

Politically constructing adult literacy:  
A case study of the Skills for Life strategy  
for improving adult literacy in England  
1997 – 2002

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## Abstract

This thesis explores how the problem of adult literacy has been politically constructed through the policy texts that form the Skills for Life adult literacy strategy. Using the theoretical lens of Bowe et al's policy analysis triangle (1992), the political, conceptual and historical foundations of the strategy are analysed, and the processes of policy text production are explored. Theoretical recommendations are made on the need to analyse more closely the discursive nature of policy-making.

The case study approach combines data collected from interviews with practitioners, policymakers and researchers, with reflections upon the researcher's own experience and networking in the field. Combining the perspectives offered by this data with tools from Critical Discourse Analysis, the wide range of policy texts and press releases that discursively construct the strategy are analysed. A model of the construction of the adult literacy strategy from its foundations in the Moser working group through to the first anniversary of the strategy in March 2002 is proposed which transcends the partiality of perspectives available from within the strategy.

Skills for Life provides an example of a strategy that is a government priority, receiving substantial funding and cross-departmental support. Engaging a wide range of stakeholders, the strategy represents New Labour's commitment to modernising government. As I will argue in this thesis, the strategy is under-researched and opportunistic, driven more by wider policy concerns relating to human capital and social inclusion than by evidence of need. The emergence and amplification of these findings through this thesis validates the need to analyse the construction of the problem to which the policy responds.

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*Whatever colours you have in your mind  
I'll show them to you and you'll see them shine.*

(Dylan)

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## Abbreviations

This thesis addresses literacy as an aspect of adult education, emerging in the 1970s through to its prioritisation within the Skills for Life adult literacy strategy. Thirty years of adult education are therefore covered, and attached to this chronology is a wide-ranging and often shifting plethora of abbreviations. The abbreviations that are drawn upon in this research are listed below.

ABE	Adult and basic education
ABSSU	Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit
ALBSU	Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit
ALI	Adult Learning Inspectorate
ALRA	Adult Literacy Resource Agency
ALU	Adult Literacy Unit
AoC	Association of Colleges
BAS	British Association of Settlements
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BERA	British Educational Research Association
BSA	Basic Skills Agency
BSAI	Basic Skills Accreditation Initiative
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CIF	Common Inspection Framework
CLS	Centre for Longitudinal Studies
CTAD	Cambridge Training and Development
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
ESOL	English as a Second Language
FE	Further Education
FEFC	Further Education Funding Council
FENTO	Further Education National Training Organisation
HE	Higher Education
IAG	Information, Advice and Guidance
IALS	International Adult Literacy Survey

ILEA	Inner London Education Authority
IoE	Institute of Education, University of London
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
LSDA	Learning and Skills Development Agency
MSC	Manpower Services Commission
NAGCELL	National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning
NCVQ	National Council for Vocational Qualifications
NEC	National Extension College
NIACE	National Institute for Adult Continuing Education
NIAE	National Institute of Education
NLS	National Literacy Strategy (in schools)
NRDC	National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
QCA	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
RaPAL	Research and Practice in Adult Literacy
TECs	Training and Enterprise Councils
TIG	Technical Implementation Group
TIG-lets	Sub groups of the main Technical Implementation Group
UCET	University Council for the Education of Teachers
Ufi	University for Industry

### **Textual Note to the Reader**

The discourse of policy is idiosyncratic, and some of the inconsistencies in the stylistics and grammar adopted by different policy texts have ramifications for the writing of this thesis. In writing this research, I have elected not to capitalise the national standards (QCA, 1999), the national core curriculum for adult literacy (BSA, 2001), or the national tests. This is because these texts are not consistently capitalised when referred to in policy texts. I see their capitalisation to be a deliberate attempt to increase their significance: for example, this is particularly notable in the capitalisation of the national standards in ABSSU policy texts but not in the national standards text themselves.

I have found it difficult to treat the Moser working group as a singular noun because one finding from this thesis is that the working group consisted of a diverse body of individuals who did not always work in harmony with one another. Similarly, I have struggled to treat government as a singular noun because another finding of this research reveals some of the inconsistencies and tensions between and within different areas of government.

Throughout this research, I have been committed to writing in an accessible and readable style. At times I have struggled to distil complex academic and political concepts into plain, straightforward language. The reader will need to be the judge of the extent to which I have achieved this.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

The thesis is describing the construction of an adult literacy strategy in England at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century. This introductory chapter will fall into three main sections: the first section offers a description of the political landscape mapped by this thesis, the second section provides a travelogue of my journey through the research, the third section describes the route that this thesis will provide for the reader through the research and through the landscape of the adult literacy strategy. My research journey was untidy, sometimes losing direction, sometimes following dead ends and cul-de-sacs (to quote the poet, Antonio Machado: “Traveller, you have no path. As you walk, the path forms. The path forms as you walk and when you look back, the path is seen where you will never return.”<sup>1</sup>) However, the reflexive nature of writing the research offers a path to the reader which is logical and ordered. Bowe et al’s (1992) policy analysis triangle (which is discussed in chapter two) provided an organisational device, categorising the policy into the contexts of implementation, influence and policy text production. Other themes emerged from my interviews and my own involvement in the field, and these were also used to analyse the policy texts. The opening chapters of this thesis provide the conceptual, historical and political context for the strategy; the analysis of the data is reported in chapters six, seven and eight. The concluding chapter offers a reflection on the thesis as a whole, the findings and knowledge emerging from this work, and speculations and hopes for the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from *Fields of Castilia* (1917) by Andrew Macnab (<http://www.nonduality.com/macnab.htm>)

## **1.1 The Landscape**

Shortly after New Labour was elected for their first term in office, the results of the International Adult Literacy Survey revealed that the UK had substantial basic skills deficiencies in comparison with their European competitors. Adult basic skills do not form a major theme in the Government's vision of a learning society, which they voiced in *The Learning Age* (1998a), but this consultation paper does recognise that, "Our weakness lies in our performance in basic and intermediate skills... More than one in five of all adults have poor literacy and numeracy skills, putting the UK ninth in a recent international survey of twelve industrial countries." (DfEE, 1998a) They go on to state that they will take action on the deficit in basic skills through more than doubling the help for basic literacy and numeracy skills among adults through colleges, the New Deal and other help for unemployed people, and other routes to involve over 500,000 adults a year in basic skills tuition. The target of 500,000 adults a year is linked to provision rather than attainment, and this target is repeated in the Terms of Reference that are provided to the Moser working group.

A working group, to be chaired by Sir Claus Moser, was appointed in June 1998, to advise the government on adult basic skills, including the effectiveness of different kinds of provision, models of good practice, and ways of increasing and widening participation. Although individuals on this working group were familiar with different aspects of basic skills, the working group as a whole was primarily influenced by the Basic Skills Agency (BSA) commissioned research, using correlative data to consider different aspects of basic skills deficiencies, and the international OECD data (both of these are discussed in chapter three and subjected to further analysis in chapter six). The report from this working group was published in March 1999. The report

presented the recommendation that a wide range of provision using the broadest range of technology should be available for those with basic skills difficulties.

The recommendations from the Moser working group were relevant to the UK and they were a response to the IALS survey of the UK, but the government response to the report was different in England from other parts of the UK. My thesis is addressing events in England. The Hansard archives (21 April 1999) show that the Government were questioned over their intended action following the publication of the Moser report in the House of Lords and Baroness Blackstone replied that the recently set up University for Industry (Ufi) and the expansion of further education (FE) were two important initiatives that would contribute towards meeting the target of 500,000 by 2002. This placed adult literacy within the existing context of initiatives which formed the government's vision of a learning society. Baroness Blackstone stated that she would be chairing a high level strategy group, supported by expert practitioners, to take work forward and that the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) would be consulted regarding the development of a "new strong qualification". It is of significant interest that the next inclusion of adult basic skills as a matter for discussion in the Hansard archives is not until a select committee has been set up in the latter part of 2001, more than two years later. This suggests that adult basic skills were placed, so to speak, on a back burner whilst substantial progress was made with literacy in primary schools through the national literacy strategy. For 16 – 19 year olds, key skills had already been established through the GNVQ programme, and as part of the Government's vision of a coherent system of education a national qualifications framework was being rationalised.

In the summer of 2000, Susan Pember was appointed to head an Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit (ABSSU) and in November 2000 a draft consultation report was published on the government strategy in this area (DfEE, 2000). The final draft of this report, *Skills for Life*, was published in March 2001. The Skills for Life strategy takes its name from this *Skills for Life* policy text. The roots of this document can be seen in *A Fresh Start* (1999), the report of the Moser working group, and the government response to this report, *Better Basic Skills* (1999). The strategy was, and is at the time of writing, a large-scale piece of government policy which seeks to mobilise the provision of basic skills education to those who were seen to have literacy or numeracy difficulties. A formative part of this strategy was the publication by QCA of national standards for adult literacy and numeracy, which outlined the skills that people were expected to demonstrate at different levels. These standards were used to inform the development of national curricula, national teaching standards, new teaching qualifications, national tests in literacy and numeracy, new diagnostic and screening tools to assess literacy and numeracy levels, and new learning materials. A plethora of publicity surrounded the birth of the new strategy, including an advertising campaign which used Gremlins to represent people's feelings associated with their inability to succeed in different tasks requiring literacy and numeracy skills. Funding of adult basic skills courses increased dramatically to an investment of £1.6 billion over three years, announced in November 2002, simultaneously funding protocols began to link investment with achievement in the national tests, based on the levels set out in the national standards (QCA 1999). The National Research and Development Centre for Adult Basic Skills (NRDC) was set up under the auspices of ABSSU to address the lack of evidence seen to exist in this field.

These events were unfolding during a time when England elected and re-elected a New Labour government which had stated that education was its number one priority for policy; a time when the economy and the political climate were relatively stable - although skills shortfalls were being anticipated for the near future, there were funds available to set about tackling these perceived shortfalls. This was an England following the cessation of post-IRA violence and prior to the political focus on terrorism following the events of 9/11, when international economic competitiveness received headlines rather than international terrorism. This was the time of the gestation and birth of the Skills for Life adult literacy strategy.

## **1.2 My Journey**

At the time of the setting up of ABSSU, and prior to the publication of the Skills for Life strategy document, I moved from my role teaching English GCSE, A Level and foundation level communications key skills to mixed ability secondary school and sixth form students in East London, to the very different context of being a research student who taught English GCSE to adults and basic literacy skills to homeless adults in central London. Jennifer Ozga (2000: 44) suggests that “researchers are inevitably influenced in their choices about theory by their ideas about how things ought to be,” and my own choices of both research area and methodology have been influenced by my own views on, and experiences of, the world. My journey into this research moves through this period of history. I had developed an interest in literacy during my post-graduate training to be an English teacher, and as a secondary school English teacher, mentored in my teacher training by Chris Searle, an inspiring and radical advocate of critical literacy and the author of several books detailing his work as a practitioner. I became aware of the possibilities of using literacy to develop an



agenda of social empowerment, whilst simultaneously being trained as a professional teacher to deliver, what seemed to me to be, a different kind of literacy through the use of the national curriculum and other documents. At this time the national curriculum for English had already been established in secondary schools, and the national literacy strategy for primary schools was being developed and implemented in schools. I felt restricted by the impoverished notion of literacy that drove much of the school curriculum and I applied to do post-graduate research at the Institute of Education at the University of London with the intention of exploring alternative models of literacy. This coincided with the writing of the Skills for Life adult literacy strategy within the newly-set up ABSSU. As I observed the birth of this strategy, both as a literacy researcher and as a teacher of English to adults, I became increasingly preoccupied with trying to make sense of this complex strategy. As a practitioner, it was difficult to understand what was happening, why it was happening, and what the effects would be upon my practice; as a researcher, I was presented with a substantially different perspective of the strategy. I wanted to reconcile these perspectives. I also became sensitised to different voices speaking within the policy documents, and I wanted to listen more carefully to these voices, and to explore what other voices had been lost or echoed in the formation, editing and marketing of these texts. As an English Literature and Philosophy graduate I was acutely aware of the need to maintain a sensitive ear to the nuances of language. This led me into a journey through policy analysis and different forms of discourse and textual analysis. I also wanted to understand why the concept of literacy inherent to the strategy's thinking was so far removed from my own understandings of what literacy meant. Whereas my teacher-training took place once the national curriculum had been established, the adult literacy strategy offered me the opportunity to study its birth within the

Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) following a prolonged period of gestation subsequent to the publication of the Moser report, *A Fresh Start* (1999).

The need to make sense of the strategy and the desire to understand the notions of literacy driving this strategy set me on a process of data collection which included interviews, networking, textual analysis, and reflections upon my own practice. In turn, the collection and analysis of this data led to the question: ‘How is the problem of adult literacy politically constructed?’ Both data collection and analysis were organised by the following research questions, themselves sub-questions of this much larger question:

1. If Skills for Life is a strategy to promote adult literacy in England, what might be meant by literacy?
2. Why has tackling levels of adult literacy become a policy priority for England at this time, and what are the key drivers behind the government’s strategic agenda?
3. What is the strategy and how do its constituent parts fit together?
4. How will the effectiveness of the strategy be measured in the short term, and what alternative measures might exist?
5. What lessons might be learnt from a study of the Skills for Life strategy?

### **1.3 The Journey through the Thesis**

These five research questions structured both the analysis of the data and the writing up of this thesis. Chapter two will outline the processes of data collection and analysis in more detail. This analysis was theoretically framed by Bowe et al’s model of policy

analysis (1992) and this theoretical literature will be reviewed at the start of chapter two to provide the framework for my choice of method. Inherent in the construction of the problem of adult literacy is a dominant model of what is meant by 'literacy'. Chapter three teases out the concepts of literacy which inform the strategy, although these concepts are rarely explicit in the policy texts themselves, and evaluates these concepts against academic debates over the meaning and significance of literacy. Earlier literacy campaigns in England are described in chapter four, and the social and political context of England at the time of the Skills for Life strategy is explored in chapter five. Together chapters three, four and five form three different foundations for the analysis of the strategy: chapter three offers a conceptual foundation, chapter four an historical foundation; and chapter five a political foundation which links with Bowe et al's notion of the importance of the context of influence in the evolution of policy (Bowe et al, 1992). While these chapters are predominantly descriptive, their use of data emerging from interviews and from critiques of the policy texts provides some analysis. Chapters six, seven and eight constitute the major analyses of the data. Chapter six traces the construction of the problem of adult literacy from documents recording the meetings and discussions of the Moser working group through to publications marking the first anniversary of the Skills for Life strategy. The evidence which informs these texts is evaluated, and the strategy's language and presentation is analysed. Chapter seven then seeks to bring together the different elements and initiatives that form the strategic whole. The complexity of these mechanics, and the often conflicting cogs which were whirring in the machinery, proved one of the most challenging parts of my research to write; in itself this is of empirical interest. Through combining analyses of written sources and data emerging from my interviews, I am able to identify the silences and absences within the writing of this

strategy. Using data from interviews, textual analysis and argumentation, I will claim in chapter eight that the strategy's construction of measures of success makes it difficult to assess the effectiveness and value of the strategy from outside and bounds what can be meant by literacy within the policy debate.

Chapter nine organises the conclusions from this thesis into three main categories. The first section of the chapter addresses lessons that the adult literacy strategy might learn from this thesis. The hypothesis that the problem of adult literacy has been politically constructed is supported by the research, and the weaknesses of the conceptual foundations of the strategy are reiterated. Speculations on the future of the strategy are made, including the recommendation that the strategy should allow for greater levels of consultation in the mechanics of various strategic initiatives, and in its construction of the problem of adult literacy. The second section reflects on the methodological conclusions, supporting the validity of the case study approach and the utilisation of interviews alongside textual analysis. The final section of chapter nine considers the theoretical lessons that can be learnt from this research. The use of Bowe et al's policy triangle as a lens through which to organise and analyse data in policy analysis is evaluated, and I recommend that this tool needs to give greater attention to the construction of texts, both in terms of process and discourse, and that the element of 'speed' needs to be incorporated into the analysis. A final observation is made that future research in this area needs to explore learners' perspectives on the strategy: this journey visits only the perspectives of policymakers, researchers and practitioners.

## Chapter 2: Methodology

### 2.1 Introduction

Drawing together the empirical methods of interviewing, data collection, and observations from my practice and networking, combined with analytical tools derived from textual analysis, this case study encapsulates both substantive and methodological aims. The substantive aims are to describe and analyse the evolution and implementation of the adult literacy strategy in England between 1997 and March 2002. My research began with the hypothesis that the adult literacy strategy was not internally coherent, and that when observed from different perspectives the strategy presented subtly different concepts of literacy, different reasons of why adult literacy levels were a major problem, and different notions of what would need to be achieved for the strategy to be a success. These views developed into five main research questions which have driven the collection and analysis of data:

1. If Skills for Life is a strategy to promote adult literacy in England, what might be meant by literacy?
2. Why has tackling levels of adult literacy become a policy priority for England at this time, and what are the key drivers behind the government's strategic agenda?
3. What is the strategy and how do its constituent parts fit together?
4. How will the effectiveness of the strategy be measured in the short term, and what alternative measures might exist?
5. What lessons might be learnt from a study of the Skills for Life strategy?

Table 2.1: Research questions

The final research question has wider aims than the previous four. Although this case study concentrates upon one particular area of English government policy, I am in agreement with the claims made by Gale (1999), Ball (1994a) and others that new conceptual tools are needed with which to study policy. Rather than seeking to generate new tools, this thesis intends to gather several sets of tools which have been used to analyse policy and to combine them in a coherent piece of machinery. None of the tools alone are able to deal with the complexities of policy making in the era of a New Labour government. The majority of policy analysts recognise that “to analyse policies simply in terms of the words written in formal documents is to overlook the nuance and subtleties of the context which give the text meaning and significance” (Taylor, Rizvi et al. 1997: 15), but to concentrate solely on context and influence is to neglect the conscious crafting of these documents, “language is not just a transparent medium for reflecting the way things are... language constructs the world in one way or another according to position or perspective” (Fairclough 2000: 23). A balanced and combined approach is needed.

Because the concepts informing my methodology are informed by previous literature on policy analysis, this chapter will begin by locating my thinking within existing policy literature. These concepts provide a lens through which to see the adult literacy strategy and this, in turn, has had some effect on structuring my data collection and data analysis methods. In conclusion to the chapter, I will provide a reflection on the strengths of my approach, and areas which I would consider developing in subsequent research.

## **2.2 Theories of policy analysis**

In *Reforming Education and Changing Schools*, Bowe and Ball with Gold (Bowe, Ball et al. 1992) reject a linear approach to policy which would posit the generation of policy as a distinct ‘moment’ separate from the implementation of policy. Instead they characterise policy as a continuous cycle and their research analyses the trajectory of policy over time. They claim that the relationships between policy makers and practitioners are more complex than they might first appear:

Who becomes involved in the policy process and how they become involved is a product of a combination of administratively based procedures, historical precedence and political manoeuvring, implicating the State, the State bureaucracy and continual political struggles over access to the policy process; it is not simply a matter of implementers following a fixed policy text and ‘putting the Act into practice’.

(Bowe, Ball et al, 1992: 10)

Through foregrounding the importance of text and its continual interpretation and reinterpretation within the policy process, Bowe et al develop a useful policy cycle that moves continuously between the contexts of “influence”, “policy text production” and “practice”. The first two of these concepts are of substantial interest to this thesis as it explores the beginnings of the Skills for Life adult literacy strategy; the context of practice category also bears relevance to my understanding of the strategy but I would anticipate this category gaining increased relevance as the strategy is rolled out at grass roots level.

Bowe et al present the **context of influence** as the site “where policy concepts are established... acquire currency and credence and provide a discourse and lexicon for policy initiation” (20). At this level there are many competing intentions struggling for influence, and this allows the theory to address the power struggles between different organisations and individuals. Bowe et al suggest that it is here that policy discourses are constructed, and the authors refer explicitly to elements of this discourse as “the definition and social purposes of education, what it means to be educated” (19). I think that this context is addressing two distinct aspects of policy: how the problem which the policy seeks to address is constructed, and the establishment of policy concepts, such as national standards or social inclusion claims. Bowe et al draw particular attention to the struggle between interested parties in influencing the social purposes of the policy at this level, and this struggle will be illustrated in my description of how the problem of adult literacy shifted from the initial meetings of the Moser working group, when the state was seen to be responsible for individuals failing to develop their literacy skills, to the agenda of the later Skills for Life policy texts where the individual with low literacy skills began to be seen as responsible for a whole raft of factors which were negatively affecting society. Stephen Ball (1994a: 112) describes the emergence of policy texts from the struggle between these voices, as “a cannibalisation of multiple voices”, and he suggests that this is further complicated by the difference in strength and influence between different parties: policy influence is “a struggle to be heard in an arena where only certain voices have legitimacy at any one point in time” (112). The influence of people’s voices is linked by Hajer and Wagenaar (2003: 13) to the nature of what is seen to have validity within that discourse at that time: “what has standing in societal discourse determines not only who is allowed into the halls of decision-making and



who is kept out, it also designates what is considered a legitimate political argument". Taylor and Rizvi (1997) point out, research needs to reflect the political nature of policy as a kind of compromise which is struggled over at all stages by competing interests. Methodologically, I have sought to access these struggles and compromises by interviewing different people who hold different power positions within the strategy, from senior policy players such as Lord Moser and Susan Pember, through to practitioners and researchers who tried to make their voices heard, sometimes successfully and sometimes unsuccessfully, during the consultation stages of the policy.

Although Bowe et al's context of influence offers a useful category for considering policy through recognising the importance of personal influence, private networks and public arenas, I would argue that it neglects the importance of wider political, social and historical discourses. In a later text, Ball (1999) builds on this concept with his notion of 'policyscapes' – global policy paradigms that influence national politics: for example, Ball refers to the OECD and the World Bank (both strong influences upon the English adult literacy strategy). In his text on Education Reform (1994), Ball also recognises the importance of other policies and the history of policy and practice as other influences on the development of policy. Influenced by this, I have located the adult literacy strategy within its historic context (chapter four offers a detailed overview of earlier adult literacy campaigns) and within its social and political context (chapter five provides insight both into national policy initiatives which were contemporaneous with the birth of the adult literacy strategy, and wider national and international debates on the relevant themes of human capital and social inclusion).

As with Bowe et al's research (1992), this thesis foregrounds text as a representation of policy and recognises the discursive nature of policy. The **context of policy text production** acknowledges that texts can be differently interpreted, and are constantly being rewritten as different texts and utterances are produced by key actors or agencies of government (for example, press releases or speeches):

Thus a whole variety and criss-cross of meanings and interpretations are put into circulation. Clearly these textual meanings influence and constrain 'implementers' but their own concerns and contextual constraints generate other meanings and interpretations.

(Bowe, Ball et al, 1992: 12)

These writers theorise the different interpretations of texts which might emerge from different contexts using the postmodernist approach of Barthes which anticipates readers being active in the construction of meaning from "writerly" texts rather than being restrained by tight authorial control: for Barthes (1975) the reader has become a producer, rather than a consumer, of the text. I would, however, argue that the policy texts written around the adult literacy strategy deliberately seek to control the possible interpretations of their content through their careful use of language and presentational devices. Ball (1994b: 16) recognises that "policymakers do make concerted efforts to assert such control [over the meanings of their texts] by the means at their disposal" and, I would argue, this means that the texts need to be analysed not only in terms of the content of their message but also in terms of the presentation of the message. Through analysing the language, imagery and visual presentation of the texts, I seek to realise this theoretical perspective in the methodology of this research.

Bowe et al's **context of practice** is also informed by Barthes' distinction between readerly and writerly texts; by viewing policy as a form of writerly text, Bowe et al are able to claim that the practitioner becomes a producer of policy rather than a passive consumer (as would be the case with a readerly text). Bowe et al are keen to stress that practitioners are not passive readers, but that "they come with histories, with experience, with values and purposes of their own" (1992: 22), and therefore policy makers cannot control the interpretations and meanings which will be drawn from the policy texts that they have constructed. The practitioner does not simply implement the policy, but reinterprets the text, therefore producing new meanings from the policy text: "policy is not simply received and implemented... rather it is subject to interpretation and then 'recreated'." (1992: 22) Because the time span of my case study is looking primarily at the creation of these texts, I have not been able to extend my research to how the policy texts are interpreted at the level of practice. I see this as an area which is ripe for further exploration as the strategy becomes established. However, Bowe et al's concept of the context of practice would need to be further developed as it identifies practice purely with practitioners and omits a wide variety of partners such as awarding bodies, network organisations, and researchers – all of whom play a key role in interpreting the adult literacy strategy.

### **2.3 Empirical Scope**

The theoretical approach to policy analysis discussed in the previous section has shaped both my research questions and my notions of how one can go about researching educational policy. Policy is a large and complicated area and the scope of this research project has also been dictated, to some extent, by the empirical restrictions of available evidence and the methodological restrictions of what I could

realistically aim to achieve as a sole researcher during the three-year PhD process. Data has been collected through interviewing, participation and networking, and the collection of a wide range of written texts, both published and unpublished. The selection of this data was driven by a clear sense of the boundaries of my case study. Figure 2.2 provides a visual depiction of these boundaries. The outer ring depicts the context of the strategy's development: the right hand side of this outer ring shows the main processes that took place in the development of the Skills for Life strategy, the left hand side organises the national and international arguments that have had an impact on the prioritisation of the adult literacy agenda. The middle ring shows the main initiatives that form the content of the strategy, and the central ring represents the aims that are stated for the strategy across the different policy texts.

