



**BASKET**

# Professional development for teachers of adult basic skills

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The BASKET project is part of the



## Introduction

Literacy and numeracy are complex capabilities and the demands of society are dynamic, requiring us all to improve our skills as we progress through life. The range of essential basic skills has extended over the last 20 years due to technological progress. In parallel the risks of social and economic exclusion have increased.

The importance of basic skills development is recognized at highest level within Europe. The report of the EU High Level Group on literacy <sup>1</sup>states:

*Literacy is about people's ability to function in society as private individuals, active citizens, employees or parents. ... Literacy is about people's self-esteem, their interaction with others, their health and employability. Ultimately, literacy is about whether a society is fit for the future*

*(EU High Level Report)*

It is easy to assume that teaching basic skills is a straightforward task. However, it is one of the most challenging and skilled areas of teaching. In working with, for example, an adult beginner reader, an adult literacy teacher may be working with an individual for whom more straightforward methods of learning to read did not work the first time around at school, and so a deep level of teacher knowledge and expertise in teaching reading is required. Added to this, the experience of coping in life without literacy is likely to have added layers of both coping strategies and insecurities from the learner about their capacity to learn successfully.

Those working in adult basic skills have to understand the context of the adult learner, recognize learners' knowledge and experience and build on their strengths in order to create an effective learning process. Teachers must have the skills to engage, motivate and empower learners to enable them to do what they want to do in their private, family, community and working lives.

The world of adult literacy is full of stories of successful learners for whom the right expert help unlocked the door to literacy sometimes decades after school years. Basic skills learners need highly skilled expert professional to help them succeed and not re-experience earlier negative experiences.

Europe is committed to Lifelong Learning and the role of the teacher<sup>2</sup> in delivering this is critical. As the EU High Level Group remind us:

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<sup>1</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/education/literacy/what-eu/high-level-group/documents/literacy-report.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> In different countries, different terminology is used, sometimes teachers, or trainers, tutors, practitioners or adult educators. This document uses the term 'teachers' to refer to all the above.

*...high quality teachers and teaching lead to better learning outcomes, including literacy performance*

*(EU High Level Report)*

However, the role of the adult basic skills teacher is often under-valued in EU member states. There is a lack of established systems for the training of adult basic skills teachers, with no established professional development pathways. In many countries there are no formal qualification requirements for those teaching adult basic skills and no common European frameworks or standards for their professional development. There are also differences between the partner countries in how they approach continuing professional development (CPD).

This is in contrast to teaching in schools, colleges and universities. To deliver successful lifelong learning parity of esteem across all fields of education is needed. Basic skills teachers should have the same status as all other teachers.

Adult basic skills teachers need to be well-qualified and highly skilled to ensure effective use of public resource and to ensure time spent in learning produces effective progress. To quote the EU High Level Report on Literacy once more:

*Countries with the highest level of literacy achievement ... have highly talented, well-qualified, well-trained teachers*

*(EU High Level Report)*

### **Initial teacher education for basic skills teachers**

Adult educators in many countries constitute a mix of professionals with uncertain status and different backgrounds and qualifications. For those teaching adult basic skills this mix is wider still. In some cases the teachers may have no formal teaching qualifications at all, or have only participated in short seminars and training courses. To ensure that all learners can benefit from working with expert teachers it is crucial to provide sound initial teacher training, followed by programmes of continuing professional development.

In some countries the only teaching qualifications available are designed for teachers of children, despite the very different approaches needed to work with adult learners. Teaching adults is not the same as teaching children. Adults choose whether or not they wish to learn, and how. As individuals they may be parents or grandparents and may be highly skilled in other areas, as employees or in their vocation. The teacher/learner relationship is a meeting of equals in which the motivation and previous experiences of the learner need to be fully recognised.

In other countries, there are qualifications for those training to teach adults, but these do not include, for example, the specialist skills needed to teach an adult to read. Teachers of basic skills for adults should undertake initial professional development in: teaching adult learners, in developing their knowledge of the subject they are going to teach and in the pedagogy and teaching methods specific to that subject.

Basic skills teachers need a sound understanding and knowledge of the specific subject area they are going to teach (i.e. literacy, language, numeracy or digital competences). They also need excellent pedagogical<sup>3</sup> skills and teaching methods as to how to teach these particular subjects to adult learners in ways that build on learners' prior knowledge and experience.

*There should be a wide range of ...teaching strategies, including digital aspects, assessment techniques, methods for diagnosing problems*

*(EU High Level Report)*

The NRDC review of research into basic skills teacher education summarises a set of consistent features of effective professional development programmes<sup>4</sup>, one of which was:

*Teachers should 'be taught as they are expected to teach' by taking part in practical professional development activities which not only support their acquisition of relevant subject matter knowledge, but help them to 'see' the subject from their learners' point of view*

*(A literature review of research on teacher education in adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL, Morton et al, NRDC, 2006)*

An example here of the experiential learning techniques that might be used in specialist teacher education to help teachers 'see' the subject in this way is the use of a 'mirror writing' activity. Participants would be exposed to text that did not make sense to them and asked to undertake tasks relating to it (this can be done with text reversed as seen in a mirror or in other contexts by using an unfamiliar script such as Arabic or Mandarin). A reflective discussion would then focus on how the experience felt, what helped and hindered them in coping with the tasks.

Context is also important. Professional basic skills teachers need to develop competence in teaching in less formal arenas than a traditional classroom. They need, for example, to

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<sup>3</sup> This report uses the terms pedagogy and teaching methodology to refer to what some members of our group describe as 'didactics'. In our discussions we found the use of this term a source of confusion because in England and Scotland the adjective 'didactic' is used to describe a method of teaching in which the teacher is dominant and the learner a passive listener. It is an example of a 'teacher-centred' approach, rather than the 'learner-centred' starting point that is so critical in adult learning.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.nrdc.org.uk/publications\\_details.asp?ID=79](http://www.nrdc.org.uk/publications_details.asp?ID=79)

operate in workplaces or in prisons or in community contexts and may need to experience this as part of their initial teacher education.

