

## Back to the Future? Functional Literacy and the New Skills Agenda

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the re-introduction of the concept of functional literacy into policy in England, using Levine's (1982) critique of the term as a starting point. We describe some of the different ways the term 'functional literacy' has been interpreted in the UK, the USA and Canada since its first international appearance and trace the development of the new policy in England. We offer a critical reading of two key policy documents to show how Levine's criticisms remain pertinent in the contemporary context. The ambiguity of the term 'functional literacy' allows it to pull competing definitions of literacy into alignment, which accounts for its appeal to policy makers. Like Levine, we find evidence that this ambiguity enables slippage from a broad vision of literacy to a narrow, vocationally-focused one. Our analysis of contemporary English policy documents shows how a narrowed conceptualisation of literacy is likely to result in impoverished pedagogy.

### Introduction

In 1982 Kenneth Levine published an article in the Harvard Educational Review (Levine 1982) in which he discussed the dominance of the concept of *functional literacy* in adult basic education since the Second World War. In the years following publication of Levine's article the term *functional* all but disappeared from policy discourse in the UK. However, in 2007 the UK government announced a policy to introduce new qualifications in *Functional Skills* for learners in England over the age of 14. These qualifications cover English, Mathematics and ICT, are available to adults as well as children and may eventually replace *Skills for Life* qualifications designed for adult literacy learners<sup>1</sup>. The 2007 policy announcement thus marked the reappearance of the term *functional* in the context of adult literacy education, although there was no acknowledgement of the history and contrasting definitions which surround the term and thus

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<sup>1</sup> Between 2001 and 2010 adult literacy education in England was funded and organised through the *Skills for Life* policy (DfES 2001, 2003, DIUS 2009). Although *Skills for Life* was formulated by the UK government in Westminster, it only applies to England because education is the responsibility of the devolved administrations in the other countries of the UK. For the same reason, the *Functional Skills* qualifications will only be used in England, Wales and N Ireland.

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– albeit often tacitly - shape contemporary understandings. It therefore seemed an opportune moment for us to revisit Levine’s discussion, whilst assessing its relevance to the contemporary context. Levine’s paper is theoretical rather than empirical. By contrast, we offer a case study of the contemporary literacy scene in England, set within its broader historical and political context. We begin by summarising Levine’s argument.

Levine pointed out that despite the widespread popularity of the term *functional literacy* in a number of Anglophone countries at the time he was writing, it was characterised by ‘a systematic and insidious ambiguity that permits incongruent interpretations while simultaneously promoting a comfortable illusory consensus’ (1982:249). He warned that its positive connotations encouraged unrealistic assumptions about the potential benefits of becoming literate for individuals and societies. He noted that the concept was first introduced because it was recognised that literacy teaching in schools did not result in the kinds of competencies deemed necessary in adult life. Originally, therefore, it was meant to signal ‘real-life’ contexts and purposes. However, it came to be appropriated by those who needed to justify cost-benefit analyses and a vocational and human resource model of literacy as a commodity (p256). Although widely adopted, the concept was not underpinned by any operational definition. It was, however, based on an implicit assumption that literacy was concerned with reading rather than writing (p 261) – a view which sees literacy primarily as a means of bringing people within the reach of bureaucrats and state authority and control. In contrast to this view, Levine noted the importance of the cultural and socioeconomic context in determining the nature and value of literacy; he described it as a ‘positional good’ (p259) that has value in terms of social status, not just utility. Our analysis suggests that Levine’s criticisms of functional literacy remain as pertinent in the contemporary context as they were in 1982. He noted the resilience of the concept, suggesting that “it has been fulfilling, however imperfectly, a necessary social role” (page 263). This point is reinforced by its recent re-appearance in policy discourse in England, despite the fact that a contrasting, socially situated view has now become mainstream in research and practice. Levine’s view prefigured the approach to literacy as a socio-cultural practice which was beginning to be articulated at that time (see Scribner and Cole 1981, Heath 1983, Street 1984) and has since become established as the New Literacy Studies (Barton and Hamilton 1998, Barton, Hamilton and Ivanič 2000; Gee 1990; Brandt 2001) Why, given the contested history of functional literacy, is it moving centre stage once again in UK policy?