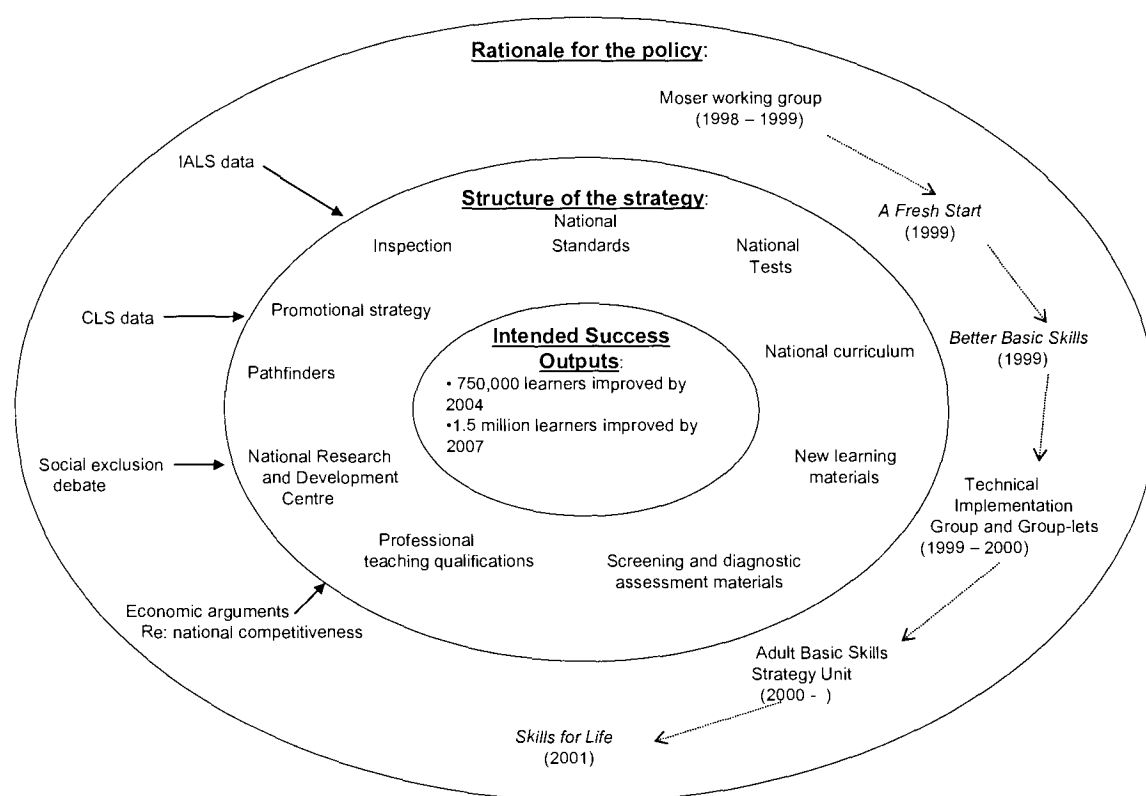


Figure 2.2: The boundaries of the case study

A similar diagram is used to depict the range of empirical sources of documents which were collected through this case study. Some of these were subsequently subjected to detailed textual analysis; others were used for information and to clarify my understanding of events. These are shown in Figure 2.3. Interviews and source documents, such as minutes and reports, were gathered through my research to provide a description of the processes which constituted the development of the strategy, and these were then mapped against the final official documents, providing evidence on the extent to which policy texts represent the processes of negotiation and consultation, and revealing the power struggles leading to the “cannibalisation of multiple voices” (Ball 1994a: 112).

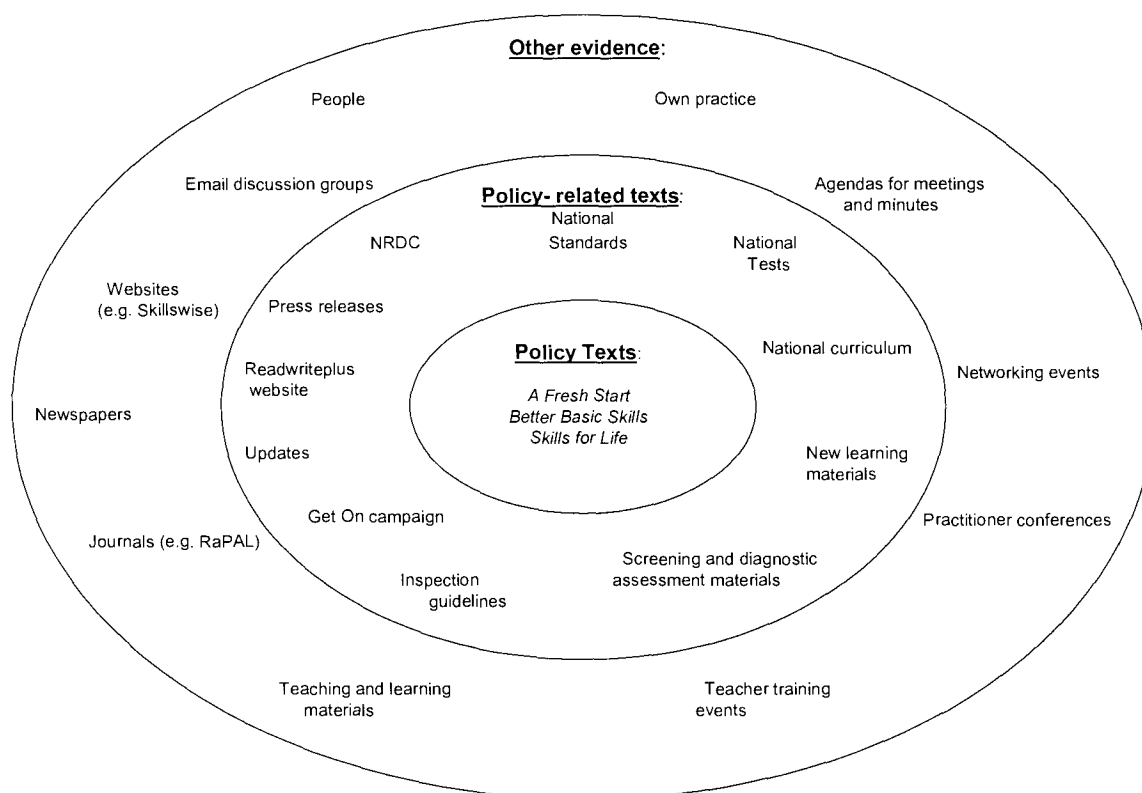


Figure 2.3: Empirical range of the strategy

The strategy developed in synchronicity with my research and, as such, I was addressing a moving target whose shape was changing during my research. Whilst the immediacy of strategy events denied me the benefits of hindsight, a wealth of

contemporaneous evidence was readily available for exploration: I have been able to attend conferences detailing the development of the strategy at various stages in its formation; I have interviewed policy makers whilst they are in the process of “making” the policy; I have joined email discussion groups which are responding to events as they happen without any of us knowing what might happen next. But to organise these data it was important to establish a timeframe. Events seemed to develop exponentially and, without the implementation of clear chronological boundaries, there seemed to be the risk that my research would be lost amongst the spiralling mass of data. Because my focus is upon the events leading up to and during the establishment of different initiatives, I decided to focus upon the timescale between the election of the New Labour government in 1997 and the first anniversary of the publication of the *Skills for Life* strategy (March 2002). Within this period all of the initiatives within the strategy were introduced, although they had not yet begun to evolve through the experience of being transformed into practice. The evidence collected within this research is taken from this time-frame; although reference is made to texts published subsequently, these texts are not analysed here.

#### **2.4 Methodological Scope**

This thesis employs a range of methodological tools to investigate the strategy, and these are organised within the principles of a case study approach. The following sections of this chapter will justify my use of a case study approach in studying an area of policy; then the main data collection methods of interviewing, participation and networking, and data collection will be outlined and evaluated. The analytical tools applied to these data will then be described prior to the concluding sections which address the writing of the research.

### **2.4.1 The Case Study Approach**

Colin Robson (1993: 146) defines a case study as “a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence.” A case study is not just an illustration of what is there, it involves the systematic collection and analysis of relevant data (Nisbett and Watt 1978), and enables a greater depth of detail to be analysed than other research strategies (Gomm, Hammersley et al. 2000). The range of contemporaneous data available to be explored and the diversity of methodological tools available for use mean that a case study is well-suited for my research: the case study’s unique strength is seen to be its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence – documents, artefacts, interviews, and observations (Yin 1994). A case study generates rich and descriptive data and allows a flexible approach to be taken to data collection, in contrast, for example, to an experimental tool which would require the research tools to be perfected prior to data collection (Anderson 2002).

One potential criticism of the case study approach can be its somewhat chaotic approach to data collection: Stephen Kemmis (1977: 100) argues that ‘case study’ cannot be defined methodologically, because the case is indeterminate – objects for study are not definable a priori, the phenomena is transformed into a ‘case’ through the process of understanding: “those who expect to follow the progress of science in brilliant light will be ill at ease following the case study worker stumbling from lamplight to lamplight in the fog.” This definition presents a more random enterprise than that carried out in my research; a more appropriate metaphor for the methodology of this research would be the mapping of uncharted territory. As with the researcher who is stumbling about in the dark, one is unable to conceive of the

whole map prior to the research and one sometimes feels lost whilst seeking to put things together, but as a result of rigorously applying the principles of cartography (or established research methods) the researcher can hope to achieve a clarification of an area of research, rather than only hoping to safely reach the next street lamp. In terms of this research project, the research methods utilised are detailed below in diagram 2.4.

<b>Research question:</b>	<b>Evidence taken from:</b>	<b>Location in thesis:</b>
If Skills for Life is a strategy to promote adult literacy in England, what might be meant by literacy?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Literature review of literacy theory</li> <li>▪ Textual analysis of policy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Chapter 3: literature review</li> <li>- Chapter 6 : the construction of why adult literacy is a problem</li> <li>-Chapter 8: measures of success</li> </ul>
Why has tackling levels of adult literacy become a policy priority for England at this time, and what are the key drivers behind the government's strategic agenda?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Primary historical sources</li> <li>▪ Policy texts</li> <li>▪ Interviews</li> <li>▪ Reflections on own practice</li> <li>▪ Literature review of policy analysis texts</li> <li>▪ Wider reading</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Chapter 4: earlier literacy campaigns</li> <li>- Chapter 5: political and social context</li> <li>- Chapter 6: rationale for adult literacy being a policy priority</li> </ul>
What is the strategy and how do its constituent parts fit together?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Policy texts</li> <li>▪ Interviews</li> <li>▪ Reflection on own practice</li> <li>▪ Literature review of policy analysis texts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Chapter 6: coherence and analysis of the presentation of the problem</li> <li>- Chapter 7: fitting together the different initiatives</li> <li>- Chapter 8: Analysing the coherence of the success factors in the policy</li> </ul>
How will the effectiveness of the strategy be measured in the short term, and what alternative measures might exist?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Policy texts</li> <li>▪ Interviews</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Chapter 3: literature review and alternative literacy theories</li> <li>- Chapter 8: Analysing the policy texts</li> </ul>
What lessons might be learnt from a study of the Skills for Life strategy?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Policy theory literature</li> <li>▪ Reflections on the findings of this research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Chapter 2: Methodology</li> <li>- Chapter 9: Conclusions</li> </ul>

Table 2.4: Table of research questions, research tools, and location in thesis



### **2.4.2 The Interview**

My choice of methodology was informed by my interpretivist approach to educational research: my research aims to produce rich descriptions of the different interpretations that different people make of the same events. Part of my hypothesis for this research was that the strategy has different appearances when viewed from different perspectives: even at the personal level, the strategy appeared to be substantially different when viewed from my position as an adult literacy tutor than it appeared from my position as a researcher. I therefore needed to develop research tools which would allow me to value the differences between these perspectives even while seeking to reveal the areas where they overlapped. I decided to use interviews as a means of accessing and prioritising different perspectives on the strategy, and to triangulate these against the careful analysis of policy texts. This method enabled me to explicate different perspectives, meaning that I was able to move beyond my own perspective on the strategy as a practitioner: although I do not assume that one is able to adopt a “view from nowhere”: at best one can aspire to seek a shared ground where different interpretations converge (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000).

The interview is an important tool for case study (Yin 1994) and proves particularly suitable for this research project because of the focus on people’s different perspectives on events. As a research tool the interview enables the researcher to elicit descriptive and explanatory information that presents a picture of the interviewee’s interpretation of a situation (Robson 1993). The use of interviews in this research reveals the interviewee’s perspective on the strategy and on adult literacy. Initially, I considered designing a survey questionnaire to use in conjunction with interviews but realised that the advantages of the interview outweighed the value of a survey in this

research. Firstly, the use of interviews guaranteed a full response rate. Although neither method could guarantee that the subject would answer all the questions that I hoped, the interview provides the opportunity to continually frame and reframe questions to explore areas an interviewee may be reluctant to discuss, providing a level of shading which would not be apparent from a blank space on a questionnaire form. The interview also provides a very flexible agenda, allowing me to alter my questions in response to what the interviewee was saying rather than having to provide questions prior to the interview, and allowing me to remain sensitive to the areas that the interviewee prioritised or avoided.

My interviewees were chosen from three different broad areas (research, practice, and policy), and the interviews took place over three distinct periods of time. Overall, I interviewed nineteen people: nine people who were involved in policy-making, five people who were involved in practice, and five people who were in academic positions at the time of my research. I soon realised that none of these groups was discrete, and most of my interviewees were part of more than one setting. The purposes of my research were not to make generalisations from the interview data; therefore purposive sampling was a valid means of accessing different perspectives. There was a degree of opportunism in my choice of interviewees and Appendix 1 shows an example of some of the negotiations necessary to fit an interview into people's busy lives. Figure 2.5 uses a Venn diagram approach, which I developed whilst analysing the interview data, to depict the location of each interviewee. It is evident that very few interviewees existed only within policy, practice or academia.

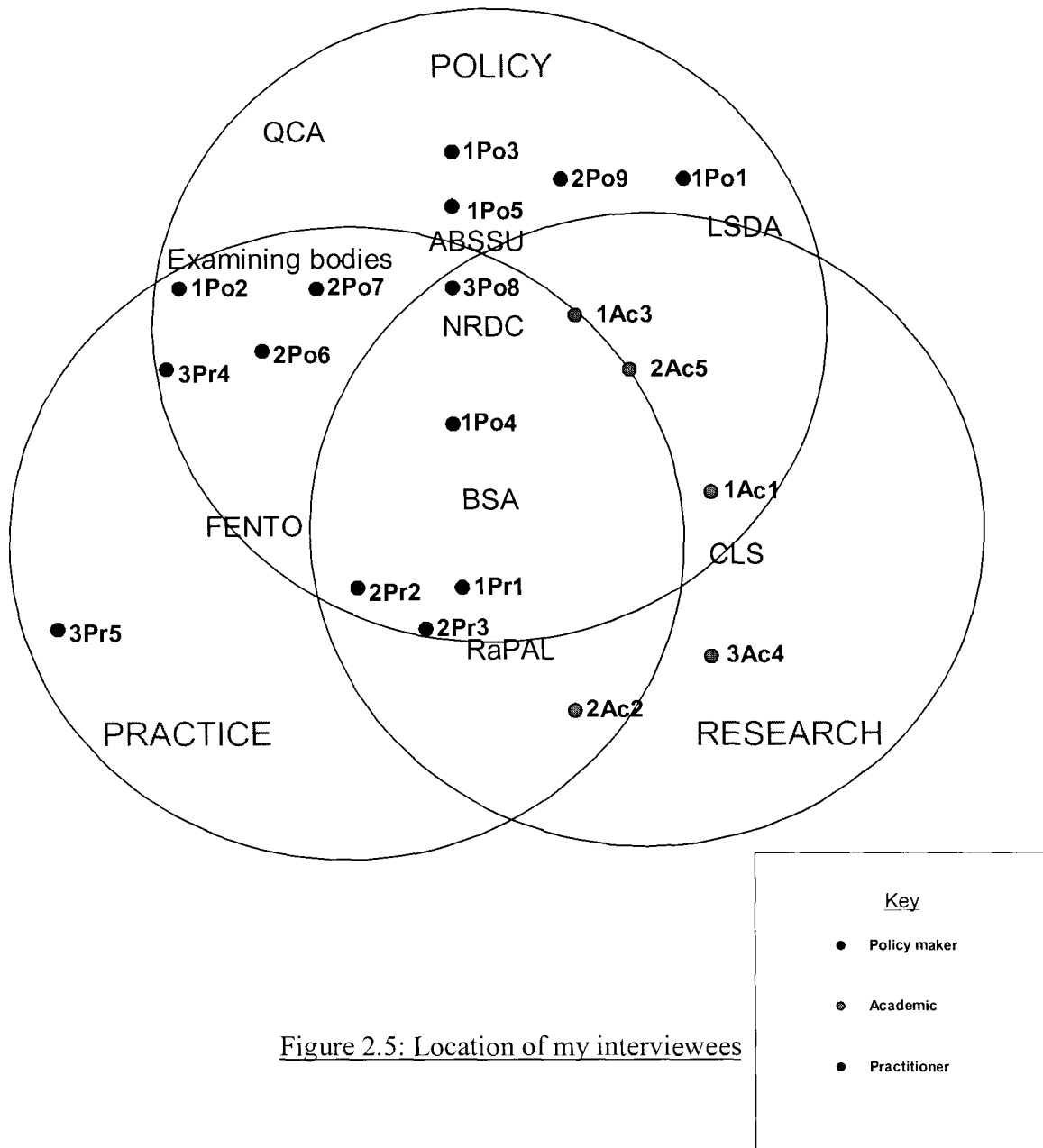


Figure 2.5: Location of my interviewees

Chronologically, these interviews took place during three periods of time, which will be discussed below, and each interview is therefore coded according to the period of the interview (the first number), the primary role of the interviewee (policy-maker, practitioner or academic), and an identifier number. These codes were used as identifiers throughout the analysis of the interview data, and are used to reference interviewee's quotes in the thesis. Each period of interview can be seen to have had distinct purposes as is shown in Figure 2.6. The initial set of interviews was used alongside written policy texts and media coverage to clarify the boundaries of the case

study and to explore the content of the strategy in more detail. Although I had already studied the main strategy texts, I felt that there were gaps in the narrative surrounding the development and implementation of this strategy and these interviews were used to elicit more detail regarding the strategy and its evolution; to clarify issues which lacked coherence in the policy texts, and to flag up different perspectives on the development of the strategy at that point in the policy process. These interviews were, on the whole, particularly enjoyable to carry out. I positioned myself as “an informed conversation partner” (Kvale 1996: 125) and allowed the conversations to develop pretty much according to the interests and priorities of the interviewees. The interviews were semi-structured to the extent that I provided each interviewee with a written list of the four or five areas I wished to discuss prior to the interview, but there were no formal questions or fixed agendas. As such, this offered the interviewee the opportunity to expand on what he or she saw to be a priority, and allowed the interview to follow the interviewee’s narrative thread rather than trying to control this: something that would not have been possible if the interview had been more tightly structured. Cohen et al suggest that “the more one wishes to acquire unique, non-standardised, personalised information about how individuals view the world, the more one veers towards qualitative, open-ended, unstructured interviewing.” (Cohen, Mannion et al, 2000: 269). In my case, there was also the need to gain awareness of different perspectives on the adult literacy strategy: some of these would not have been possible for me to predict prior to the interview.

<u>Period</u>	<u>Type</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Breakdown</u>
1. September to December 2001	Exploratory	8	5 policy players 1 current practitioner 2 researchers
2. September to December 2002	Gap-filling	7	3 policy players 2 current practitioners 2 researchers
3. July to October 2003	Evaluation	4	1 policy player 2 current practitioners 1 researcher

Table 2.6: Outline of interview schedule

After these initial exploratory interviews, I refined the boundaries of my case study and developed further my main research questions. There was a brief pause in my research during my maternity leave, which provided me with a broader perspective on my work but also disadvantaged me as the strategy continued to march on regardless of whether I was watching the action or not. In the autumn of 2002, I carried out a second set of interviews. This time I intended that the interview agendas should be more tightly focused upon exploring the absences and silences I had found in my study of the strategy formation, and in updating my knowledge on the progress of the strategy. The interviews were more structured and the interview agendas varied more between people as I used the interview to draw upon the interviewee's expertise. The gap-filling interviews were more challenging than the earlier cohort of interviews as I tried to control the agenda of the interview more tightly. Also, the chronology of these interviews meant that the strategy was more established and, whilst people were still happy to talk about their work in this area, the subject was no longer a novelty and some of the initial enthusiasm had waned. Rather than talking at length, I found that

some subjects sought to deflect my questions by suggesting that I spoke to other people. This was particularly the case when interviewing people within ABSSU: the unit had grown substantially since my first interviews and people's roles within it had become more specialised as the strategy developed. This meant that people were happy to talk about their area of expertise, but were reluctant to offer a perspective outside of this.

The final group of interviews was carried out in late summer and early autumn of 2003. This cohort was much smaller, and I intended that these interviews would primarily serve to appraise my findings against the expertise of the interview subjects. Prior to the interview I provided these interviewees with a more specific list of some of the areas I would like to discuss, and provided one or two of my findings, relating to the expertise and location of my interviewee, as a means of checking and evaluating my findings: an example of an interview agenda from this set of interviews is in Appendix 2. Following from the gap-filling interviews, I had anticipated that the evaluation interviews would be the most challenging. In fact, these interviews were enjoyably focused and intellectually challenging in a way that the previous interviews had not been. Rather than covering a large area, these interviews tended to hone in on one or two aspects which were discussed in much greater detail.

#### **2.4.2.1 Access**

I approached people either using emails, to contact people with whom I had already had some interaction, or through a written letter. For the exploratory interviews I was surprised at how keen people were to discuss their perspectives on, and experiences in, this field. The personal element of the interview also had great value in terms of

accessing future interviewees. Several subjects recommended other people who might be useful to interview, therefore enabling me to develop my sample through snowballing; and some interviewees also acted as gatekeepers, providing access to other powerful people in the strategy context. Coate (1999) explores the patterns of response and non-response to her initial request for interviews as part of her analysis of power relations within the interview situation. Although we were both involved in interviewing “powerful” people, I initially felt that her considerations of access had little relevance to my research as I had had no problem in organising interviews with each of the people I approached. Geoffrey Walford (1994) suggests that the perceived difficulties of gaining access to powerful people may have been overemphasized in the past. Drawing upon a collection of papers he has published, he argues,

Those in power are used to their ideas being taken notice of. They are well able to deal with interviews, to answer and avoid particular questions to suit their own ends, and to present their own role in events in a favourable light. They are aware of what academic research involves, and are familiar with being interviewed and having their words tape-recorded. In sum, their power in the educational world is echoed in the interview situation, and interviewers pose little threat to their position.

(Walford 1994: 225)

However, the situation became more complex during my organisation of gap-filling interviews, and Coate’s (1999: 51) consideration that “the cooperation and non-cooperation of informants [informs] an analysis of power relations within an interviewing situation”, gained relevance to my work. Access to potential interviewees became more difficult, particularly with people working within ABSSU.

By the time of my evaluation interviews, I was unable to access any member of ABSSU who was willing, or available, to be interviewed for my research: at no point was I explicitly refused an interview, but each time the interview was arranged it was cancelled at short notice, or I was redirected towards another potential interviewee within the department who was described as “more suitable”. There are a number of possible reasons for this. Firstly, the strategy was no longer seen to be new and radical, which meant that people had less to gain through the marketing opportunity of being interviewed by me. Secondly, my research was no longer unusual in being academic research on basic skills. At the start of my research in 2000, there was little academic interest in this field with the exceptions of the Centre for Longitudinal Studies, the Lancaster group, and a few other interested parties. By the time I returned to this field in autumn 2002, there was a National Research and Development Centre for Adult Basic Skills (NRDC) and a range of other DfES funded research on this area. Thirdly, the Institute of Education had become one of the main homes of the NRDC, and had therefore gained political significance rather than being perceived as a neutral site. In the case of one interview (2Po7), access was only awarded because the subject had assumed that I was part of the NRDC because my research was based at the Institute of Education. When my interviewee realised that this was not the case at the start of the interview, she rapidly lost interest in talking to me and spent much of the interview refusing to give her opinion on matters. It is possible that my difficulties in organising interviews might have been due to the close association of the Institute of Education with the NRDC, a counter-case to the above example.



#### **2.4.2.2 Format**

All of the interviews were semi-structured but I prepared carefully for each one and provided prompts which could be used if there was a loss of momentum in the conversation. For example, when interviewing one prolific academic I provided a list of dated publications which we referred to several times in the interview and which served to jog his memory. In interviews with strategy players, I developed a diagram of some of the different possible perspectives on the strategy based around my own experiences as an adult literacy tutor, researcher, and my empathy with the potential experiences of my learners. This diagram was used in several interviews, partly to check my understanding of the strategy against the understanding of the expert I was interviewing, and partly to clarify what the interviewee was saying against my understanding. (This provides a clear example of the hermeneutic circle (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) as I moved from my preunderstandings prior to the interview, to a greater understanding through the interview which was then used to amend the diagram prior to the next interview). Interestingly, this diagram received radically different receptions – being dismissed out of hand by one prominent policy player (1Po4), but receiving praise and close consideration by another senior policy player (1Po5). This reinforced my impression that there were very different perspectives on the evolving strategy, even amongst policy players.

