

## Adult literacies from the perspective of practitioners and their learners: a case study from the north of England

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### Abstract

*This article is based on qualitative research with adult literacy practitioners and learners in the north of England. I draw on interview and focus group data to identify their perspectives on adult literacies and compare these with the understandings of literacy on which current policy-making for adult literacy in England is based. The research revealed a wide range of ways in which literacy is understood in practice, compared with a much narrower conceptualisation in current policy. The article concludes that teachers' and learners' perspectives on adult literacies reinforce the notion that literacy is not a fixed concept, but that its meanings and uses vary according to time and context. It argues, however, that a policy environment based on an understanding of literacy which emphasizes employability and economic outcomes creates challenges for teachers and learners to maintain their own perspectives in relation to what literacy constitutes and what is important in adult literacy education.*

**Keywords:** Adult literacy; literacies; policy; practice

### Introduction

It has been suggested that the variety of ways in which literacy is understood has been a major focus in recent literature on adult literacy (Duckworth & Ade-Ojo, 2016) and indeed, the comment that 'Definitions of what it means to be literate are always shifting' (Crowther, Hamilton & Tett, 2001, p.1) is supported by the many theories and viewpoints that have been expressed. Research in the field has included a series of analyses of the ways in which literacy is understood in education policy and by various international surveys on adult literacy. However, far less consideration has been given to the views of literacy teachers and adult literacy learners about what literacy is and what it means to be literate. With this in mind, and drawing on research with adult literacy practitioners and



some of their learners in the north of England, this article explores teachers' and learners' perspectives on literacy. It compares these understandings of literacy with those on which current policy-making for adult literacy in England is based and highlights tensions between some of the ways in which literacy is conceptualised. The article concludes that teachers' and learners' perceptions in relation to adult literacies reinforce the notion that literacy is not a fixed concept, but that its meanings and uses vary according to time and context. It argues, however, that a policy environment based on an understanding of literacy which emphasizes employability and economic outcomes creates challenges for teachers and learners to maintain their own perspectives in relation to what literacy constitutes and what is important in adult literacy education.

## Background

A review of previous research in the field reveals a range of ways in which literacy is conceptualised and how these understandings have changed over time. These varied viewpoints include the perception of literacy as a universal set of decontextualized technical skills with a focus on the reading or writing of paper-based, formal texts (Bartlett, 2008; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; St. Clair, 2012). This is contrasted in the literature with 'sociocultural' perspectives on literacy (Perry, 2012, p. 50) which include the social practice understanding of literacy as a collection of practices that vary according to social context, rather than existing as one 'single phenomenon' (Post, 2016, p. 756). Among these sociocultural perspectives on literacy is the theory of 'multiple literacies' which, although sharing much common ground with the social practice viewpoint differs through its emphasis on 'multimodality' and the notion of what constitutes 'text'. Such a perspective has been linked with digital literacies; Cope and Kalantzis (2009), for instance, argue that developments in electronic communication, such as texting and email have resulted in the emergence of new literacies. 'Critical literacy' meanwhile, places greater emphasis on issues of power and agency and the way literacy can be used for empowerment (Perry, 2012). The comment that 'Literacy in the real world has become much more than making sense of written words on a page' (Parr & Campbell, 2012, p. 562) reflects the breadth of these perspectives on literacy.

The view of literacy as a set of fixed skills, described as an 'autonomous' model of literacy by Street (1995) and sometimes presented as a 'traditional' approach to understanding literacy (Duckworth & Ade-Ojo, 2016) has been thoroughly critiqued, being criticised particularly for leading to a 'deficit' view of literacy, which sees it as something lacking in illiterate people. The argument is made that approaches to literacy learning which are based on the acquisition of skills reinforce this 'deficit' model (Crowther & Tett, 2011). It is also suggested that much policy making in the UK is based on such understandings of literacy, and that large-scale international surveys such as the OECD's International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) in the 1990s and its more recent Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) also have their basis in such a model (Bartlett, 2008; Boudard & Jones, 2003; Edwards, Ivanic & Manion, 2009; Oughton, 2018). Further criticism has been levied against policy perceptions of literacy which understand it in terms of its ability to bring about economic success and global competitiveness (Tett, 2014). This is echoed in debates about the notion of 'functional literacy'. Burgess and Hamilton for instance, describe how the concept shifts from referring to literacy in real contexts, enabling people to have 'a fuller and more creative life' with 'access to their own culture' (2011, p. 3) to become associated with employability and the benefits of literacy to the economy. They identify the negative

