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Outcomes of basic skills training

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Overview

Why do we need quantitative evidence of impact?

What are the barriers to collecting high quality evidence?

How can they be overcome?



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Selected NRDC projects 2009-13

- EU data and terminology (EC)
- Family literacy in Europe (EC)
- International review of adult literacy policies (NALA)
- Evaluation of impact of adult literacy & numeracy provision in England (English gov't)
- Strategic Review of LLN Training in Victoria & South Australia
- Cohort study research on employment, numeracy & the digital divide
- Distance travelled as an adult literacy funding mechanism (Eng gov't)
- Workplace literacy (UK gov't)
- Institute of Education, MA: International Perspectives on Adult Literacy Research and Policy
- 2 new family literacy studies (forthcoming)



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Why do we need quantitative evidence?

The failure to demonstrate the economic and social benefits of adult learning is a major weakness of the field, one which limits the capacity of adult education to contribute to the EU lifelong learning strategy

Adult Learning – It Is Never Too Late to Learn: 2006
European Council Communication:



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Why don't we have this evidence?

We do have much evidence of the impacts of low literacy: IALS, ALL, PIAAC in October

Much less evidence of programme effects

Difficult to collect programme-related evidence. E.g. adults are elective learners, difficult to track after course

Simplistic, limited evaluation models



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Simplistic evaluation models

Focus on a limited range of “hard” human Capital outcomes over a limited period of time: skills gain, employment, earnings

Do not take sufficient account of “soft” non-cognitive and/or psychosocial outcomes: self-confidence, self-concept, attitudes to reading, literacy practices, social capital, etc

Evaluation models are not aligned with programme theory



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Complex programme theory

Programme impacts are produced by complex interaction of human and psychosocial effects

Programme impacts are dispersed over a broad range of outcomes and policy areas

Programme impacts may unfold over a long range of time after programme ends




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Simple evaluation model

Programme impacts are produced
by improving human capital

A light blue downward-pointing arrow indicating the flow from the first point to the second.

Skills gains should be quickly
visible (and measurable)

A light blue downward-pointing arrow indicating the flow from the second point to the third.

Skills gains should fairly quickly
lead to economic gains



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Simple evaluation model

“This is like claiming you are a good shot because your bullets always end up in the same place – even though they are nowhere near the target”

US political prognosticator Nate Silver



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Stakeholder conflict

Policymakers: focused on human capital impacts

Practitioners: focused on human capital +
psychosocial capital

Simple evaluation models lead to evaluations that
are of limited use to policymakers and which are
often threatening to practitioners



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“Tyranny of effect size”

Programmes forced to demonstrate short-term human capital impact (e.g. skills gain or economic returns)

Distorts practice – e.g. teaching to the test



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Taking account of psychosocial impacts

Three broad options:

1. Qualitative evaluation methods, e.g. learner interviews. Weaknesses: very subjective, lots of “response bias”, not v useful for measuring impact or comparing programmes

2. Quantitative evaluation done badly, e.g. learner surveys w/non-robust questions: “Are you more confident now?”

3. Quants done well: validated instruments measuring change over time in psychosocial outcome measures. E.g. Tett et al’s 2006 evaluation of Scotland provision



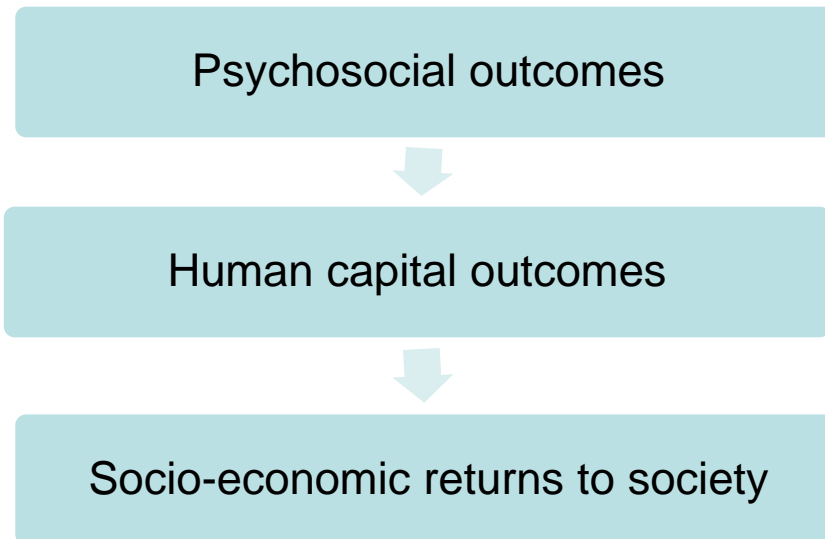
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So what?

Policymakers are not worried about a crisis of self-confidence, they are worried about a crisis of low literacy





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Options

A: Measure less. Reject the primacy of quantitative evaluation.

B: Remain in current rut, adding more methodologically sophisticated but theoretically simplistic techniques

C: Improve evaluations by measuring more, better and longer.



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Longitudinal evaluation: examples

Family literacy: long-term study of Turkish Early Enrichment Project (TEEP), which has since evolved into the well-known Mother-Child Education Programme (MOCEP), shows large impacts that would not be apparent in short-term evaluation

Early Childhood Education and Care: long-term evaluation of US Perry High Scope Preschool programme by Nobel-prize winning economist James Heckman and team shows that economic returns are the product of non-cognitive impacts



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Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning

9-year US study (Reeder, 2009) of high school dropouts in one urban area (Portland, Oregon)

Compared those who took adult literacy or numeracy (LN) course w/those who did not

Short-term: both groups made LN gains – probably because of workplace practices. Cf new NRDC research on numeracy, employment and ICT: employment appears to drive numeracy gains

Short-term skills gains were not greater for those who took LN courses

Those who took courses did show short-, medium- and long-term gains in **literacy practices**, e.g. how often read news section of newspaper



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Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning

These changes in literacy practices were associated with long-term gains in literacy skills

Causal chain:

1. Programmes produced changes in literacy practices, which were measurable in the short-term
2. Over period of 5+ years, these changes in practice led to measurable improvements in skills



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Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning

PISA reports on importance of “reading engagement”

Getting children to read more helps them read better (which encourages them to read even more...)

Adults: Practice Engagement Theory (Reder, 1994):

programmes should focus on improving learners’ literacy practices, as this will eventually lead to improved skills



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Benefits of longitudinal research

Better understanding of inter-relationship of full range of short- and long-term outcomes. E.g. LSAL shows that improving practice improves skills

Produce evidence on a full range of long-term impacts and returns to society. Not just employment & earnings but Wider Benefits of Learning e.g. improved mental wellbeing, physical health, civic participation

This evidence would allow accurate cost-benefit analysis giving policymakers the data they need.



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Barriers to longitudinal evaluation

Unwieldy

Expensive

Goes beyond policy cycles



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A necessary long-term investment

A concentrated wave of longitudinal evaluations
conducted over the next two decades

- address many of the key outstanding issues in the
fields of adult and family literacy,
- lay the theoretical groundwork for future, shorter-
term studies that fit more realistically into national
and regional policy cycles



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