

▶ ADULT LITERACY RESEARCH

Using partnerships to build literacy and numeracy capabilities in communities

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▶ IT HAS LONG BEEN accepted that adult literacy and numeracy is best taught and learned in real-life situations using resources that relate to everyday needs. This 'situated learning' means that opportunities for learning are everywhere, not just in colleges or designated learning centres. This understanding was crucial to the development of early workplace learning programs, and underpins Australia's significant success in integrating literacy and numeracy with wider vocational skills development.

However, integrating literacy and numeracy skills acquisition with vocational education and training (VET) is only one possible approach to developing these skills in varying social contexts. Just as literacy educators have learned to avoid treating literacy needs in isolation, governments and other social agencies have acknowledged the inadequacy of 'single agency' responses to a range of social policies, and the need for whole-of-government, cross-sectoral approaches to a wide range of social issues.

Governments are increasingly favouring the use of partnership models for policy development and service provision of social programs. At the same time, it is increasingly recognised that learning is a central driver in building social capital, or the skills and networks within a community. The challenge for governments is to link policies in various sectors to the goal of a learning society, and for educators to move outside the educational domain into other social environments.

Literacy and numeracy are fundamental to the growth of social capital, especially for communities who feel left behind and socially excluded. To what extent do literacy services go beyond the educational domain? Does literacy development

contribute to the construction of social capital? Can the lessons learned from the integration of literacy learning with vocational education be used to develop such practices in other social domains?

▶ The research

The study intended to act as a preliminary investigation of these issues by exploring:

- how literacy and numeracy integration is being, or might be, achieved in cross-portfolio approaches with agencies for whom education and training is not core business
- how approaches to building literacy and numeracy skills might be further developed through partnerships and joined-up, whole-of-government approaches.

The methodology combined a literature review with interviews of managers in cross-sectoral community projects and exemplary workplace projects. This was complemented by a 'think tank' assisted by the Australian Council for Adult Literacy and overseas information on the subject.

▶ The findings

The review of workplace learning sites confirmed the success of initiatives in Australia in integrating literacy, numeracy and vocational skills acquisition through 'built in' rather than 'bolted on' methods. In fact, some of the lessons learned in these sites could be transferred to other social environments.

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The investigation of five welfare and community sites revealed the importance of working in partnerships, but also the challenges inherent in this approach. While the notion of integration was important at all sites, it was interpreted in different ways: in some as a teaching content issue, in others as a means of establishing social, political and economic arrangements to support such ways of working.

While the workplace approach could be transferred to non-workplace sites (such as community centres), significant resources would be required to train the non-specialist in identifying literacy and numeracy, and to train the literacy specialist in the culture and context of the community setting.

Overall, the study highlighted the difficulties in developing and sustaining partnerships and the importance of finding a balance between accountability requirements and local flexibility. The study also identified the need for time and commitment from those involved, as well as skills of coordination, cooperation, negotiation and openness.

▶ Implications for policy and practice

Partnering approaches have the potential to support literacy and numeracy learning in a number of community environments. In the process they enrich the community by promoting greater interaction between individuals and helping to build important networks.

Success of integrated literacy and numeracy programs outside the education and training sector is not easily achieved, but may be assisted by:

- creating a framework for community organisations which coordinates and supports diverse approaches and outcomes, and which is in consultation with the VET system but not constrained by it
- developing evidenced-based policy and a more integrated and joined-up approach, including greater clarity about the role of literacy and numeracy in assisting social capital
- analysing the needs of different targeted populations
- providing innovative grants and pilot projects to encourage innovation and build upon successful initiatives

- offering professional development in all sectors and domains to build the capacity of frontline workers to assist clients with literacy and numeracy needs, as well as building awareness of literacy and numeracy issues in these workers
- expanding the role of literacy workers to settings outside the classroom and building their knowledge of other sectors.

The full report of *Using partnerships to build literacy and numeracy capabilities in communities*, by Rosie Wickert and Jenny McGuirk, will be available from the NCVER website at <<http://www.ncver.edu.au>>.

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