Although I tried very hard to make sure that the interviews did not encroach too much upon the interviewee's time, the semi-structured approach meant that some respondents were happy to talk at greater length than I had anticipated. The most extreme example of this was one civil servant (2Po6) who passionately wanted to talk about the strategy and therefore cancelled her entire morning's work to talk with me –

the interview filled two tapes! Unlike the researchers and practitioners I interviewed, there was a tendency amongst people working within ABSSU to approach the interviews less as a conversation and more as an opportunity to market the strategy product. This meant that the interview had quite a different style, but the very fact that the interviewees were using a particular style and carefully considered choice of vocabulary was, in itself, an area ripe for textual analysis. The interviews also allowed me to develop empathy with the different subjects. This is a key element of a hermeneutic approach.

In so far as this empathy is complemented by the interpreter's broader or at least different stock of knowledge, it is even possible – and this constitutes one of the main theses of hermeneutics – for interpreters to understand agents better than the agents understand themselves.

(Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000: 54)

The tool of the interview enabled me to take an empathetic approach to the individual social actors and to seek out a rationale for their assumptions and actions in the strategic processes.

Immediately after each interview, I jotted down my initial reflections on the interview and wrote out the main areas of interest which had emerged during the interview. I often returned to these notes during my rereading of the interviews, comparing my immediate reactions to the interview with the thoughts that arose when reading the interview transcripts. Each of the interviews was personally transcribed and, as my

typing is fairly slow, the process of transcription allowed me to listen closely to the tapes from a position outside of the interview. Rather than having an interactive role to play whilst listening to the interviewee, I was able to take a more critical role. I was also able to hear the content of the interview without being distracted by the body language of the interviewee. Following transcription, I made a note of any further issues and thoughts that had occurred to me. These notes were used to inform my analysis of this data.

#### **2.4.2.3 Power relationships**

Theoretically, I recognised the power struggles that existed between people and organisations in the development of the strategy, and this has been talked about in the first section of this chapter where I discussed Bowe et al's context of influence. Power struggles also emerged in some of my data-collecting interviews. In the initial cohort of exploratory interviews, I was keen to position myself as a relative newcomer to this field; one who was well read and informed around the main facts and events, but who was unthreatening and outside of the political relationships which exist between different organisations and players. The official strategy documents had already furnished me with the official information on the strategy, and I wanted these interviews to go beyond this. I felt that if I was positioned as uninformed then the interview would merely replicate information that I had already researched and, similarly, if I appeared to have political alliances then the agenda of the interview would change into being part of the political dialogue which exists in this field rather than being an exploration of the interviewee's own perspective. I wanted to appear as both informed but naïve and I tried to develop this impression through being clear on the facts, for example on government targets and dates, whilst appearing unaware of

the historic relationships between different players and organisations. To some extent this deliberate positioning of myself in the role of interviewer was manipulative and it was a conscious decision based upon the kinds of data which I wanted to elicit from the interviews. I was keen to present myself as being from a position outside the policy, and to encourage people to be as open and frank as possible, rather than responding to where they might have thought I had allegiances. In the later interviews, I was able to present my expertise in more detail, but I again did this in such a way that it was intended to be unthreatening to the interviewee. I think that the interviewer is positioned within any interview and this will necessarily have an impact upon the data, but I recognize that this positioning becomes particularly important when interviewing powerful people.

My choice of relatively unstructured interview formats was partly influenced by Maurice Kogan's (1994: 71) reflections on interviewing powerful people:

It is in the nature of political or organisational studies that interlocutors with distinguished records and minds of their own are not likely to accept too much control over the questions they answer. Indeed, it is precisely because one wants to capture their individual construction of events and relationships that it often proves best to explain what one is after and let them structure the answer.

Interviews are "complex social events rather than just information transfer sessions" (Block 1995: 37), and these events were further complicated by the imbalance of power between myself as the student interviewer and the subject as a senior policy maker, established academic, or powerful stakeholder. Kelly Coate (1999) explores

the issues that arise from interviewing powerful people, in her case senior academics in English universities. For both of us, our informants had greater experience in the interview process and they were all in a position of relative power within the interview process over ourselves as research students. I think that the power imbalance can be divided into three sections: the interviewee may have power because of their privileged position and status, because of their greater level of knowledge, or because of their greater experience of the interview process, although none of these groups are mutually exclusive.

(i) Power due to privilege of position and status.

Many of my interviews were with policy makers, senior academics and key people within the area of adult literacy. Politicians and senior government officials are well versed in controlling any information they provide (Walford 1994: 5) and several subjects subtly used the interview agenda to present the official view of the adult literacy strategy and to avoid discussing more contentious issues, such as the overall coherence of the strategy or the areas of dissent in its evolution. That is not, however, to negate the data that was collected in the interview, because this avoidance of certain issues provided a further area to analyse: my interest was in the silences of the interview agenda as well as being interested in what was said. Stephen Ball observes that interviews with the “elite” are “actually both richer and more difficult than is typically acknowledged by researchers” (Ball 1994b: 113), and he recommends that analysis of the interview should draw attention to the informant’s choice of language and metaphor and to the images of policy making that are conveyed. My use of a very loosely structured interview agenda aimed to enable the interviewee to speak at length, allowing the development of their language and narrative for future analysis:

“it is precisely because one wants to capture their individual construction of events and relationships that it often proves best to explain what one is after and let them structure the answer” (Kogan 1994: 71).

(ii) Power through knowledge

The interviewee’s level of expertise also places them in a powerful position, this was particularly the case in the initial exploratory interviews when I had relatively little knowledge of the strategy and intended to use the interview to gather knowledge. In later interviews I was able to trade my own research findings, knowledge and experience against that of the interviewee, making the interview process feel more equal in that sense. In the first few interviews, I felt unable to offer anything in exchange for that which the interviewee offered. This is perhaps a cynical interpretation of the interview process, but as my research developed the majority of my interviewees became more willing to engage with my ideas and findings, therefore offering more contributions of their own and further developing their perspective. In the final cohort of interviews, some of the people whom I interviewed began to ask me about my findings and sought my opinions on events: an interesting reversal from earlier interviews.

(iii) Power through interview technique

Reflecting on the experiences of her own post-graduate research, Coate (1999) observed some of the problems of interviewing people who have experience doing interviews themselves. One possible consequence is the foregrounding of the interview process, an awareness that denies the rapport to develop as a natural conversation (Coate 1999: 55). In one of my initial exploratory interviews, a

practitioner with substantial research experience evaded my questions by directing the conversation to whether my tape recorder was working and whether I should check this. At the time I did not recognise how effectively this changed the direction of the interview; only during transcription did the careful avoidance of the issue I was trying to discuss become fully evident. This demonstrates one incident where the interviewee is able to foreground the interview process as a means of evading the question.

#### **2.4.2.4 Limitations of the interview**

The interview is not a straightforward data collecting exercise where the interviewee has a set of information which is then transferred unproblematically to the interviewer; the interview is “not merely a neutral conduit or source of distortion but rather the productive site of reportable knowledge itself” (Holstein and Gubrium 1995: 3) and the respondents are “not so much repositories of knowledge – treasuries of information awaiting excavation – as they are constructors of knowledge in collaboration with interviewers”. (4). The actual interview process shapes the form and content of the data which emerges from the interview, meaning that the data collected in an interview will be affected by the relationship between the interviewer and the informant within the interview encounter. It is important to recognise not only how the researcher has influenced the interview agenda through their actions, but also, as Coate (1999) recognises in relation to her own postgraduate research, this reflexivity should develop an awareness of how the interviews and the information they provide could have been influenced by the ways in which the interviewees have positioned the researcher. Although my methodological approach does not aspire to a positivist “objectivity”, it is important to acknowledge explicitly that the interviews

are not an objective account of the interviewee's experience, but subjective data emerging from a social encounter. Whilst this may appear to beg questions on the reliability of the research tool, the interview data is intended in this research to offer only a snapshot of the interviewee's perspective, a description of thoughts and opinions at one point in the strategy's development. The fact that a different interviewer or a different time would have resulted in the construction of different data is interesting, but does not negate the value of the richly descriptive data collected at one moment in an interview with myself.

Interviews are unlikely to yield the whole story, at best offering individual perspectives on events within one particular context (Fitz and Halpin 1994). As with Fitz and Halpin's own research into educational policy making, the interviews in my research are used to provide insights into educational policy making that are not otherwise available in documentary form, and therefore not in the public domain. These interviews were triangulated against the collection of textual documents and my own involvement in the field of adult literacy, both through my practice and through my attendance at various events.

#### **2.4.3 Personal Involvement: participation, networking and practice**

My attendance at conferences and involvement in several networking organisations in the area of adult literacy provided me with further insights into the events of the strategy. Throughout my research project, I kept detailed fieldnotes where my thoughts, experiences and responses to both published texts and other events were recorded. These notebooks allowed me to reflect upon my own experiences on the evolution of the strategy, and to provide further detail to my understanding of



different initiatives. I also used my role as a practitioner and researcher to bounce some of my ideas against a larger audience than my supervisors through participating in email discussions, publishing short summaries of my research, and presenting my work at conferences, both nationally and internationally. Because my research was focused on understanding the construction of the strategy, my personal involvement was used to consolidate my interview and textual data, rather than becoming a main form of data collection. If this research was extended beyond 2002, I would anticipate that an ethnographic approach which allowed a greater degree of participant observation to take place would be a good way of better understanding how the strategy is implemented at grass roots level.

## **2.5 Analysis**

My research process was not linear – a straightforward exercise in collecting and then analysing data. Instead, in keeping with a hermeneutic research approach, my journey moved from data collection to analysis to data collection: hermeneutic research assumes that “what are conceived as facts, as well as the selection of facts, are both affected by the whole research-sociological situation” (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000: 61), the researcher must maintain a position of reflexivity, maintaining an awareness of the influence of their practice and preunderstandings upon the data. This problematisation of ways of knowing places the researcher at the centre of the research process. Hermeneutics assumes that the researcher continuously moves from their preunderstanding to understanding and then back to refining his or her preunderstandings.

To know, one must be aware of one's preunderstandings even though one cannot transcend them. At the same time, however, whilst they are an essential starting point, they need to be left open to modification in the course of the research.

(Scott 2000: 28)

In this sense, "preunderstandings" refers to our own personal experiences and frames of reference that we use to make sense of the world, as well as our cultural location in a particular society at a particular time. Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) suggest that the research also moves continuously from part to whole as another aspect of the hermeneutic circle. This reflects my own position in this research: I shifted from the whole of the strategy to the part offered by one text, whether written text or interview or conference presentation, and back. I was also continuously moving from my own preunderstandings of what the strategy was, based on my cultural knowledge and experiences, to my understanding of the strategy, which evolves during the research process. The progress of my research then informed and refined my preunderstandings.

Data were collected throughout the journey (from the search for policy texts, through different stages of interviews, to reflections upon my ongoing involvement in the field of adult literacy), and analysis and reflection at all the different stages then fed into my data collection, for example through influencing my interview agendas, or altering my approach to policy texts. The initial aim of the data analysis was to look for patterns in the data (Barton and Hamilton 1998): my intention was to understand the

points where different perspectives converged over the strategy, before looking for differences. The interview transcripts, the central policy documents, and other relevant texts were inputted into the NVivo data analysis package through which themes were identified and highlighted throughout the texts. The themes were organised into the three main groups of context, content and discourse, and then further subdivided<sup>2</sup>. The use of NVivo to organise the data in this way meant that all of the gathered data were treated as textual. This treatment is in keeping with my discursive approach to policy.

Prior to moving into educational research, my discipline was English Literature and I drew upon my skills in textual analysis as one analytical strategy within this research. The policy texts' use of language, metaphor and imagery, styles of address, and stylistic presentation were studied as a means to understand and explore how the texts presented adult literacy levels. I was particularly interested in how the notion that adult literacy levels in England were a major policy problem was generated, and the potential repercussions which adult literacy levels were presented as bearing on the country as a whole, as well as for the individuals concerned. The findings of my thesis suggest that the policies' use of language marketed both the strategy and the problem. Fairclough (2003: 39) draws attention to the relationships between the policy texts and other texts external to the policy, referring to these relations as "intertextuality", the indirect referencing and relationships between texts. The chronology and empirical scope of my case study enabled me to relate the different policy texts using this principle. Drawing upon many texts in this research also allowed a "bigger

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<sup>2</sup> A table of the organisational categories used to categorise the data is shown in Appendix 5.

picture” to be generated which allowed me to elicit the silences from the text, identifying that which had been unsaid:

Texts inevitably make assumptions. What is ‘said’ in a text is ‘said’ against a background of what is ‘unsaid’, but taken as given. As with intertextuality, assumptions connect one text to other texts, to the ‘world of texts’ as one might put it.

(Fairclough 2003: 40)

Many of these silences were around definitions of literacy and previous good practice in the field of adult literacy. Policy texts tended to present the solutions to the problem of low levels of adult literacy as new and radical, rather than seeking to draw out similarities to strategic initiatives and prior practice in this field. Chapters six, seven and eight explore the claims made in texts through what is said, what is not said, and the relations between different texts. This relates back to the power struggles at the level of context of influence: not all ideas, claims, or interests are heard at the level of the policy texts.

As an English Literature and Philosophy graduate, I am aware of the importance of maintaining a sensitive ear towards the choice of language and imagery in a text, and from the beginning of my research I found it interesting that policy makers tended to use similar language and imagery, whether through their presentations at conferences or through my interviews with them. This choice of imagery was, however, subject to change over time. At the start of the strategy, for example, there was a prevalent metaphor that this strategy was a “crusade” or a “mission” and that ABSSU were “laying down the gauntlet” to practitioners. This religious and militaristic language reverberated from the speeches of David Blunkett, through the RaPAL conference

presentation by Susan Pember, to the language of several civil servants in the initial set of exploratory interviews. Its repetition is suggestive of a carefully controlled and edited voice emerging from the Department of Education and Skills, and creates a hegemonic impression of policy makers and practitioners coming together in a moral fight against a common enemy.

Also within the discourse of the policy texts was the careful use of plural pronouns which appeared at times to be referring to the “we” of the government, and sometimes to the “we” of all educated people in England. Interestingly, the “we” was always in opposition to the identity of the illiterate. Becoming aware of this patterning of language, partly through my constant reading and rereading of the texts and partly through my organisation of the texts in NVivo, led me to distinguish between how the identity of the reader is constructed within these texts, how the reader is positioned in relation to adult literacy (and adults with low literacy levels), and how the adult with low literacy levels was depicted in these texts. These findings are developed in chapter six where the construction of the problem of adult literacy is explored in detail.

## **2.6 Writing the Research**

Interpretivism assumes a complex understanding of the world, recognising the partiality of the researcher’s view as well as the limitations of other perspectives. (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000; Scott 2000). Unlike more positivist approaches that apply the categories of the researcher upon the world, an interpretive approach enables theories and concepts to arise from the enquiry rather than preceding it

(Robson 1993). As such, an interpretive approach is hypothesis generating: data collection and analysis are not rigidly separated but develop hand-in-hand, each informing and refining the other (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000). In my own research, the boundaries of my case study have been refined as the research questions have developed and the research questions and hypotheses have been reformulated through the ongoing analysis of data.

Case study research is particularly difficult to write up because of the quantity of descriptive data that is collected and the importance of a reflexive approach. (Anderson 2002). The researcher needs to reflect upon her own use of research tools and the impact that her choices have upon both the data gathered and the analysis of that data (Mauthner 2000). Reflective research is characterised by careful interpretation and reflection: interpreting one's own interpretations, looking at one's own perspectives from other perspectives, and turning a self-critical eye onto one's own authority as interpreter and author. (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000). Scott and Usher (1999: 16) criticise the tendency of much research which does not question how the researchers have created their texts, "texts are created that are author(itative) but seemingly without author(ity)". I have aimed to avoid this weakness through maintaining an awareness of how my own subjectivity influences the collection of data in this research project and through explicitly considering the ways in which the research was written up. I am interested in promoting the possibilities of different interpretations of the findings of this thesis – I do not intend this research to take a "god's-eye" view of events. Scott and Usher suggest that most research reports assume a realist form, "thus conveying the impression that the researched account stands in some way for a set of phenomena that exist outside it and can be understood

without reference to the way in which it was constructed.” (Scott and Usher, 1999: 116). They recommend a reflexive understanding of the research experience to enable the text to interact more honestly with the reader. It would be wrong of me to assume that there could be only one interpretation, my own, of this research evidence. Mauthner (2000: 298) comments that “inevitably the end result... reflects the researcher’s interpretation and construction of narratives.” Therefore, reflexivity is important at every stage of my research project, offering a means of acknowledging, if not escaping, the boundaries of my own perspective. To be fair to myself as a researcher, the research evidence itself, and to the reader, this thesis presents the evidence with the awareness that it could be differently interpreted.

## **2.7 Ethics**

One can claim that value-free interpretive research is impossible (Denzin, 2001: 23), and reflexive research demands that the researcher looks at her own practice during the research as well as their findings. These considerations overlap closely with the researcher’s relationship to the ethics of her research project. My position as a researcher has had an impact upon the design and implementation of this case study. I am not a neutral conduit through which the data will pass: I am an English teacher with my own opinions on what literacy is and should be; I am interested in social justice within our society; I am a research student working within a recognised academic institution. Each of these elements of identity has shaped my choice of research area and has had an impact upon the evolution of this project. Perhaps these factors would have held less influence if I were working for an external organisation that had its own research agenda, but the identity of an external organisation would have a different impact upon the research, rather than no impact at all. It is not only

my role as a researcher upon which I have reflected - I am also a member of a larger body of academic researchers and this has also had an impact upon the design and presentation of this research. My research needed to conform to the expectations of a postgraduate piece of study and this has had implications for the writing up of this project. Through my own beliefs, political views and experiences of working with people with literacy difficulties, I do not feel that I could have comfortably presented research findings that conformed to some of the dominant stereotypes that draw causal links between a lack of literacy skills and poverty, crime or other anti-social behaviours. Nor would I have willingly adopted the paternalistic or patronising tone that can be found in some of the policy literature in this area. I acknowledge that this has made me more critical of documents or interviewees who present literacy in this way, but to some extent, these have been amended through empathising with my interviewees as part of the interview process. Through interviewing, for example, influential policymakers who held a relatively deficit model of literacy, I have been able to understand, although not agree with, views which are in substantial opposition to my own.

As a researcher, I have also had ethical responsibilities towards the people I have interviewed and I have followed the recommendations made in the British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines. The initial contact that I made with my interviewees explained the area and purposes of my research, and this was further clarified at the start of each interview where I outlined my research area in more detail and responded to any questions from the interviewee. The evolving nature of my research project did mean my research was presented slightly differently in the initial interviews to the way that the project was presented in later interviews, but I



have consistently been open about my research. Prior to beginning recording I agreed with each interviewee that it would be acceptable for me to tape the interview, and I also offered to switch off the tape recorder during the interview if the interviewee wished to speak confidentially: only one interviewee took advantage of this opportunity. At the end of each interview I offered the interviewee access to a copy of the transcript, once it had been typed up, and the tape. I agreed to make suggested amendments to the transcript, an action that meant that the interviewee could have control over their version of events. In this research I think that it is important to give the interviewee this level of control over what they have said for several reasons. Firstly, I hoped that people would speak more freely if they knew that they were able to later amend what they had said. Secondly, this provided the opportunity for some interviewees to further clarify what they had said during the course of the interview, or to provide additional references. Thirdly, once transcribed not all interviews made complete sense – people rarely speak in sentences, and some people speak with greater coherence than others. Offering the interviewee the opportunity to edit the interview transcript was one way of making sure that the transcript I then used for analysis made as much sense as possible. Only a minority of interviewees made amendments to their interview transcripts: only five interviewees asked for transcripts to be sent to them, and three of these were researchers themselves. This perhaps reflects their awareness of the interview procedure.

Only I had access to the tapes and transcripts and any use I have made of the interview data has anonymised the interviewee who is quoted (my assurance of confidentiality was differently valued by different interviewees and one interviewee appeared disappointed that the interview would not publicise her complaints). In

retrospect, I would have designed a written consent form because confidentiality was more difficult to assure through the writing of this data than I had anticipated. The field of adult literacy is small and consists of relatively few people, most of whom know one another, which means that there is the risk that identities might be revealed when, for example, quoting academics because the number of active independent academics in this field (at the time of my research) barely reached into double figures. Therefore, some extracts from the interview data became impossible to use, as their use would implicate the identity of the subject. This was disappointing for me in terms of writing up my data: although the interviews had an impact upon my thinking, it was not possible for me to include all of the quotes that I would have liked to have made use of when writing up this research. The small size of the field also meant that to ensure the confidentiality of my interviewees, I have not been able to provide copies of all of the anonymised transcripts of the interviews in the appendix to this thesis: people's discussion of their lives are too revealing of their identities in most cases. Appendix 4 offers one example of an interview transcript.

## **2.9 Conclusion**

The methodological approach that is taken in this thesis is influenced by theories of policy analysis, and by my own understanding and position within the field of adult literacy. From this theoretical and experiential basis, the next three chapters outline the three different foundations which, in my view, need to be understood as a context to the adult literacy strategy.

## Chapter 3: The Concept of Literacy

### 3.1 Introduction

To understand the adult literacy strategy, one must have an understanding of what is meant by literacy within the strategy<sup>3</sup>. Literacy is not consistently presented within the policy texts, and its presentation rarely corresponds to academic notions of the meaning and value of literacy. The first section of this chapter will explore what is meant by literacy within the strategy. I will argue that this is underdeveloped and under-theorized, and that these flaws are a significant weakness of the strategy. As Scribner (1988: 71) argues, the definitional controversy over literacy has more than academic significance:

Each formulation of an answer to the question “What is literacy?” leads to a different evaluation of the scope of the problem (i.e. the extent of *il*literacy) and to different objectives for programs aimed at the formation of a literate citizenry. Definitions of literacy shape our perceptions of individuals who fall on either side of the standard (what a “literate” or “nonliterate” is like) and thus in a deep way affect both the substance and style of education programs.

Therefore, the exploration of what is meant by literacy within the strategy will inform the strategic presentation of the problem, the proposed solutions, and the notions of how these can be evaluated; these will be analysed in chapters six, seven and eight. The presentation of literacy in the strategy has similarities to the “autonomous”

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<sup>3</sup> Although the Skills for Life strategy also makes recommendations for English as a Second Language (ESOL) and numeracy within their basic skills remit, the focus within in my thesis is literacy.

theories of literacy, and the first sections of this chapter explore these links. These theories will then be critiqued through drawing on more recent literature related to the more ethnographic approach of the New Literacy Studies. The latter part of this chapter argues that literacy theories need to also address the power relationships between different literacy practices; this section develops the ideas of Hirsch (1987), Freire (1973), Lankshear (1997), Lankshear and Knobel (2003), Lankshear and O'Connor (1999), Lankshear and McLaren (1993), and Gee (1997, 1996, 1988). Although Lankshear, Gee and O'Connor are often classified with New Literacy Studies, I will separate them for the purposes of this chapter because of their focus on challenging power relationships, rather than describing what currently exists. What I don't do in this chapter is address the substantial body of research which considers emergent literacy on an international level: absolute illiteracy is rare in any culture, but is probably extinct within our own, where all individuals are subjected to written and printed media from the earliest age. Even if one is only able to recognise a Macdonald's restaurant sign, one is demonstrating some level of literacy. What I also don't do in this chapter is to extend the notion of literacy to iconic and visual forms (see for example, Kress and van Leeuwen 2001; Kress 2003); both this chapter and my thesis as a whole keep a focus on literacy as reading and writing because this is the main focus of the *Skills for Life* strategy.

### **3.2 The Policy Concepts of Literacy**

The policy texts preceding and surrounding the Skills for Life strategy lack a rigorous definition of literacy. There are few attempts within the texts to explain what literacy is. An overview of the texts suggests that there was anticipation within *A Fresh Start* (1999: paragraph 64) that literacy would be defined within the new national

curriculum for adults<sup>4</sup>, and this was one of the major recommendations of the Moser working group:

One of the crucial elements of the proposed strategy must be clarity about the skills, knowledge and understanding that anyone needs to be literate and numerate in the modern world. These skills need to be enshrined in a new curriculum, with well-developed and understood national standards.

Literacy is not being defined in this text. The members of the Moser working group were provided with summaries of the IALS research findings, and of the research carried out by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies (CLS) on the national cohort birth data (Bynner and Parsons 1997; Bynner and Parsons 1998); these summaries were written by the secretariat of the Moser working group and are referred to in the minutes of the working group, although the actual summaries were not present amongst the archived materials. One can infer that the working group would have been influenced by the assumption made in these reports that literacy could be discretely tested as a set of skills possessed by the individual; both the IALS and CLS data extrapolated findings from a series of reading and writing tests to make claims about literacy levels. The assumption that these skills would be more thoroughly defined in the national curriculum is not met. The national curriculum seeks to locate the definition of literacy in *A Fresh Start* and claims that the national standards are also based on the definition of adult literacy contained within the Moser working group report: “The standards describe adult literacy and numeracy within the definition expressed in *A Fresh Start*: ‘the ability to read, write and speak in English and to use mathematics at a level necessary to function at work and in society in

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<sup>4</sup> Future references to the national curriculum will refer specifically to the national curriculum in adult literacy.

general” (Basic Skills Agency 2001: 3). However, while the national curriculum locates the national standards’ model of literacy within *A Fresh Start*, the national standards themselves do not refer explicitly to the earlier definition in *A Fresh Start*: “Literacy and numeracy are the fundamental skills that every adult needs to be able to function and progress at work and in society in general” (QCA 1999: 1), and although their definition appears to be similar, I would argue that there is a subtle but important difference between the ‘ability’ necessary to function and the ‘fundamental skills’ that are needed to function and progress. ‘Ability’ implies a broader concept than the accumulation of a discrete set of skills: this distinction will be developed later in the chapter in my criticism of skill-based approaches to literacy, but it is worth mentioning here because it implies that the QCA are working to more of a skills-based agenda than that which informs the Moser working group report or the Basic Skills Agency (BSA) who are the chief authors of the national curriculum.