In restating and extending Levine’s discussion, we supply the historical and theoretical context missing from recent policy announcements concerning adult literacy education in the England. We also trace connections to the wider UK and European policy contexts. In the spirit of Levine’s original article, we hope to open up a space for debate about the theoretical underpinnings of the new policy as well as to explore the likely impact of the reappearance of a discourse of ‘functionality’ on teaching and learning in adult literacy education. We begin by outlining the theoretical framework of our argument, explaining our understanding of literacy and of the policy process. We then describe our methodology, commenting in particular on the processes of tracking the policy as it unfolds, and locating and selecting key documents for analysis. In the next section we present a two-stage case study, beginning by updating the

historical analysis provided by Levine. After a brief summary of the history of functional literacy up to the end of the 1970s, we outline its manifestations and uses in an international context over the subsequent three decades and its theoretical roots in functionalism. This is the necessary precursor to the second stage of our case study, which offers a critical reading of two key contemporary English policy documents from England.

### **Theoretical Framework**

We work within the framework of Literacy Studies, which sees reading and writing as historically contingent practices embedded in social contexts and relationships. Rather than being a universal attribute or a set of purely technical skills which produce uniform consequences, literacy is understood, valued and used differently in different social domains and contexts. Our conceptualisation of literacy has made us alert to the everyday meanings and uses of reading and writing. This approach, developed since the 1980s, is now supported by a wealth of empirical evidence and theorising (see Street and Lefstein 2007 for an overview). A socially situated view of literacy entails an understanding that different policies construct literacy in different ways. Any particular policy may endorse some kinds of literacy and disregard others, thereby powerfully shaping the possibilities for teaching and learning. It therefore becomes important to scrutinise the development of a new policy initiative to see how it constructs a particular version of literacy and the social relations in which this version is embedded. Furthermore, we would argue that a socially situated approach should be extended to the analysis of *policy* and that ‘policy literacy’ (Lo Bianco, 2004), entails examination of the wider historical, theoretical and political context of any given literacy policy.

Our approach to policy development is to see it as a process that involves both discursive and material elements. A particular policy reform can be seen as a “social project” to which a critical mass of participants need to be recruited. There are typically many different interest groups involved, some with conflicting or diverse views of what the policy should be doing. This was the case when the new *Skills for Life* strategy was being developed (see Hamilton and Hillier, 2006). Over time, struggles between these social actors are “smoothed out” and this process can be tracked in the texts produced as the policy unfolds (see Ball, 1993; Fischer, 2003; Fairclough, 2003; Hamilton and Pitt, 2009). Therefore, in the early stages of the life of a policy, when it exists only in the form of texts, linguistic analysis offers the most useful means of understanding it.

### **Methodology**

Our study involved collecting and carrying out close critical reading and some linguistic analysis of the ways in which literacy is defined in a range of policy documents. In order to consider how the changing policy environment of *Skills for Life* was framing the nature and goals of adult literacy education, we settled on two key documents to analyse in detail backed up by ‘lighter’ references to other documents, chosen for their significance in the unfolding of the policy. All documents selected for analysis or reference were chosen from a corpus of texts consisting of the following:

- (1) A range of historical documents referring to the concept of functional literacy

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- (2) Documents on the official European Union website dealing with adult education and training and setting out policies formulated as a result of the Lisbon Strategy
- (3) Policy announcements and speeches by English politicians which aimed to integrate the goals of the Lisbon Strategy with national concerns and signalled the move to functional skills;
- (4) Extracts from the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) website which explain the new policy to practitioners;
- (5) Extracts from new standards for adult literacy education which give detailed guidance to practitioners about teaching Functional Skills;
- (6) A government report on adults' skills called *Skills for Life, Changing Lives* (DIUS 2009); and
- (7) A booklet called *Functional Skills: the facts* (DCSF/BIS 2010) designed to provide a summary of the new policy for a range of audiences

This corpus represents the documentary 'trail' we followed as we traced the genesis of the policy in national and European agendas and the ways in which it was subsequently communicated in increasing detail to the organisations and individuals who would be responsible for its implementation. The first document we chose for detailed analysis, *Skills for Life, Changing Lives* (DIUS 2009) (hereafter referred to as *Changing Lives*), set out the refreshed policy on adult literacy, language and numeracy from 2009. It is a key statement from the relevant government department, published on-line and in print with a permanent status. Its timing meant that this document lay at the nexus of *Skills for Life* and the new functional skills policy, and is thus a key site for examining the intersection of the two discourses. Our analysis of key sections of this document is complemented by discussion of a document called *Functional Skills: the facts*, which exemplifies many of the features we have identified in other documents we have analysed. Furthermore, it is particularly significant because it appeared at a pivotal moment at what was, officially at least, the end of the development phase of the policy and seemed designed to usher in its nation-wide implementation.

