The benefits of Community-based Adult Learning

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Introduction

This article aims to summarise research that demonstrates the positive impact of community-based adult learning (CBAL), especially in creating a more equitable education. The last decade has seen a considerable reduction in funding for CBAL internationally (Zhang & Perkins, 2022). One reason for this may be that its effectiveness as a way of reducing inequalities is not well-understood by policy makers (Webb et al., 2019). I hope that this short article may enable practitioners to provide evidence of the positive difference that participating in CBAL can make.

Four areas were identified from the literature as the main benefits for participants: engaging with, and making progress in, learning; developing resilience, self-confidence, and social capital because of participation in learning; reducing the attainment gap through supporting parents and their children in family learning programmes; the positive impact of CBAL on health and well-being. Each section provides the context against which the changes brought about by CBAL, especially for those learners that are disadvantaged, should be assessed. In addition, because of the importance of the support volunteers provide for learners, there is a section on volunteers and volunteering.

Engaging in learning and making progress

Research shows that participation in adult learning remains highest among advantaged people who have benefitted from education in the past (UNESCO, 2022) with participation by 'low- skilled individuals 40 percentage points below that of high-skilled adults' (OECD, 2021, p.12). Disadvantaged groups have been classed as 'hard to reach' but a better term might be 'easy to ignore' (Lightbody & Escobar, 2021), and CBAL approaches have been shown to address these systemic inequalities when engaging people in education and learning (Duckworth & Tett, 2019). Learner engagement is always a collaborative process that places learners at its centre and requires investment of time and resources to ensure that learners' needs are met

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(Beattie, 2022). Engagement is most effective when CBAL practitioners build on their local knowledge of the community and specific groups (e.g. Refugees and Asylum Seekers), provide easy access to provision through outreach activities, and link to other professions and institutions such as teachers or the health service (Smythe, 2015).

Once people are engaged, their progression is often driven by the desire to continue to learn (UNESCO, 2022). This is most likely to happen when learners' goals are recognised and supported (Duckworth & Ade-Ojo, 2016). Participation in CBAL enables adults to upskill and reskill in a changing world and so contributes to educational and economic progression (OECD 2021). In Scotland, CBAL provides the first step into education for many adult learners and offers access to the Further and Higher Education system. It thus plays an important role on the pathway to progression (Scottish Government, 2022)

Progression is often incremental, with adults moving gradually towards their goals once they have gained confidence. This type of success then enables them to be involved in larger life changes such as taking on a new job (Bennetts, 2003). Adults' life circumstances, for example having caring responsibilities, mean that economic and educational progress may not be their priority and personal progression can be the most important outcome of participation (Babb et al. 2021). Sometimes, however, funders prioritise employment outcomes above learners' own goals, and this can lead to learner disengagement (Allat & Tett, 2019). Scottish research on CBAL, for example, found that increasing self-confidence was a key progression outcome especially where learners were recovering from ill-health, adjusting to changes in their personal circumstances, or involved in helping others through volunteering (Macintyre, 2012).

Promoting resilience, self-confidence, and social capital
Resilience means adapting well in the face of adversity and bouncing back from difficult experiences and there are several ways in which CBAL can help build resilience. Ruhose and colleagues' (2019) study of adults' workplace training showed

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that participating in learning developed resilience and grit. UNESCO (2010) found that CBAL had a strong impact on active citizenship, political voice, social cohesion, diversity, and tolerance, and therefore benefitted social and community life. Tett and Maclachlan's (2007) research with literacies learners showed that participating in CBAL built confidence that then enabled people to do things differently and apply what they had learnt in different contexts. For example, participants developed a stronger belief in their own potential and achievements, increased their skills, and had a greater ability to deal with conflict and stand up for themselves.

At the individual level, *social capital* comprises two dimensions: trust in people generally, and personal involvement in social activities (Ruhose et al., 2019). Participating in valued social networks helps to form bonds between similar people, and bridges between diverse people. Research shows that participating in learning as an adult can build social capital by forming bridges between diverse people. For example, Auckland & Kilpatrick's study (2021) showed that education and training assists in the establishment of learning and support networks that can build social capital through learning, fostering collective leadership, establishing norms of social inclusion, and developing skills in working together. More specifically, Tett and Maclachlan's (2007) research found that bridging social capital had been developed through learners being at the centre of a range of new networks in relation to their tutors, other staff, and fellow students. Moreover, these networks built up learners' knowledge of who, when and where to go to for advice and help. Similarly, a study of home-school relationships in Scotland (Tett and Macleod, 2020) found that CBAL practitioners were able to build bridges between schools and parents through engaging with head teachers, providing opportunities for parents to go into the school, and encouraging parents to try out new ideas and perspectives based on the value of their own knowledge.

Supporting parents and their children to close the attainment gap
Working in partnership with parents has been shown to bring benefits to schools, pupils, and the wider community (Willemse et al., 2018) in ways that lead to 'a comprehensive, goal linked programme of school, family, and community

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partnerships' (Epstein 2018, p.402). Such partnerships are particularly important for families from the most socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, because effective home-school partnerships have been shown to be central to a pupil's educational success (OECD, 2021). Since parents play a vital role at all stages of education, Education Scotland (2016, p.4) has argued that family learning can impact on both 'closing the poverty related attainment gap' and lead to 'improvements in parental confidence and parenting skills.'