Both the national curriculum and the national standards are useful in breaking down literacy into a series of discrete skills: the demonstrable accumulation of a range of skills is necessary for the learner to be defined as having achieved a certain level. These national standards are influenced by the policy agendas being developed in other areas of education, not from academic work being developed in adult literacy:

The adult literacy and numeracy standards are the outcome of a review of existing of similar frameworks, including the

- National literacy strategy for schools
- National numeracy strategy for schools
- National curriculum levels for English
- National curriculum levels for mathematics

- Key skills of communication
- Key skills of application of number

As the result of this review, development work and widespread consultation were undertaken, leading to the production of national standards for literacy and numeracy.

(QCA 1999: 2)

While the standards seek to define the skills that an adult needs to be “functionally literate”, the national curriculum describes the content of what should be taught in adult literacy programmes. While based on the national standards, it also “draws heavily on existing and planned curricula and strategies in this country and overseas” including the National Literacy Strategy in schools, the key skills units in communication, the revised National Curriculum for English in schools, and curricula in other countries (Basic Skills Agency 2001: 2). In interview, Alan Wells also stated that the WordPower curricula, which were already established in the adult literacy field (see chapter four) were also influential.

The concept of literacy is not further developed within the policy texts and, because the national standards will not be reviewed until 2007 and are not subjected to any critique within the strategy, the notion of literacy which is constructed in the national standards dominates the strategy’s development: the significance of this will be explored in detail in chapter seven.

### **3.3 Literacy as an Attribute of an Individual**

The skill-based approach to literacy adopted in the adult literacy strategy has many similarities to that taken by early writers on literacy who have been retrospectively

grouped together as exponents of an “autonomous theory of literacy”, a label developed by Brian Street (1984) to describe their assumption that literacy is an attribute of the individual which one either does, or does not, have. These writers treat literacy as being independent from its social context, tacitly assuming that literacy forms a range of skills or abilities that can be decontextualised from the events in which they are used. It is important to remember that these writers are not explicitly attempting to define literacy: their work describes what are seen to be the cognitive and civilising advantages caused by literacy, rather than describing what individuals do with reading and writing in their lives. As shall be discussed below, there is a striking contrast between these writers’ focus on exploring the value of literacy and the New Literacy Studies’ focus on describing literacy.

Drawing from historical, anthropological and sociological perspectives, Jack Goody and Ian Watt (1968) offer an analysis of the psychological impact and cultural consequences of the emergence of literacy. Evidence from contemporary anthropological studies on non-literate cultures and historical evidence on the development of writing from hieroglyphic and logographic systems through to the Greek alphabetic writing system are combined, permitting Goody and Watt to claim that the emergence of alphabetic literacy enabled new ways of using human intelligence. “Writing establishes,” these writers suggest, “a different kind of relationship between the word and its referent, a relationship that is more general and more abstract, and less closely connected with the particularities of person, place and time, than obtains in oral communication.” (Goody and Watt 1968: 44). This shift in relationship is seen as a necessary condition for the emergence of logic and the distinction between myth and history. Goody and Watt also suggest that the fact that



the majority of free citizens in fifth century Greece could read and write was a necessary condition for the development of political democracy. The historical work of these two writers coheres with the observations made by Eric Havelock (1991). Havelock relates the development of philosophy at the time of Greek civilization to the emergence of the alphabetic writing system, and this leads him to claim that “without modern literacy, which means Greek literacy, we would not have science, philosophy, written law, or literature, nor the automobile or the airplane.” (Havelock 1991: 24) Goody and Watt, however, also voice reservations on the effects of widespread literacy: “literate society, merely by having no system of elimination, no ‘structural amnesia’, prevents the individual from participating fully in total cultural tradition to anything like the extent possible in non-literate society.” (Goody and Watt 1968: 57) This situation potentially fosters alienation, exposes people to, what Goody and Watt see to be, the questionable ideals of the mass-communications industry, and generates culture conflict between the public literate tradition of school and the “often directly contradictory” private oral traditions of the pupil’s family and peer group. (59) This final point anticipates the later sociological work of the New Literacy Studies which concentrates on rendering visible private uses of literacy.

Walter Ong (1982) takes a slightly different approach to the contrast between literate and non-literate cultures: he challenges the reader to imagine a culture where no-one has any experience of written language. Through empathising with this thought experiment, Ong describes an oral culture where language has no visual presence and exists only through the immediacy of sound. The restriction of words to sound, Ong argues, determines not only modes of expression, but also thought processes: “sustained thought in an oral culture is tied to communication” (Ong 1982: 34) He

contrasts this with written cultures, where writing retains and organises thought. Again, writing is seen to enable abstract and analytical thinking which isn't possible in a purely oral culture, and the advent of writing is claimed to have fundamentally altered human consciousness and ways of thinking. Although Ong makes the observation earlier in his text that orality and literacy co-exist, his study is concerned with "primary orality, that of persons totally unfamiliar with writing" (Ong 1982: 6); this creates a dichotomy between literacy and orality similar to the dichotomy between literacy and non-literacy in the work of Goody and Watt, and both arguments reach the similar conclusion that thought processes within societies without literacy are necessarily different from those within literate societies. It is this stark dichotomy which has caused the greatest unease amongst critics from the New Literacy Studies field, and which has led Street to describe these theories as representing a "Great Divide" approach to literacy (Street 1984): the divide is between cultures which are seen as fully literate and those which have no experience of literacy. This simplification and generalisation can be seen as a device of argumentation: Goody and Watt (1968), Havelock (1991) and Ong (1982) all develop their arguments through a macro perspective and seek to present a stark contrast between the two different, simplified, states of literacy and non-literacy or orality. These cultures are simplified as a means of supporting the writers' claims about the consequences of literacy.

To some extent the conclusions laid out by Goody, Watt, Ong and others beg the question of whether "non-literate" individuals within our own society are also somehow primitive, irrational and intellectually limited as a consequence of being unable to read and write. The correlations between a lack of literacy and a lack of

intelligence can be seen to reverberate throughout current public and media perceptions of the current “literacy crisis”, and these observations have repercussions for the ways in which literacy is talked about at the level of policy, and influence public perceptions (Barton 2000). This sense of inferiority is present in the correlations claimed between a range of social factors and adult literacy: that “illiterates” are intellectually lacking, of reduced benefit to the economy, and inherently limited in their possible contributions to society. These claims are analysed in detail in chapter six, where the problems associated with and constructed around adult literacy levels are explored.

Each of the above arguments focuses upon the benefits and consequences that being literate holds, whether for the society or for the individual. The exponents of “autonomous models of literacy” address one very limited model of literacy which emerges from a hierarchical notion of the value of different literacies: Street (1990) uses the metaphor of an evolutionary pyramid at the top of which stands Western, alphabetic, essay text literacy to explain this concept. Rather than acknowledging that there are varieties of literacy and that individuals do different things with literacy within the same society, for example reading stories, filling in forms or writing shopping lists, these writers identify and address one ideal form of literacy (Street 1984). The perceived evolution of literacy in a single direction risks charges of ethnocentrism because other literacies, to the extent that they are identified at all, are deemed inferior. This bias can be observed within the adult literacy strategy which forms the case to be studied in this research: other languages are ignored and ESOL (English as a Second Language) has been a contested terrain, excluded from the Moser report, fought over during the Technical Implementation Groups, and finally

included in the *Skills for Life* (2001) strategy. Similarly, the school strategy for literacy is seen as the area of greatest influence of the strategy: a prime example of alphabetic, essay text literacy taking priority over other possible forms.

Street (1994, 2001) questions the potential social and pedagogical repercussions of the autonomous model. If literacy is considered to be one thing, or one decontextualised set of things, then the pedagogic implication is that this one thing can be successfully delivered to the individual who has a deficit. The conceptual ramifications of this will be returned to and developed in more detail in chapter seven, where the content of the strategy is analysed, and in chapter eight, where notions of what a successful strategy would do (or deliver) are explored in detail. This sense of being able to “inscribe literacy” upon a person lacking literacy is, Street would argue, not a social reality. Instead, the social reality is that practically everybody has some involvement in literacy practices and rather than concentrating upon abstraction and decontextualisation as a means of establishing definitions, we should focus research on ethnographically observing the reality of actual literacy practices. Rather than attempting to condense literacy into one thing, we should look at the many things that literacy is. Although I would not claim that *A Fresh Start* (1999) or the national curriculum (Basic Skills Agency 2001) respond to ethnographic observations of literacy practices (in fact, in chapter six I will be critical of their neglect of this literature), their definition of literacy as an “ability” has more sensitivity towards the opportunity for literacy practices to be contextualised and social, than the focus on abstract skills which informs the national standards (QCA 1999). As the Skills for Life strategy developed during the time-span of my research, the growing importance of the national tests (discussed in chapter eight) meant that the concept of literacy as a

set of abstract and definable skills gained precedence over an ability-based approach. The next section discusses a group of writers who group together under the broad label of New Literacy Studies – these writers don't aim to reject the findings of the autonomous theorists (although they are scathing of their use of a deficit model), but intend to move beyond their narrow focus on one area of literacy, to consider a range of literacy practices.

### **3.4 Literacy as a Social Practice**

Following his criticisms of an autonomous approach, Street (1995: 149) proposes “an ‘ideological’ model of literacy that is methodologically and theoretically sensitive to local variation in literacy practices and that is able to comprehend people’s own uses and meanings of reading and writing”. This model has been adopted and developed by New Literacy Studies. The roots of the approach can be seen in the work of Heath (1983) and Scribner and Cole (1988), and their concepts of “literacy events” and “literacy practices” evolve through research carried out by Street (1984), Hamilton and Barton (1998, 1996), Mace (1992, 1998) and their colleagues. Within the UK these writers are often linked through their involvement in ‘Research and Practice in Adult Education’ (RaPAL), an organisation aimed at developing research and practice in adult literacy. This organisation is referred to in more detail in chapter four. The essence of this approach is studying what people do with literacy in their own lives which, David Barton (1994: 4) claims, provides “a richer view of literacy which demands ... a new way of thinking about what is involved in reading and writing.” Rather than being seen as one thing, literacy is seen as many things (Scribner, 1988), located in particular aspects of people’s lives rather than being universal: “it varies

with who people are and where and when they are living” (Mace, 1998: 13). Drawing from the hypothesis that “looking at definitions of literacy may be an impossible task: the idea that complex concepts are susceptible to dictionary like definitions is probably a myth” (Barton, 1994: 19), Barton lays out the field for future research in this area by recommending, “what is needed is not exactly a definition of literacy; rather we need a metaphor, a model, a way of talking about literacy” (14) And in their recent retrospective on some of the main work in this area, Jim Crowther, Mary Hamilton and Lyn Tett observe: “the new literacy studies dispenses with the idea that there is a single literacy that can be unproblematically taken for granted.” (Crowther, Hamilton et al. 2001: 2) Advocating an approach that problematises the very notion of literacy focuses attention onto the acts of reading and writing, rather than seeking to evaluate their consequences, and this methodological approach contrasts with the writers discussed in the previous section. Focus shifts from consequences to practices.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Shirley Brice Heath (1983) undertook long-term ethnographic research with two working class communities in the United States. Although her focus was on children’s uses of literacy in their homes and communities, her argument that one cannot research literacy *per se* because in isolation the term does not mean anything, is seminal to the work of later writers in this area. Heath presents the notion that the researcher needs to find something real to observe and discuss and she recommends looking for the “concrete context of written communication” (Heath 1988: 350) From these claims, Heath develops the conceptual tool of the “literacy event” which serves as a means to facilitate a realization of the abstract notion of literacy.

The *Literacy Event* is a conceptual tool useful in examining within particular communities of modern society the actual forms and functions of oral and literate traditions and co-existing relationships between spoken and written language. A literacy event is any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants' interactions and their interpretative processes.

(Heath, 1988: 350)

The observation of any occasion when text is integral to the activity marks a contrast to earlier focuses on formal literacy events where literacy became associated with school practices. As with the later work of the New Literacy Studies group, Heath observes a wide range of text-based activities: literacy events might be as diverse as reading price tags and road signs, writing shopping lists, and glancing through letters sent home from a child's school. Heath is particularly keen to draw attention to "invisible" home literacies and to develop a more complex understanding of what we are doing when we are involved in reading and writing. Through observing this wide range of activities, Heath realizes that an individual's literacy has been affected even before they learn to read and write through the ways they have learnt to interact with texts, the ways they talk about texts, and the behaviour patterns they have inherited from their community.

Within this research account literacy is seen as a social phenomenon, rather than a discrete set of skills that an individual either does or does not have, which leads to a rejection of the notion of any kind of autonomy between literate and non-literate. In

fact, Heath claims that her findings “may discredit any reliance on characterising particular communities as having reached either restricted or full development of literacy.” (351) She refuses to label either of her focus communities as “oral” or “literate”: within this conceptual framework they are neither and they are both. The contrast between the home and the school literacy events can be defined as vernacular and dominant literacies: “vernacular literacy practices are essentially ones which are not regulated by the formal rules and procedures of dominant social institutions and which have their origins in every day life.” (Barton and Hamilton 1998: 247) Dominant literacy is seen to be that which is expected in schools, the kind of literacy which Street conceptualised the autonomous writers placing at the top of this evolutionary pyramid.

During the same period, Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole (1988) carried out an equally seminal ethnographic project with the Vai tribe in NW Liberia. As with Heath, this research offered the opportunity to develop a theoretical perspective based on observations of actual individuals rather than drawing inferences from historical anthropological data. Scribner and Cole’s research is generated, in part, by similar concerns to those held by Heath: that theorists have placed an emphasis upon formal school-based literacy practices which has resulted in a serious underestimation of the cognitive skills involved in non-school, non-essay writing and an overestimation of the intellectual skills entailed in the “essayist” text, seen by earlier writers to be the pinnacle of literacy achievement (Scribner and Cole, 1988: 61). The occurrence of three distinct literacies within the Vai tribe was the rationale for using this cultural sample. The Vai tribe are unusual in their use of an independently invented phonetic writing system which is used mainly for commercial purposes, as well as formally



taught Arabic and Roman alphabets. The Vai script is transmitted outside of any institutional setting (61). This coexistence of schooled literates, non-schooled literates and non-literates who share common material and social conditions enabled the comparison of cognitive performance between these groups. Evidence emerging from Scribner and Cole's research showed no marked differences in performance in logical and classificatory tasks between non-schooled literates and non-literates, supporting their hypothesis that cognitive changes result from the formal schooling process rather than through literacy per se, as claimed by earlier writers. They conclude: "the metaphor of a "great divide" may not be appropriate for specifying differences among literates and non-literates under contemporary conditions" (1988: 70).

While Scribner and Cole used some psychological testing to arrive at this evidence, they became increasingly aware during the course of their research that literacy is a social, rather than an individual, attribute:

Most efforts at definitional determinism are based on a conception of literacy as an attribute of individuals, they aim to describe constituents of literacy in terms of individual abilities. But the single most compelling fact about literacy is that it is a *social* achievement; individuals in societies without writing systems do not become literate.

(Scribner, 1988: 72)

The realization of the social complexities of literacy lead Scribner and Cole to develop the concept of "literacy practices" as a means of answering questions "about *how* Vai people acquire literacy skills, *what* these skills are and *what* they do with them." (Scribner and Cole 1988: 62) This concept is utilised and developed within

subsequent research within the New Literacy Studies to refer to the conceptions of the reading and writing process that people hold when they're engaged in the event (Street 1993): literacy practices are not observable units of behaviour because they involve values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships. This concept is normally used alongside Heath's notion of literacy events: literacy events are empirical and observable, while practices are more abstract and can be inferred from events and other cultural information (Barton 1998). This conceptual change provides an explicit shift in methodological focus from the psychological to the primarily sociological.

If literacy consists of the social practices of reading and writing – rather than of a cognitive skill, such as decoding text – then research on literacy has to be able to take account of social context and social change...

An ethnographic perspective on literacy assumes that an understanding of literacy requires detailed, in depth accounts of actual practice in different cultural settings.

(Street 1993: 121)

The concepts of literacy events and practices shape the four-year ethnographic research project undertaken by Mary Hamilton and David Barton (1998) in Lancaster during the early 1990s. This project is of particular significance because it is the first long-term ethnographic research carried out with adults in England: previous studies have either tended to concentrate on adults in developing countries, or on school-aged children. As with Heath, Hamilton and Barton observe a wide range of literacy events and infer various literacy practices from these. Barton (1994) refers to this approach as “ecological”, suggesting that rather than isolating literacy activities from

everything else, an ecological approach would aim to understand how literacy is embedded in social life. In this research Hamilton and Barton (1998) move beyond Heath's classifications of the functions and uses of literacy, recognising instead that reading and writing can serve many different functions in different settings: "just as a text does not have autonomous meanings which are independent of its social context of use, a text does not have a set of functions independent of the social meanings with which it is imbued" (Barton and Hamilton 1994: 11). Emerging from this research are six propositions that are used to orient much of the subsequent work in this area:

- Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts.
- There are different literacies associated with different domains of life.
- Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies become more dominant, visible and influential than others.
- Literacy practices are purposeful and are embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices.
- Literacy is historically situated.
- Literacy practices change, and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making.

(Barton and Hamilton 1994: 7)

While these writers look more closely at what literacy is, a focus that can be seen to have been lacking within the autonomous theories, this means that they shift focus away from the potential consequences and values of literacy. The main differences

between the ideological and autonomous approaches to literacy can perhaps be usefully summarised in Table 3.1.

	<b>Approach</b>	<b>Main Research method</b>	<b>Research tools</b>	<b>Perspective</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>
<b>Autonomous approach</b>	Generalising	Historical anthropology	Measurement Testing Hypothesising	Macro Whole society	Inference of consequences
<b>Ideological Approach</b>	Problematizing	Sociological ethnography	Observation	Micro Individual	Description of processes

Table 3.1: Comparison of autonomous and ideological approaches to literacy

I welcome the shift in focus from the autonomous to the ideological approach to adult literacy, but, as with any theory which has been developed only recently, there are limitations within the New Literacy Studies approach. My main areas of concern are the refusal within New Literacy Studies to generalise from observing literacy practices at the micro-level, to question the inequity between different literacy practices on a much larger scale, and to problematise the relationship between the researcher and the researched. There has also been, at the time of my research, an inability in this research to engage with policy agendas (this is a claim that would need to be re-evaluated in light of the engagement between the NRDC and researchers located in New Literacy Studies). Each of these reservations will be discussed individually below.

The academic field of the New Literacy Studies has substantial significance for this case study because many of the leading researchers have previously worked as practitioners in this area, many during the initial adult literacy campaign of the early 1970s. There is an ethos shared amongst this group of researchers of promoting research in practice, and the theorists work with practitioners through the RaPAL organisation. The commitment to altering the scope of research through working alongside practitioners is admirable, but juxtaposed with this ideal is the attempt to improve the validity of the research through observing literacy practices from a neutral space, outside of the classroom or the social situation. A theoretical conflict emerges here between the commitment to ethnographic methodologies and the desire to remove oneself from one's research. Notably, the New Literacy Studies theorists research the literacy practices of other individuals, they do not research their own literacy practices.

Jane Mace provides a contrast with much work in the New Literacy Studies: she has written as both a practitioner and an academic since the 1970s and her writings provide a valuable historical and learner-centred perspective. She moves beyond the categories of practitioner or researcher – she is both and she intends to act upon her research findings, rather than her research forming an end in itself. Her work focuses on trying to find something other than a problem-solution reflex to the issue of “illiteracy” (Mace 1992). This moves the theory back from the attempt at neutral value-free descriptions of different literacy practices, towards a value agenda: Mace advocates that we need to examine what we think is so special about literacy (Mace 1997). As with other writers within the New Literacy Studies, Mace stresses, “Literacy is about life beyond as well as within the walls of bureaucracies and school

buildings...” And she sees her work as having an essentially practical focus, “designing strategies to encourage people to see that these courses may meet their own interests – and to educate them and others to rethink their own attitudes to ‘illiteracy’.” (Mace 1992: xx) Outside of her academic research, Jane Mace maintained a visibility at policy level throughout the time-span of my case study through her involvement in the Advisory Group on developing teacher qualifications, and her critical, and often, humorous observations on this process which were distributed through several email discussion lists.

The commitment to research having repercussions at the level of practice and at the level of public perceptions is also in evidence in the work of Barton, Hamilton and Street. Hamilton and Barton (1998: 161) continuously challenge the deficit model of literacy which they see to be perpetuated by media and policy (a claim that will be explored in more detail in the subsequent history chapter):

Adults who report problems with reading and writing nevertheless engage in a wide range of literacy activities... Adults with difficulties reading and writing are not empty people living in barren homes waiting to be saved and filled up by literacy.

This commitment to changing the ways in which literacy levels, and those with low literacy levels, are viewed by wider society is a powerful theme running through these authors. Anecdotally, Denny Taylor recalls David Barton announcing at a conference meeting,

‘If the *Guardian* keeps having titles like “Two Million Illiterates in Britain”’ he says, ‘then New Literacy Studies has failed and I have wasted my time.’

(Taylor 2000: xi)

I would argue that New Literacy Studies has not yet sufficiently addressed issues of why literacy is important nor has it sought to challenge power inequalities brought about by relationships between dominant and vernacular literacy practices. A major weakness of the New Literacy Studies is that it observes power but it doesn’t seek to actively challenge this, although this might be because the field has had to develop the conceptual tool of ‘literacy practices’ before it is able to evaluate effectively the power relations between them. I am uncomfortable with the focus on descriptions of diverse literacy practices if it does not move beyond a description to recommendations for practice or policy. It is not enough, in my opinion, to recognise a diversity of literacy practices: one needs also to consider why some literacy practices are considered to be more important than others, and why performance in some areas of literacy has greater exchange value for the individual involved than others. The following example perhaps helps to illustrate this claim.

While writing this chapter, I have been involved in a diversity of literacy practices. Three particular examples spring to mind as I write this text: the first of these is the fond remembrance of reading stories to my nephew; the second was an irritating incident involving a cycle maintenance handbook and a bike with broken brakes; the third example involved having to fill in a form in a court room to provide surety for

bail alongside a colleague, who will be called John in this example. Extracts from the first two texts are included here:

Daisy, on the other hand, felt bright and cheerful. "Uu-ooo! Uu-ooo!" she tooted as she came out of the Yard, and backed to the Station.

"Look at me!" she purred to the waiting Passengers. "I'm the latest Diesel, highly sprung and right up to date, You won't want Thomas's bumpy old Annie and Clarabel now."

*Branch Line Engines*, The Rev. W. Awdry  
London: Edmund Ward (1965)

**7. Brake boss flex:** If the seatstays or the fork legs are too flexible, applying the brakes will bow them outward and decrease braking pressure. This can be counteracted by attaching a horseshoe-shaped "brake booster" connecting the brake mounting bolts and bridging over the tire.

*Zinn and the Art of Mountain Bike Maintenance*  
Lennard Zinn  
Boulder, Colorado: Velo Press (2001)

Describing these literacy events is straightforward. In the first case, I was sitting with my nephew on my knee, an illustrated and fairly battered children's book in my hands, the television quietly playing in the background. My sister and parents were talking nearby; my niece occasionally toddled past with my daughter in hot pursuit. In the second example, I was alone in my kitchen with my bike in pieces on the floor, my hands were oily, the large cycling manual was propped on the draining board (I later discover, to my husband's fury, a coffee stain spreading on the back cover), and, with rising frustration I realised that I was going to be late for a meeting at university. In the final example, I was standing in a courtroom filling in a badly photocopied form in front of a handful of solicitors and barristers and court officials (I was not sure who was which). In terms of literacy practices, I know that my nephew likes to have



different voices for the main characters, that he appreciates being given the opportunity to point out relevant aspects of the illustrations, that he wants to be able to see the text even though he can't read the words independently, that he will talk about different characters to me as I read. I am also aware, while later standing in my kitchen with oily hands and a rising sense of panic, that I don't understand the technical terms in the book, that I haven't followed the instructions carefully and logically one at a time (foolishly, I have not started following the instructions from the beginning of the chapter, but have leapt midway in the chapter which is why the brake cable is still connected to the handlebars when it shouldn't be), and that the diagram of the brake set bears no resemblance, in my eyes, with the bits of cable and the various bits of bike that are scattered on the floor. In the final example, I am aware that I need to sign my signature, print my name in capital letters, and write the amount of bail on the dotted line, but I am not sure where each should go, I am irritated at being patronised by the judge, and I have started writing without reading the entire form. John, who is standing alongside me, copies what I do and we both sign the form in the wrong place.

The purpose of these examples is to demonstrate two claims. The first point I am trying to make is that I have a bank of literacy skills that I can draw upon in different situations to make sense of different texts. That does not make me literate in every event: one could argue that I was only partially literate in relation to *Zinn and the Art of Mountain Bike Maintenance*, but it does distinguish my ability to interact with these texts from Andrew's ability as pre-literate. My nephew, who has recently had his third birthday, has learnt the specialised vocabulary relating to diesel trains and steam engines, and he genuinely enjoys the complexities of the original narratives

rather than simplified modern counterparts; but he cannot be considered to be literate, despite his knowledge. I would argue that his involvement in the story telling does not constitute literacy: at best he is forming notions of how to act with a text which might influence his emerging literacy. I, meanwhile, have no train-spotting knowledge and I don't understand all of the vocabulary or concepts (for example, why does Daisy 'back' into the station? What does 'highly sprung' mean?), but I can understand the principles of characterization and the use of punctuation well enough to make the books entertaining. My literacy skills transcend the context in some way which makes me able to take an active role in deciphering the texts. Barton (1994) feels uncomfortable talking about literacy skills, but I would argue that I was using similar literacy skills in these examples, many of which can be found in the national standards (QCA 1999): I was able to trace and understand the main events of continuous descriptive prose; identify the main points and specific detail; and I could have made the commitment to use reference materials to find the meanings of the words I was unfamiliar with (all standard descriptors for level 2). These skills also empowered me to fill in forms and to entertain my nephew in a way that someone lacking those skills could not have done.

