

# **The impact of CBAL: a literature review for Aberdeenshire Learning Communities Partnership**

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## **Introduction**

This document summarises the (peer-reviewed) research that demonstrates the impact of CBAL and covers most of the areas highlighted in the *Adult Learning Strategy for Scotland*. It reviews four aspects: 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.

## **Engaging in learning and making progress**

Research shows that participation in adult learning remains highest among those who have benefitted most 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). Despite these findings, CBAL has been able to engage disadvantaged groups in education and learning (Duckworth & Tett, 2019). Learner engagement is always a collaborative process that requires investment of time and resources to ensure that learners are at the centre of provision (Beattie, 2022). This engagement can be promoted by CBAL practitioners building on their local knowledge of the community and specific groups (e.g., Refugees and Asylum Seekers), providing easy access to provision through outreach activities and linking 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. This is most likely to happen when learners’ goals are recognised and supported (UNESCO, 2022). Another outcome of participation is that it enables adults to upskill and reskill in a changing world and so contributes to educational and economic progression (OECD 2021, p. 25). As the *Adult Learning Strategy* points out, CBAL provides the first step into education for many adult learners and offers access to Scotland’s Further and Higher Education system. It thus plays an important role on the pathway to progression.

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. Scottish research on CBAL, (Macintyre, 2012) 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.

## **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 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) Scottish research with adult 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 has shown that participating in learning as an adult built social capital especially in forming bridges between diverse people. For example, Auckland & Kilpatrick's study (2021, p.562) 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. In addition, a study of home-school relationships in Scotland, (Tett and Macleod, 2020) found that CLD 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 exposing parents to new ideas and perspectives about 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 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, Scottish policy has focused on the twin aims of 'closing the poverty-related attainment gap' and 'improvements in parental confidence and parenting skills' (Education Scotland 2016, p.4).

Research (Milbourne 2005) has shown 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 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, p. 5) 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. Moreover, the Covid-19 requirements to socially distance and shift from in-person classes to online learning in adult education 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, 130) found that Local Authority adult education services produced online responses that reduced isolation, improved mental health and wellbeing, whilst increasing support for people affected by job insecurity. Recent Scottish research (Tett, in-press) demonstrated the specific impact on mental health. This research found that the CBAL approach to learning that responded to learners through adjusting the curriculum, caring for the whole person, and recognizing their strengths, resulted in a decrease in anxiety, isolation and loneliness. 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).

### **Conclusion**

This review of research has shown that CBAL has a positive impact, especially on those adults that are furthest from learning and are disadvantaged. Its contribution is wide-ranging and goes across the 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 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. Scotland shows a similar lack of investment as the *Adult Learning Strategy* acknowledges (Theme 1, Action 3) and was found in Tett's (in press) recent study. It is therefore particularly important if we are to achieve the *Fairer Scotland Duty* of 'reducing inequalities of outcome caused by socio-economic disadvantage' that CBAL is properly funded to meet demand and support the progression of learners.

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