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

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In the early 2000s, as a newly appointed lecturer and new member of Lancaster University's Literacy Research Centre (LLRC, founded by David Barton, Mary Hamilton and Roz Ivanic), I, along many others in the adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL field, was optimistic that practice-based and socio-cultural views of literacy, language and numeracy (ALLN) could positively influence adult education policy. In England, our hopes were supported by the establishment of a national research and development centre (NRDC, with the LLRC as core partner) and the introduction of a new strategy for adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL called Skills for Life. As our government-funded research was beginning to demonstrate the relevance of a social practice perspective, we hoped that adult literacy/numeracy would become adult literacies/numeracies and that curricula and teaching practices would move away from purely skills-based ideas. Funding for professional development and practitioner research was available and created new opportunities for teachers to engage in their own research and/or to work together with university-based researchers like me. As an organisation, RaPAL was at the heart of this movement and its work illustrates the strengths and opportunities of practitioners and researchers coming together.

Today, we live in a very different ALLN context and many of our hopes and dreams have been dashed. Overall, ALLN is not a priority for governments. Reliant on public funding, it is vulnerable not only to the changing parties in power but to wider political and economic conditions. For many, investment in the school sector remains the priority. Over the past 20 years or so, policy commitment and funding for adult literacy, language and numeracy education (ALLN) has been steadily reduced and so has the number of people participating in programmes. Research also is sparse. At the same time, understandings of the purpose and role of ALLN have become increasingly narrow. In England, Skills for Life has been replaced by Functional Skills, a framework that has employability and formal qualifications at its core. Vestiges of a broader view of literacy, learner-centredness and a flexible curriculum still exist but are not easy to find. The voluntary and charity sector, pivotal for countries like England and Scotland first 'discovering' their need for

ALLN in the 1970s, remains active but is also suffering from changing political and economic conditions and lack of funding.

Looking beyond England, the picture is slightly more diverse. Scotland has had an 'adult literacies' curriculum for many years, delivered by local councils and community organisations. The Scottish curriculum recognises the range of literacy and numeracy practices learners engage in. However, as austerity has hit, the erosion of community-based provision for adults that serves wider purposes beyond work-related skills and employability is a reality in Scotland and other countries too.

While policy commitment for ALLN is low, the need for it continues to be highlighted in national and international assessments evidencing people's lack of what is also often referred to as basic skills. This includes the small but significant number of adults who for various reasons (including difficult school experiences) lack the fundamental skills and confidence to engage with literacy or numeracy and for whom the current often college-based provision is unlikely to work. Easily referred to as the 'hard to reach', a phrase that belongs to a discourse of individual responsibility, we ought to ask what it is about the current provision and its format that makes it so difficult for these people to join. Have current policies, with their priority on younger learners, vocational skills and employability, secretly written off these adults, forgotten that they exist and deserve to be supported? Another feature of current policies is that understandings of the wider benefits of learning, for individuals, families, communities and the state, seem to have disappeared. As ALLN is dominated by a work-related discourse, opportunities to link ALLN with wider social policies and to tap into the benefits of learning for well-being, confidence, community participation and citizenship for people of all ages are being lost. All this is happening at a time when societies are experiencing important demographic changes, with growing numbers of senior citizens having learning needs and learning desires waiting to be fulfilled.

The alignment of ALLN policies with the further and vocational education and training sector that we are experiencing in England is neither new nor unique. Similar developments can be seen in other countries (for example Australia). Newer perhaps is the influence of ideas and approaches from the formal education sector on adult literacy, language and numeracy. In England this move began under Skills for Life, with the establishment of national standards and curricula. But it is through the more recent Functional skills and GCSE policies that we have seen an explicit and

much stronger influence of what I would broadly call school discourses of literacy and numeracy on the adult sector. As part of this, existing courses are tied in with qualifications, with funding partly dependent on learners' success in exams and assessments. Ideas and research findings from school education are being taken up and, as in the case of phonics, applied to adult literacy teaching. With regards to English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), courses primarily serve the goals of social and economic integration. ESOL qualifications too are aligned with and allow bridging into school-equivalent qualifications.

So, what has led to these changes? What has supported the dominance of functional models and why have policy priorities shifted towards younger learners, reducing investment into learning for older adults and those not seeking employment? What understandings and values about adult learning underpin current policies and how do these resonate with wider developments in society, public policy and the economy? How do practitioners, teachers, programme managers and others, experience the current system and how do they engage with ideas that they may or may not share? As the reductive and yet powerful discourses of adult literacy, language and numeracy education as human resource development and functional skills have gained traction, what has happened to concepts and research which not so long ago have influenced the field? What has happened to literacy as social practice, to critical literacy and participatory education, ideas and aspirations that were more prominent in ALLN in the 1990s and the early 2000s? Are these ideas obsolete? Or are they still relevant and even alive, if only in the work of individual teachers and small charities?