implications of this for literacy education and for policy making, arguing that this narrow perspective on literacy creates a ‘marked impoverishment of the discourse’ underpinning adult literacy education (ibid., p. 13). Hamilton and Pitt (2011) suggest that ‘functional’ literacy is aligned with a ‘human resource’ model in which literacy is understood as ‘a commodity to be exchanged in the global market place’ (Hamilton, 2012, p. 170). This discourse of functionalism in relation to literacy has also been linked to a neoliberal agenda as a result of the way it links literacy with employability and economic issues (Allatt & Tett, 2019; Duckworth & Brzeski, 2015; Hamilton & Pitt, 2011).

Researchers in adult literacies have called for policy and practice in adult literacy education to move away from a narrow skills-based perception of literacy which links literacy development primarily to economic prosperity and employability issues, advocating sociocultural perspectives instead (including Black & Yasukawa, 2011). Reder (2009, p. 47) for example, argues for a social practice perspective to be used in both policy and practice for adult education along with the replacement of measures of literacy proficiency with ‘literacy practice measures’ which recognise the social contexts in which literacy is used. Within the context of these debates my own study considers the views of adult literacies practitioners and learners with regard to the meanings and purposes of literacy, and compares their perspectives to those on which current policy is based.

### **The policy context for adult literacy education in England**

The ways in which literacy has been defined and understood within previous adult literacy policies in England, such as the ‘Skills for Life’ initiative launched in 2001 (Hamilton & Hillier, 2006) and the Functional Skills qualifications which replaced it in 2012 (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010) have been the focus of a series of analyses (Burgess & Hamilton, 2011; Hamilton, 2012; Taylor, 2008). In these policy analyses a ‘traditional’ view of literacy emphasizing reading and writing within formal, paper-based texts has been identified. Literacy is defined by standards and rules and is understood primarily as a collection of cognitive and technical skills that a learner needs to acquire. Little consideration is given to the social context in which literacy is used and therefore policy approaches to literacy are often aligned to an autonomous model (Street, 1995). Through dominant discourses relating to employability, economic prosperity and vocational issues, literacy is seen as a means to individual and national prosperity by enabling people to gain and maintain employment and to contribute to national economic success and competitiveness; a ‘human capital model of literacy according to Hamilton (2012) which is also linked to a neoliberal policy agenda ‘that equates literacy with employment and earnings’ (Hamilton & Pitt, 2011, p. 600).

Studies of adult literacy policy in other countries, including Australia, Canada and New Zealand, have revealed similar perspectives on literacy to those identified in English policy. Discourses of ‘crisis’, and the media’s role in promoting this, deficit and the linking of literacy to national and individual economic prospects are recurring themes. Walker and Rubenson (2014), for instance, in their study of the influence of the media in Canada on public perceptions of literacy describe how it is presented as a ‘national crisis’ (ibid., p. 144) and how low levels of literacy are personified as an ‘enemy’ to be defeated as well as an issue of ‘national shame’ (ibid., p. 158). There are echoes here of the discourse surrounding the introduction of the Skills for Life strategy in England, which was introduced with grim statistics about levels of illiteracy in the country and the implications of this for the national economy (Hamilton & Pitt, 2011). The strategy was

publicised in a high profile media campaign that used ‘gremlins’, that is, cartoon characters that ‘taunted the less literate into adult education’, as a metaphorical representation of literacy difficulties (Kendall & McGrath, 2014, p. 59). In Australia, Black and Yasukawa (2011) report a similar discourse of crisis around adult literacy and numeracy in which the media played a significant role. They show how dominant discourses around literacy advocate literacy education which will lead to benefits to the economy and increased productivity on a national level and better employment prospects for the individual. Similar concerns emerge from literacy and language policy analysis in New Zealand, where Hunter identifies deficit discourses and a focus on the needs of employers and the labour market, alongside an assessment strategy which measures literacy as ‘a range of de-contextualised skills’ (2012, p. 306). However, her study also highlights the difference between policy perceptions and those forming the basis of practice, in that the employers in her workplace are more concerned with the use of language and literacy in the context of the workplace, that is, as the ‘social practices of the workplace’ (ibid.); In contrast, Scottish policy for adult literacy education is recognised for its social practice perception of literacy, although the extent to which this is put into practice in adult literacies education has been questioned (Ackland, 2013). Differences between policy perceptions of literacy and those of practitioners enacting policy are among the issues considered later in this paper.

