



Research and Practice in Adult Literacy

## **Consultation on 'New Challenges, New Chances: Next Steps in Implementing the Further Education Reform Programme'**

### **Feedback from RaPAL (Research and Practice in Adult Literacy)**

#### **Background and Introduction**

RaPAL welcomes the opportunity to contribute to debate on the implementation of the Government's reform programme for Further Education. This submission has been produced following consultation with RaPAL members. It begins with a brief introduction to RaPAL. This sets out our approach to literacy and the aims and principles which we believe should underpin all literacy education. This is followed by answers to the questions in Section 8.7 of the consultation document relating to the review of literacy and numeracy provision for adults.

RaPAL is the only UK national organisation that focuses on the role of literacy in adult life. We are an independent network of learners, teachers, managers and researchers in adult literacy and numeracy. RaPAL was established in 1985 and is supported by membership subscription only.

RaPAL campaigns for the rights of all adults to have access to the full range of literacies in their lives. We offer a critique of current policy and practice where it is based on simplistic notions of literacy as skill. We argue for broader ideas of literacy starting from theories of language and literacy acquisition that take account of social context. The theories we draw on are broadly known as the new literacy studies.

RaPAL encourages a broad range of collaborative and reflective research involving all participants in literacy work as partners. We support democratic practices in adult literacy work and believe that a learning democracy can only be achieved if teaching, learning and research are kept together. A dynamic relationship between research and practice keeps the meaning of literacy open and responsive to the variety of changing social contexts and practices that exist in our society.

We recognise the role of professional development in this process and of activities which enable learners to make their views known, in all media. As we see it, students are central to a learning democracy and their participation in the decision-making processes of practice and research is essential.

Further information about RaPAL can be found on our website <http://www.rapal.org.uk>

## General Comment

In recent years, and particularly since the current economic crisis began, policy has shifted much more towards vocationally-oriented literacy education. In this climate there is a risk that literacy education that is more focused on personal and community development and social justice issues can be squeezed out. However, we need a much broader vision of the purposes and contexts for literacy education. It is also essential for policy makers to recognise that vocationally oriented learning and learning for community and personal development are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the latter kind of provision can contribute to economic goals in a number of ways. For example, it can play a vital role in enabling individuals and communities to develop the resilience needed to withstand harsh economic conditions. It can also be an important first step back into education and training for long-term unemployed people, many of whom may find it difficult to move straight into vocational training.

## Response to the Discussion Questions

### **Q19. What more is needed to accelerate the rate at which the most successful teaching practices / models of delivery are spread across the sector?**

In order for practitioners to be able to share successful practices and models of delivery they need to be able to meet, discuss and showcase techniques. The best avenues for this are face-to-face sessions, which can take place either in person or via Skype. The least useful sessions are training days dominated by a set syllabus and a tick list of activities. More use could be made of YouTube, Skype and Teacher's TV to share successful practices.

There are many ALLN tutors who are nearing the end of their careers. There is still insufficient opportunity for them to share their experience and expertise. There should be more national opportunities for the 'ordinary' *Skills for Life* tutor to discuss and share ideas with newer tutors, for example through involvement in the delivery of training and professional development.

We would urge policy makers to provide adequate support for provision and allow a less centralised system - one which is not based on a pre-defined curriculum and outcomes. This is quite consistent with the localisation agenda favoured by the present government. Successful teaching practices are most likely to flourish when provision is meaningfully funded, teachers are supported and they are offered far greater flexibility to respond to local needs, aspirations and circumstances.

In addition, we would point out that 'accelerating the rate' is not the most relevant issue here. Professional development needs time - for any or all of the following: reading, thinking, reflection on experience, trying out and evaluating new strategies, sharing successful practices - and therefore of course it needs adequate funding. It cannot be rushed: practitioners, like any other learners, need opportunities to reflect on what they do now, and to grow at their own pace.