These are the core questions I ask in my current research and which I am hoping to find answers for. My study seeks to provide a critical history and analysis of adult literacy, language and numeracy policies and practices, with a focus on England and Scotland, complemented by insights from other countries in the UK and beyond (for example Australia and Germany), where similar changes have taken place, and similar policies are being pursued. I begin in the 2000s and at the point where Mary Hamilton and Yvonne Hillier's Changing Faces (2006), the last detailed study of ALLN, ended.

Why is this study needed and how could it be helpful? There has been limited research on ALLN. Researchers and practitioners alike have experienced reductions in funding and in opportunities to carry out research. Time to reflect is scarce. The

sector itself has always been at the receiving end of fluctuating policy attentions with changing governments instigating repeated reforms without these necessarily being thoroughly researched and reflected upon.

As there has been limited research, we don't know enough about different policies and types of provision, how they are being delivered, their effectiveness and what learners gain from them (Grotlueschen et al. 2024). Practitioners too have received little attention. Not only are there limited professional and career development opportunities, let alone opportunities to engage in research, many teachers and tutors experience low pay and insecure working conditions. When a national qualifications framework is in place practitioners are also likely to experience constraints in relation to what and how they can teach and how they understand their roles as professionals supporting learners and their individual needs and aspirations. There has been very little research in recent years trying to document and analyse practitioners' experiences of policy. Yet, teachers, curriculum developers and programme managers daily and deeply engage with students, they translate curricula and exam expectations into meaningful learning activities, and they work hard to respond to students' needs and interests. Practitioners, in further education colleges, local authorities, charities or other organisations, are the people who, daily and across the academic year, have to make sense of and 'live' with the policies designed in Westminster or elsewhere. In so doing, they also have to square their own understandings of ALLN, their views about what learners should and want to learn, their knowledge of how adults study, with policy directives, curriculum guidance and exam requirements that may or may not match their professional experience and beliefs. But there have been very few studies in recent years looking closely at practitioners' experiences and views of, for example, the Functional Skills policy in England or similar policies in Australia and elsewhere.

With regards to the influence of ideas from school education on ALLN policy and practice, these changes appear to be happening without there being much critical reflection and discussion about them, what advantages they may have and what compromises they might entail. We know that many adults who have limited literacy and numeracy skills had difficult and even traumatic experiences as children in school. Replicating approaches that originate in school education may not work for these adults. On the other hand, what we have learned from teaching children to read and write, while certainly needing to be adapted, shouldn't just be rejected from the outset. Intuitively a method such as phonics or the sitting of formal exams

may be counter to my (our) understanding of ALLN, but it would be wrong to dismiss these approaches outright. We know that phonics can work as a method to help adults gain some of the essential understandings of how letters and sounds work.

In sum, we need critical and in-depth research that explores the intentions, practices and effects of current and recent provision and that enquiries into the changes the sector has experienced while giving testimony to different views and discourses that have and are shaping the sector, some more dominant and influential than others. There is a need for research that takes a deliberately critical approach, with a view towards understanding the drivers of current policies, the effects these have, what is and what isn't achieved. I hope that my study can also provide the necessary insights, theoretical and practical, for thinking about new work, be that more research that might be needed, advocacy, or policy work that we ought to engage in. For example, as I intend to ask what has happened to social practice views of literacy, I will engage with the (for me) difficult issue of acknowledging that our hopes for an ALLN provision that is informed by social practice ideas have, by and large, failed. Here, as part of my study, I will have to be self-reflective and even self-critical. To do this, I will look into the interface between research and policy and ask what studies, by whom, have been received by policy-makers and what findings and insights have feed into new policy insights and new policies. Why have other research perspectives had less impact? This type of analysis is essential for understanding where the social practice and related approaches might have (conceptual or practical) limitations, where academics like me may have missed opportunities to engage with policy and where we may have failed to share our findings. Based on this, we can then think about how these perspectives could be developed, what new ideas are needed and what we ought to lobby for.