My second argument is that describing these events is not enough. Describing reading to my nephew does not help teach him to read, although one could go on to use my description as data to inform pedagogical recommendations on ways to read to children. Opting out of reading Zinn and asking friends to help instead, does not make the text more user-friendly and is unlikely to give me the confidence to now attempt to mend my bicycle suspension, which started to creak as soon as my brakes had been sorted out. Completing the court form alongside my friend does not give him the

confidence or the knowledge to question what he has filled in, and it does not provide the impetus for the form to be better designed in the future. The New Literacy Studies writers have voiced their optimism for challenging public perceptions of literacy and influencing policy agendas, I would argue that to do this their work needs to move beyond the descriptive. This criticism leads this chapter into the next two sections on literacy and power, and powerful literacies. I am in agreement with Street (2001) when he advocates that “the ethnography of literacy, then, has to offer accounts not only of rich cultural forms and ‘situated’ literacy practices, but also broader, more politically charged accounts of the power structures that define and rank such practices.”

### **3.5 Literacy and Power**

Several writers have sought to write explicitly about the relationship between literacy and power. This section of the chapter looks at the argument developed by E.D. Hirsch, touches on the work of Paulo Freire, and then links this with the more recent theorising by Colin Lankshear, Peter O’Connor and James Paul Gee, who are often categorised within New Literacy Studies, but whose work, I would argue, has extended beyond that of Hamilton, Barton et al. The issue of power is relevant to the analysis of the adult literacy strategy in this thesis. If one adopts an autonomous model of literacy, as has been done in the majority of the policy texts, then one assumes an accumulation of value as one works one’s way up the “pyramid” of literacy skills: there is more value in having accumulated a lot of literacy skills (e.g. performing above Level 2 in the national standards) than in having fewer literacy skills (e.g. performing at Entry Level 1). Similarly, there is more value associated with some literacy practices (e.g. using apostrophes correctly) than there is associated

with other literacy practices (e.g. writing colloquialisms). The New Literacy Studies approach does lend itself potentially to more complex understandings of power relationships. In their article, 'Literacy and Bourdieu's Sociological Theory: A Reframing', Carrington and Luke relate New Literacy Studies approaches with Bourdieu's concept of capital to argue that different contextualised literacy practices command different value in different social contexts (Carrington and Luke 1997). As I shall discuss in chapter eight, value in the Skills for Life adult literacy strategy becomes associated with the notion of the learner demonstrating progress and achievement along the linear model of the national standards, whereas alternative concepts of literacy would suggest alternative measures of value and success.

### **3.5.1 Hirsch and Cultural Literacy**

E.D. Hirsch (1987) rejects the notion that literacy is a set of discrete decontextualised skills; he argues that literacy is the ability to understand and make assumptions about the context in which something is written or spoken, and is dependent upon the shared knowledge of specific information: "the level of literacy exhibited in each task depends on the relevant background information that the person possesses." (1987: 8) Hirsch's argument for the explicit teaching of cultural literacy derives from the perceived correlation between the apparent decline of literacy standards in the US and the apparent decline in the shared knowledge between Americans: the purpose of his book is to provide a normative list of the cultural information that an American needs to know to be literate within that society. Hirsch considers that literacy has the potential to challenge social determinism, and he emphasises the responsibility of the academic writer to address this moral issue:

Once we become aware of the inherent connection between literacy and cultural literacy, we have a duty to those who lack cultural literacy to determine and disclose its contents.

(1987: 26)

Although he claims to be describing the things one needs to know to be “literate”, Hirsch becomes increasingly prescriptive through the course of the book and it is the content of this prescriptive knowledge, with claims as ridiculous as the statement “a literate Briton has to know more about the game of cricket and the Corn Laws than an American” (75), which provides the temptation to view his text as Right Wing traditionalism. His model of cultural literacy is backward looking, grounded within a perceived heyday of shared values and effective communication where all citizens shared a communal knowledge of Shakespeare, the Great War and the intricacies of baseball. In their review of his book, Aronowitz and Giroux criticize Hirsch for adopting a “clothesline of information” approach (Aronowitz and Giroux 1988) which fails to consider the political aspects of literacy: he does not consider how this literacy and knowledge has been constructed or which group within society has been most proactive within its construction, and he dismisses the role of social class in excluding people from dominant literacies by claiming that the distinction is one of schooling, which has been made universal in the US, not of economic or social class.

I would, however, argue that there is considerable overlap between the work of the New Literacy Studies and Hirsch, although ideologically the relationship is not an easy one. These writers share the notion that literacy is not something that is lodged within the individual, but that it is something about the relationship between the individual and the text: “any reader who doesn’t possess the knowledge assumed in a

piece he or she reads will in fact be illiterate with respect to that particular piece of writing” (Hirsch 1987: 13). A brief illustration of this point can be made by returning to my earlier example of the failed relationship between me and my mountain bike manual: my literacy skills are limited by my lack of cultural knowledge of mountain bike mechanics and, therefore, I am unable to fully decipher the text. Hirsch acknowledges that there are many different kinds of literacy in different domains of life (although he does not use this New Literacy Studies terminology of literacy practices there is a clear conceptual overlap here), and he recognises that the relationship between these domains is not equal. The main difference between the two theoretical positions, is that Hirsch seeks to find a way to challenge social power relationships through providing, what he sees to be, the cultural knowledge necessary for people to become literate within dominant literacy practices. Whilst recognising that “everyone is literate in some local, regional, or ethnic culture” (22), he argues that providing access to the dominant literacy will empower those who are excluded, challenge social determinism and inequity, and benefit the country as a whole through providing the information necessary for people to be able to communicate more effectively. This commitment to using literacy to challenge social inequalities is a theme that runs through the history of adult literacy campaigns, and can be heard behind the use of evidence to claim that reducing the numbers of adults who have low levels of literacy can have benefits in challenging the social exclusion of these individuals.

As Aronowitz and Giroux (1988) note, what Hirsch fails to do is to consider why one particular literacy has become dominant within society, and, I would argue, to develop any notion of the active role that an individual can take within literacy

practices. Hirsch's argument assumes that the individual is passive, and he makes no place in his argument for the individual to question or clarify knowledge. The power relationships between different literacy practices are seen to be fixed – it is the individual who is expected to acquiesce to their demands through developing the appropriate knowledge, rather than seeing the power relationships as being in flux and open to challenge. Hirsch's notion of cultural literacy “bolsters a social order which is unequal and oppressive, one that demonizes the Other and translates difference into deviancy.” (Lankshear and McLaren 1993: 19). Aronowitz and Giroux (1988) relate Hirsch's notion of cultural literacy to functional literacy, both are ideological and result in further immersing those who are disadvantaged, leading them to accept as inevitable and to participate actively in the very social practices and relations that disadvantage them.

### **3.5.2 Freire and Critical Literacy**

In direct contrast to the passive role which Hirsch awards the individual within the literacy practice, Paulo Freire (1973) sees literacy as the condition for the individual to move from a passive position within the world into a “critically transitive consciousness”; literacy empowers people by rendering them active questioners of the social reality around them, a process referred to by the concept of *conscientização*. *Conscientização* is seen to represent the development of the awakening of critical consciousness, becoming literate is a necessary first step to being able to improve one's position within the world. By learning to be literate, one becomes able to change the world. Although using a radically different definition of literacy to that used by earlier writers, Freire risks the criticism that he has created a similar “great divide” between literates and non-literates based upon their possession of literacy

(Street 1995) Although Freire vehemently rejects a “banking” pedagogy, a teaching practice in which the educator is seen to deposit knowledge in the learner, there is, as Street has recognised, an element of this pedagogy within Freire’s theory, resulting from Freire’s notion that the literate individual is better equipped to challenge and critique society than the non-literate one. To an extent, Freire has commodified literacy as something that can be given to “illiterates” and which will transform their lives, no less than Goody and Watt claim that the advent of literacy transformed Western society.

Freire’s ideas will not be explored in detail in this thesis, as Barton points out: “In many ways Freire is starting from a different place from the other people mentioned so far; he has different aims, he is asking different questions and, crucially, underlying his approach is a different view of literacy.” (Barton 1994: 27) This brief discussion was intended to provide an introduction to the context of empowerment which is developed in the theoretical claims made by Lankshear and Gee, and is also relevant through providing some of the thinking which informed the first UK literacy campaign, which is discussed in detail in chapter four.

### **3.6 Critical, Cultural and Operational Literacies**

The arguments proposed by Colin Lankshear and Knobel (2003), Lankshear and O’Connor (1999), Lankshear (1997), and James Paul Gee (1997, 1996, 1991) can be seen to have their roots in the New Literacy Studies concept of literacy practices: from this position they initially develop the concept of “powerful literacy” (Gee 1996, Lankshear 1994), later refining this as the concept of “critical literacy” (Lankshear



1997). To understand their evolving argument, which holds substantial resonance for my own work, it is necessary to clarify some of the terminology used by these writers, although this terminology will not be adopted within the framework of this thesis. Gee (1997) begins by problematising the notion of literacy practices. We are, he claims, “different situated selves” (Gee 1997: xv): for example, I am, amongst other things, a research student, a cyclist in central London, and an English teacher. Each of these selves is, Gee argues, socially located in different Discourses. He capitalises Discourse to indicate that he is referring beyond the purely linguistic range of discourse: Gee’s Discourse includes the many different things which can constitute identity including clothes, behaviours, beliefs, vocabulary etc (1997: xv). Gee distinguishes the one primary Discourse one inherits through being born into it, from the many secondary Discourses which we acquire later in our lives (for example, school, university, work, or religion.) These Discourses are not neutral: “Discourses are intimately related to the distribution of social power and hierarchical structure in society, which is why they are always and everywhere ideological” (1996: 132). And these Discourses are not equal: some Discourses are more dominant than others, enabling greater access to social/material success in society.

Texts are one aspect of the coordination of the situated selves (1997: xvi) and, in the same way that our selves are multiple, so too are texts: they are situated and rendered meaningful through different Discourses. This argument seems plausible: if we return to the example of me standing alone in my kitchen with bike cables all over the floor then this presents quite a different Discourse to the revered copy of Zinn which stands behind the till in the local bike shop. Within the Discourse of the bike shop the copy of Zinn unlocks its meanings to the various cycle mechanics, whereas in the

Discourse of a research student about to be late for a meeting at university, the text released no meaning and acted as a hindrance instead. I would argue that literacy is something that we do with these texts to unlock their meaning, but Gee (1996) and Lankshear (1994) initially present a much wider notion of literacy: literacy is presented as intrinsic to the mastery of secondary Discourses, exceeding specific relationships with texts. Lankshear and Gee recognise power inequality existing between these literacies: in the same way that there are dominant and non-dominant Discourses, Gee and Lankshear argue that there are dominant and non-dominant literacies:

Having control over certain Discourses – and, hence, of their literacies – can result in greater acquisition of social goods (money, power, status) by those who enjoy this control; lacking control, or access to control, of these Discourses is a source of deprivation.

(Lankshear, 1994: 62)

These claims echo other findings in New Literacy Studies. Heath (1983) observed the success of middle class children, whose primary Discourse (to borrow Gee's terminology) had less conflict with the formal school-based literacy, they were more successful within school than children in Trackton or Roadville who were acculturated within a non-dominant Discourse. Sharing Heath's and others' concerns, Lankshear and Gee consider that the dominant Discourse has dominated studies of literacy and that attempts to decontextualise literacy from literacy practices have actually "quietly and indirectly smuggle[d] context and Discourses back in, often by tacitly assuming mainstream, school-based, middle-class or Dominant Discourses as

the only ‘real’ ones” (Gee 1997: xviii). This returns us to Street’s criticism of the elevation of essayist literacies to the top of the evolutionary pyramid.

Whilst I agree with the notion of dominant and non-dominant literacy practices, I am uncomfortable with the conceptual breadth that Gee and Lankshear associate with literacy in this early work. I am not arguing that the skills that I used in my earlier examples can be decontextualised from the literacy practice, and I would agree with Lankshear, Gee and other writers in New Literacy Studies that my literacy only exists through its relationship with the social practice of interacting with text, but I do identify a common thread through different literacy practices rather than assuming that each literacy practice is a different literacy. I have a resource of reading and writing tools that I can draw upon in different social situations. This notion of some kind of essence or resource is in tension with the earlier work from Lankshear and Gee – in fact, Lankshear states in 1993 that “literacy must not be seen as referring to something singular, like an essential technology, a specific skill or a universal phenomenon” (1993: xviii) – however a narrower notion of literacy seems to become encapsulated in their concept of “powerful literacy”. Whereas literacy practices are part of Discourse, both Lankshear and Gee present powerful literacy as a meta-language, a particular use of literacy, which somehow exists outside of Discourse: “a particular *use* of a Discourse (to critique other ones), not a particular Discourse” (Gee 1996: 144): powerful literacy means knowing more than how to operate successfully within a Discourse (Lankshear 1994: 66). I would argue that at this point in his development of this concept Lankshear is unable to articulate clearly what he means by ‘powerful literacy’, although he offers a much more controlled definition of discourse and proposes the new concept of a critical literacy in *Changing Literacies*

(1997) three years later. In relation to his argument in 1994, Lankshear suggests that 'powerful' literacy offers three modes of empowerment:

- Powerful literacy enhances the prospects of mastery and high level performance, thereby increasing potential access to social goods
- Powerful literacy enhances the possibilities for analysis, enabling one to see how skills and knowledges can be used in new ways and new directions.
- Powerful literacy is required to critique a Discourse and to seek to change its identity and effects on oneself and others.

(Lankshear 1994: 66)

Lankshear seems to be suggesting that powerful literacy is something that you do with text: a powerful tool with which one can challenge and change society. As such, this bears close resemblance to the claims made by Freire of the potential of literacy to change the world. Lankshear refines this concept in his book *Changing Literacies* (1997) where he proposes the concept of 'critical literacy': "'critical literacy' is not a name for some finite established entity. Rather, it implies more the idea that there are standards or criteria on the basis of which we may distinguish *critical* conceptions and practices of reading and writing and viewing, etc. from *non-critical* or *acritical* literacies." (1997: 42) As Gee and Lankshear argued above, literacy practices are closely tied up with Discourses which are inseparable from power relationships in society. These writers advocate developing critically literate readers to enable them "to detect and handle the inherently ideological dimension of literacy, and the role of literacy in enactments and productions of power." (1997: 46) Therefore, critical or powerful literacy become part of a wider concept of literacy.

Following the above theorisation, Lankshear and O'Connor summarise their definition of being literate as follows:

It marks the difference between merely being *socialized* into sets of skills, values, beliefs, and procedures and being able to make *judgments* about them from a perspective that identifies them for what they are (and are not) and recognizes alternative possibilities.

(Lankshear and O'Connor 1999: 33)

More prosaically but echoing the same premise, Harris states that “in the face of any text I can ignore it, accept it, challenge it.” (Harris 1993) It is in the later work of Lankshear (Lankshear and O'Connor 1999; Lankshear and Knobel 2003) that I find the most useful definition of literacy, cited in the 2003 text in relation to the work of B. Green (1998), which suggests that literacy comprises of the operational, the cultural and the critical:

The *operational* dimension focuses on the language aspect of literacy. It includes but also goes beyond competence with the tools, procedures, and techniques involved in being able to handle the written language system proficiently. It includes being able to read and write/key in a range of contexts in an appropriate and adequate manner. The *cultural* dimension involves competence with the meaning system of a social practice; knowing how to make and grasp meanings appropriately within the practice – in short, of understanding texts in relation to contexts.... The *critical* dimension involves awareness that all social practices, and thus all literacies, are socially constructed and ‘selective’... The critical dimension of literacy is the basis for ensuring that individuals are

not merely able to participate in some existing literacy and make meanings within it, but also that, in various ways, they are able to transform and actively produce it.

(Lankshear and Knobel 2003: 11)

If we return one final time to the three examples of recent literacy events in my life, I can recognise that I had the operational but not the cultural skills to be able to unlock all the meaning from *Zinn and the Art of Mountain Bike Maintenance*, I had the cultural and the operational skills to be able to read to my nephew, and I had the critical literacy skills to recognise the limitations of the courtroom form, although I did not use the situation to try and improve upon this. In contrast, my nephew has the cultural skills to interact with the Thomas the Tank Engine stories, my friend has the cultural knowledge to engage with Zinn, but both of these people lack the operational skills necessary to take a literate role within these activities. This moves us away from the inclusiveness of the earlier work of the New Literacy Studies, within which both my friend and my nephew would have been classed as taking a literate role within the events. This triumvirate concept of literacy also enables the possibility of incorporating some of the national curriculum and national standards, which form a central part of the new adult literacy strategy as operational aspects, into our concept of literacy; although, following the argument of Lankshear and O'Connor, there is the need to complement these operational skills with cultural knowledge and critical awareness. The concluding chapter of this thesis will argue that the strategy provides a set of tools to address the operational and that the practitioner needs the freedom to work with the learner to develop the other two.

This chapter has served to provide a review of literature on theories and concepts of literacy, thereby providing a conceptual foundation for the analysis of the strategy. The following two chapters also serve to provide foundations for analysis: chapter four provides the historical foundations, while chapter five provides the political and social context in which the strategy is situated.

#### **4.1 Introduction**

The Skills for Life adult literacy strategy is not the first national attempt to raise levels of adult literacy in England. The majority of teachers who were affected by the strategy during the time span of my case study had previous experience of teaching adult literacy; the examining bodies who worked on the new qualifications for adult literacy had worked on previous adult literacy qualifications; the national curriculum drew on pre-existing curricula; and the learning materials can be seen to carry textual echoes referring to back to previous pedagogy in this area. This chapter will detail the history of what had been happening in England from the Right to Read campaign in the early 1970s through to the start of my case study in 1997. The focus of this chapter, as with the thesis as a whole, will be upon events in England, although influences from other countries are referred to in places. I have divided the chronology of this chapter into four main periods:

1973 – 1976:	Campaigning
1976 – 1984:	Manoeuvring
1985 – 1991:	Disillusionment
1992 – 1997:	Formalisation

Each period of time is then divided into three further sections. The first section, “The Context of the Problem”, identifies reasons why adult literacy became, or did not become, a priority in each of these periods and relates this to broader social and political events and trends. The second section, “Initiatives”, describes the various initiatives intended to remedy the problem. The final section of each period,



“Measures and Evaluations”, examines the different ways in which the success and quality of the various initiatives was measured.

Different versions of history emerge from different sources, and this research draws from a variety of data including primary written sources from each period, written historical analyses looking back upon events, and my interviewees’ personal recollections. Sometimes these different voices complement one another, sometimes dissenting versions of the same events emerge. This chapter charts a journey through these sources: it does not intend to offer an exhaustive history of events in adult basic education, but rather intends to discuss the main events in this history and to consider the themes which will subsequently have relevance for the analysis of *Skills for Life*.

		THE CONTEXT OF THE PROBLEM	INITIATIVES	MEASURES AND EVALUATIONS
1973	Campaigning	Welfarist agenda Russell Report Est. 2 million illiterates Private Member’s Bill Release of £1 million funding	BAS conference Launch of <i>A Right to Read</i> BBC’s support and campaign Volunteer tutors	Aim – Short-term elimination of illiteracy.
1974		Deteriorating economic climate	Setting up of ALRA Wide-ranging liaison between policy and practice	Focus on development of teaching materials
1975		Limited funding available for adult education	<i>Write First Time</i> ALRA trainers’ kit	Charnley and Jones (1976)
1976				

Figure 4.1 Timeline of main events 1970s – 1996 (cont. overleaf)

		THE CONTEXT OF THE PROBLEM	INITIATIVES	MEASURES AND EVALUATIONS
1977	Short term manoeuvres	Ruskin speech linking education and economic investment	Federation of Worker Writers ALRA - further 2 years funding	Charnley and Jones (1979)
1978		ACACE Report <i>A Strategy for the Basic Education of Adults</i>	Adult Literacy Unit (ALU) BBC/NEC Wordpower MSC funding full time pre-TOPS courses	
1979				
1980			Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit (ALBSU)	
1981		Rising unemployment	ILEA piloting RSA Diploma for basic skills tutors	
1982		Ongoing budget cuts to education and limited funding available to adult education		
1983				
1984				
1985	Disillusion	Increasing discourse of vocationalism National Council for Vocational Qualifications set up	RaPAL set up	ALBSU/MSC funding Hamilton's work on NCDS data (self report) 1987 – 1989: research on assessment materials (ALBSU) ALBSU/Training Agency/BBC Basic Skills Accreditation Initiative ALBSU Quality Standards Award of the first Wordpower certificates
1986				
1987			Granada World In Action 'Starting from the Bottom'	
1988		Education Reform Act Development of TECs		
1989				
1990		Abolition of ILEA	International Year of Literacy	
1991		Ongoing development of open learning centres		
1991		<i>Education and Training for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century</i> (White Paper)		
1992	Formalisation	Further and Higher Education Act Schedule 2 / non-schedule 2 funding divide. Statutory requirement to provide adult literacy tuition	BSA Resource centre at IoE	Increasing range of accreditation packages
1993				
1994				
1995		School based national literacy project piloted in primary schools	BSA formed from ALBSU – cradle to grave approach	CLS research undertaken looking at correlations between literacy levels and other social factors
1996		First IALS survey carried out		

Figure 4.1 Timeline of main events 1970s - 1996

## 4.2 1973 – 1976: Campaigning voices

<b>The Context of the Problem</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Welfarist agenda</li> <li>• Russell Report</li> <li>• Release of £1 million funding for adult literacy provision</li> <li>• Pressure group politics</li> <li>• Deteriorating economic climate</li> <li>• Limited funding of adult education</li> </ul>
<b>Initiatives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• BAS conference and launch of <i>A Right to Read</i></li> <li>• Adult Literacy Resources all-party private members bill</li> <li>• BBC promotional campaign and education programmes</li> <li>• Formation of ALRA</li> <li>• <i>Write First Time</i></li> </ul>
<b>Measures and Evaluations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Short-term targets and investment aiming to eliminated illiteracy</li> <li>• No research evidence</li> <li>• Charnley and Jones (1976)</li> </ul>

Figure 4.2: Overview of the campaigning period

### 4.2.1 The Context of the Problem

Adult literacy was first identified as a national policy issue in the UK in the mid-1970s; prior to this there had been neither the widespread perception of a lack of literacy skills amongst adults, nor the level of provision necessary to rectify such a problem (Hamilton, Macrae et al. 2001: 24). Until 1974 any attempts to address adult literacy skills existed only at local levels and fifty percent of Local Education Authorities made no provision for basic skills (British Association of Settlements 1978). Although some local education authorities, charities, the army and prisons recognised and sought to address a lack of literacy skills in their institutions (Hamilton 1996), “where provision did exist, it was often based on an unenlightened attitude to adults, representing a curious philosophy, part school remedial department,

part special school.” (British Association of Settlements, 1978: 5) These attempts were local and received little publication or policy attention.

Although adult literacy had received little attention prior to the national campaign of 1974, adult education had achieved some visibility at policy level in March 1973 when a committee chaired by Sir Lionel Russell published a report on adult education. This report considered adult education to have potential benefits for those who were, what would be referred to do today as, socially excluded. Recommendations included the clarification of policy in this area by the Secretary of State for Education, the increase in expenditure for adult learning, and greater cooperation between LEAs and other agencies to provide for the “disadvantaged” and for those who were not participating in learning (Russell 1973). However, the report largely failed to provide the leadership or the vision to build a new beginning and the government did not fund the Report’s recommendations (Fieldhouse 1996: 64). Fieldhouse suggests that this was partly because of the deteriorating economic climate following the international oil crisis and partly because of the Treasury’s view that any extra funding for adult education had been swallowed up by the newly established Open University. The implementation of the Russell Report can also be seen to have been negatively affected by rapid changes of Secretaries of State for Education during this period of the mid-1970s which meant that there was no clear leadership to take forward policy. On a more positive note, the Russell report (1973) succeeded in refocusing adult education on the socially committed, political work done with disadvantaged groups (Fieldhouse 1996: 64). The adult literacy campaign was therefore launched at a time when policy interest had some focus on adult education for those who had previously missed out on education opportunities or who were disadvantaged, but there also

appeared to be few treasury funds to commit to this issue: the heart was perhaps more willing than the wallet.

The early 1970s were an era of widespread political activity based around the issues of gender, class and race. The interviewees for this research who had been involved in adult literacy during the 1970s talked about their wider political beliefs being intrinsic to their involvement in adult education. One interviewee who is still a practitioner in this area spoke of the belief held by practitioners that they could make the world a better place through education:

We were feminists and we were socialists, all the people that I can think of just about, and it was largely women – there were honourable exceptions like J\_\_ and T\_\_, but largely it was women and I think women who came together because we could have been social workers or something, we might have been revolutionaries, but we weren't.

