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Adult literacy and social inclusion

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Adult literacy education and social inclusion

Conference paper abstract, Scutrea 2017

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Hamilton and Pitt (2011, p. 598) describe how literacy has been used by the UK government as 'one of the key indicators of social exclusion' and as such it would seem a reasonable assumption that adult education should aim to foster an inclusive society. Using a definition of social inclusion based on 'enabling people or communities to fully participate in society' (Charity Commission, 2001, p. 2) this paper explores the extent to which adult literacy education is aimed at increasing the social inclusion of its learners. It examines the relationship between adult literacy and social inclusion as it is currently perceived in current UK policy, in international literacy surveys and by adult literacy teachers and their learners.

UK policy on adult literacy education over a number of decades has already been the subject of considerable analysis, with strong discourses of employability, economic prosperity and functionalism identified within policy documents relating to the earlier Skills for Life initiative and Functional Skills qualifications (Taylor, 2008; Burgess and Hamilton, 2011). A 'human resource' model of literacy (Hamilton, 2012, p.169) has been recognised, for example, which views literacy 'as a commodity to be exchanged within the global market place' and links it firmly with economic success and prosperity. Concerns for standardisation and measurement have also been highlighted in analyses of literacy education policy. More recently, analysis of current policy for literacy education in England and Wales and its lack of specific provision for adult learners has identified a much stronger focus on younger learners and the unemployed, and presents notions of literacy that are focused to an even greater extent on the need to achieve qualifications in order to find and sustain employment (Allatt, 2016). While acknowledging that employability and economic prosperity may be important factors in social inclusion, the paper identifies a tension between the narrow focus of policy on employability and functionalism and the perceptions of adult literacy teachers and their learners, whose views encompass a broader range of factors relating to literacy education and social inclusion, including community participation and social life, avoiding isolation, involvement in digital environments and the ability of individuals to make informed choices about their futures.

The paper draws on data from Critical Discourse Analysis of UK policy documents, interviews with literacy teachers and discussions with adult literacy learners. Notions of adult literacy presented by international surveys are also considered. The paper argues that a greater sense of adult literacy education being about social inclusion, along with a broader notion of inclusion itself, emerges from the views of practitioners and their learners than in the policy documents, which appear to have a much narrower focus on literacy education as a means of younger learners gaining and maintaining employment.