## **Q20. What more is needed to maximise the quality of the literacy and numeracy teaching workforce?**

Above all, staff need to see a future. Better job security is therefore essential. There need to be more full-time or fractional staff, rather than hourly paid or agency workers, as this means that teachers can access training sessions and benefit from peer-support.

Like any other learners, professional practitioners need to start from where they are now: they need to be encouraged to note and value their strengths, and recognise and select achievable areas for improvement. We would take issue with the assumption that a prescriptive (and therefore simplistic) training regime can neatly develop a teaching workforce.

Teachers need regular opportunities for training, especially peer-led training, and better funding for additional diploma courses. There should be more subject specific training at postgraduate level. This training needs to be blended, making use of Skype, YouTube, discussion boards etc. Online training courses and modular courses have an important role to play. Unfortunately, the trend seems to be towards part-time and full-time taught courses which disadvantage the majority of the teaching workforce who are either geographically or financially unable to take the courses.

There need to be more opportunities for teachers to engage in research, which we would view as an essential element of professional development. Various approaches to supporting practitioner research have already been used successfully in this sector, most notably the practitioner-led research projects funded by the NRDC. We would also advocate the inclusion of action research modules in more professional development courses.

We are troubled by the implication in this question (as well as in questions 19, 21 and 22) that if the intended policy outcomes have not so far been fully realised, the reason must be some deficiency on the part of the workforce. We contend that a key factor in the deficiencies implied in the consultation document is the design of the *Skills for Life* policy initiative itself. It was a classic example of a 'Command and Control' policy, based on a strongly 'technical-rational' concept of the problem it was addressing. This is reflected in the narrow and static but detailed specification of what literacy is (the national curricula), the use of inappropriate (unfit for purpose) standardised testing, and the narrow and numerical approach to assessment of learning and to evaluation of success. This approach was extended to the way in which the policy was implemented: teachers required to attend highly prescriptive training in the curriculum; providers forced by funding systems and the narrow success criteria to exclude learning activity which was relevant and needed but which did not fit the definition; evaluation of the whole policy based simply on qualifications gained; vast amounts of money spent on the development of materials packs; and the widespread use of short-term contracts with private consultancies to deliver much of these aspects of implementation. All this work was done far removed from actual learners, based on 'one size fits all' assumptions. The Parliamentary Accounts Committee in its report on *Skills for Life* recognised that this approach to the problem at best only 'captured the low hanging fruit', and that achievement of the *Skills for Life* targets did not imply the policy had been a success.

Virtually none of the enormous budget for SfL was spent on teacher development in the true sense of the word. An alternative approach could reasonably have spent all the money on this - it is perfectly possible and there is evidence to suggest that the outcomes might have been better.

The solution needs to fit the problem: if it is agreed that there are literacy deficiencies in England (and our evidence for this is only indicative, because of the difficulties of measuring whatever literacy is in every context), then this is a highly complex problem, hard even to define satisfactorily and not amenable to a technical-rational 'solution'. We argue that part of the problem is that the key people involved, the teachers, are assumed to be unthinking 'delivery agents' of a standardised curriculum and standardised pedagogy. All the research on educational reform (including Michael Fullan's evaluation of the National Literacy Strategy) identifies the critical importance of teachers being consulted and fully involved in the change process. This was largely ignored in the case of *Skills for Life*.

What is needed is a much stronger emphasis on continuous professional development, recognising that most teachers learn most of their expertise on the job, after they have qualified, and throughout their whole career. Furthermore, teachers should be encouraged to return to the heart of the matter and view their work as essentially investigative. They should be taught how to have investigative conversations with learners which reveal the sources of students' confusion (what is it about reading and writing which is so problematic), their learning preferences, the extent of prior 'indoctrination' with traditional views of literacy (which assume that literacy difficulties result from 'problems' within the individual), as well as the limitations of the tutors' own views. Tutors should be taught how to create new methods with learners as co-researchers from these discussions. This is vital in both literacy and numeracy. However, current models of professional training and development provide little or no opportunity to learn how to work in this way.

