Adult literacy, language and numeracy education: Skills for Life or Skills for Work?

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Introduction

My (ongoing) project:

A critical analysis of current ALLN (Adult literacy, language and numeracy) policy and practice and how it has evolved in the 20-30 years

(England, +Scotland, Australia and other countries)

Questions:

What understandings (discourses) of ALLN, of learners and teachers underpin current policy and practice?

How did we get to where we are now?

What future and what can we as practitioners and researchers do?

Another question

Who benefits from the current system?

Does the skills discourse work for some, if not many learners?

Given the state of the economy, poverty, cost of living, low attainment (young people) and lack of equity and social justice in the school system, are the aims of the current policy matching many of the learners' aims and aspirations?

May we (I?) fail to acknowledge the possibility of 'transformative' teaching and learning in functional skills curricula? (Duckworth and Smith 2019, Ade-Ojo and Duckworth 2019)

Policy and funding for adult literacy/ies (AL) in England today

A very brief summary:

Much of the AL offer is via further education (FE) + private providers

Core goals: employability, work-related skills, younger learners

Functional Skills

Significant funding cuts and decline in participation.

The discourses of literacy and learning underpinning current policies

Literacy as generic skill – **autonomous view** (Street 1993)

Belief in standardised programmes + accredited learning

Assessable (via exams) and measurable

Focus on the **individual** as learner engaging with or needing to engage with literacy (shared literacy practices and mediation ignored).

Business/employer – led; **economic** focus – **human resource development discourse** (Duckworth and Smith 2018)

Policy analysis

Using multimodal critical discourse analysis (Machin and Mayr 2023)

Lack of dedicated policy documents significant in itself:

e.g. only a short section within much wider 'Skills' policy - see also recent Skills England reports

Discourse analysis: **what is missing is telling**.

Names matter

Skills for Life→**Functional Skills** (Foundational Skills – Australia)

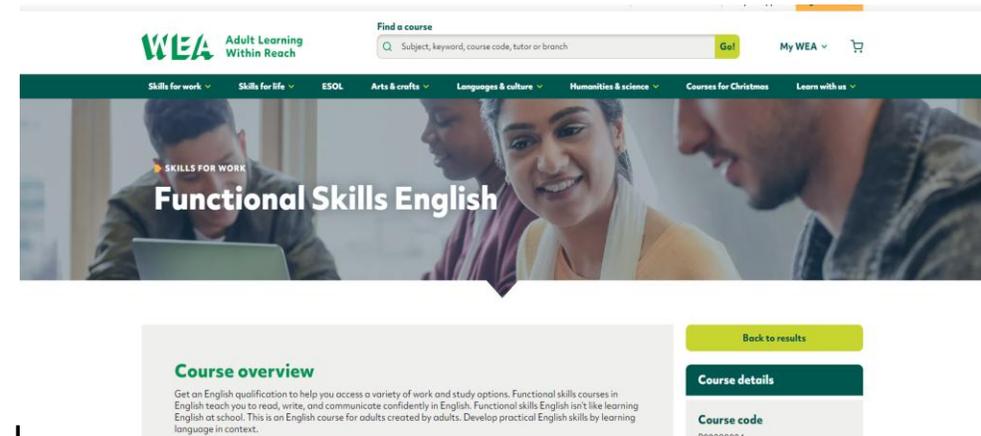**Functional English** → **Skills for Jobs** (White paper, 2021)

Skills England

'Literacy' replaced by 'English'

Adults - dropped???

Education replaced by skills

Adult Education Budget → Adult Skills Fund

Scotland: Adult Literacies

The 'Skills for Life campaign'

Started Jan 2024

Part of: Skills for Careers website – a one stop shop web space with information and links to training and education offers.

What discourses about ALLN and about adult learners does an analysis of the campaign reveal?

Campaign's aim: motivational

it 'invites young people, adults and businesses **to make the most of their potential** by engaging in a range of government skills and technical education offers',

'Ultimately giving **businesses** the skilled workforce they need for the **economy** to thrive.' (Campaign introduction and background, 2025, p. 4/9).

Government policy to 'steer' citizens towards the right decisions – '**nudge**' as a policy tactic (Mulderrig 2019)

Photography/colours: beautiful light as **metaphor** for potential of the day; custom designed typeface – digital alarm clocks/morning/potential

Home > Skills for Life

Skills for Life: it all starts with skills

Whether you're growing your business, changing your career or just starting out, it all starts with skills.

SKILLS FOR LIFE

TODAY'S : THE DAY

Start exploring your next steps

Today's the day to start exploring skills and careers information. You can look at your qualification and training options or get career ideas that would suit you.

Campaign addresses potential students as '**entrepreneurial subjects**' (Machin and Mayr 2023, 77),

Aligns with a discourse of adult education as **individual responsibility** that is a feature of neoliberal state policies (Mulderrig 2017)

Gaze and pose

your qualification and training options or get career ideas that would suit you.

Young people

If you're in education or just about to leave, you can get help working out your options.

Adults

View your choices for learning skills that will help you change or progress your career.

Businesses on the employer website

See options to train your employees or hire new staff

Some linguistic and visual features

Imperatives: **individual responsibility**/agency

Synthetic personalisation (Fairclough 2013); eye-level

Settings/people/activities: learning/work/professional

Structural impediments to taking part excluded.

