'s (2008) study noted:

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.

Students interviewed in Tett *et al*'s (2006) study identified three main barriers that had affected their decision to engage in literacy learning. They were:

- **Personal sensitivity:** '*I felt I was too old to learn*' and '*I was worried that it would be too like school*'
- **The stigma attached to literacy learning**: '*I was worried that people at work would find out that my spelling was really bad*'
- **Lack of publicity about provision**: '*I didn't realise that there were classes like this*'

In terms of motivation students identified:

- **Self-improvement: '***I want to better myself and do something with my life*' and '*it will prove I'm capable of doing things for myself*'
- ***Development of skills*: '***I want to write letters and read them without asking my husband*' and '*I need to read the notice board at work*'.

Maclachlan *et al*'s (2008) study identified the **importance of easily accessible environments** to help people engage in learning. For example a student said:

It was easy to come along here as I just phoned up and then saw the organiser who asked me about what I could do. If it had been more difficult I don't think I would have come along.

However, providing such environments is costly and can have a long **outreach/lead in time** as a tutor in this study pointed out:

I spent two years at X 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 into it, then going into class sessions, that we're doing now. We couldn't have done that in week one.

A key factor that leads people to persist in learning is having a positive identity as someone capable of becoming more literate. This is because it represents

a resource that individuals can continually draw upon when engaging in learning and it may also be an outcome of engagement in learning. As one student in Maclachlan *et al*'s (2008) study suggested:

> *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 ... It's boosting my self-esteem, giving me more confidence and helping me know I can get a job.*

The other aspect is the pedagogy and practice of the education and training providers. This involves a **flexible curriculum that responds to the learners**: '*the tutors here offer me lots of choice and help me to move on to the next thing when I'm ready*'. It also involves **group work that builds a positive learner identity**. For example: '*the whole group gets on well together and it gives me support to try things that I find difficult such as writing on the flip-chart*'. Finally **positive tutor- student relationships** were very important. For example:

> *It motivates me that the tutors are working so hard to help me. I've already been able to write a letter and had a good result from it. I feel it's the first time anyone's reacted to anything I've said.*

The key finding from Tett *et al*'s (2006) study was that participating built confidence that then enabled people to do things differently. Their study found that there were **psychological** differences. Students reported: increases in their self-esteem; a greater belief in their own potential and achievements; they had greater independence; they were happier; more able to voice their opinions; more aware of others. Confidence was also related to **increasing skills**. For example students reported that they were more able to: speak to other people confidently; use computers; read newspapers and books; fill in forms; go shopping and calculate the best value items. Students also reported changes in **facets of their lives** such as: approaching strangers for information; feeling safer in their neighbourhood; more able to deal with conflict and stand up for themselves; and able to engage in conversations without needing an interpreter.

Below are specific illustrations of the changes that students reported:

> *I'm not crabbit (bad tempered) anymore because I'm not avoiding problems I'm tackling them head on.*
> *I don't need to depend on others and have changed to being very hopeful and helpful.*
> *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 more confident in speaking to others so I'm not scared to go to interviews now.*
> *I am a union rep at work ... people now come to me for advice with problems with staff.*

This study also found that learning was dynamic because benefits gained in one domain, such as education, impacted on others, such as family and community. Many people detailed the variety of ways in which their participation in adult literacy had helped them to do a better job as a parent, and had improved relationships generally within their families. These positive changes in attitudes to education and family life are likely to result in benefits for the wider family and community as well as the individual concerned.

These findings show the importance of providing good quality teaching to enable literacy learners to progress and sustain their learning. However, education cannot on its own affect large-scale social transformation, but it is a necessary and pivotal component of such change causing adults to think and act differently.

References

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