#### **Q21. What conditions are needed to accelerate the pace of innovation throughout the sector and what is the potential?**

There is potential for innovation, but it needs time and money as well as recognition of the many innovations that providers are already making. Innovation is more likely to happen if teachers are freed from the constraints of prescriptive curricula and allowed to exercise their creativity and expertise by designing literacy education that truly meets the aspirations and interests of the students.

One of the main priorities should be moving away from a vision of literacy 'levels' where 'normal progression' is assumed to be one level per year. The current system, which is based on this vision, results in courses being tailored more to the needs of funding bodies than to learners. People learn in different ways and some take longer than others to reach the same standard, so one size of provision does not fit all.

Adults lead complex lives and have to balance many competing responsibilities. For some people, at some times in their lives, 'standard' courses may be appropriate, but this is often not the case. Literacy support therefore needs to be much more flexible and we need to move away from the idea that if a student cannot attend regularly or complete a standard course they have 'dropped out'. We should abolish the requirement for adults to do external accreditation tests which are expensive and time-consuming and not often relevant to adults' learning needs and desires. Funding should not be tied to learners achieving qualifications in a set time, as this is unrealistic for some and takes away the pleasure and real understanding of what is taught.

The 'pace of innovation' is not an ideal in and of itself. There needs to be a clear sense of the specific changes that are desired by learners, practitioners and policy makers, but at present

policy in this area is not well defined or clearly articulated. As an example, there has been no announcement to date on whether or not Functional Skills qualifications will replace Skills for Life qualifications. The uncertainty which inevitably results from this lack of clarity is not helpful.

**Q22. Are the current incentives in the system driving the required provider behaviour and what else can be done to improve this?**

We assume that what is meant by "required provider behaviour" is motivated, supportive, engaged and committed staff. Such behaviour could be promoted by allowing tutors, providers and learners more say in planning and developing provision. They should also be included in designing a funding regime which supports successful learning, rather than (at worst) a mechanistic tick box approach. There is clear research evidence that the vast majority of adult literacy and numeracy teachers already possess a high level of motivation and commitment, but that these qualities cannot be harnessed if they are unable to participate fully in the process of reform. As the large-scale study of teachers in the sector carried out by the NRDC points out

'More often than not, teachers working in this field are motivated by a clear sense of purpose, even moral purpose, and a commitment to social justice. If they are to function as agents of change, and agents of the social, cultural and, particularly, the economic transformations that the government trusts Skills for Life will achieve, then they must not only feel included in the reform process, but share ownership of the reform initiatives.'  
(Cara et al 2008 p100)<sup>1</sup>

**Q23. What more can be done to stimulate greater learner demand for numeracy courses?**

Increased support and resources are needed to enable providers to hold events to promote numeracy provision. Courses need to be offered in the places and at the times which will attract the learners. The funding mechanism should encourage delivery of short, 'bite-size' courses rather than pushing learners straight into qualifications. There should also be more embedded courses, so that adults can learn numeracy in the contexts in which it is used.

There is a need for employers to be more willing to fund provision in the workplace that addresses the kinds of skills their workers need, and for them to create the sorts of working conditions in which workers are able to flourish.

**Q24. What more can be done to encourage employers to increase the take-up of literacy and numeracy provision by their employees?**

Employers and educators need to be able to form partnerships based on mutual understanding and trust. Union Learning representatives have an important role to play in this process. There needs to be an analysis of the literacy and numeracy demands in particular jobs and workplaces. Managers should be encouraged to lead by example and take up a literacy or numeracy challenge.

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<sup>1</sup> Cara O, Lister J, Swain J and Vorhaus J (2008) *The Teacher Study: The Impact of the Skills for Life Strategy on Teachers* London: NRDC

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