Returning to England, the Skills for Life initiative, though seen by some as the most significant piece of policy-making in adult literacy education (Ade-Ojo & Duckworth, 2017) came to an end in 2012, to be replaced by a suite of ‘Functional Skills’ qualifications. Since then there has been little significant policy-making for adult literacy provision in the country. Adult literacy receives some mention in a number of policy documents aimed at the post-16 sector more generally, rather than being the subject of policy-making in its own right. Current policy appears to be focused more on younger people leaving school without minimum grades in English and mathematics (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015) than on provision for older learners. At present, however, funding for free tuition continues for some adults, with a focus on provision intended for certain groups of learners, such as the unemployed, 18 to 21 year olds, the homeless and people in prison (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2014). Requirements of funding mean that in many cases adult literacy programmes must lead to accreditation (such as learners achieving qualifications such as Functional Skills, for instance). Other learners are job-seekers, mandated by the Job Centres, who are required to attend classes and improve their employability skills in order to receive financial benefits (Job Seekers Allowance). Failure to attend classes can result in benefits being withheld, a practice often referred to as ‘sanctions’ (GOV.UK) and training providers receive ‘payment by results’ according successful achievement of ‘job outcomes’, that is, learners finding and maintaining work (Carter & Whitworth, 2017, p. 806). Teachers’ views on the implications of both these situations for the breadth of the curriculum they can offer and their autonomy with regard to what they can teach are addressed later in this paper.

Where policy exists for adult literacy education in England, it presents similar understandings of literacy to those identified in the earlier Skills for Life and Functional Skills documents. Analysis of current policy documents, for instance, reveals a view of literacy as a set of skills in reading and writing that are essential for a person’s work and every-day life that can be measured in levels and stages and are suggestive of a traditional and autonomous approach to literacy (Street, 1995). No consideration is given to creative writing, reading for pleasure or learning for its own sake. Repeated references to ‘good’ literacy (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2014, p. 4) imply that some

aspects or forms of literacy are viewed by policy-makers as being better than others, while discourses relating to the economy, functionality and employability are identifiable through the use of financial and economic terminology, including *returns, drivers, market, investment, earnings, performance, sustainability, outcomes*, and even *Net Present Value* in policy documents. (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2014, p. 2). In addition, repetition of terms such as *work, employment* and *employers* strengthens the employability discourse (ibid., p. 4.) while discussion of *skills, operating, personal efficacy, measurement* and *levels* (ibid., p. 2) further emphasizes the discourse of functionalism. Although there is also some acknowledgement that literacy may relate to wider issues, such as an individual's self-confidence, social mobility and health, the focus on functionalism and employability is dominant in current as well as previous policy for adult literacy education in England.

## Methodology

This article draws on research undertaken with adult literacy practitioners and learners between 2014 and 2016 in West and South Yorkshire, two counties in the north of England. Seventeen teachers of adult literacy were interviewed by telephone about their views on literacy and literacy education and additional face-to-face interviews were later held with four of these teachers to explore their perceptions in greater depth. The practitioners interviewed worked in a range of educational settings, including further education colleges, local education authority provision and private training providers. Although they were all teachers, they described their roles somewhat differently, and their job titles included 'curriculum leader', 'curriculum manager', 'Functional Skills teacher' and 'English tutor'. They ranged in experience from being relative newcomers, having taught in adult literacy for less than one year at the time of the interviews, to a number of practitioners who had been working in the field for twenty years. The interview sample also featured a trainee teacher undertaking a teaching practice placement in a college. Most of the interview participants were female, with only two male practitioners amongst the interviewees and their ages varied from the early 20s to the 56 to 65 age group. The majority of participants were aged between 45 and 55. Their highest qualifications ranged from first degree to doctorate, with some having additional specialist qualifications for teachers of adult literacy.