#### **Recommendation 1:**

**Teachers of basic skills for adults should undertake initial professional development with a focus on:**

- **how to teach adult learners;**
- **ensuring they have sufficient depth of knowledge and understanding of the subject (ie literacy, numeracy, ICT);**
- **developing their expertise in the teaching methodology and pedagogy of the specific subject;**

### **Continuing professional development (CPD)**

Initial teacher training offers a quality baseline that needs to be enhanced and developed through regular continuing professional development and updating of theory and practice. There are currently very few opportunities for basic skills teachers to engage in CPD.

Professional development needs to be valued and teachers provided with space, time and, where possible, funding to undertake qualifications and training. Teachers should have equity of access to professional development opportunities.

Models for delivery of CPD should be as flexible and accessible as possible. A variety of formats need to be considered for delivering CPD to fit into busy people's lives and help to motivate them so that good teachers are not lost.

ICT and blended learning make it possible for teachers to access training at a time and place that are suitable for them. Module-based training enables teachers to learn more about a particular subject that is of interest to them and helps their professional development.

Flexible pathways through CPD with prior recognition of learning should be developed to facilitate the movement of some existing schoolteachers and teachers of other subjects to adults into the adult basic skills workforce.

#### **Recommendation 2:**

- **CPD programmes should be developed as part of an over-arching framework for the professional development of basic skills teachers;**
- **CPD should be available, accessible, and teachers' participation should be facilitated**

- **CPD should be flexible and recognise the prior experience of teachers.**

## **Effecting change: building the infrastructure to support the development of adult basic skills**

There will always be a need for adult basic skills teachers. Accordingly, countries should include adult basic skills as a permanent part of their national education system, rather than as a short-term solution to solve a temporary problem. In some countries the infrastructure for developing a workforce of basic skills teachers is in formative stages.

Awareness raising about basic skills needs in modern societies is an important initial and underpinning stage in the development of a coherent national policy for basic skills. In advocacy work with policy makers, use should be made of available national and international data on the impact of poor basic skills as well as individual case studies focusing on the individual, family and societal impact of low basic skills.

*As the 3201st Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council meeting: Council conclusions on literacy pointed out:*

*Monitoring skills levels in the adult population and engaging businesses, media, NGOs, social partners, cultural institutions, as well as social, employment and health services at local level, should form the basis for strategies aimed at increasing awareness of literacy problems in society as a whole.*

Basic skills development should be included as a specific area within the national strategy for Lifelong Learning. The EU Commission criteria for *National Strategy Reports on Social Protection and Social Inclusion* should include useful reference to basic skills levels in the adult population and steps being taken to address low levels of basic skills.

Awareness raising should also take place with individual citizens emphasizing the impact of improving basic skills on their life chances and encouraging them to take responsibility for the development of their skills.

### **Recommendation 3:**

- **The infrastructure for developing a basic skills workforce should be integrated into existing systems**

## **Standards, Frameworks and Funding**

There are currently no common European qualification frameworks or standards for the professional development of teachers in the field of adult basic education. There are national

systems of standards in some countries, but for those wishing to create systems where nothing is in place, a European reference point would be very helpful.

Access to funding to engage in teacher education and continuing professional development is reported by many as a major barrier to improving the quality and effectiveness of the basic skills teaching workforce.

#### **Recommendations 4 and 5:**

- **A European Framework with a set of standards for the teaching of adult basic skills should be developed**
- **Funding to support the professional development of the basic skills teaching workforce should be made available**

#### **Wider European support**

Low levels of basic skills is not just a national problem, it is a shared European issue. Member states face similar problems of low basic skills but are at different stages of development in terms of addressing these.

Expertise and experience built up in certain EU countries should be shared with those who are at an earlier stage of development. There is a need to make such knowledge accessible to others and available for transfer.

The EC should finance cross-border development of infrastructure for basic skills drawing on existing professional networks, such as EBSN, and building on recent EC projects in the field, such as ALFIE and EURALPHA, among others.

#### **Recommendation 6:**

- **Sustained mechanisms should be developed that provide countries with access to expertise and experience built up in other countries: frameworks, advocacy strategies, structures, content etc. The EC should facilitate the transfer of effective policy initiatives.**

## About BASKET

BASKET is a Learning Partnership within the Grundtvig/LLP programme, cooperating with the European Basic Skills Network (EBSN). BASKET is addressing the need for professional adult basic skills teachers. By basic skills we refer to reading, writing, oral communication, everyday maths and digital competences. The partnership has partners from Norway, Germany, Switzerland, Romania, the Czech Republic, Hungary, England and Scotland. The partnership runs from August 2011 to August 2013.

The BASKET partnership advocates for the importance of creating good models and systems for training basic skill teachers for adults. It promotes the importance of establishing good models for delivery of the training as well as focus on how to support and motivate teachers to attend such training

The partnership has developed a set of recommendations for developing professional adult basic teachers in Europe. The recommendations are aimed at decision makers, researchers and other stakeholders in adult basic skills.

The document is based on discussions and presentations during partner meetings, and also an online debate with more than 100 registered participants. The topic of the debate was the qualifications of adult basic skills teachers.

We acknowledge that time and capacity of a Learning Partnership are limited, and hope the recommendations will be used, developed further and disseminated by others.

The recommendations and other results from the project are available on <http://basket.vox.no/>