We also refer to three other documents to support the points we make about *Changing Lives*. The first document we mention is the *Functional Skills Standards*, published by the QCA in 2007. This was one of the first documents to provide detailed information about the proposed structure and content of Functional Skills and represented an important early source of official information for practitioners. The second document we refer to, a Green Paper published in 1998 several months after the Labour government took office, set out the new government's vision for lifelong learning. It was highly significant for adult literacy education since it announced the government's plan to set up a working group (the Moser group) on post-school basic skills provision. The report produced by this group (DfEE 1998) made numerous recommendations, many of which were later incorporated into the *Skills for Life* initiative. Thirdly, we refer briefly to the original *Skills for Life* strategy (DfES 2001) by way of comparison with *Changing Lives*.

We focus on the representation of social actors and their actions in *Changing Lives* for two reasons; firstly, because we see the shaping of learners' and practitioners' identities as an important aspect of the policy process in itself (MacLeavy 2008, Levinson et al 2009) and secondly, because we believe that such representations constitute a crucial mechanism through which policy shapes the possibilities for teaching and learning. Although we have carried out detailed analysis of the whole of the *Changing Lives* document, most of the examples we discuss here are taken from the Foreword and the Introduction. As might be expected in a document of this type, the main body repeats and expands information provided in the opening two sections.

In the next section we outline the historical context in which, we argue, the latest change in policy in England needs to be placed, particularly because this context has not been mentioned in any of the documents and announcements we have reviewed. Our discussion shows that while the term 'functional literacy' itself may have fallen out of favour in recent decades, the assumptions and beliefs about literacy on which it rests have nevertheless persisted and shaped policy in a number of countries.

### **A Brief History of Functional Literacy**

Levine describes the emergence of the notion of functional literacy in UNESCO publications of the 1950s (see Gray, 1956) and its subsequent use in many countries. Thomas Sticht (2003) traces its even earlier origins in the US Works Progress Administration programme in the 1930s and later in US army programmes during WWII.

From its inception after the Second World War UNESCO campaigned for adult literacy education in poor countries, but it was not until the 1960s that adult literacy in rich Western countries was "discovered" as a policy issue (Limage, 1987). The United States of America and international bodies – firstly UNESCO but more recently the OECD - were influential in this discovery and have also been in the forefront of developing increasingly sophisticated measures of adult literacy that can be used to produce comparative international statistics. Their influence can be seen in the adoption of ideas and definitions of "functional literacy" that are commonly quoted in national policy documents across the world. For example, The UK Right to Read Campaign in the early 1970s (the first European country to take up the issue) referred approvingly to UNESCO and borrowed the functional literacy definition from the US National Reading Centre:

"A person is functionally literate when he has command of reading skills that permit him to go about his daily activities successfully on the job or to move about society normally with comprehension of the usual printed expressions and messages he encounters" (quoted in BAS, 1973).

As Levine points out, this definition was seen as a positive move away from inappropriate school based measures such as reading ages and an important step forward at the time, expressing the idea of a continuum from "illiteracy" to "literacy" rather than literacy being an either/or state as previous definitions had assumed. It also argued that literacy instruction should be linked with

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real life activities. The use of functional literacy was (and still is) accompanied in UNESCO publications by a liberal rhetoric that sees literacy not as an end in itself, but as a means to a fuller and more creative life controlled by people themselves and enabling them to gain access to their own culture (see for example, UNESCO, 2006).

In line with this view, the UK campaign contextualised literacy in the everyday, starting from real life materials and tasks identified by adult learners rather than those designed by teachers and adapted from children's books and worksheets (see ALRA, 1976). The campaign asserted the importance of access to literacy as an individual human right and a tool for social change. (see Hamilton and Hillier, 2006)

However, as Levine points out (p. 257), the term *functional literacy* quickly became aligned with ideas and educational practices that form part of the human resource model which took hold of education and training in the UK and elsewhere in the 1980s. This model links literacy directly with economic development, individual prosperity and vocational achievement. Levine concludes that the term "functional literacy" was initially adopted as a useful concept for the international political and diplomatic context within which UNESCO operates, but subsequently hardened into a simplistic view about the role of literacy in culture, citizenship and the pre-requisites for employment.