Two focus groups were also held with two of the teachers and some of their learners, the first of which took place in a private training organization operating from a village community centre. Members of this group were developing their literacy through creative writing, in a class they attended for personal reasons (enjoyment, social, personal challenge, for instance). They were not working towards a qualification. There were four learners present, initially, although two chose to leave shortly after the discussion began. The second focus group was held in a local education authority adult learning centre in inner city location where the learners were studying on a Functional Skills English course. This group included four members, two of whom were ESOL learners. Two of the learners had joined the class in order to gain qualifications to allow them to progress onto other courses of study. One member of the group was re-training after a long period of time working in one industry and another was there mainly to improve her English language. The groups' teachers were present in each and contributed a little to the discussions, although the opinions given were mostly those of the learners.

The sample of participants for the interviews and focus groups was small and by no means an attempt to generalise. However, I believe that the research provides a valuable

insight into practitioners' and learners' understandings of literacy. Details of participants are provided in Tables 1 and 2. All have been given pseudonyms.

Table 1: Interview participants

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Organisation type</b>	<b>Length of experience</b>	<b>Full-time, part-time or voluntary</b>	<b>Age group</b>	<b>Face-to-face</b>
Carol	FE (further education) college	12 years	Part-time	36-45	
Catherine	FE college	6 months	Voluntary	56-65	
Clare	Training provider (LEA)	4 years	Full-time	26-35	
Debbie	FE college	5 years	Full-time	45-55	✓
Donna	Adult education college	11 years	Part-time	36-45	
Faye	Training provider	9 months	Part-time	45-55	
Felicity	Adult education college	8 years	Full-time	45-55	
Heather	FE college	9 years	Full-time	36-45	
Jane	Training provider	2 years	Part-time	45-55	
Joe	Training provider (LEA)	4 years	Full-time	21-25	
John	Training provider	12 years	Full-time	36-45	
Lucy	FE college	20 years	Full-time	56-65	
Mary	Training provider	12 years	Full-time	45-55	✓
Moira	Further education college	12 years	Full-time	45-55	
Pauline	Training provider (LEA)	20 years	Full-time	45-55	✓
Sarah	Private training provider	5 years	Part-time	56-65	✓
Sonia	Training provider	1 year	Part-time	45-55	

Table 2: Focus group participants

<b>Group</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Learner or teacher</b>	<b>Age group</b>	<b>English as first language</b>
1	Julie	Learner	45-55	Yes
1	Jess	Learner	26-35	Yes
1	Sarah	Tutor	56-65	Yes
2	Martin	Learner	45-55	Yes
2	Zara	Learner	26-35	No
2	Eli	Learner	21-25	Yes
2	Daniel	Learner	21-25	No
2	Mary	Tutor	45-55	Yes

Group 1 = private training provider; Group 2 = Local Education Authority (LEA) training provider

## Teachers' perspectives on adult literacies

In the interviews teachers were asked about their views on what constituted literacy, why adults needed to be literate and what they thought a literate adult should be able to do. I also asked them about the policies governing literacy provision in their organisations and gave them the opportunity to add any additional comments they wished to make. Their responses provided insight into their perceptions of what literacy is and what they felt the purposes of adult literacy education to be. Some of their responses reflected an 'autonomous' understanding of literacy (Street, 1995) in their focus on 'skills' and in the way they described literacy according to 'levels'. For instance:

I think adults should have a minimum level 1 because that will enable them to put things like basic letters together and fill in the necessary forms for everyday life. (Clare)

They should be able to write at level 2 and to be able to read at level 2. (Moir)

Meanwhile, Joe's comments suggested he too viewed literacy as a skill to be learned in a series of stages:

There's different levels to being literate, technically you need to be able to write at a basic level ... to be able to pick up a pen and write words... when you're able to use sentences, use punctuation, use grammar, but to have some idea of the meaning and the background behind the text, that comes in at a higher level.

