

Working with youth to raise literacy and numeracy skills

Research evidence on engaging youth in strengthening their literacy and numeracy

Research shows that there are particular factors which need to be taken into account when working with youth to strengthen literacy and numeracy.¹

Effective literacy and numeracy provision for youth requires all the same features of good practice for other adult learners. However it appears that for youth these are more significant than for other adult learners, as youth are much more likely to 'switch off' if the literacy and numeracy provision is not seen as immediately relevant to their interests and needs.

- Young people need to see that the literacy and numeracy for something that is of immediate interest and relevance to them. This requires weaving or embedding literacy and numeracy into relevant interesting youth contexts.
- Literacy and numeracy should be embedded into the programme not 'bolted on' to other learning and all staff and young adults must see that literacy, language and numeracy run through everything, 'not just on Thursday afternoons'.
- The literacy and numeracy aspects of tasks should be highlighted within sessions and not 'disguised' within other learning.
- The way in which practitioners introduce literacy, language and numeracy is crucial to the attitudes of learners – these skills should be constantly promoted as relevant and essential and should be made intrinsic to the learning programme.

Recruitment and retention

The key differences between getting young adults to engage in literacy and numeracy learning and other sectors of the population are in the areas of recruitment, retention and motivation.

- The most successful recruiting strategy for recruiting learners to these programmes appears to be "word of mouth" and referrals from other agencies dealing with youth.
- Programmes which are successful in recruiting and retaining young people offer activities that are highly appealing to young people and have informal environments where young people feel 'at home'.

¹ See bibliography attached for key references

- Programmes which start by using young adults' interests and then progress to wider issues appear to be successful in recruiting and retaining learners. The sessions need to be relevant to the young adults' lives at the time and have provision which is perceived as 'useful' by the learners.

Motivation

Literacy, language and numeracy provision that is relevant to young adults' lives, aims and aspirations is more likely to engage and motivate learners.

- For most young adults their aim in attending any course is financial independence and autonomy. This is most often associated with employment and independent living. For this reason, qualifications that relate to employment and progression are highly valued by most youth learners.
- Research highlights ICT as a great motivator in work with young adults.
- Youth learners need to see that the provision is designed to meet their needs, is different from school and that the learning leads to qualifications or employment.
- Learning experiences should be enjoyable and engaging, and should develop young adults' self-confidence.
- Mentoring relationships can play an important part in motivating young people but only when the mentor can relate well to the learner.

Pedagogy/Teaching practice

Programmes focused on raising literacy and numeracy for youth should consider..

- **Tailored resources** Using teaching and learning resources that are unique to youth environment and goals.
- **Non-academic** Teaching which engages young adults uses 'non-academic' approaches - it is important to avoid terminology that relates to school and formal education, since this can alienate learners.
- **Informal** There is strong research evident to support the efficacy of creating an informal atmosphere and environment in a learning programme.
- **Flexible** Planning for youth literacy programmes takes many factors into consideration so that the individual requirements are accounted for and the teacher can be flexible about how outcomes are achieved.
- **Individualised** Young adult learners respond well to a more individualised approach, where possible - individualise programmes through non-generic teaching and retain as much of a one-to-one approach as possible.

- **Feedback** Young adult learners value regular feedback, both formal and informal, on their progress and require evidence that their participation is worthwhile
- **Learner groupings** Young people's complex needs including and underpinned by literacy needs, require careful planning of learner groupings especially where young people are from non-English speaking backgrounds and indigenous backgrounds.

Educators

Educators working with youth learners need to be able to engage with and relate to young adults and have appropriate skills in teaching literacy and numeracy.

Relationships

Work with young adult learners must acknowledge and appreciate their values and culture, as distinct from other age groups.

- Tutors need to maintain a non-judgmental attitude; 'not being like teachers', staff must be 'user-friendly'; interrupt the adult/child relationship – encourage young adults to 'teach' the practitioners.
- Best practice programmes for young people rely on tutors being positive about change and modelling strategies to meet the challenges.

Key resources for programme design and teaching of literacy and numeracy

There are two key sets of documents which provide a useful framework for designing effective embedded literacy and numeracy :

- **The Theoretical Framework** The theoretical framework document outlines the theoretical understandings that can be used as a basis for making principled decisions about strengthening literacy and numeracy in vocational training.
- **The Adult Learning Progressions for Literacy and Numeracy** The learning progressions provide a framework that shows what adult learners know and can do at successive points as they develop their expertise in literacy learning. This framework can be used as a guide to identifying the next steps for adult learners. Each progression covers a particular aspect of learning. The progressions can be used in many different adult learning settings. They describe what is learned in the order that it is usually learned. They are accompanied by teacher resources for each progression

Both of these documents can be found at www.literacyandnumeracyforadults.org.nz

References

The following references provide further detailed information which may be useful:

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