(3Pr4)

Another person from this time, who is now involved more in the development of policy corroborated the previous statement:

And you have to remember that for some of us, as it were on the left of the adult literacy campaign of the 1970s, were also making very strong links with, what we called, social movements. We saw literacy, in a sense, as part of other social movements. Particularly the movements around working class writing and community publishing; about making visible voices from below, which in turn were linked to the development of oral history and the

development of labour history, and they in turn were linked to socialist feminism and, indeed, the teaching and learning were linked in some instances to thinking about feminism – having women only literacy groups, for example, having non-hierarchical approaches to group discussion and techniques of discussing issues which practitioners thought, I think, would help people to raise their own consciousness about why literacy problems.

(3Po8)

Whilst these political ideals seem to have been widespread at grassroots level, Brian Street (1997) also refers to political activity within institutions. In 1973, the Further Education Officers in the BBC were becoming aware that “illiteracy” was a problem facing a considerable minority of adults and proposed that the BBC should use its broadcasting and educational facilities to make a contribution to overcoming this problem. It is relevant that they saw illiteracy as a problem which affected the individual, and this contrasts with the dominant view during my case study that adult literacy levels presented a problem to society.

The sense of a moral agenda is reflected in the work of the British Association of Settlements (BAS). In November 1973, BAS organised a national conference, “Status Illiterate: Prospects Zero”, and the proceedings of this conference acted as the first step towards the publication of *A Right to Read* (British Association of Settlements 1974). Through the use of evidence relating to the ability levels of school leavers, BAS estimated that two million adults were functionally illiterate. The widespread promotion of BAS’s estimation of the extent of need was a major factor in the publication generating policy and public attention (ALBSU 1985). A parallel can be

observed here with the use of the IALS statistics to inform and motivate the Skills for Life strategy, and the use of statistics on adult literacy levels providing a catalyst to promote government action. As will be discussed later in chapter six, the use of statistics in this area can be interpreted as enactive, generating government and public attention to a perceived problem (Barton 2000). *A Right to Read* (1974) was a successful attempt to elevate literacy education onto the national political agenda for the first time: the first section of the text offers a range of narratives describing how low levels of literacy had affected the lives of “illiterate” individuals, and the second section outlines a structured policy for improving adult literacy levels. This first section was essentially descriptive and qualitative but was placed at the front of the text, the statistics were used to support the impact that these narratives had; this is quite different from more recent policy documents relating to the Skills for Life strategy, where statistics often precede more qualitative or descriptive data. In contrast to later policy documents, this document was written by practitioners and those at the grass-roots level, rather than being formulated by politicians and civil servants, and the authors assert their independence within the body of the text, “above all, it is a comprehensive policy not a piecemeal assortment of the changes and improvements we happen to think might most readily find ministerial approval.” (BAS 1974: 22). The BAS acted as a pressure group and successfully elicited a national response from the government: as Clare explains,

It was in fact an impressive bid for State finance, which mobilised a wide section of civil society to put pressure on the government: from the quasi-governmental BBC to the right thinking citizen there was a moral crusade mounted to establish the ability to read

as a right offered free of charge to every man and woman in the country.

(Clare 1985: 18)

Although BAS was the author of the policy document, it was not a sole campaigning voice. Around the same time as the BAS campaign, the BBC had allocated £1 million for a series of television and radio broadcasts drawing attention to the problem with adult literacy, and to fund the provision of some basic education programmes (Street 1997: 7; Limage 1993). Clare (1985) suggests that BAS and the BBC succeeded in awarding the whole project of adult literacy such enormous publicity that it could not be ignored at a policy level; “both national and local government were forced to make some sort of visible response.” (Clare 1985: 18) This promotion of policy through guaranteeing the issue public visibility is echoed in the use of the ‘Get On’ advertising campaign as part of the Skills for Life strategy to generate awareness of literacy problems in society.

BAS’s interest in adult literacy was essentially welfarist (Hamilton 1998): literacy was seen as a civic right necessary for a fulfilled life within our society, and BAS emphasised literacy as a means for the individual to have wider access to cultural and educational opportunities, and as a tool for democratic social change.

We believe that the power for social action depends on the ability to handle communications. In order to participate, to exercise certain rights, to choose between alternatives and to solve problems, people need certain basic skills: listening, talking, reading and writing.

(BAS 1974: 2)



This was a discourse of entitlement, encapsulated even in the title of the publication – a right to read. Street (1997) identifies the driving social attitudes of “paternalism and amateurism” within the campaign, and there was some concern that policy attention could not be maintained upon this area if a welfarist discourse dominated, “adult illiteracy appears to be in danger of becoming the trendy topic of 1974, taking the place of the environment, drugs, and other matters of intense but transitory attention among the ‘concerned’ section of the populace” (*Adult Education* 1974: 175).

#### **4.2.2 Initiatives**

The presentation of the BAS policy text to the government was complemented by the MP Christopher Price’s introduction of an all-party private member’s Adult Literacy Resources Bill on the same day (Mace 1979) leading to the Government announcing, within a month of the launch of *A Right to Read*, the release of £1 million of public funds to be spent upon a literacy campaign. But, whilst the original literacy campaign of the 1970s was the first time that the government had nationally addressed the issue of adult literacy, Hamilton (1996: 151) suggests that the policy commitment to the problem of literacy was not whole-hearted,

...the money that was released was a relatively small amount, slipped through in the margins of educational policy and seen as a temporary measure.

Mace also draws attention to the relative paucity of this initial grant, “the year the government found £1million for adult literacy, the capital expenditure on universities was £86 million” (Mace 1979: 13). A conversation recorded in *Write First Time* highlights the perceived injustice in the distribution of funds:

What's a million pounds compared to what the Universities get. I'm not saying they shouldn't, but one student gets a fortune spent on him, teaching in small groups and all the facilities, and the people who should get the resources are the people who need it most. And they are the people who got least in the past. All they get is one night a week.

(Write First Time 1978: 59)

Such a comparison reframes our perspective on the attention awarded to this campaign: whilst attention to the issue may seem impressive, the level of funding and commitment does not.

The publicity and promotion of the issue were considered to have been very effective. In their 1978 report on the development of the policy, BAS opined that the BBC programmes were largely successful: "the measure of their success lies in the number of adults who felt able to come forward for help" (British Association of Settlements 1978: 8) However, there is the need for balance between promotion and supply, and concerns were also expressed at the time that this campaign was not being sufficiently supported at the local level: Robinson observed gloomily that the BBC campaign was "doomed to fail unless it is geared in with provision on the ground wherever it succeeds in encouraging one illiterate person on the road to learning" (Robinson 1974: 231). It is not clear whether the lack of local provision was a consequence of a lack of funding reaching the providers, or due to the lack of an established infrastructure for delivery. These considerations have both been identified as priorities within the Skills for Life strategy.

The initial partnership between the BAS and the BBC was extended to include a broad range of other partners and, within this, there was a focus on welfare organisations,

A feature of the adult literacy campaign since 1975 has been its collaboration with other agencies. Such agencies have acted both as direct referral agencies for basic education as well as providing facilities through which basic education schemes are able to recruit students. Job Centres, Citizens Advice Bureaux as well as social services departments and libraries have provided support for recruitment. But so too have Post Offices, shops, local firms, trade unions and women's organisations.

(ALBSU 1985: 18)

In 1975, the National Institute of Adult Education (NIAE), a government-funded organisation, was commissioned by the government to set up an Adult Literacy Resource Agency (ALRA) for one year to help local authorities and voluntary organisations to establish adult literacy provision which would tie in with the BBC's adult literacy initiative, and a further two years of funding was agreed by central government in early 1976, extending ALRA's remit to establish an advisory service, sponsor and provide training programmes for practitioners, and to produce a limited amount of teaching and learning materials (ALBSU 1985).

The focus of both Christopher Price's Bill and the new agency was resources. There were few resources available in this area, the majority had been borrowed from school-based remedial contexts, rather than being designed specifically for adult learners. The BBC produced some resources that could be used by the learner as an

accompaniment to the BBC series *On the Move*. However these materials were limited in scope and range, and the interviewees who had been practitioners at this time suggested that adult beginning readers soon exhausted their supply of suitable reading materials. With this problem in mind Sue Shrapnel suggested, in *Adult Education* (1974 47/4), the idea of a news-based periodical paper to be circulated through teaching schemes. In time this evolved into *Write First Time*, a publication consisting of students' own writing which will be discussed in the next section of this chapter. As well as the lack of resources in this area, there was also a paucity of research – both on the extent and consequences of the problem, and on the most effective pedagogical approach for adult learners. In interview, one researcher talked in detail about how there was no existing research which directly focused upon adult literacy in the UK: “adult literacy education was not even a field of practice at that time, it was just being defined... and the idea that there would be any academic research area that was called that – well, no-one had started thinking about that at all” (2Ac2), and in *A Right to Read*, the BAS stated the need for research to be developed in this area. Brooks et al (2000) claim that the first national survey of any aspect of adult basic skills in Britain took place in 1972, but further investigation shows that this survey was not disseminated until an article in the 1980s (Rodgers 1986). Certainly BAS seemed unaware of this survey during their involvement in this area. Although *Write First Time* and other examples of student writing were developed in line with the theories of critical literacy which were being developed by Freire and his contemporaries in South America, and although my interviewees suggested that many tutors were aware of these theories, the radical notions of literacy presented by Freire and his contemporaries did not find an audience within government policy. The policy

concept of literacy was mainly informed by school-based models of reading and writing, and this has similarities with the current Skills for Life strategy.

Fifty-thousand volunteer tutors were recruited as a result of the *Right to Read* campaign, but this workforce were seen by BAS as a temporary measure necessary to get the campaign started before the local education authorities were up to speed on provision (BSA 1974). Whilst “the contribution of volunteers to adult literacy provision in this first decade was unquantifiable” (ALBSU 1985: 12), concerns about this situation were also voiced in my interviews by some individuals who were practitioners or coordinators of provision at this time: “we felt the need to reduce the number of people who were volunteers” (1Pr1). BAS, in particular, felt at this time that the amount of provision needed to be increased, but that this should not be allowed to happen at the “expense of quality” (British Association of Settlements 1978: 11). One consequence of using volunteers was that adult basic education appeared less important than other areas of education, which had a professional teaching force. Another issue was that these volunteers received little training in how to teach adult literacy and the majority were not trained teachers. As two of my interviewees explained, there was the sense that by virtue of being literate oneself, one would be able to teach others to become literate, a dubious pedagogic principle encapsulated by one interviewee’s recollection “we have all met literacy teachers in the 70s who read Tolstoy for breakfast as it were but were hopeless at teaching students” (1Pr1). The level of teacher training was erratic. ALRA published a Trainers’ Kit which had been produced by BAS, and the BBC also produced materials to help tutors to deliver course content, but there had been no systematic research on how adults best developed their literacy skills (Brooks et al 2000). No research had

been carried out in this area, and there was no clear definition of what was meant by literacy. Therefore, ideas were borrowed from the school remedial context and the critical literacy practices that were being developed in South America. The field was one of trial and error, and the management, coordination and training of volunteers varied across different local authorities. The theme of professionalizing the workforce can still be seen as a major theme of the Skills for Life strategy.

#### **4.2.3 Measures and Evaluations**

As part of the non-broadcast element of the programme, a research project was developed by NIAE to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the campaign through unstructured interviews with tutors and students and visits to a number of literacy programs (Street 1997). Charnley and Jones (1979) first published this research in 1978, voicing the key argument that the essential feature for the success of the campaign was the improvement in the self-confidence of learners, rather than their mastery of literacy skills (Street 1997). The ethos of this research suggested that the strategy could not be evaluated by measuring observable outputs. The problem of functional illiteracy was seen as something that could be alleviated within a short period of time: *A Right to Read* recommended that a target was set for 1985 with the total elimination of functional illiteracy being aimed for at a date slightly further in the future (BAS 1974). The allocated money was, therefore, seen as a one-off commitment to solving this problem and, in line with this thinking, the political campaign that ensued was considered by the government to be short-term, addressing a problem that could be quickly remedied. The benefits of hindsight make this short-term approach appear to be naïve but this continues to pervade policy thinking around adult literacy through until the late 1980s.

### 4.3 1976 – 1984: Manoeuvrings

<p><b>The Context of the Problem</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ruskin speech linking education and economic investment</li> <li>• ACACE Report: <i>A Strategy for the Basic Education of Adults</i></li> <li>• Rising unemployment</li> <li>• Budget cuts</li> <li>• Limited funding of adult education</li> </ul>
<p><b>Initiatives</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ALRA to ALU to ALBSU</li> <li>• MSC pre-TOPS funding</li> <li>• ILEA piloting staff training</li> <li>• Conflict between ALBSU and WFT</li> </ul>
<p><b>Measures and Evaluations</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Charnley and Jones (1978, 1979)</li> </ul>

Figure 4.3: Overview of the manoeuvring period

#### 4.3.1 The Context of the Problem

Adult education covers many things and by the late 1970s focus had shifted from adult basic skills; for example, *Adult Education* ran very few articles on adult literacy by the early 1980s: in 1982 only three references are made to adult literacy or basic skills throughout the year, and one of these is in reference to international education. The policy rationale of adult education can be observed to have gradually changed from the welfarist arguments of the original literacy campaign (Hamilton 1996) to more economic considerations. Following Callaghan’s speech at Ruskin College in 1976, the links between education and economic investment become more explicit.

... [A] very different policy rationale was in ascendance: that of economic efficiency, rather than the right to read... Through the 1980s, public discussions about literacy increasingly invoked the vocational discourse of human resource investment. Talk was of literacy skills, rather than wider knowledge or practices; training rather than education; and literacy and numeracy were linked into

wider discourses about national training and economic needs and the development of functional competencies.

(Hamilton 1996: 151)

In part these connections can be related to the rising unemployment figures, in 1981 ALBSU refers to the two and half million unemployed and comments that “with the number of unskilled jobs disappearing at a rapid rate throughout Western Europe, those most educationally disadvantaged will find it increasingly difficult to get work in a particularly competitive job market.” (ALBSU 5, April 1981). There are two separate issues here: one is the matter of rising unemployment, the other is the new demands of the labour market. Rising unemployment figures can be seen to have acted as a double-edged sword on government interest in adult literacy: focussing attention on the need for individuals to be employable whilst also reducing the amount of available spending that the government was able to commit to this area. Changes in the labour market meant that there were fewer jobs available for people who had low levels of literacy. However, the notion that a lack of literacy skills represented an actual cost to the state through a lack of productivity is not yet in evidence within this debate.

#### **4.3.2 Initiatives**

In keeping with the original campaign’s sense that adult literacy problems could be quickly remedied, government funding continued to be short-term and often erratic through the 1980s, denying the opportunity for large-scale initiatives in this field. Central government funding cuts “damaged already fragile provision immeasurably” (ALBSU 1985: 2). The perceived effects of this lack of funding were seen to be drastic: whilst the original campaign of the 1970s had set out the objective for free



provision for any adult, by the mid-1980s there were no national guidelines ensuring a consistent provision across geographical areas.

It is true to say the possibilities for the basic education student to receive tuition still depend to some extent on where he or she lives and the amount of money allocated for adult literacy and basic education shows enormous discrepancies.

(ALBSU 1985: 26)

The local authorities had a degree of autonomy in deciding how to fund adult literacy courses, or if in fact to make any funding provision for adult literacy: as local education budgets were cut, adult basic education was often affected. Course fees were decided at a local level and adult literacy learners paid different amounts for tuition in different areas.

In contrast with LEA provision, the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) had been set up by the government to fund employment-related training specifically, and this was very well funded compared with other adult education agencies. The MSC provided funding for full-time adult literacy and numeracy courses which were intended for people who could not pass the entry tests for vocational training for work courses called TOPS, or who were unable to get or to keep a job due to their problems with reading, writing and mathematics. These were intensive full-time courses and the students who attended were provided with an allowance in addition to their other state benefits. This was the first time, and has been the only time, that full-time basic skills courses were funded (Hamilton 1996). From a practitioner's perspective these courses provided the financial opportunity to deliver adult literacy education, an opportunity that would not otherwise be available. But, a certain level of skills was necessary to

undertake this type of course which meant that those with the greatest need, in terms of their level of literacy, were excluded. The MSC remit also had repercussions for an understanding of what adult literacy was: the MSC was interested in training adults for employment, it was not supporting a welfarist agenda. It may have been possible for practitioners to subvert this to an extent, one practitioner recalled delivering courses that were funded by MSC but which, this interviewee explained to me with a wry smile, weren't "necessarily what the MSC wanted" (2Pr2). This interviewee could not remember these courses being inspected or controlled in any way other than the MSC having a cursory look at the course syllabus, which itself had been designed with the intent of achieving MSC funding rather than being representative of the course content. Although one can take a Machiavellian view on this and assume that it does not matter where the money comes from as long as it enables the provision of adult literacy, the consequences of the MSC funding these courses was also to make an explicit link between literacy and employability, a link that becomes increasingly emphasised over the following decades.

Short-term funding and a limited remit also plagued the central agency for adult literacy. The reforming of ALRA as the Adult Literacy Unit (ALU) in 1978 was seen to be "an interim arrangement to carry through until the concepts, structures and functions of a comprehensive adult basic education service can be defined" (Adult Education, 50/6). Perhaps the assumption that this area of policy would be developed in the near future was the reason for the short-term investment during this period. At the policy level there is the sense of limbo between the commitment to the original campaign and some sense of future action. In 1980, ALU was again reformed as the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit (ALBSU). Each of these transformations was

accompanied by a shifting remit, “it began as a resource agency, but became more of a monitoring and quality control body” (Hamilton 1996: 152). The remit had placed a focus on adult literacy in terms of those seeking work, but in 1982 this was slightly changed to deal more directly with the needs of those who had no immediate prospect of work. It was not until 1984 that the government placed ALBSU onto a three-year rolling contract to enable them to make longer-term aims, a situation which still exists for their daughter organisation, the Basic Skills Agency (BSA).

Whilst the policy agenda can be seen to be changing, the repercussions of this at the level of the practitioner take a little longer to emerge: the period of the early 1980s can be interpreted either as a golden era within the history of adult literacy teaching or as a dark age. On the positive side, the pedagogical field of adult literacy was evolving and new teaching materials were being created. One practitioner reminisced, “things got really good by the early 1980s” (1Pr1); but in sharp contrast, a civil servant stated, “I think the movement lost steam... about 1978 when the government lost interest... there was no accountability and no-one had any idea whether anybody learnt anything or not. And I think probably most people didn’t.” (1Po4) Within these opposing perspectives there is the strong sense of differing experiences amongst contemporaries: whilst practitioners at the grassroots level may have been enjoying their chance to develop this new educational field, at the policy or national levels this optimism and sense of progress were lacking:

Almost no publicity, waiting lists, lack of choice over tuition, few new materials, absence of training opportunities (in some areas even initial training for volunteers has been abandoned) are all examples of the way quality suffers when resources are drastically

reduced and even more seriously the damage suffered often cannot be repaired at a later date.

(ALBSU 1982)

In January 1977 the BBC launched a new series called WordPower, aimed at adult literacy learners and supported by a course text available from the National Extension College (NEC). In contrast to this formal material written by professionals, other publications aimed to publish students' own writings as a resource. One well-publicised example of this was the *Write First Time* publication.

*Write First Time* began as an idea in reading matter. It took an outsider, at the founding meeting when we were arguing over a title for the paper, to tell us that what we were really trying to make was something to do with writing.

(Mace 1979: 87)

This marks a shift in pedagogic focus from a right to read to a right to write, and can be seen to be tied up with wider political agendas of power and social class:

When people began to take seriously the persistence of adult reading and writing problems in this country, it became clear very soon to some of us that there was no fundamental work to be done on this unless we worked at the same time on who owns and controls the word.

(Write First Time 1978: 4)

Other student publications followed *Write First Time*, and many of these collaborative enterprises were members of the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers, which was formed in 1976. Inherent within the development of these student materials was a pedagogy which focused on the empowerment of the student:

one practitioner from this time talked about the need “to say actually people have a right to be able to write and express themselves” (1Pr1). There were tensions between the different concepts of adult literacy which began to emerge. Whilst some practitioners and learners were demonstrating a commitment to developing students’ writing skills and their social awareness through media such as *Write First Time*, the central resource agency held a depoliticised notion of adult literacy, and there was a sense of political dissent between the practitioners who were involved in community publishing, with their associated notions of learner empowerment, and the government-funded agency. Initially *Write First Time* was partly funded by the national agency, but as the content of *Write First Time* was perceived to become increasingly political, funding difficulties arose between the newspaper’s managing committee and ALBSU. The newspaper’s circulation ended in 1984, “killed off by politically inspired funding cuts” (Thomson 1990: 6). Mention of this event is omitted from the ALBSU newsletters from this period, and this is pertinent to the claim made in several interviews that ALBSU’s perspective did not always reflect the wider experiences of the adult basic education field.

The Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) stands out during this period because of its aims to develop pedagogy and practice through a staff training programme: they piloted the RSA Diploma in Teaching and Learning in Adult Basic Education from the mid-1970s and, until the late 1980s, this remained the only nationally accredited form of training for people involved in post-school literacy (RaPAL Spring 1990). But, whilst resources were developed in this decade, and whilst research in this area can be seen to be emerging, there continued to be a lack of professional training and development for many adult literacy tutors.

### **4.3.3 Measures and Evaluations**

Adult literacy was still a relatively new area of adult education and Marriott observed in 1979 that “the British adult literacy movement found little assistance in existing educational theory and developed too quickly to acquire its own explicit and generally agreed principles of assessment.” (Marriott 1979: 68) Conflicting concepts of literacy had begun to emerge during this period: some, such as the MSC, were focusing on discrete reading and writing skills; some, such as *Write First Time*, were embracing concepts of critical literacy and social empowerment. Outside of the funding of the national agency it is difficult to gain a sense of policy intentions on adult literacy during this era. One civil servant suggested, “I don’t think the Department [of Education and Science] had a strategy at all, it was keep on with the good works, but there was no sense of... having targets or things like that.” (1Po4) In contrast with the lack of interest in adult literacy in the UK, MPs seem to have paid greater attention to adult literacy as an international problem: the British Committee on Literacy arose in the 1980s through MPs’ interest in Britain’s contribution to literacy work overseas. This appears to have had no impact on adult literacy in the UK.

Throughout the 1970s and the early 1980s there was no real sense of quality control within adult education, and particularly in the field of adult literacy. Whilst there was a movement away from one-to-one tuition with volunteers, and a movement towards paid teachers, there was little inspection (some interviewees claimed never to have been inspected prior to the 1992 FHE Act, others had vague memories of having LEA inspectors in their classrooms once or twice in twenty years or so of teaching). One of these interviewees, a practitioner during this period who is now a key policy player,

explained how the discourses of quality control and accountability simply weren't in evidence during these periods:

What there was in the 1970s was commitment, good will, a sense of outrage that this problem existed in our society, and a strong sense of the need to get.... Lots of arguments about the best teaching approaches: phonics versus language experience versus reading for meaning. There were debates, and the BSA's predecessors were trying to get some shape into it. But they wouldn't have used the word 'quality'.

(3Po8)

Charnley and Jones undertook Government-funded research to evaluate success in adult literacy (Charnley and Jones 1979: 32). They write substantially regarding the problems of any attempt to measure "literacy", and conclude that:

The measure of his (sic) success must start with his intentions, or expressive objectives, and work within his perceptions of the adaptations he is required to make, rather than through the application of formal and external standards.

#### 4.4 1985 – 1991: Disillusionment

<p><b>The Context of the Problem</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing discourse of vocationalism</li> <li>• Introduction of NCVQ</li> <li>• 1988 Education Reform Act – introduction of national curriculum in schools</li> <li>• Abolition of ILEA</li> <li>• White Paper: <i>Education and Training for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Initiatives</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• RaPAL</li> <li>• Granada World In Action Programme on adult literacy</li> <li>• 1990 International Year of Literacy</li> <li>• Open Learning Centres</li> <li>• Wordpower</li> </ul>
<p><b>Measures and Evaluations</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ALBSU research on assessment materials</li> <li>• ALBSU/Training Agency/BBC Basic Skills Accreditation Initiative</li> <li>• ALBSU Quality Standards</li> </ul>

Figure 4.4: Overview of the disillusionment period

##### 4.4.1 The Context of the Problem

Fieldhouse (1996: 68) argues that the increasing emphasis on vocationalism throughout the 1980s

... led adult education in two complementary directions: into training and retraining (for the unemployed and for those in work) and into accreditation, qualifications and awards which would enable individuals to utilise their learning in practical ways, which would be beneficial to the economy. Economic revival and wealth generation rather than social improvement became the major driving force.

Both of these themes are in evidence in terms of adult literacy and it is worth considering how the changing policyscapes contributed to this agenda. Research had shown that UK performed poorly in international comparisons of skills levels, and



Gilbert Jessup claimed that the majority of people were operating below their potential in both employment and their wider lives (Jessup 1991). In 1985, the government set up a review of Britain's vocational qualifications and the subsequent report called for the creation of a national framework of occupations standards-based qualifications, which were to reflect ability to perform the occupation ('competence') rather than completion of a course of training ('time-serving'). Based on these recommendations, the government set up the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) in 1986. Similarly, the 1991 White Paper *Education and Training for the Twenty-First Century* voiced concern over unaccredited provision. In turn this led to the Further and Higher Education Bill, subsequently passed as the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act.

The 1988 White Paper *Employment in the 1990s* proposed the creation of regional training and enterprise councils (TECs) which shifted control for training from educationalists to employers, who dominated the TECs (Fieldhouse 1996: 70). Addressing the 1990 ALBSU conference, Sir Brian Wolfson, chair of the National Training Taskforce, stated

Employers should give priority to literacy and basic skills because they are the foundations of occupational competency.