The desire to link literacy with employability led to efforts to measure and compare literacy levels and texts via tests and readability manuals but when Levine was writing in the early 1980s attempts to operationalise a measure of adult literacy were very limited. He ends his historical survey with the Adult Performance survey (APS) which was the first major attempt to develop a survey type of instrument for adult literacy. Since then, the project of operationalising adult literacy has developed apace. In the definition adopted by the APS we see the emergence of the performative language of skills and competencies characteristic of the human capital approach. There are many other more recent developments where "functional" is interpreted in terms of the measurement of competencies and vocational skills. For example, the Ontario Adult Functional Literacy Framework, developed in Canada the 1980s, while it refers to "everyday" tasks, presents a narrow range of test items and curricula related to vocational texts, consumer knowledge and regulatory, form-filling practices in line with new views of the skills needed by the well-equipped global citizen. The test items focus mainly on reading, demanding very limited writing skills. The Ontario framework prefigures the current Canadian *Essential Skills Framework* (HRSDC n.d.) It also shows continuities with the International Adult Literacy Survey co-coordinated by the OECD which was to become so influential during the 1990s and into the present. (see Hamilton and Barton, 2000).

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) continues the tradition begun by UNESCO, of attempting to measure literacy levels by means of surveys, and to produce international comparisons. The IALS study is carried out by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in partnership with national statistical research agencies in Canada and the USA. Its findings are integrated into a set of key statistical indicators issued by the OECD for use by policy makers (see OECD/CERI 1997).

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The IALs test does not call itself a test of functional literacy and is the most sophisticated attempt so far at capturing the complexities of adult literacy. Test items were generated from real life texts such as bus timetables, advertisements and consumer instructions. The final test uses 35 texts, each one as the basis for several question items and allocates adults to 5 levels and 3 different dimensions of literacy achievement.

The IALS reports and the test itself strongly emphasise the links between literacy, employment and economic prosperity. The test items appear to sample a transnational culture that taps into people's participation in the global economy. Hamilton and Barton (2000), Blum et al (2001), and others, have critiqued the test, arguing that it represents a partial and flawed model of literacy achievement. However, the OECD's policy *rhetoric* expresses the same humanistic aims as UNESCO continues to do, arguing for the importance of lifelong learning to achieve a more equitable distribution of literacy within and across different countries, the importance of developing a general cultural environment of literacy and the need for cross-sectoral policy initiatives in literacy. Throughout the reports, though, the authors struggle with what they view as the "problem" of cultural diversity in their attempt to arrive at an internationally valid and universal test of adult literacy. Thus, the ambiguities that have always characterized the notion of functional literacy are reflected here too.

Despite critiques of the validity of the International Adult Literacy Survey its impact across OECD countries has been substantial. In the UK, for example, the estimate of 7 million adults in need of literacy and numeracy help was partly derived from the IALS results. It became the underpinning rationale for the *Skills for Life* policy in England and the development of a national test and a core curriculum for the field (DfES, 2001). Although the IALS assessments were not directly used as a basis for the accreditation developed for *Skills for Life* it was calibrated against the international test scores. *Skills for Life accreditation* also linked with core competency frameworks being developed for countries in the European Union with the particular aim of harmonizing qualifications across countries in order to make exchange of labour easier within the EU area. Some of the underpinning discourses of SfL therefore derive from the "human resource development" discourse that dominates both international and European Union policy with its identification of key competences for employability (see European Union 2006; OECD 1997; Henry et al 2001; Rizvi and Lingard 2009)

The tensions and contradictions that have historically surrounded the term 'functional literacy' were also a feature of *Skills for Life*. The initiative was one of a number of educational reforms announced in the 1998 Green Paper (DfEE 1998). This document presented a broad vision for education, emphasising its contribution to social justice and personal fulfilment as much as its economic benefits (see p 7 for example). Over the lifetime of the *Skills for Life* policy, however, there has been a shift towards a much more vocationally focused agenda (Appleby and Bathmaker 2005). There are a number of reasons for this, one being the UK government's response to the economic crisis which began in 2008. This intensified what was already an increasing focus on skills for employment. We argue, therefore, that one of the characteristics of functional literacy highlighted by Levine was already a feature of *Skills for Life*, and this explains why it was possible for policy makers to present the introduction of *Functional Skills* as

