

# Teaching adult literacy : can anyone do it or are specialist skills needed?

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National Research and Development Centre  
for adult literacy and numeracy



# Adult learning, lifelong learning

Multiple benefits:

- Financial, economic, social, community, health, well-being



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## Adult literacy learning

- Core importance of adult literacy in an increasingly literate world: literacy matters
- People who struggle with reading & writing are disadvantaged in many ways

## The story transcends the figures

- All our countries have adults in the population who are not able to read well or write fluently
- Lots of measurement debates about numbers and levels, but the people are there
- But from the individual perspective...



## It's hidden, perhaps not surprising?

- Think of something you are not good at
- Make a quick note of it

## What about you?

- Now think of something you tried to learn as a child but were not successful
- Can you do it now?
- What made you decide to learn later?
- What helped you to learn?

## The perspective of adult literacy learners

- The stories told by people who have learnt to read as adults
- The years of (often complex) strategies to avoid embarrassment
- Wanting to fit in...





## The learners' success stories

- Of the elation and joy at finally learning to read
- Of a new-found confidence
- Of being able to interact independently with the world



*agnesszilagyi.wordpress.com*

## So how can we achieve this?

In our schooling systems, we expect young children to:

- First, to learn to read
- Then, to read to learn

Reading is used to access all other curriculum areas



## The schoolteacher's perspective

- Primary teachers teach the full curriculum
- Most are not literacy specialists or experts
- Many of their pupils are successful
- In terms of reading, the pupils could be described in 3 broad groups:

- The 1st group learn to read pretty much unaided, they don't need much help, in a literate environment they figure it out for themselves.
- The 2nd group need some help. The debates continue about which methods work best, but with some help of whatever kind, this group succeed.
- The 3rd group are the ones the teachers struggle with that need more intensive or expert help.

## Recent research on 11 year olds (EEF)

- 11% were at least 16 months behind the minimum expected level for age group
- Consistent pattern over 7 years
- 24 trial projects evaluated, in 6 broad groups
- All 6 mention quality and professional development of teachers



## What about the adult teachers?

- They know about androgogy, how adults learn, about motivation, positive approaches, starting from what learners **can do**
- But is this enough?



## The limits of a general approach

- Is it enough to teach the medium of communication we use to teach everything else?
- Is it enough to teach something most of us can't remember learning to do?
- Is it enough to cater for people who were part of 'the 3<sup>rd</sup> group' as children and have spent years in camouflage?



## Adult literacy teaching as a specialism

In addition to excellent practice in leading adult learning, need:

- Deep understanding of language and literacy
- Subject-specific pedagogical content
- To select strategies for individual learners taking into account their personal context

## Features of adult literacy teacher training

- Experiential activity to ensure teachers can ‘see’ the subject from the learners perspective (for example being exposed to unfamiliar text and asked to respond to it in various ways)
- Exposure to excellent practitioners, to observe, reflect and discuss

## Features of adult literacy teacher training

- Access to trained mentors
- Peer observation activities to encourage development of critical reflective analysis early in their own professional development
- This list has selected highlights only and is the subject of a separate session

## So, can anyone teach an adult to read?

- Depends how much success matters?
- A typical story: didn't understand at school, adopted a low profile, sometimes for decades. Finally found the courage to seek help, but if you get more of what didn't work first time around, the chances are you are back out of that open door...

# Any questions?

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