(ALBSU 1990)

This comment marks a depersonalisation from focusing on the benefits that literacy holds for the individual, a focus which pervaded the earlier BAS campaign, to suggesting that improving literacy holds a wider agenda of benefits to the employer. Policy events around adult literacy have shifted from the space of a more liberal adult education agenda to being driven from an employment agenda. At policy level,

literacy was now seen within an employment framework. Literacy increasingly moved into the remit of employment training and alternative provision of literacy courses through local authorities continued to be under attack through funding cuts. Many of the people I interviewed for this research were involved in adult literacy in the 1970s and 1980s. Several commented on how the “zeitgeist” changed during this period, moving away from the pressure group politics and concerns with class, race, gender and so forth which had dominated their thinking in the 1970s. The mid-1980s marked the second term of government for the Margaret Thatcher-led Conservative party and the end of this previous “zeitgeist” can, perhaps, be symbolised by the abolition of the ILEA, which had been committed to many of these radical political agendas and whose abolition was introduced within the 1988 Education Reform Act. The abolition of ILEA can be seen to signify the removal of power from alternative forms of education provision, and was particularly damaging for adult literacy provision and development (Fieldhouse et al 1999: 96). ILEA had promoted an active campaign against illiteracy, setting up the Language and Literacy Unit as a focus for advisory and development work in this area. And the abolition of ILEA was accompanied by drastic funding cuts for education provision in London (Payne 1991) Local authorities were also hit by funding cuts as a consequence of the introduction of the community charge and then the poll tax during this period.

The National Child Development Survey (NCDS) data, which provided detailed information on children born within one week in 1958 was recognised as a valuable resource for research in this area during this period, marking a shift from looking at individual learner experiences to looking for patterns in large-scale quantitative data. The first analysis of this data regarding adult literacy was carried out jointly by

ALBSU and the National Children's Bureau (Simonite 1983). Mary Hamilton then proposed a research project to the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) and received a year's funding to carry out further research on these results. ALBSU was the steering group for both projects and held responsibility for the publication of the final research reports (Hamilton 1987). This marks the first in a long line of ALBSU (and later BSA) publications of NCDS research. In contrast with the later analysis of this data by Bynner et al (1994, 1997), these first two reports were based on self-report rather than being attempts to measure objectively the literacy abilities of respondents (Bynner 1997). These reports will be discussed in more detail in chapter six on the problems of adult literacy.

#### **4.4.2 Initiatives**

Improvements in the provision and delivery of basic skills were slow, if existing at all, through the early 1990s and several interviewees voiced their sense of frustration with this period of history. During our interview, one practitioner was particularly bitter regarding the "lost opportunity" of the International Year of Literacy in England and placed blame upon ALBSU,

I know they did a huge good work in campaigning for the place of basic skills in local authority agendas and in doing their kite-marking they were saying quality means small groups and that was good stuff that they were doing. But 1990 felt a bit of an opportunity missed to be honest.

(1Pr1)

As a government-funded agency, the role that ALBSU could take in an UNESCO initiative was restricted by the UK's exit from UNESCO membership, but the impetus of the earlier campaign and the enthusiasm of some practitioners' memories of the 1980s does seem to become lost in the 1990s. Both Herrington and Moss and ALBSU published articles during this time which indicated the fragmentation of adult literacy provision: the area is considered to be under-resourced, under-funded, and "many boroughs seem to be moving towards an isolated and marginalized service". (Herrington and Moss 1991: 11)

In 1991, ALBSU published 'standards' to describe the expected competences of basic skills tutors, followed in 1992 by their 'Quality Standards for Basic Skills Programmes' that set out what ALBSU believed every basic skills student should be entitled to when they joined a programme. These were intended to map out the minimum standards and to offer a means of combating the lack of consistency in delivering courses in different locations. Hamilton (1996) suggests that ALBSU took an increasingly tight control of the training and accreditation of adult basic skills tutors during this time, although a professional career structure for many adult literacy tutors was still lacking, in part due to their part-time and piecemeal status. Tutors' experiences were not the same across the country, for example in London, ILEA developed a professional development programme and ensured that part-time tutors would be paid to attend these courses. Hand-in-hand with attempts to professionalise practice through the provision of training and standards, ALBSU recognised "there is a need, now recognised by practitioners, for the body of knowledge and experience developed over ten years in adult literacy and basic skills work to be made more explicit by research work." (ALBSU 1985: 34)

During this period, ALBSU recognised the importance of focusing media attention onto the field of adult literacy as a means of generating support for this work. Through the editorial of their newsletter, they explain the importance of careful and conscious image building.

We know that publicity needs to be continuous rather than just once a year, of high quality and professionally produced... Moreover, as well as using imaginative methods to recruit students, basic education, both locally and nationally, has recognised that informing decision-makers and the public in general is crucial if we are to gain and maintain support for our work.

(ALBSU 1986: editorial)

In 1987 there was a sudden upsurge of media interest in adult literacy, directly related to the Granada World in Action programme 'Starting from the Bottom.' This programme was based on adult literacy in Rochdale, but attracted substantial national interest. Many new referrals to adult literacy programmes followed this publicity (RAPAL Spring 1997). It is worth considering why the media decided to award substantial attention at this time. There had been a lapse of interest in the area of adult literacy since the early 1970s, so this enabled the issue to be presented as new and shocking. Additionally, evidence was being gathered through the new research projects (Simonite 1983, reports in the RaPAL bulletin, and the ongoing research of Mary Hamilton) which could be used by the media to inform their stories. However, unlike relationships with the media in the late 1990s, there is no sense that practitioners or the national agency were in any way in control of releasing these stories to the media. It is also of interest to note that despite this upsurge in media

interest and the promotion of a literacy problem, no response was made at a policy level.

The lack of existing research in this area had inspired the first conference on Research and Practice in Adult Literacy, which was held at Lancaster University in June 1984 and was rapidly followed up by a second conference in February 1985. This meeting of practitioners and interested academics led to a collective of researchers and practitioners, calling themselves RaPAL (referring to the name of the original conference) and this collective published a regular bulletin, maintained a network of communication between practitioners and researchers, and encouraged practitioners to become involved in research. One of the drivers behind this collective was the realisation that “the British ABE movement was rooted in a strong practical tradition that was slow to theorise or make links with other fields.” (Hamilton 1996: 157): the lack of links between higher education (HE) and practice meant that the academic work which had begun exploring and developing different conceptions of literacy (for example, Street 1985; Heath 1983) had made little impact upon practice. The RaPAL bulletin of events is useful from a historical research perspective because it often offers an alternative narrative of events in the field of adult literacy. As several practitioners comment at the first RAPAL conference,

The only national newsletter is run by ALBSU and, naturally enough, primarily reports ALBSU projects: “it is very much a show-case for literacy’, ‘it works from the top-down and only tells us of the successes.’

(Hamilton and Barton 1985: 13)

In contrast with the ALBSU newsletter, the RaPAL bulletin offers a more critical response to events from the late 1980s onwards. RaPAL also presents an ideological model of literacy, focusing on social practice accounts of literacy rather than a more autonomous skills-led model (this has been discussed in detail in chapter three). RaPAL were keen to challenge to assumption that school-based essayist models of literacy were inherently of more value than other forms of literacy.

#### **4.4.3 Measures and Evaluations**

As part of the movement of adult education towards accreditation and employability (as discussed in the previous section), ALBSU worked with the Training Agency (previously MSC) and the BBC to launch the Basic Skills Accreditation Initiative (BSAI). The primary function of this initiative was to enable people who were improving their basic skills to gain a qualification which would be recognised by employers and educationalists alike (Hillier 1991). From 1987 – 1989, ALBSU sponsored a two-year research project with Nottingham University to develop materials for the assessment of progress in adult literacy and this led to the first WordPower certificates being awarded in mid-1990s. The qualifications were mapped to the attainment targets in the English national curriculum as well as providing continuity with other qualifications within the National Vocational Qualifications Framework. Hillier (1991) suggested that this initiative has also been influenced by “recent moves to introduce a way of recording achievement in the school system, through records of achievement and continuous assessment, rather than judging two years’ work on the basis of one three-hour examination.” (Hillier 1991: 72)

The benefits of the WordPower certificate were expected to include a measure of a student's literacy ability which would be recognised by an employer, and to provide a clear syllabus, a common framework for adult literacy teaching, and resources for teaching in adult literacy in an area where traditionally there were few specialised resources. However, the introduction of an accreditation package into this area of education was not straightforward. Eldred (2000) recalls that "questions were raised about the vocationalisation of the curriculum for learners" (2000: 3), and Hillier (1991) is critical of the ways in which this initiative was developed with little consultation with existing tutors, "it had been introduced to us as practitioners and subsequently to the students because it was a good thing. When questioned, the rationale broke down drastically" (Hillier 1991: 74). The BSAI had an impact upon the ways in which adult literacy courses were funded: Hamilton suggests that these qualifications were linked to strong concerns with cost effectiveness, accountability, and the control of programme outcomes.

As standardised accreditation and outcomes were increasingly demanded by funders, the tension between these and the original student-centred approaches to teaching and measuring progress became stronger. Perhaps more than anything else, this changed the face and feel of adult basic education.

(Hamilton 1996: 157)

Once qualifications existed it was easy to use them to justify funding of courses, but it became more difficult to justify the funding of courses which did not result in clear outcomes.



#### 4.5 1992 – 1997 Formalisation

<p><b>The Context of the Problem</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1992 FHE Act leading to Schedule 2/ non-Schedule 2 funding divide and statutory requirement for local authority to provide basic skills education</li> <li>• School based National Literacy Project</li> <li>• First IALS survey</li> </ul>
<p><b>Initiatives</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resource Centre at IoE</li> <li>• ALBSU – BSA</li> </ul>
<p><b>Measures and Evaluations</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inspection of basic skills provision</li> <li>• Range of correlative research emerging on factors relating to low literacy levels</li> </ul>

Figure 4.5: Overview of the formalisation period

##### 4.5.1 The Context of the Problem

The Further and Higher Education (FHE) Bill was implemented in 1992, resulting in significant changes in the funding and management of adult education. The Act meant that adult basic education (ABE) became a statutory form of educational provision in the UK for the first time (Hamilton 1996), satisfying one of the main recommendations of *A Right to Read* nearly twenty years after the original literacy campaign. The FHE Act served to resurrect the divide between vocational education, which was referred to as schedule 2 and became the responsibility of FE colleges, and non-vocational education, which was referred to as non-Schedule 2 and remained the local authority’s responsibility. This meant that LEAs had a much reduced role; Hamilton argues that this had an impact upon ABE because traditionally “local government was very influential on ABE” (Hamilton 1996: 153). In its consideration of the effects of the Act upon basic skills, ALBSU predicted that the main changes would be in the area of organisation, management and funding of basic skills. Hamilton (2001) suggests that the changes enforced by this Act caused adult basic education to “become more firmly established, increasingly formalised and less

rooted in the interests and experiences of people in communities” (Hamilton et al 2001: 25). The FHE Act located ABE within an educational rather than a community context, and ABE continues to be primarily located in education in the Skills for Life strategy.

On the international stage, interest in quantitative adult literacy research had also gathered momentum. The first International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) was carried out by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 1994, although the UK did not participate in this survey. In 1996, the IALS was carried out in the UK, marking the first national random probability sample of adults of working age in the UK. The test itself measured prose, document and number literacy through formal paper-based tests, using close-ended assessment which had its genesis in the US in the 1980s. The results for the UK were not published until after the election of the New Labour government and, therefore, the effects of the IALS are discussed in the next chapter; the implementation of this survey supplied the quantitative data which would later inform the construction of the problem of adult literacy during the late 1990s.

Government attention on literacy began to extend to a ‘cradle to grave’ approach and this was reflected in the change in the name and remit of the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit to the Basic Skills Agency.

We believe that this describes more clearly the area of education and training we are concerned with and will be easier to explain and remember for people who don’t know much about us. It also

reflects our extended remit agreed by the Government as part of our review.

(BSA Publication Spring 1995)

As part of the extension in remit, BSA became responsible for improving the quality of basic skills provision within compulsory education. This extension of the concept of basic skills is also demonstrated through the emergence of core skills, as defined by the NCVQ, in 1996 which mapped closely against concepts of adult literacy. These changes in thinking seem to suggest that literacy skills require more formative work and are part of a larger picture of education, rather than the quick-fix issue suggested by the 1970s campaign.

#### **4.5.2 Initiatives**

Jan Eldred (2000), looking back on this era, observed that through attempting to come to terms with the complexities of the funding methodology which had been introduced by the FHE Act, managers were driven by a desire to ensure that all courses carried qualifications which were eligible for FEFC funding, and this resulted in students undertaking tasks which linked to accreditation criteria. In keeping with the observations of several of my interviewees who were practitioners at this time, Eldred observes that attached to this was an increase in mechanistic materials and the sense of a competitive climate which meant that teachers were less likely to share their resources. In 1993, the Resource Centre was opened at the Institute of Education providing much greater access to the wide range of materials, both teaching and research, that had been built up across the previous two decades. On the one hand, this collection of resources seems to redress the lack of such materials at the time of the initial campaign, but a more cynical perspective might question the influence of the

BSA, who manages this collection, upon the choice of materials which are stored here. It is of note that the resources are primarily those published by the national agency: the archives of *Write First Time*, for example, are stored elsewhere.

The experiences of the previous decades also enabled new relationships to be built with the media. ALBSU began to use the media more successfully as a means of commanding national interest and government attention. The national agency regularly released aspects of research which were classed as newsworthy, often through the wide-spread dissemination of executive summaries of ALBSU/BSA sponsored research, and through national and local conferences. One particularly news-worthy area was the correlative studies of cohort data carried out by Bynner et al (for example, 1994, 1997). These received substantially more media attention than previous analyses of this survey data: whether this has been due to BSA's greater experience in the marketing of this research to the media, or whether due to external factors, is an area which may be worth exploring in more detail in the future.

#### **4.5.3 Measures and Evaluations**

Accreditation was a burgeoning area and a range of accreditation packages flourished. Moser's working group was critical about the range of possible qualifications that existed through the 1990s (Moser 1999), but some practitioners, with whom I discussed this, felt that the flexibility of some of these qualifications was a strength which has been lost in the development of a national test. For example, the Open College Networks offered a flexible form of accreditation which was achieved through units of study rather than through end-outcomes as was the case for Wordpower.

It is during the 1990s that academic research seems to flourish in this field. As has been discussed in chapter two, two distinct paradigms can be seen to emerge: one seeking objectively to measure aspects of functional literacy, one more interested in exploring the social practices that surround the use of literacy in people's lives. Whilst academics such as Brian Street, Mary Hamilton and David Barton contributed to understandings of literacy through their ethnographic work, ALBSU continued to fund and disseminate the analysis of longitudinal data by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies (Bynner 1994, 1997) In interview, John Bynner suggested that the CLS research was seen by ALBSU to be particularly useful because it provided real evidence of a need which could be used to generate government interest in this field: once they could provide real evidence of need, there was a lot of government interest in it (Bynner et al 2001). ALBSU/BSA also took an increasingly active role in funding small-scale practitioner-led research projects although these seemed to receive little dissemination. In interview with practitioners who were involved in this research, disappointment was expressed that the findings of these local research projects had not been developed or promoted in any way.

#### **4.6 Summary**

The processes of policy formation have undergone several changes over the past three decades. The original *Right to Read* campaign demonstrates a complete policy document being presented to, and largely adopted, by the government. This policy has its roots in the premise that adult literacy needs to be recognised as a national issue before it can be adequately addressed. This raising of public consciousness was largely due to the substantial involvement of the BBC and the widespread dissemination of descriptive data and statistics on the extent of the problem. This

policy was visionary and demanded the involvement of a wide range of partners, however the campaign can also be seen to have been short-term and static: it did not evolve because there was no sense of evaluation or long-term goals.

Following the original campaign, there seems to have been a loss of policy focus, although practitioners interviewed for this research suggested that in the period of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the field was inventive and dynamic. The lack of existing research meant that practitioners appeared to be able to experiment with resources and pedagogies, but the disparate events of different practices do not seem to be held together by any overarching strategy. There is no overall vision of how adult literacy can be effectively improved, and there is no sense of developing quality. In terms of whether things were being done effectively within a particular period, conflicting perspectives emerge between those involved in practice and those involved in policy. A sense of government strategy does seem to re-emerge in the late 1980s as literacy is focused upon as an issue of employability. This is a pared-down notion of literacy which focuses upon a narrow range of skills rather than seeing literacy as an inherent part of wider welfarist concerns. A sense of educational holism begins to emerge: qualifications fit into the larger national qualifications framework and there is a search for quality and standards to ensure consistency across practice. The 1990s continue these processes of standardisation and rationalisation. The metaphor of funnelling seems apt: over time the concept of literacy has become more functional and skills-based, narrowing down from the wider political concerns of the early 1970s. In chapter seven, consideration will be given to whether the introduction of a national test, national standards and a national curriculum are the natural endpoint of this funnelling process.

Other areas observed from this historical period which are pertinent to the following case study of the Skills for Life strategy are: the increased management of the media to generate awareness of the issue of adult literacy and to manipulate policy attention; attempts to professionalise those involved in teaching in this area; the relationship between what is happening at the national policy and the grassroots levels; and the roles of outcomes, accreditation and funding in shaping provision.

**Chapter 5: The Social and Political Context of the Skills for Life Strategy:  
From the election of New Labour to the first anniversary of *Skills for Life***

**5.1 Introduction**

The *Skills for Life* adult basic skills strategy has been developed during the first two terms of the New Labour government, becoming a priority of the government in its second term of office. The strategy coexists with a range of other initiatives and has been developed within a larger policyscape of events: this chapter details these broader political changes and initiatives. The chapter will be divided into three main periods which reflect the development of the *Skills for Life* strategy; within these periods the sections will be organised, as with chapter four, into (a) the context of the problem; (b) initiatives; and (c) measures and evaluations. The three main historical periods forming this chapter are:

May 1997 – March 1999:	Focus
April 1999 – May 2000:	Development
June 2000 – March 2002:	Action

Following my argument in the methodology chapter (chapter two), the analysis of the Skills for Life adult literacy strategy needs to be contextualised by an overview of the ‘policyscape’ (Ball 1994a): on an international level that includes the developing notions of the value of literacy, human capital theory and also the broader discourses on social inclusion and learning societies across different countries. The development of policy is also influenced by the existence of other contemporary national policies and the history of policy in that area: “the text and its readers and the context of response all have histories” (Ball 1994a: 17). The first section of each historical



period will focus on the political context. The second of the sections details the evolution of different initiatives within the adult literacy strategy, and the final section relates to the development of research and initiatives by which the strategy might be evaluated. This chapter is therefore providing the social and political foundations for the analysis of the strategy in the remainder of the thesis.

		THE CONTEXT OF THE PROBLEM	INITIATIVES	MEASURES AND EVALUATIONS
1997	Focus	School national literacy project Key skills Election of New Labour 'Third Way' thinking <i>Excellence in Schools</i> <i>The Learning Age</i>	Appointment of Moser working committee	CLS/BSA research and IALS survey
1998		School national literacy strategy UFI and learndirect		Participation target set by DfEE of 500,000 by 2002
1999		Social Exclusion Unit set up  Centre for the Wider Benefits of Learning set up	<i>A Fresh Start</i>	
2000	Development	National Skills Taskforce reports  <i>Learning to Succeed</i>  Learning and Skills Act	<i>Better Basic Skills</i> TIG and TIG-lets  Development of national standards; national curriculum; national test; and national teaching standards ABSSU set up	Development of national tests   BSA Taskforce report on basic skills
2001	Action	Setting up of LSCs	Consultation on Skills for Life	Achievement target of 750,000 by 2004 Pathfinder projects set up
2002			Publication of <i>Skills for Life</i> Training delivered to tutors	New inspection framework  QCA approval of qualifications NRDC Improving basic skills priority of LSCs

Table 5.1: Timeline of main events

## 5.2 April 1997 – March 1999: Focus

<p><b>The Context of the Problem</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School national literacy project</li> <li>• Key skills for 16 – 19 year olds on GNVQ programmes</li> <li>• Election of New Labour</li> <li>• “Third way” policies</li> <li>• Publication of <i>Excellence in Schools</i></li> <li>• Publication of <i>The Learning Age</i> (1998)</li> <li>• Ufi and Learndirect</li> <li>• Social Exclusion Unit set up</li> <li>• Centre for Wider Benefits of Learning set up</li> </ul>
<p><b>Initiatives</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appointment of Moser working group</li> <li>• <i>A Fresh Start</i> (1999)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Measures and Evaluations</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CLS/BSA correlative evidence</li> <li>• IALS survey</li> <li>• DfEE participation target of 500,000 adults improving their basic skills by 2002</li> </ul>

Table 5.2: Overview of the ‘Focus’ period

### 5.2.1 The Context of the Problem

The early 1990s had seen the discourse of education moving towards an increasingly skill- and employability-focused agenda, in which the value of adult basic education was primarily seen as an investment in human capital (Coffield 1997). The election of the New Labour government in the spring of 1997, by a huge majority and at a time of relative economic stability, marked a shift in the dominant political discourse: education also began to be seen as a potential solution to problems of social exclusion. The New Labour manifesto stated that the party had taken “a new and distinctive approach” in each area of policy: “one that differs from the solutions of old left and those of the Conservative right” (The Labour Party 1997). This new political approach became coined as the “third way”, although disagreement exists over what is meant by the “third way”. Tony Blair (1998) defined the Third Way as standing

“for a modernised social democracy, passionate in its commitment to social justice and the goals of the centre-left, but flexible, innovative and forward looking in the means to achieve them... it is a Third Way because it moves decisively beyond an Old Left preoccupied by state control, high taxes and producer interests; and a New Right treating public investment, and often the very notions of society and collective endeavour, as evils to be undone”(Blair 1998: 1). The Third Way can be understood in terms of political positioning, in terms of ideology, and in terms of methods of governance. In their analysis of New Labour’s educational policies in their first term of office, Ann Hodgson and Ken Spours (1999) argue that the third way is, in part, a pragmatic response to historical legacies of the Conservative marketised era and Labour’s ‘tax and spend’ image, and they anticipate that this political approach will evolve over time: this places the Third Way as a new political position evolving from two established locations. Ideologically, the Third Way contrasts with the previous seventeen years of Conservative rule due to its attention to issues of social exclusion (Hodgson and Spours 1999), although the 1997 manifesto commitment to the Conservative spending limits for the next two years restricted the implementation of new strategies. The Third Way also presents a collaborative discourse promoting linkages between government departments and statutory services, government at local, regional and national levels, and partnership with the private sector (Powell and Glendinning 2002). Politically, ideologically and collaboratively, the “third way” can be seen to have considerable influence upon the content of the Skills for Life strategy through its combination of the concerns of economic competitiveness and social inclusion, and through its proposed collaboration across many stakeholders. *A Fresh Start* (1999) dovetailed the New Labour commitment to economic competitiveness, to the development of lifelong learning, and to social inclusion. The report also adhered

to the notion of pan-Government initiatives by advising that policy in this area should extend to more than one government department.

New Labour's emphasis on restructuring the welfare state to ensure that money was better spent rather than committing more money to be spent, led to the distinction between 'good' welfare (such as education and health) and 'bad' welfare (such as social security) (Muschamp, Jamieson et al. 1999). The principle behind the welfare state similarly shifted from being a safety net in times of trouble, to becoming a springboard for economic opportunity: work was seen as the best route out of poverty and the purpose of the welfare state was seen to be the provision of opportunity rather than dependence. Whilst the State had responsibilities in supporting its citizens, this discourse also identified that citizens had responsibilities towards the state:

An inclusive society imposes duties on individuals and parents as well as on society as a whole. Promoting better state and civic support for individuals and parents as they meet their responsibilities is a critical contemporary challenge, cutting across our approach to education, welfare, and crime reduction.

(Blair 1998: 131)

This theme of responsibility can be seen in the shift between adult literacy being seen as the responsibility of the state, to being seen as the responsibility of the individual who is deemed to have a problem: this is discussed in chapter six.

Although Blair had stopped talking about a "stakeholder economy" before the 1997 election (Levitas 1998), the notion of a stakeholder economy where everyone has a stake in society and owes responsibilities to it (The Labour Party 1997) resonates

through the polycscape for welfare and education. Supporting this principle was the commitment to shifting the unemployed from welfare into work, not only as an economic imperative so that they contribute to public expenditure through paying taxes, but also as the basis for a greater social cohesion (Hodgson and Spours 1999: 11). New Labour saw economic efficiency and social justice as two sides of the same coin (Muschamp, Jamieson et al. 1999).

Education was the number one priority of New Labour's election manifesto, being defined as good for the individual and an economic necessity for the nation (The Labour Party 1997). New Labour identified people as the "country's greatest national asset" and education is seen as the means for them to achieve their potential (The Labour Party, 1997). As Josh Hillman explains:

Such statements were not just driven by the outcomes of focus groups, nor are they simply about the establishment of a hierarchy of policy objectives. Rather, they constitute an increasingly inevitable response to far-reaching and accelerating socio-economic changes in advanced capitalist societies: globalisation of the economy, increasingly rapid technological change, and the transformation of industrial structures and labour markets.