My study, which I have begun in autumn 2024, thus intends to be critical and to look carefully and deeply but to also be forward looking. My methodology relies on a combination of research and policy analysis and conversations with practitioners. For my policy analysis, I draw on insights from critical education policy research (Stacey and Mockler 2024) and I use tools from multimodal critical discourse analysis (Machin and Mayr 2023). As part of this analysis, I trace and examine the changing discourses of ALLN, and their related slogans, from 'Skills for Life' to 'Skills for Work' (England) and beyond. I map research and research findings to policy statements and documents, seeking to identify influences and omissions. To

understand the perspective of those working in the field, over the past 6 months I have conducted many in-depth and open-ended interviews with teachers and tutors, programme managers and curriculum developers. As a university-based researcher, I rely deeply on these exchanges of ideas with those working in the field.

While risking to prejudge and prejudice what I will find, my rationale for engaging in this study is closely connected to my concerns about current provision and my scepticism regarding its priorities. I worry that current policies in England and elsewhere – and the prioritisation of ALLN as functional skills that drives them – miss out on the opportunities, ideas and successful practices that previous policies, with their wider conceptions of adult basic education, have offered. In the process, they not only continue to exclude significant parts of the adult population from education, they also fail to develop education policies that draw on the potential of adult learning to help us address some of the pressing challenges of our times. Given the state of the planet, threats to international relations and peace and what many experience as a deep societal crisis affecting their lives, the priorities of skills for work, economic growth and productivity that drive ALLN, while understandable, nevertheless beg to be questioned or at the very least to be debated. Threats to democracy, issues of citizenship and the growing importance of digital technologies and AI invite questions about the role of adult (basic)education that current models and programmes struggle to address.

While calling for a return to a broader, more humanistic and emancipatory approach may be seen as naïve, for me these ideas, though not prominent in current policy, are not only still alive, but our current world and its digital contexts makes them newly relevant and newly applicable. ALLN is directly affected by global developments and global threats such as the climate emergency, the COVID 19 pandemic, wars and the rise of far-right policies and autocratic regimes, to name but a few. As they are facing these threats, national governments frequently and too easily deprioritize ALLN seeking solutions elsewhere (Grotlüschen et al. 2025) . Yet, these mega-level challenges, as Grotlüschen and her colleagues call them, invite us to rethink the concepts of lifelong and lifewide learning and the potential of ALLN to help us address national and global challenges. Frameworks and visions such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals offer ways to reconsider the goals and practices of ALLN (Grotlüschen et al. 2024), to challenge dominant discourses, reconnecting it to earlier traditions, while reimagining its purposes and practices in light of the pressing issues and opportunities of our times.

Practitioners' experiences, which are too often ignored, suggest that adults who take part in ALLN can benefit in many ways, beyond finding a (better) job. ALLN can bring positive change to individuals, their families and communities, society and the state. These benefits may not be easily measurable but are no less real. A rethink of current policies and practices is needed. To do so, we also need to look carefully at current provision and what it does or does not make possible. While tightly framed by funding and qualification regimes, current provision is nevertheless likely to be more diverse than we think. As practitioners engage with set guidance and expectations for teaching and learning, they are not simple 'implementing' policies and 'executing' directives, but they use their professional judgement and expertise to work with their students, to adjust the content of classes and to make learning meaningful and engaging. Some, perhaps many, practise 'everyday resistance' and 'workarounds' (Smythe 2015). These creative ways in which teachers interpret, engage with and 'translate' curriculum guidance and assessment frameworks are likely to make current provision more diverse than we think. Teachers' work in interpreting, working with and around set policies and guidance is at the heart of what makes provision successful (what makes it work for different learners and why). Understanding practitioner agency, researching local adaptations, inquiring into place-based adjustments to centralised policies, searching for what is possible and what can be done, promises to generate insights that can help us to develop new ideas and new arguments for how the current system ought to and can be changed and for new policies that are needed. For me, understanding what is and what isn't possible within the current set up, what 'workarounds' are possible and what 'cracks' in the system there may be, is essential in terms of addressing the concerns I mentioned above. It is essential for helping of think about what we can do, as researchers and practitioners, to work towards a more inclusive ALLN policy and practice. Beyond the theoretical insights I hope to gain from my research, coming up with ideas for the future, for work we can and ought to do, for ideas we can take to policy and into future research is an essential motivation for embarking on and engaging in this study.

References:

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If you would like to find out more about my study or would be interested in contributing to it, please email me at u.papen@lancaster.ac.uk. I would like to talk to practitioners working in adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL, regardless of whether you work for a college, local authority or other provider. I am keen to speak to both experienced colleagues who remember previous policies, and newer practitioners whose experience is based in current systems and whose perspective may differ from my own.