When asked what they thought literate adults should be able to do, practitioners included writing, reading, speaking and listening. Although they all mentioned reading, this carried differences in meaning, with some interview participants referring to 'basic' reading such as 'reading timetables or instructions' (Jane). As John put it:

Being able to read simple straightforward texts is one of the minimal skills I think a literate adult should have.

However, most participants understood reading as more than a basic ability, feeling that being literate involved the ability to read more deeply and critically. According to Heather:

I think they should be able not just to read for information but be able to pick up on inference.

Felicity's comments echoed this view:

It's ... being able to read between the lines, what's maybe an underlying message. Is someone trying to persuade you about something in their advertising? Being able to be critical I suppose. Knowing exactly what something is saying maybe not just in the written words but what's implied as well.

Reading for pleasure also featured in some practitioners' responses. Sarah, for instance, described how one of her learners discovered this:

She thought she wasn't a reader and she'd got an idea of what a reader was from school ... but then she discovered she could just read for fun, for her own pleasure. That it wasn't for anyone else's benefit ... it opened up a whole new world for her really.

Teachers' views on reading for pleasure were mixed however, with Mary feeling that it was a 'luxury because of the time involved', echoing perhaps the views of a participant in Kendall and McGrath's study of further education teachers' perceptions of reading for whom it was 'solitary, private and individualised activity' needing space from 'the distractions of work or family' (2014, p. 67).

Interview participants also had differing views about writing, although all identified it as an aspect of being literate. Some responses gave neat, legible handwriting with correct spelling and grammar as being the most important features of writing (Debbie). For these participants then, literacy's purpose was largely functional, and this was particularly apparent in the discussion of the writing of formal letters and Curriculum Vitae along with the completion of forms. They did not all share this viewpoint, however. Sarah, for example, who was keen to promote self-expression and creativity in her literacy classes, said it was about more than 'just filling in a form'; a view shared by Felicity: 'It's about enjoyment as well ... a means of self-expression.'

The range of different understandings of literacy held by participants extended further when some explained that being literate also meant being numerate. As Lucy put it: So much of effective literacy requires numeracy as well and, similarly, Pauline felt that:

Literate is not just having a good command of English and communication. It's also about being literate in things like your maths and ICT (Pauline).

A recurring theme in relation to literacy was communication, and for Pauline this meant:

The speaking and listening skills to be able to talk to a variety of people ... it's about social skills and being able to understand what is appropriate when communicating with people.

For most of the practitioners interviewed, literacy's communicative function also included digital communication. The use of computers, the Internet, emailing and texting were recurring features amongst their responses. According to Stordy (2015, p. 456) 'Digital literacies have transformed what it means to be literate and to experience literacy' and this comment is reflected in many of the responses given by the teachers interviewed. Sarah's opinion that, 'Literacy also now includes being able to use IT and digital technology' was typical of the views expressed, as was Pauline's comment that, 'Nearly everything now is done online and that is a really important part of being literate.' Mary also acknowledged that:

Things change ... like technology. That's a completely different kind of literacy, like Facebook and texting.

There was still some preference for traditional media, however. Debbie, speaking more about her personal preferences, for instance, acknowledged that:

I still like to touch and feel a book. I don't get the same enjoyment from reading something off a screen.

Literacy was also linked to benefits to the individual such as autonomy, independence and empowerment without which, according to Carol, a person would be 'disadvantaged ... in dealing with authorities'. An adult's self-confidence was another recurring theme, as were issues to do with social participation and inclusion. For Lucy, being literate was about getting 'the most out of life and participation in society' while Catherine felt that an adult who was not literate 'could well lead an isolated life.' Notions of equity featured



in the responses too, identified by Mary and Jane as the ability to participate and to have the same choices and opportunities as other people. Improving children's life chances was also mentioned by a number of the teachers interviewed, including Pauline:

It helps benefit the next generation because ... if parents are literate then their children have got more chance of being helped at home and moving on in life as well.

Alongside reading, writing and other specific aspects of literacy, 'functioning' on an everyday basis featured regularly in participants' responses. This involved a range of contexts for which adults needed literacy, including the home and family, health care, work place and job-hunting, travel and transport. For some participants this was about 'managing', for others it went a little further to 'being in control of one's life' (Carol) or 'being able to run their own affairs' (Debbie). Some teachers interviewed linked the functional aspects of literacy firmly to an adult's ability to find and maintain employment, the writing of CVs and letters of application along with the completion of forms being mentioned on a number of occasions. John's view, for instance, was that:

It's to improve employment prospects really ... That's one of the main reasons for being literate.