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a logical next step. In 2004 the UK Treasury commissioned ‘an independent review to examine the future skills needs of the UK economy’ (UK Treasury 2004:6). At national level there was a perceived need for a more coherent qualifications framework in the post-16 sector, including greater parity between academic and vocational qualifications, while EU member states had agreed to harmonize qualifications across countries. In 2005, while this Review was underway, the government published a White Paper on skills (DfES 2005) which made numerous references to ‘functional’ skills and this marked the (re)appearance of this discourse at national level. The report produced by the skills review (Leitch 2006) subsequently took up the notion of functional literacy and numeracy, defining them with reference to the levels used by IALS, although the latter had not used the term ‘functional’.

The Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) is the latest initiative to collect comparative statistics for adult lifelong learning (Schleicher, 2008). PIAAC has been developed through the combined efforts of the OECD and the European Union and, starting in 2011, it will focus on what are considered to be the key cognitive and workplace skills required for successful participation in the economy and society of the 21st century. PIAAC builds on the measures developed for the International Adult Literacy Survey, and, like the IALS, it is likely to be very influential in the way that policy is developed and in shaping our definitions of adult literacy and numeracy in the future.

### **The Theoretical Roots of Functional literacy**

The historical analysis above shows how pervasive and persuasive functional literacy has been as a strand of thinking and how, in the context of earlier, less informed, views about adult literacy it was seen as a progressive way forward which recognised the role of changing contextual demands on practices of literacy. The account also shows, however, that the idea of functional literacy is closely linked to other ideas that tend to lead it towards a narrow conception of literacy education. Levine’s detailed critique showed how this slippage happens and how it is counterproductive to real progress in understanding literacy and its relationship to historical change and economic prosperity. As described above, he argues that it is based on mistaken assumptions about literacy’s social, economic and political dimensions, that it promises spurious accuracy and that it “seesaws” between broad liberal humanism and a narrow vocational approach.

Whilst Levine convincingly explains the appeal of functional literacy in terms of its elasticity, there is another reason why the term is so resilient which he does not make explicit in his critique. The term “functional” carries with it ideological baggage from its sociological origins in the functionalist theories of Durkheim, Merton, Spencer and Parsons which have been widely critiqued against alternative theories of society (see Giddens, 2009). Functionalism emphasises the value of the equilibrium of society in which all elements have a pre-determined role. Successful normalisation of individual behaviour through socialisation or education will enable an individual to play their part by fitting in to the status quo rather than changing or disrupting it. Functionalism is not concerned with interior meanings and interpretations or the symbolic

aspects of social life – it is performative and system driven. Such a theory cannot explain how or why people might exert positive agency to challenge inequality and change society and it is thus inherently conservative. In our view, this is why the concept of ‘functional literacy’ is not only reductive and ambiguous, but actually harmful.

This theoretical “baggage” helps to explain how the notion of “functional literacy” so easily migrates to the idea of literacy skills as helping people to fit in, to be normal and the tendency for it to be used narrowly to refer to externally defined vocational skills. Perhaps even more seriously for literacy learners, the concept of functionality and the normality associated with it, entails the opposite side of the coin: dysfunctionality and deviance, which are qualities that become associated with those who have underachieved in education and training.

### **‘Functional Literacy’ Discourses in Key Contemporary Policy Documents**

A key source of information about the new qualifications for practitioners was the *Functional Skills Standards* document produced by the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA). The definition of Functional Skills in this document is broad, echoing earlier interpretations of ‘functional literacy’ as embedded in and serving ‘real life’ contexts and purposes:

The term ‘functional’ should be considered in the broad sense of providing learners with the skills and abilities they need to take an active and responsible role in their communities, everyday life, the workplace and educational settings. Functional English requires learners to communicate in ways that make them effective and involved as citizens, to operate confidently and to convey their ideas and opinions clearly. (QCDA 2007)