Do online marketing campaigns reach learners? (L&W Institute 2023)

Policies are not (exactly) the same as local practices:

In the move from policy text to teaching practice: Opportunities to disrupt and adapt (Allatt and Tett, 2019a)

Engaging with policy - not implementing (Ball 2015)

What do practitioners think about current policy? What can and do they do to maintain a broader and more flexible literacies/numeracies agenda?

A few themes:

- Few resources for outreach and community-based work

- 'Picking the low hanging fruit' (younger learners?) –funding

- Functional Skills – ESOL overlap

- Influence of school discourses? (e.g. SPAG? Spelling test at entry 3 'a bit retrograde'; FS – academic drift: equivalent to GCSE or stepping stone, Cornish 2021)

Phonics for adults: good or bad?

That Reading Thing

it seems to meet a need, and it works.

1-2-1 approach: but doesn't fit easily in current funding regime and level of funding
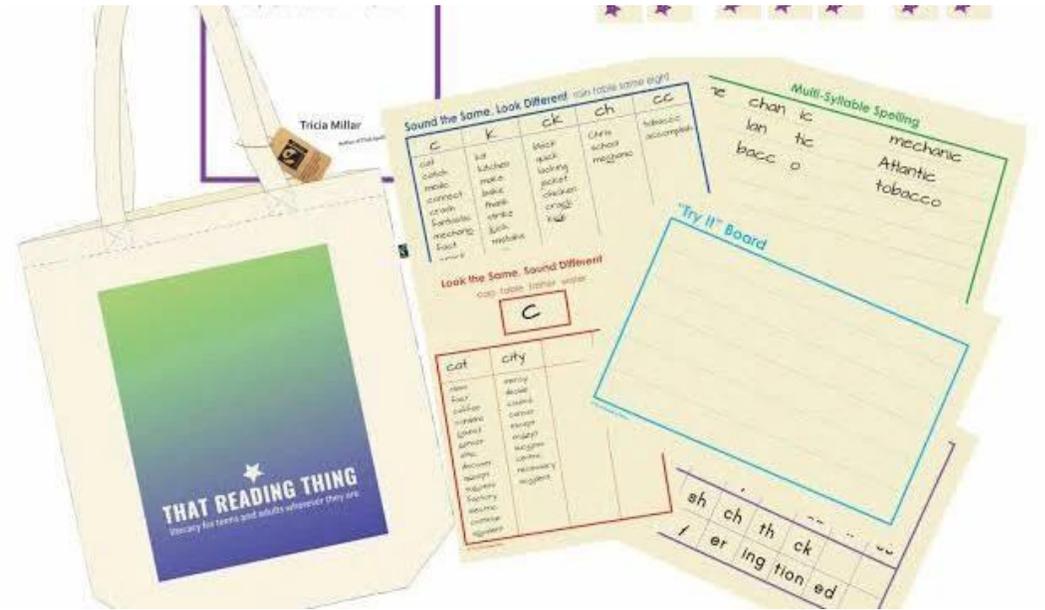
Flexibility?

Flexibility in provision:

people can work from home, on their own, at different times and pace; drop-in sessions with tutors available and online assessments and self learning (using BKSB)

But perhaps not for right for all?

What about those who need more support? Who prefer to learn with others?

Discourse of **self-governance** and **responsibilisation** (Cornish 2021); entrepreneurial self (see campaign)

Flexibility possible with regards to **delivery**, but **content?**

Literacy/numeracy teachers **'are all very creative and innovative'**; they try to 'work with work' and 'dance around it' (see also Allatt and Tett, 2019; L&W Institute 2021)

But: **'workarounds', 'redo and jug around'**

require much effort from tutors to create materials and come up with activities that respond to students' interests and needs, are contextualised, but also help work towards the qualification.

Exam papers: limited contexts used – diversity of students

Space for real life literacy practices?

Occasionally mentioned in interviews, but:

Relies on the tutor's knowledge of **social practice/ contextualised/embedded approach** and some experience with drawing on this approach to prepare learning resources and activities.

Requires **time, effort and experience**.

(see also Skattergood, 2022)

Practitioners in current policy

SKILLS FOR LIFE

Working conditions: workload/class sizes; part-time/sessional contracts

Fewer opportunities for **CPD**, working together, and for higher-level and **specialised teaching qualifications** that would include time for thinking about different concepts of literacy

Tutors asking for ready made resources and something akin to textbooks)   - **exam driven curricula** unavoidable? **Teachers seen as technicians?**

Functional only - Reading/writing for pleasure?

Reading for pleasure/creative writing - no place in FS (unless teachers bring it in):

> research/policy about children's literacy – RfP seen as important!

Benefits of ALLN beyond work and employability ignored or not seen as important, **just an incidental 'add on'** (health, community life, citizenship...)

State considers itself responsible for work-related education only?

Summary: The discourses underpinning current policies

Policies seem to be 'stuck' in between

A schools/academic discourse/remedial view

+

An economic perspective (the assumed needs of businesses and employers)

Lifelong learning conceptualised as HRD only

Citizenship as duty (economic contribution)

Deficit view

The future and what we can do (practitioners and researchers)

Documenting workarounds/resistances, etc. – making the case for '**what works**' and **why**. (RTCs+?)

Documenting wider benefits of learning: collections of case studies?

Challenging limited content and lost opportunities

to use adult learning for addressing wider issues

(and failing to see how these are interrelated).