However, practitioners' views on the relationship between literacy and employability varied considerably. Sarah, for example, said that:

I don't think it's just about work actually. A lot of people come here because they have to ... pressure from the Job Centre ... but for some people in the class their reasons for coming are very different. I think it's more about being amongst people who are in a similar position to them socially, as well as being literate and about gaining confidence generally ...

Some questioned perceptions of literacy that focused predominantly on employability, believing literacy to be about more than this:

It's not just about the skills and abilities an adult should have ... should people be trained up just to do the jobs they do? (Donna)

In some cases, the employability and vocational focus of the national and institutional policy environments within which practitioners were working (deleted for anonymity) had caused them some frustration and the feeling that it led to a restricted or impoverished curriculum which focused on preparing learners for employment and achieving qualifications. This left little capacity for reading and writing for pleasure or for the benefits of learning purely for its own sake. Jane, for instance, explained how this meant that her organisation did not have 'much room ... for people who just come along because they want to learn a bit.' Pauline shared her frustration, adding that in her place of work they had at one time been able to provide courses which helped learners to 'grow in their confidence and in themselves' without the requirement to achieve a qualification, but that now 'all our learners have to achieve a formal exam.' The resulting need to 'teach to the exam' (Debbie) as it was perceived by some of the practitioners, was a further source of frustration and viewed as detrimental to the breadth of the adult literacy curriculum. Felicity felt particularly strongly about this:

It's not just about passing an exam ... I feel we're in danger of losing the love of literature, the love of writing ... we are having to just drill it in.

Carol's opinion was that adult literacy policy which was concerned primarily with employment and qualifications was affecting the overall character of literacy education, causing it to be far more driven by the syllabus and shaped much less by the specific interests of learners. In her view, this had resulted in the subject being 'vocationised'. For some teachers, the frustration they experienced when faced with the 'pressures of achievement' (Mary), end examinations and employability concerns led them to find ways of working which meant that they could maintain their own and also their learners' values in relation to what is important in adult literacy, while still working within the required policy and funding frameworks. Felicity, for example, described how, despite the pressures of time and examinations, she endeavoured to include some study of literature and creative writing in her adult literacy classes so that they were not based purely on employability and preparation for examinations. Other teachers explained how they encouraged their learners to become involved in non-work based activities outside the classroom that allowed them to make use of their literacy learning. Sarah, especially, was keen to celebrate learners' achievements in these contexts, recalling, for instance, how one member of her literacy class had developed so much self-confidence, both as a reader and inter-personally, as a result of attending literacy classes that she had started volunteering as a 'Reading Friend' at her local school, supporting and encouraging pupils' reading. Another member of Sarah's class had published some of her creative writing in the local press.

During the interviews with practitioners, data had been collected regarding their ages, highest qualifications, length of time in practice, type of educational organisation in which they worked and whether they worked full-time, part-time or in a voluntary capacity. These data were gathered in case they were of significance during the analysis process. Most of these participant characteristics did not appear to influence their views on literacy, however, bearing in mind that the sample was not of a sufficient size to present a definitive argument about this. One observation however (although not a generalisation due to the small sample size) is that there is a link between institution type and practitioners' perceptions regarding the influence of policy on the adult literacy curriculum. As explained earlier in the paper, participants were drawn from a range of organisations, including colleges of further education, an adult education college, private training organisations, local education authority provision and an educational charity. Those from the further education colleges and local education authority training providers described the most restrictions on their practice and they expressed greater concerns about the target-driven nature of policy and its emphasis on the achievement of qualifications, along with what they see as the resulting loss of focus on the needs of individual learners. In the case of some of the practitioners from training providers, their learners were job seekers for whom the payment of Job Seekers Allowance depended on their attending classes. These practitioners subsequently faced the additional challenge of the detrimental impact of government policy for job seekers on learner motivation in the classroom. The teachers from the adult education college and the educational charity, meanwhile, described greater flexibility regarding the content of their classes.