In *Changing Lives*, however, which describes the refreshed *Skills for Life* policy and is therefore concerned solely with adult education, we immediately see the kind of slippage noted by Levine, and the discourse becomes fixed almost exclusively on employability. This is made clear with the first mention of the policy’s intended beneficiaries:

Research consistently shows that a skilled **workforce** is a productive **workforce**, better able to respond to the challenges and opportunities posed by ever greater competition, technological change and new markets. (p3 emphasis added)

We have already alluded to the ideological ‘baggage’ associated with the notion of functionality, in particular a concern with the normalisation of individual behaviour and system-driven approaches to policy. We suggest that this could be one reason for its current appeal, since it fits well with the kind of top-down, technocratic approaches to policy which are characteristic of contemporary government in a number of countries ( see Ozga and Lingard 2007, Harvey 2005). In *Changing Lives* a ‘technocratic’ discourse is apparent in the impersonalised representation of the government and the learners through the use of abstract nouns which stand for their qualities or actions. For example, paragraph 4 of the Introduction represents the intended beneficiaries of

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Skills for Life by means of the abstraction ‘social exclusion’ (‘giving everyone in our society the opportunity to develop their skills will help us tackle social exclusion’). In paragraph 2 we are told about the need for investment in *skills* (not in the *people* who might need the skills) and in paragraph 9, that *Skills for Life* will now focus on *employability* (not on *people* who may or may not be employed). Similarly, the Introduction describes a range of actions taken by the government, all of which have abstract nouns, rather than human subjects, as their objects. The government itself is represented in the form of its strategy, which, we are told, has been ‘boosting demand’, ‘ensuring ...capacity’, ‘raising standards’ and ‘increasing learner achievement’ (pp 4-5). In this paragraph the activities of teaching and learning are represented by the nominalizations ‘teaching and learning infrastructure’ and ‘provision’, while teachers themselves become ‘the provider base’. In all these examples human actors are removed, and processes and actions are turned into abstract entities. This level of impersonalisation is perhaps not surprising, for as van Leeuwen (2008:47) points out, ‘impersonalisation abounds in the language of bureaucracy, a form of organisation of human action which is governed by impersonal procedures’.

In the following quotation, learners are represented in an impersonalised way by the word ‘needs’:

[T]he Government set itself the ambition to be a world leader in skills by 2020, benchmarked against the upper quartile of OECD countries. For Skills for Life, by 2020 we want 95 per cent of the working-age population to possess at least functional levels of literacy and numeracy.

To deliver this world-class ambition, and to make real progress towards it by 2011, we have refreshed our strategy for addressing literacy, language and numeracy needs.

(DIUS 2009:5)

Another point to note in this extract is the contrast between the representations of the social actors: the government has ‘ambitions’, whereas the learners have ‘needs’, although it could be argued that the reverse is equally true. Furthermore, the government sets its own ambitions, but the learners’ agency is removed as they do not define their own needs – in fact elsewhere in the document they are represented as ignorant of the fact that they may have needs. These ways of representing learners instantiate a deficit discourse, which has underpinned much of the official documentation connected with SfL. As Hamilton and Pitt(2009) note, adult literacy learners are often perceived as marginalised and therefore tend to become stigmatized, which can make it difficult to depict their perceived needs without representing them as deficient. However, we would argue that such representations are not inevitable. A more positive alternative can be found in the government report which laid the foundations for SfL and which referred to potential learners as ‘[e]very citizen with worries about literacy or numeracy ....’ (DfEE 1999: 11)

As we have already noted, it is important to trace the connections between particular policies and the wider European and global agendas which help to shape them. In the quote from *Changing*

Lives above, the wider context is signalled by the reference to the OECD, but it is clearly evident throughout the document, which mentions ‘today’s global slowdown’ (DIUS 2009:3) in its first paragraph.

The dominant discourse of *Changing Lives* is one of literacy skills for employability, but there are traces of other discourses. For example, a description of the Employability Skills Programme (ESP) in Chapter 4 states that in addition to providing help with LLN, it offers ‘employability qualifications, job-search support and work experience’ (p35). This appears to be an implicit recognition that increased literacy alone will not enable people to obtain employment. Furthermore, we are told that the new adult advancement and careers service (AACS) will provide advice on ‘issues that can act as barriers to accessing learning’ such as childcare, understanding housing and employment rights and personal financial management (p37). Such statements indicate a recognition that unemployment and other social problems have complex causes and cannot be solved purely by an increase in the number of adults with literacy qualifications. They instantiate what might be termed a discourse of ‘joined-up government’, which was a prominent feature of policy debates and announcements of the Labour government. Even though this particular discourse is materialised in the words quoted above, there is another, stronger, discourse of individualism underpinning the description of the proposals. All the help is to be targeted at the individual level and there is no mention of wider structural issues that may be contributing to the difficulties faced by the intended beneficiaries of the policies.

