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

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# 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)



- 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

Focus on specific  
groups of  
learners

Pledge of funding  
but no national  
campaign to raise  
awareness

More focus on  
younger learners  
(major policy  
actions here)?

# 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!



# Perceptions of literacy in policy

- 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

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# References

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