### **Learners' perspectives**

Focus group discussions with two groups of adult literacy learners provided the opportunity to explore with them their perspectives on literacy and literacy education. With both groups I started the discussion by asking the learners what 'literacy' meant to them and then allowed the conversation to develop. To an extent, the learners' perceptions

reflected those of their teachers in that there was some acknowledgement of the role of literacy in everyday functioning, though only very limited mention of employability. Only one learner (Daniel) linked his literacy learning to an improvement in his job prospects, though others acknowledged the benefits of their literacy development in allowing them to, as Martin put it, ‘get on’ in life. As with the teachers interviewed, literacy seemed to have a range of different meanings and purposes to the learners in the focus groups. The benefits for their children were one aspect of being literate mentioned by some of the learners. Zara, for example, felt that, ‘It’s very important because I have kids at school, to help them with their homework’.

When the discussion moved on to what a literate adult should be able to do, most of the learners mentioned writing in some form. For some, it involved the physical activity of writing, including the ‘joined-up writing’ with which Eli seemed particularly concerned:

Eli: I can’t write joined up writing.

Gwyneth: And do you think that’s important?

Eli: Oh yeah.

This was also important to Martin who felt his use of only capital letters in his writing and ‘no joined up writing or anything like that’ was an issue. Some of the learners evidently associated being literate with vocabulary and spelling and this was of concern to Martin, in particular, who in the past had needed to find alternative ways of expressing his ideas:

Instead of using the word I’d like to use, like big words, by abbreviating everything. It makes the same sense but doesn’t look professional.

‘Big words’ clearly carried greater value for him, as did the need for his writing to look ‘professional’. It was interesting, however, that he did not recognise that there was anything skilful about his ability to find different approaches within his writing. His views, along with Eli’s focus on ‘joined up’ writing, suggest the influence of an autonomous view of literacy perhaps lingering from the learners’ schooling, where the focus is on literacy as a set of rules and skills. Although none of the learners mentioned punctuation, for Julie, literacy did mean ‘reading, writing, grammar and things’. She went on to describe her creative writing though, and how important this was to her. She had begun writing creatively for her own pleasure initially, inspired by dreams and by books she had read. However, she explained how she enjoyed sharing her writing with her friends and classmates and also that some of her stories had recently been published locally. ‘I just like it when people like them.’ Literacy was evidently not solely an individual activity for Julie, but also a social pursuit.

Communication in general was a recurring feature of the focus group discussions, and the ability to express oneself came in to this, while listening was also an aspect of literacy for some learners:

Jess: We need to be able to listen as well as put our own discussion forward.

Julie: Other people’s opinions matter as well, to listen to what they’re saying and what they think.

As with the teachers interviewed, there was some acknowledgement of a link between literacy and maths in one of the focus groups. Martin mentioned ‘trouble with mathematics’ when outlining what literacy meant to him and Zara also made this link, adding that without literacy:

How are you going to do the maths? If we don’t understand what we are reading, then we are not going to resolve the problem.

Meanwhile, everyone in the focus groups identified a link between literacy and digital technologies. Jess made a typical comment, for instance, I think they’re probably on a par, aren’t they, computers and literacy.’ That the learners were increasing their confidence in digital environments was apparent in both groups. Some of the learners said that they had never used a computer until they began to attend literacy classes, but explained how they were now able to type and format a range of documents and also carry out research using the Internet. Others described how they could now post contributions to blogs and participate in social media. Texting was also discussed and all members of the group agreed that these activities counted as literacy even though they used a digital format rather than being print-based. In one group, however, the benefits of reading electronic against paper-based texts were debated at length and, as like the teachers, some learners still valued the latter. As Julie put it: ‘You can’t beat a book.’

The development of confidence through literacy was a further theme in the focus group discussions. Jess felt particularly strongly about this, describing how participating in adult literacy classes had led to her finding her ‘voice’. It had given her ‘confidence to speak’ and made her feel ‘empowered’. She explained how this confidence had allowed her to play a more active role in her community by volunteering as a ‘Reading Friend’ at her child’s school, supporting the pupils in their reading.