Research (Milbourne, 2005) shows that CBAL practitioners can support parents in ways that value their knowledge and encourage their active involvement in their children's schools. This is because they are more likely to understand the local community and home circumstances and care about parents as people that have a lot to offer the school. Practitioners can also act as intermediaries in facilitating effective communication between the home and the school as well as helping parents to access and understand other relevant services (Timmons & Pelletier, 2015). Family Learning Programmes themselves provide supportive social spaces where new networks can be built, friendships formed and parents' own development can be prioritized (Marandet & Wainwright, 2017). CBAL practitioners can also help parents to have their voices heard in ways that are likely to be positively received through creating a 'culturally responsive climate' (Auerbach, 2010, p.730) where parents and schools respect the expertise that each brings to the education process.

Increasing health and well-being

Socio-economic disadvantage is a key driver of poor health because the more disadvantaged someone is the less likely they are to live in good quality housing, have time and money for leisure activities, feel secure at home or work, be employed, or afford to eat healthy food (Bambra and Payne 2021, p. 266). Marmot and colleagues' research (2020) has shown that socio-economic disadvantage also leads to feelings of lack of control over one's life, greater levels of stress and anxiety at the individual level and lack of social cohesion and trust at the community level. More particularly, the Covid-19 requirements to socially distance and shift from in-person classes to

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online learning led to an increase in mental ill health because learners received less social and emotional support from friends, family, peers, and staff (Babb et al., 2021).

Research shows that CBAL provision in lockdown had a positive impact on health and wellbeing. For example, James & Thériault, (2020) found that Local Authority adult education services produced online responses that reduced isolation and improved mental health and wellbeing, whilst increasing support for people affected by job insecurity. Recent Scottish research (Tett, 2023) demonstrates the specific impact on mental ill health. This research found that the CBAL approach to learning, which responded to learners through adjusting the curriculum, caring for the whole person, and recognizing their strengths, resulted in a decrease in anxiety, social isolation, and loneliness. Other research (Leigh-Hunt et al., 2017) has demonstrated that taking an asset-based approach based on the resources and skills in communities and individuals is effective because it promotes resilience that maintains and sustains health.

In addition, Hammond's (2004) research found that 'providing challenges that learners can meet is important in terms of building self-esteem… [and enhances] all health outcomes through enabling individuals to see their lives in a broader context' (p.566). This broader context starts from a negotiated curriculum, based on the learners' desires, that emphasizes the knowledge that participants bring, and leads to increasing skills, confidence, and self-respect (González, et al., 2005).

Volunteers and volunteering

In comparison with other European countries, the UK has a very active voluntary sector where, within any period of 12 months, 38% of its adult population take part in volunteering (Ruber & Janmatt 2020, p.57). At the societal level, volunteering can be valued economically, but more importantly, 'volunteers contribute to the richness, stability, and cohesion of the society in which they live' (Warburton 2010, p.301). At the individual level, researchers have shown that volunteering can contribute to wellbeing by reducing mortality, increasing physical ability and levels of self-rated health, reducing depression, and increasing life satisfaction. In addition, volunteering

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enlarges the volunteer's circle of friends and acquaintances, enhances self-efficacy and, especially for retirees, can give them a sense of purpose in life (Connolly & O'Shea, 2015).

A recent HMI report (Education Scotland, 2022) highlighted the role of CLD practitioners in supporting and training volunteers because 'across Scotland, committed, confident and skilled volunteers are helping their communities survive and thrive' (p.7), but also warned that 'the wellbeing and capacity of volunteers' (p.8) must be considered. Research shows that there are both individual and organisational barriers that impact on volunteers. Individual factors include time (the availability of time and issues of flexibility), financial costs (such as travel), the effective use of volunteers' skills and experience, and fulfilling volunteers' personal needs (Warburton, 2010). Reducing organisational barriers requires good management support that rewards volunteers' contributions and provides sufficient aid and resources. Development opportunities are important as they can enhance volunteering experience by making the work itself more interesting (Usadolo et al. 2022).

Greiner's research (2009) suggests that development opportunities for adult learning volunteers and those who support them should involve problem solving, decision-making, and continuous learning in ways that maximize opportunities for success and the attainment of expertise. He also found that volunteers' overall feelings of satisfaction about their activities and their emotional attachment to their organisations were enhanced when their experience was utilised, and they were able to learn from other volunteers.

Conclusion

This review of research has shown that CBAL has a positive impact, especially on those adults that are furthest from learning and are multiply disadvantaged. Its contribution is wide-ranging and goes across policy areas of education, employability, social justice and health and well-being. As Boeren and colleagues argue (2000, p.203) adult learning and education can provide 'everyone with a fair chance to develop their abilities and to put them to valuable use'. However, international

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research (UNESCO, 2022) shows that, despite increasing recognition of the value of adult learning, investment remains insufficient especially in meeting the needs of the most marginalized and disadvantaged, and Tett's (2023) Scottish study shows a similar lack of investment. It is therefore particularly important that CBAL is properly funded to meet demand and support the progression of learners and volunteers.

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