In summary, our analysis reveals that the representation of key social actors in *Changing Lives* is consistent with a ‘functional’, vocationally-focused approach to education policy. Within this approach learners are represented as deficient and lacking the authority or agency to define their own needs and ambitions for learning. Furthermore, there is evidence of a neo-liberal discourse which locates the causes of, and solutions to, social problems within individuals whilst downplaying the importance of wider structural issues which limit people’s lives and opportunities. The overriding concern with economic issues means that literacy education becomes narrowly defined as skills-for-employment. However, traces of a ‘joined up government’ discourse serve as reminders of the different interests and views which have been pulled into alignment as SfL has evolved. We suggest that the notion of functional literacy has been attractive to the authors of *Changing Lives* partly because its very vagueness has helped to effect this alignment, but also because it fits well with the vocational discourse that has come to dominate and with the prevalent approach to governance.

While we were drafting this article a new policy document, bearing the title *Functional Skills: the facts* (DCSF/BIS 2010) was published by the two government departments which, at that time, shared responsibility for education. This brief document (it is eight pages in total) ‘sets out the Functional Skills policy in its entirety and will be useful to anyone involved in delivering functional skills’. As its title suggests, it is intended to provide comprehensive and authoritative information to a wide range of interested parties, including practitioners, managers and learners. It demonstrates many of the points we have made in our discussion and we therefore see it as confirmation of our argument. A few examples are sufficient to give a flavour of the document as a whole. The introduction begins with the broader definition of FS found on the QCDA

website and in many of the other *Functional Skills* publications. However, in the next sentence there is a slippage into a narrower vision for the policy: ‘Better functional skills will help to raise standards across the curriculum, improve learners’ employment prospects, and support their progression to further study.’ This sentence hints at the main policy actors (politicians, employers, HE institutions) who have played a part in the development of the new policy and whose interests it is intended to align. The mention of ‘standards’ is evidence of the preference among politicians for a top-down, target-driven approach to educational reform, while the reference to ‘employment’ confirms the close link between the notion of ‘functional’ skills and vocational education. This link is made more explicit in the next sentence, with a reference to the global economy: ‘Functional skills will also empower individuals to make the most of their life chances and to function in the modern world, where global economic competition has raised the bar in terms of the skills required from young people and adults.’ As in *Changing Lives*, the agency here lies with ‘global economic competition’, rather than with human beings, and the emphasis is on the skills required from young people and adults, not on anything that may be required (or desired) by them. The ambiguity that tends to surround the concept of ‘functionality’, as well as the tendency for it to slide from broader towards narrower definitions is also apparent in the claims made for Functional Skills here: first we are told that it will ‘empower’ individuals, but then that they will be able to ‘function’ (i.e. not grow, develop or change) as a result. It is also worth noting that once again the emphasis is on individuals rather than communities.

## **Conclusion**

Why, given the contested history of functional literacy, is it moving centre stage again in policy in England? In part the answer might be that it has never really gone away or been replaced by a more acceptable definition; it has just gone underground, co-existing in a contradictory way with other visions for literacy education. Barton (2007, pp 189) identifies a gap between rhetoric and practice. He says of the mixed messages in the current discourses used by UNESCO, the OECD and the European Union:

“In my view in such statements international bodies are trying to incorporate new approaches while still keeping hold of a rigid functional approach. This is one of several areas in the study of literacy where I see attempts to fit new ideas into the creaking framework of outworn theories which cannot take the strain. UNESCO and other international agencies still need to reassess the ideas and theories underlying the aims and methods.... There is a gulf between the liberal aims of emancipation and the practical programmes which are funded. The idea of conflicting definitions of literacy underlying the various approaches helps us see more clearly what is going on.” [Barton, 2007:192]

Our analysis supports Barton’s view and demonstrates the value of tracing the historical and theoretical lineage of apparently ‘new’ policy initiatives.

