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Allatt, Gwyneth

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Is adult literacy education still on the policy agenda in England or have the gremlins gone now?
The paper:

- Considers government policy on adult literacy education in England and whether, following a number of high profile campaigns and initiatives during previous decades, the issue is still high on the policy agenda or is being marginalised.

- Explores the ways in which literacy is conceptualised in current policy and compares this with the views of literacy teachers.
Background: my research

**Aim:** to determine how literacy is currently perceived and conceptualised by teachers, learners and policy makers within adult literacy education in England.

**Methods:**
- Analysis of policy documents using a Critical Discourse Analysis approach
- Telephone and face-to-face interviews with teachers of adult literacy
- Focus groups with adult literacy learners

**Theoretical framework:** New Literacy Studies
Previous policy for adult literacy education

• Various initiatives aimed at improving adults’ literacy from a ‘Right to Read’ in 1973 to the introduction of the *Skills for Life* strategy in 2000. (Hamilton and Hillier, 2006)
• Skills for Life introduced the first national standards and a core curriculum in adult literacy and numeracy, along with a set of national qualifications at a number of levels and a media campaign featuring gremlins as a metaphor for difficulties in literacy and numeracy (‘Move on’)
• SfL replaced by Functional Skills qualifications for adults in 2012
• ‘Replacement of the term ‘literacy’ with ‘English’’ (BIS, 2011)
Search for policy

- Difficulty experienced in the early stages of the research in identifying current government policy on adult literacy education
- Found little specific policy relating to adult literacy other than replacement of Skills for Life qualifications with Functional Skills
- Included a question on this in telephone interviews – uncertainty in the responses
- Is adult literacy no longer high on the Government’s policy agenda for education?
Current Policy?

No policy specifically for adult literacy learners?

- Emphasis on GCSE English for most learners
- Pledge of funding but no national campaign to raise awareness
- More focus on younger learners (major policy actions here)?

Focus on specific groups of learners
So is adult literacy still on the policy agenda?

To some extent:

• Funding for adults to achieve qualifications in English up to GCSE
• Establishment of the Behavioural Research Centre for Adult Skills and Knowledge with English included in its remit (BIS, 2014)
• Government response to UK’s relatively poor performance in OECD’s International Survey of Adult Skills - research commissioned into adult literacy (Milana et.al, 2014)

But:

• Lack of specific measures for adult learners – more policy actions for younger learners. Nothing on the scale of Skills for Life
• No intention to publicise opportunities available
• Support for training and qualification of literacy teachers?

Yet it appears that the gremlins are still present!
• Literacy = *skills in speaking, listening, reading and writing which are ‘essential for learning and for operating in work and everyday life.’* (BIS, 2014, p.4)

• Discourses of functionality and employability are also apparent within the documents – *returns, economy, investment, market, performance, outcomes, impact, measurement, levels, drivers, Net Present Value, sustainability, function, employment, employers, work, demonstrable, prospects*

• A ‘deficit’ view of literacy presenting literacy difficulties as a problem or a barrier which must be tackled and overcome and literacy as an attribute lacking in some people – *problem, tackle, overcome, needs, hold back*

• Absences – reading for pleasure, learning for the sake of it, creative writing
Teachers’ perceptions compared to policy

**Similarities:**
- Literacy necessary for communication on a practical, everyday level or in order to ‘function’
- Literacy associated with the achievement of qualifications in order to find and sustain employment
- Little or no consideration of reading or writing for pleasure or other purposes

**Differences:**
- Literacy seen as leading to autonomy, self-sufficiency, independence and empowerment
- Literacy necessary for critical awareness
- More of a sense of individual rather than social or national benefits from improved literacy
- Some mention of digital literacy