## Discussion

A comparison of practitioners’ and learners’ perspectives suggests some common ground between them regarding the nature and purposes of literacy and of literacy education. They shared similar views, for example, about the centrality to literacy of writing and reading and communication in general, including speaking and social interaction. In some teachers’ and learners’ responses there is perhaps a suggestion of an ‘autonomous’ view of literacy in the identification of measurable skills in reading, writing and there may also be an understanding of literacy as ‘schooling’ (Street & Street, 1995) as seen in Martin and Eli’s comments about ‘joined-up writing’ for instance.

A shared understanding is also apparent in teachers’ and learners’ perceptions of the functional aspects of literacy. Some of the teachers, for example, linked literacy with functioning on a day-to-day basis, in contexts such as the home, the work place, public transport and health care. While in learners’ responses this was more implied rather than explicit (there were no specific references to actions such as reading timetables or letters from their children’s schools, shopping and so on in their response, for instance) there was an overall sense of literacy allowing them to ‘get on’ in life. Some participants also linked literacy to employability, though this was given far less consideration by the learners than the teachers.

However, most interview and focus group participants shared a broader understanding of what constitutes literacy. The use of digital technologies as a fundamental aspect, for example, was recognised by teachers and learners alike and there was also some agreement about the link between literacy and numeracy. Regarding wider

aspects of literacy and the benefits of being literate, practitioners' perceptions included a variety of issues, such as social participation, empowerment, independence, personal confidence, the development of identity and benefits to family life and children's life chances. Although learners' views were perhaps less wide-ranging than those of their teachers, they also mentioned the benefits to their families and communities, improved self-confidence, greater independence and more social participation. Additionally, some teachers and learners related creativity to literacy, alongside reading and writing purely for pleasure. The learners' varying reasons for developing their literacy reflect the findings of a study of a social practice approach to numeracy in the USA which recognises that adult learners' motivations may go beyond the 'functional' to include personal satisfaction and fulfilment (Oughton, 2018). There are also similarities with earlier work in England which identified enjoyment, personal satisfaction, engagement and helping their children amongst learners' motivations for studying numeracy (Swain, 2005).

Overall, there were more shared perceptions of literacy than differences of opinion amongst teachers' and learner's responses. Generally, the traditional 'autonomous' approach to literacy identified by Street (1995) though suggested by some participants' responses, featured far less than a broad understanding of literacy which encompasses, not only skills, employability and functioning in everyday life, but also literacy's role in self-development, social participation and recreation. Some participants were keen to preserve those elements of literacy they saw as more traditional, relating to paper-based texts and handwriting, for instance, but all still accepted the importance of digital literacy to an extent. Although there was some talk of employability and functioning in every-day life, discourses of employability, economic success and functionalism, along with 'autonomous' approaches to literacy feature far more prominently in policy than they do in practitioners' and learners' understandings of literacy. For most of the research participants, literacy was about much more than the skills needed to 'operate' in daily life and work (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010).

## Conclusion

This article contributes to the field of adult literacies by considering the perspectives of teachers and learners, which have been under represented in recent times. Although based on a relatively small sample of participants, and therefore, not an attempt to generalise, the data discussed here illustrate the variety of ways in which literacy is understood in practice, ranging from the ability to read and write in a 'basic' way, to creative writing, reading for pleasure and communicating with others in social or digital contexts. Although there are some subtle differences in perceptions held by learners and practitioners, on the whole, there is a shared understanding that literacy is about more than the human capital and employability model on which, it is argued, recent policy-making is based (Duckworth & Ade-Ojo, 2017; Hamilton, 2012; Hamilton & Pitt, 2011). Learners' and teachers' perspectives on literacy and literacy education reinforce the notion that literacy is not a fixed concept, rather that it has differing meanings, purposes and benefits according to context. However, the implications of an economic and employment based understanding of literacy as identified in recent policy are seen in practitioners' frustration at the constraining effects on their practice which result from the demands of employability-focused curricula, examinations and the need for learners to achieve qualifications. The challenge for adult literacies practitioners, then, is to continue to deliver a curriculum which accommodates learners who wish to develop their literacy

for reasons other than work and day-to-day ‘functioning’ within a policy context concerned with employability and economic outcomes.

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