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Our comparative historical analysis of adult literacy policy in the US, Canada, the UK and other EU countries, as well as close critical reading of key policy documents in England, confirms that many of Levine's criticisms of functional literacy remain equally relevant in the contemporary context. Our discussion also highlights similarities between recent policy developments in these countries. We would argue that, although the term 'functional literacy' may not be used universally, the particular assumptions and approaches signaled by it are nevertheless a common feature of such developments.

We have demonstrated how the notion of 'functionality' is attractive to policy makers because its ambiguity allows it to align social actors who may have different or even conflicting interests. However, it tends to narrow the discourse and restrict opportunities to promote alternative visions for literacy education which recognize the diversity of literacy learners. We argue that the introduction of *Functional Skills* represents a marked impoverishment of the discourse which has underpinned adult literacy education in the UK for the last 30 years.

We view these developments as problematic. However, they are being presented as a natural and seamless progression, and this is possible, we argue, because the development of *Skills for Life* since 2001 has been characterised by an increasing emphasis on the economic benefits of adult education at the expense of concerns with social justice and diversity (Appleby and Bathmaker 2005). Such developments pull literacy into a standardised, monocultural frame that marginalises minority languages and cultures. Blunt (2004) identifies a similarly narrowed vision over the past three decades in Canada and other technologically advanced countries, whilst Ozga and Lingard (2007) point out that in education systems across the world, policy is becoming increasingly homogenised as globalisation reduces the capacity of individual states to make policy independently. Lo Bianco (2004) notes that within OECD countries the increasing emphasis on vocational education has been strongly promoted through the IALS. He notes the increasing dominance of the OECD relative to UN organisations in setting the international literacy agenda. Across OECD member countries the emergence of the 'knowledge economy' has resulted in increasing focus on the presumed economic benefits of literacy and promotion of literacy education in the context of the labour market rather than in community settings. We argue that the notion of 'functional literacy', with all its historical and ideological associations, has a particular affinity with such approaches and that this may explain its reappearance.

A huge volume of documentation was produced as the new policy was developed in England. As more and more documents appear, policies become layered on top of each other and, as Woodside-Jiron (2004) notes, through repetition and by constantly being cited as authority, these texts eventually acquire the status of 'fact'. In such an environment, we argue, it becomes more important, yet also more difficult, to track policy as it unfolds. Woodside-Jiron (2004) analyses a particular phase in the policy process in California which, following Fairclough (1992), she describes as a 'moment of tension' or 'crux', when things are changing and it becomes easier to notice and deconstruct meanings and practices that have previously been taken for granted. The particular 'policy moment' we have chosen to analyse was characterised by a number of simultaneous and highly significant changes: the introduction of a new set of

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qualifications; the move to align school and adult education; and, several weeks before the official introduction of Functional Skills, a general election followed by a change in government. For this reason we argue that it represents a particularly illuminating site for policy analysis.

Of course, policy development is a continuous process and does not stop when ‘cruces’ have passed and new initiatives become established. It is therefore impossible to foresee the detail of how Functional Skills will develop. However, our analysis enables us to make some general predictions. The overriding priority of the Coalition government which took office shortly before Functional Skills was officially implemented was reducing the national debt through enormous cuts to public spending. Further motivation for these cuts arose from the government’s aim of reducing the size of the state and the belief that economic recovery would be achieved by the creation of jobs in the private sector. We can be reasonably confident, therefore, that the notion of functional literacy will remain dominant because of its compatibility with this political agenda, and the narrow focus on employability and vocational skills is likely to intensify. In addition to the continuing need to respond to the global economic crisis, there are other consistent influences affecting literacy policy in the UK and more widely, as we have shown. Within the EU the prevalence of human capital approaches and the desire to harmonise qualifications across member states both point to the continuing appeal of the concept of functionality for policy makers. At the level of the OECD the need for cross-country comparisons is likely to consolidate its influence on policy in rich Western countries more generally. However, our analysis suggests that the notion of functionality will not prove to be an adequate basis for literacy policy. By examining its history, we can see how it oversimplifies the relationship between literacy and economic prosperity and thereby perpetrates long-standing myths in the field (see Graff, 1982; Hamilton 2012) as well as supporting unrealistic expectations of what policy investment can achieve.

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