(Hillman 1998: 63)

Hodgson and Spours recognise that in part the focus on education is a response to global changes: "globalisation of the economy, increasingly rapid technological change and the transformation of labour markets have made education and training central instruments of economic and social policy-making" (1999: 5). These arguments are analysed in more detail in the next chapter which addresses why adult

literacy was seen to be a substantial policy problem. Education, both at the compulsory and post-compulsory levels, was also seen to be a social imperative for an inclusive and just society: the focus on education went hand in hand with the notions of social inclusion. The growing perception that education did not just benefit the individual, but had wider effects upon the community and society as a whole, can be evidenced from the DfEE's decision to set up a centre to research the wider benefits of learning in 1999 to provide further evidence on these connections. Writing in 1999, Ann Hodgson observed a movement, at policy level, towards seeing a greater connection between individuals and society as a whole (Hodgson 1999). This perspective on the interconnectedness of the individual with society is reinforced, in the light of adult literacy and numeracy, through the research by Bynner et al (Bynner 1997; 1998) which provided evidence that a lack of literacy skills was linked with the major factors of social exclusion, such as crime, unemployment and poor health.

A substantial amount of political attention was focused upon adult learning during the early years of New Labour's administration. Shortly after the 1997 election, the Kennedy report *Learning Works* (1997) was published and its social focus on widening participation in learning was echoed in the work of the National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning (NAGCELL). As Bob Fryer explained, prior to the publication of the first report from NAGCELL, "it is a particular wish of the Secretary of State, and a declared priority of the government, that the extension of lifelong learning should make a contribution to overcoming exclusion and disadvantage in our society" (Fryer 1997: 6), a priority that was recognised in the first report from NAGCELL, *Learning for the Twenty-First Century* (1997). As with most OECD countries, the UK had an increasing interest in

developing a learning society and the publication of the green paper, *The Learning Age*, in 1998 signalled the government's embrace of the concept of lifelong learning and developed the issues of social inclusion and widening participation as principles for future education policy (Wilson 1999). From the chronological distance awarded by writing this thesis, these events appear as close together but accounts from this time voice a sense of frustration that things were not progressing more swiftly and that *The Learning Age* was not published as a white paper: "there is a clear danger that the decision to scale down, from a white paper with green edges to a green paper, will be understood as a signal that the issues are less important." (Tuckett 1998: 3) The change in political leadership after 18 years of Conservative administration had brought with it the anticipation that a more liberal agenda would develop around adult education. Certainly reading practitioner publications from this time such as the RaPAL bulletin or *Adults Learning* suggests a sense of anticipation as people waited for things to develop on the political stage: in 1997, Sue Cara observes "the prospect of a white paper had brought a huge richness of interests prepared to be passionate about their belief in learning and ready to translate that passion into practical and not so practical proposals for action." (Cara 1997: 5) With the changing government, practitioners appear ready to re-engage with policy makers.

During this period the first results from the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) were published, showing that the UK population had substantial literacy problems. IALS was carried out across nine participating OECD countries, including the UK, for the first time in 1997. IALS was a large-scale international piece of quantitative research which tested respondents' abilities in prose, document and quantitative literacy and the evidence presented the shocking statistic that England

had as many as one in five adults lacking the literacy skills necessary to be wholly functional in society, and ranked the UK's performance in these literacy tests as second from the bottom in Europe. The results from this survey escalated the scale of the perceived problem of literacy in the UK and strongly suggested that there was a need to be addressed (Brooks et al 2000). In part the estimation of the problem was much greater than in previous surveys because the IALS levels did not correspond with the levels set by the BSA in earlier surveys: more people were seen to be below level one because the benchmark for level one was raised in the IALS survey (Brooks et al 2000). The IALS research findings were published around the same time as the publication of the research commissioned by the Basic Skills Agency and carried out by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies (CLS). This research suggested that there were substantial correlations between a lack of adult literacy skills and factors of social exclusion (Bynner 1997). Both of these surveys were widely publicised in the media. David Barton (2000) argues that this conscious promotion of stories or evidence to effect changes in perceptions or policies is "enactive". It is worth noting this connection at this point: adult literacy can be seen to have gained importance partly through the widespread enactive publication of evidence, and partly because it began to be seen as one of the causes of social exclusion, thereby straddling two of the main areas of policy interest for the New Labour government, that is education and social exclusion. These two aspects of the political context act as a catalyst, moving the issue of adult literacy up the policy agenda.

Several initiatives from this time can be seen to have had considerable influence on the adult literacy strategy: these are the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy in schools; the development of key skills; the establishment of a University for



Industry (Ufl); and the New Deal. In terms of the analysis of the strategy in later chapters, these relate to the context of influence in Bowe et al's triangle (which I have discussed in chapter two).

#### **5.2.1.1 National Literacy Strategy in Schools**

The National Literacy Strategy (NLS) for schools was implemented in 1998 following the success of the National Literacy Projects which had been set up by the previous government in its final year of office. The main strands of the NLS were the setting of national targets, the provision of a rigorous framework for the teaching of literacy and numeracy in schools which provided termly teaching objectives, and the structure for the literacy hour, the roll-out of a professional development programme for all primary school teachers, and a media campaign (Beard 2000). The NLS meant that literacy and numeracy were separated as discrete areas of the compulsory curriculum. Beard argues that the 'predisposing' influences of international data on primary school pupils' reading levels, school effectiveness, and literacy programmes with underachievers in the United States and Australia implied that literacy and numeracy teaching in England was in need of radical change. The NLS illustrates what Hodgson and Spours (1999) observe to be "the tough accountability-driven approach to [compulsory education] providers which brooks no opposition and has led to considerable antagonism from the teaching profession" (2). An important point to be made here is that Hodgson and Spours contrast this approach to the more voluntarist approach being taken to post-compulsory education in the first couple of years of New Labour's office: as the next two historical periods of this chapter demonstrate, the adult literacy strategy marks a shift towards the accountability-driven approach to post-compulsory education and away from voluntarism.

Pragmatically, while the changes caused by the national literacy and numeracy strategies may have been benefiting the school-aged population, it would have taken several generations of policy at this level to have an impact across the whole working population. Additionally, the economy was flourishing which suggests that the government had access to more funds to commit to this issue. The school strategy had a particularly strong influence on the development of the adult literacy strategy and, in part, this was due to Michael Barber, the main architect of the school strategy and an influential figure on the Moser working group. The context of influence relates not only to the policyscapes, but also to the presence of key figures who are involved in the generation of policy. Influence can also be attributed to the success of the national literacy strategy in schools: in an article for the Guardian newspaper, Blunkett stated “[w]e are determined now to apply the same drive to improving adult basic skills that we have introduced in our primary schools.” (Blunkett 2000); this suggested that the school’s literacy agenda was an area ripe for emulation or ‘policy borrowing’. It is doubtful that the adult literacy strategy would have developed as closely to the school strategy if it had not been a successful area of policy.

#### **5.2.1.2 Key skills**

During much of the 1990s, literacy and numeracy had not been seen as stand-alone issues, but were considered as integral to a wider set of key skills (for example, see the New Labour Manifesto, 1996, or the TEC policy paper, 1997). The prioritisation of communications, numeracy and IT as the primary key skills was extended from GNVQs to the wider arena of FE. As part of the commitment to rationalise qualifications, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) would later map adult literacy levels onto the levels established in both schools and for key skills: this

is discussed in more detail in later chapters and the comparison of levels is demonstrated in table 5.3. There are, however, two major contrasts between key skills and the national standards for adult literacy: although the levels are comparable key skills apply to 14-19 year olds while adult literacy is assumed to apply to all those over 16, and the key skills levels are accredited using both portfolios and tests, while basic skills become accredited only through the national tests, as shall be discussed in chapter eight.

Level of qualification	General	Vocationally related	Occupational	Key skills in communication	Adult literacy
5	Higher level qualifications		Level 5 NVQ		
4			Level 4 NVQ	Level 4 (test+portfolio)	
3 (advanced)	A Levels and AVCE	Vocational qualifications	Level 3 NVQ	Level 3 (test+portfolio)	
2 (intermediate)	GCSE grades A* - C		Level 2 NVQ	Level 2 (test+portfolio)	Level 2 (test only)
1 (foundation)	GCSE grades D - G		Level 1 NVQ	Level 1 (test+portfolio)	Level 1 (test only)
Entry level	Certificate of Achievement				Entry Level 3 Entry Level 2 Entry Level 1

Table 5.3: Corresponding levels within the National Qualifications Framework<sup>5</sup>

### 5.2.1.3 The University for Industry

The concept of the University for Industry (Ufi) had been introduced in New Labour's election manifesto as a partnership between government, industry and education which would use new technology to enhance skills. This concept was developed alongside the idea for Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs) which would shift responsibility for funding education onto the individual, and would encourage employers to contribute to the education of their workforce. These ideas were

<sup>5</sup> This diagram is compiled from the combination of standards and levels from the key skills website and the national standards for adult literacy (2004).

developed in *The Learning Age* (1998). The Ufl was conceived as a hub of a national learning network extending into the home and the workplace, which would act as a cataloguer and broker of courses, which would stimulate the mass marketing of learning opportunities, and which would sustain guidance services related to learning (Muschamp, Jamieson et al. 1999). Behind this initiative was the commitment to making learning more accessible to a wider range of people: this was in harmony with one of the Kennedy report's recommendations for widening participation (Kennedy 1997). One element of the Ufl was the formation of learningdirect (subsequently learndirect), which was intended to act as a freephone information point for learners, enabling easy access to information on local provision of relevant courses. There was confusion around the introduction of the new initiatives of the University for Industry and Individual Learning Accounts: writing in March 1998, Stephen McNair suggests that they "remain shrouded in mystery for the time being". (McNair 1998: 3). The recommendation made by the Moser working group to use as wide a range of technology in the provision of learning opportunities is, however, a focus that becomes lost as the strategy evolves: while much accreditation is delivered through on-line testing, the vision of learners learning in their own homes through the use of interactive digital television has not yet been realised and is no longer a focus within the strategy.

#### **5.2.1.4 New Deal**

The New Deal initiatives were one of New Labour's flagship policies (Purly 2000) The New Deals were intended to take people off welfare benefits and put them into jobs: this links clearly back to the changing principles behind the welfare state. Whereas the Conservative party had accepted high levels of unemployment because

of their commitment to market forces, the New Deal packages suggested that the individual had the right to work (Hodgson and Spours 1999 : 51), but balanced against this right was also the notion of the individual's responsibility to enhance their employability. The New Deal approach has significance for understanding some of the drivers behind the adult literacy agenda: the Government's commitment to tackle social marginalisation and exclusion rather than accept these as inevitable, the emphasis on different government departments and agencies taking a "joined-up approach"; and the use of Pathfinders to evaluate aspects of the initiative prior to national implementation are all in evidence in the adult literacy strategy.

### **5.2.2 Initiatives**

Although the decision to appoint a committee led by Sir Claus Moser to advise the government on basic skills was announced in *The Learning Age* (February 1998), it was not until June 1998 that the Secretary of State for Education and Employment appointed the working group members. In interview, Lord Moser explained that the members were chosen by him and agreed by David Blunkett, the Secretary of State for Education; his interview response suggested that Blunkett and Moser were in harmony over these choices. Moser also observed in our interview that "the Secretary of State decided that the attention should shift towards adults because enough had been done about children." The remit of this working group included advising on the effectiveness of different kinds of provision, models of good practice, and ways of increasing and widening participation. Although these terms of reference are cited in the first part of the working group's final report *A Fresh Start* (1999), subsequently, Moser's working group worked to present a strategy to the existing government: an

overall vision of how they felt adult basic skills should be delivered and managed in the UK which clearly extended and moved away from their original remit.

While the working group had been appointed by the government and contained a joint secretariat from DfEE and BSA, the government was also identified as the key audience of the report: Lord Moser described how *A Fresh Start* had been aimed “at, above all, the government of course, because the government had to accept it if it was going to get anywhere.” This suggests similarities between the Moser working group and the British Association of Settlements campaign in 1974: both sought to present a strategy to the government, but whereas BAS were initially independent of policy events, Moser’s strategy existed within the context of wider policy events rather than being independent of these. *A Fresh Start* had been produced by a committee who had been approved by the Secretary of State and who had been provided with a clear remit from the government, this contrasts strongly with BAS, whose remit emerged from their own experiences and interests in this area and whose communal identity was generated from these shared interests. The report of Moser’s working group anticipated major policy changes which the government had not yet announced. One example is that *A Fresh Start* proposed that a national strategy would need to be translated into centrally coordinated local targets and action plans. This seems to anticipate the formation of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), although the arrangement at the time of the report was that funding was managed by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) and delivery was coordinated by the Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs). This suggests that the Moser group were working in adherence with wider government agendas: the report demonstrated an awareness of future initiatives that were not yet in the public domain.

*A Fresh Start* claims that, in addition to the impact of poor literacy skills upon the individual's employability, "improving their basic skills can enable people to earn more, to spend more, to help the economy to grow faster," (Moser 1999: 3), and if the individual does not take the responsibility to address his or her literacy problems, this can have "serious consequences for the capacity for local communities to regenerate, for democratic participation, for the criminal justice system, the public health agenda and issues of social cost and social welfare." (Moser 1999: 23) This depersonalises the benefits of improving literacy and dovetails the political discourses of human capital and social inclusion as drivers for education policy, potentially because these discourses were shared by the members of the working group and/or because the use of these discourses was a means of elevating the issue of adult basic skills to a dominant place on the policy agenda. The report was keen to widen participation in basic skills and recognised that the majority of people with needs were not seeking to improve their literacy or numeracy. Models for effective recruitment are explored in *A Fresh Start* but no concrete answers emerge. Alan Wells, as chairman of the Basic Skills Agency, observed in interview that,

... one of the great unknowns: how do you get people to want to do anything? And that is one of the challenges of the strategy now.

Primarily *A Fresh Start* stresses that courses need to be made more attractive to the learner. This approach suggests that learning has been commodified within the strategy discourse: adult literacy courses have become products that need successful marketing. There is also the sense that learners have rights of entitlement, a shift towards a more commercial notion that adults have the right to be able to access a range of quality learning opportunities that they can use to help them in their

development of their literacy skills. The use of attractive marketing and clear outcomes will be related to the commodification of learning in the critique offered in chapter seven.

The important role of the media was recognised by the New Labour government, and substantial attention was given to the presentation of policy and policy events to the national press. Interviewed for this research, several members of the Moser working group referred to the government's attention to a propitious time for the launch of *A Fresh Start* so that it did not clash with other policy initiatives: this implies that the media stage was being managed so that the report would have maximum media impact. The launch of the document did command substantial media attention despite competing against the news that UN troops had been sent into Kosovo on the same day. In interview Lord Moser remembered how he did seven interviews that morning and recalled that the report made front-page news. *A Fresh Start* followed the tradition of BSA documents in being glossy, professionally produced and attractive to the reader. Interestingly, the word 'adult' was omitted from the front cover of the report, an error that was noticed too late for the mistake to be amended. This suggests that there was a certain compromise of the committee's report to the niceties of style and the pressures of deadlines: rather than delay the publication of the report, the launch went ahead despite this fairly important flaw. The media particularly embraced the report's use of correlative data; the association of low literacy levels and other factors such as poor health, crime and unemployment translate easily into newsworthy stories. As Alan Wells explained in interview when discussing the focus of this research, "we didn't start from let's get a newspaper headline, we just wanted to find out what the impact was, and generally that was the kind of thing that would interest



the press because you always got something that was newsworthy out of it.” The choice of research and the broad distribution of a glossy, readable executive summary increased the report’s accessibility and succeeded in raising the media and public profile of adult basic skills.

### **5.2.3 Measures and Evaluations**

Moser’s working group presented a national strategy that sought to address the problems of literacy and numeracy, through the involvement of “everyone” in a “national and ongoing crusade” (Moser 1999). As will be discussed in chapter six, the moral language of a “crusade” has ramifications for an understanding of the strategy and this also has links to the 1970s *Right to Read* campaign. *A Fresh Start* also shared with the 1970s campaign the intention of eliminating adult illiteracy, and assumes that “by 2050 [the lack of basic skills] should have ceased to be a problem.” (Moser 1999: 2): these figures are analysed in chapter eight. The strategy presented in *A Fresh Start* responded to the Government target of reducing the number of adults with basic skills problems by 500,000 by 2002:

The Group will advise on ways in which the Government’s plans for basic skills provision for adults can be supported and developed to achieve the target to help 500,000 adults a year by 2002.

(Moser 1999: 6)

But, importantly, there is no justification for the target of half a million learners in these terms of reference. Alan Wells considered that because there were no existing national targets in this area, “they were plucked out of the air”, and Lord Moser commented upon their arbitrary nature, “it was, roughly speaking, doubling the people

who were in programmes according to their best knowledge.” From their work using existing research and responding to the Secretary of State’s remit, the working party recognised that “the government will have to undertake a baseline survey” to make sense of targets (Moser 1999: 11) and to generate meaningful and achievable targets in the future. This suggests the arbitrariness of targets prior to a national survey: a point that will be returned to in chapter eight.

The popularity of the statistical correlative evidence was perhaps an influence on the ongoing commissioning by BSA to the CLS to continue their correlative analyses of the social factors associated with low levels of adult literacy in the national cohort birth data.

### **5.3 March 1999 – April 2000: Development**

<b>The Context of the Problem</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• National Skills Taskforce reports</li> <li>• <i>Learning to Succeed</i> (1999)</li> <li>• Learning and Skills Council</li> </ul>
<b>Initiatives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Better Basic Skills</i></li> <li>• Technical Implementation Group (TIG) and sub-groups</li> <li>• QCA developing national standards for adult literacy</li> <li>• BSA/QCA developing national curriculum</li> <li>• Development of teaching standards by FENTO, BSA and DfEE</li> <li>• Setting up of ABSSU</li> </ul>
<b>Measures and Evaluation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• University of Nottingham developing National Test</li> <li>• BSA Taskforce report on basic skills</li> </ul>

Table 5.4: Overview of the development period

### **5.3.1 The Context of the Problem**

The white paper on further education, which had been anticipated since the election of New Labour, was published in 1999 as *Learning to Succeed*. A major element of this paper was changes in the management and funding of FE through the establishment of a national Learning and Skills Council (LSC) with 47 local councils operating at a regional level. Adult literacy and numeracy became one of the initial priorities of this organisation. The LSC, and the local LSCs, were responsible for co-ordinating and funding adult basic skills provision across England. The National Skills Taskforce was commissioned by Government to produce a series of reports on skills needs in the workforce. The taskforce addressed the whole range of skills and basic skills were identified as one of the six main areas of skill deficit in the UK. The collaborative discourse of partnership between government, individuals and employers was reflected in the encouragement of employers to acquire the Investors in People standard: this reflected Government encouragement for employers to take a more proactive role in the education of their workforce.

### **5.3.2 Initiatives**

The government's response to the report of the Moser working group was published in the pamphlet, *Better Basic Skills* (1999). It is difficult to define either the purpose or genre of this publication – it seeks to lay out a range of initiatives in the area of adult basic skills while lacking the vision and scope necessary for a strategic document; it requests that people contact the DfEE with their own thoughts on basic skills but is not a consultation document; it does not go into the detail that might be expected from a policy paper. The lack of coherence and direction in this document perhaps represents the lack of coherence and direction in policy events immediately

after the publication of *A Fresh Start*. The government seemed unwilling to take on board a strategy that had already been written, unlike the ready acceptance of the British Association of Settlements' strategy by the government in 1974, but it did not appear to have the time or resources to reappropriate the strategy on its own terms. Therefore, to an extent, the government appears to fudge the issue, although there was a slight increase in the funding and provision of basic skills at a national level.

The Moser report had recommended that an independent technical implementation group should be set up to oversee the implementation of the Moser group's strategy; but instead the DfEE set up an internal technical implementation group (TIG) chaired by the Minister of State for Education, Baroness Blackstone which began developing a strategy of its own rather than adopting the strategy presented in *A Fresh Start*. Various smaller "TIG-lets" were also set up; these were smaller committees with specialised remits working under the overall umbrella of Blackstone's TIG. I interviewed three people who had been involved with the TIG or TIG-lets, and one of these pointed out that quite a lot had actually been achieved during this time:

... as you will know, the TIGs were seen to have been too slow and not to have got going fast enough, even though the standards and the curriculum were actually developed at that time by Barry Brooks at QCA and the BSA, so things did happen.

(3Po8)

The relationship between the TIG and the development of standards and curricula is complex. The national standards were developed as part of the wider remit of the QCA. The QCA had been set up by the government to "protect standards and simplify the qualifications system." (DfEE 1998: 64) and to create a national framework for all

nationally recognised qualifications. Within literacy, the QCA developed national standards that would define what should be delivered and achieved through adult literacy and numeracy education. While this chronologically followed from the publication of *A Fresh Start* the work was part of the wider remit of the QCA, rather than relating specifically to the work of the TIG. The QCA was also involved in developing the national curriculum for adult literacy and numeracy with the BSA, although this piece of work was led by the BSA, again this was not a direct outcome of the TIG. This national curriculum went out to consultation in spring 2000 before being launched by the BSA in May 2000. Previously there had been no national curriculum in the area of adult literacy and the adoption of a national set of standards and a national curriculum were seen as a quality assurance mechanism in the delivery of basic skills. Both the standards and curriculum will be discussed in detail in chapter seven of this thesis. Meanwhile, with the intention of professionalising the workforce, the DfEE was developing teaching standards for adult literacy practitioners through an appointed steering committee led by the BSA and the Further Education National Training Organisation (FENTO). The lack of clear leadership and guidance for these initiatives was also seen to be a factor in the development of the teaching standards which ran substantially over time and, according to one interviewee, lacked minutes and agendas for many of the meetings. In 1999, the BSA had published the first set of national data on basic skills tutors; prior to this there had been no comprehensive knowledge of the number of adult basic skills tutors and volunteers in the UK, although ALBSU had collected information on tutor numbers in the past.

The logistics of implementation for a national strategy are immense and careful planning was necessary, but this meant that things seemed to spend a long time at the

developmental stage; as one senior policy player commented, “Come the year 2000, there was still not that much action, things were still quite slow.” (1Po3) Although the policy events described above were unfolding during this era, the sense of delay and missed opportunities pervaded the accounts of the four interviewees who had been involved on the Moser working group. Disappointment was expressed in all of my interviews with members of the Moser working group over the substantial delay in the recommendations of the report being taken up. One committee member complained,

It took too long for my liking, much too long between the publication of the report and the publication of the strategy. That was because civil servants are so overwhelmed by initiatives that they just couldn't get on.

(1Po3)

### **5.3.3 Measures and Evaluations**

Whereas the Moser Group had at times considered radical forms of delivery and suggested that an end test should be an option for the learner, the discourse evolving subsequent to the report seemed to focus more on outputs, in terms of the national standards which were to be met, curricular objectives to be covered, and test qualifications to be achieved. These are elements that will be analysed in chapter eight. This presents a more close-ended concept of education with a clear sense of destination, and contrasts with the more radical proposals of *A Fresh Start* where, to some extent, the journey was seen to be the destination. In November 1999, Baroness Blackstone announced that national tests were to be developed to give a clear and reliable measure of an adult's literacy and numeracy levels, again this work involved the QCA. In interview with myself in 2001, Alan Wells suggested that the original

proposal of the national test was developed by the Moser working group and was based around the notion of a driving test: rather than the student being assessed over the course of a programme, “that is like SATs in schools, which are actually measuring seemingly what the curriculum is”, a person could choose to study in whatever way suited them and then turn up at a centre to take the test. This notion presents the possibility of a wide diversity of learning provision. This is an innovative idea but Lord Moser, in an interview around the same time, expressed caution on the development of such an idea:

We don't yet know nearly enough about what kind of teaching and what kind of teaching materials work best and by that one means not just turning you into somebody who yesterday couldn't read but today can, but turning you into somebody who will go on being able to read.

The concerns expressed by Lord Moser do not seem to have cast light upon the more simplistic notion of an externally assessed summative test which the University of Nottingham was commissioned to develop at the end of 1999.

Following the publication of *A Fresh Start* (1999), the DfEE asked the BSA to set up a task force to look at how to encourage 3.5 million adults to improve their basic skills and to identify approaches for national and local promotional activity targeted at these events. In turn, the BSA commissioned MORI to carry out this research on existing survey data and a very slim, glossy pamphlet was published (Basic Skills Agency 2000). In the emerging plethora of policy texts, this adult literacy document sank without trace. It was about this time, however, that the BSA's remit from the government began to change and the DfEE began to take greater responsibility for the

development of research in this area. This is anticipated to some extent in the government's response to the report of the Moser working group:

Information about basic skills attainment and provision is patchy.

We need better information on the characteristics of the millions of adults with poor basic skills and the effects of poor basic skills for individuals and the country. We need to identify obstacles and incentives to learning, and to find out which methods of learning work most effectively for which groups. DfEE is developing a research strategy in consultation with other partners.

(DfEE 1999: 2)

Although the national agency had succeeded in maintaining some level of attention on the issue of adult basic skills since its inception in the 1970s, following *A Fresh Start* it seemed that there was the need for more comprehensive and sophisticated evidence in this area rather than the “enactive” research which the BSA had so successfully produced over the years. The recognition of this need for new kinds of research in this area anticipates the role given to the NRDC following the publication of *Skills for Life* (2001).

New Labour had inherited an adult education system that contained a confusing breadth of qualifications and awarding bodies and, although *The Learning Age* (1998) recognised that not everyone who learns needs or wants a qualification (DfEE, 1998), there was the realisation that the qualifications system needed to be rationalised. Amongst the policy makers interviewed for this research, there was the sense that the qualifications reform and the development of a meaningful qualification for adult literacy learners was relevant to social inclusion: one interviewee working within the



area of policy for many years, drew comparisons between the importance that degrees might have for middle class professionals to the importance that a literacy qualification might have for someone who had been socially excluded. Peter Wilson (1999) is more cynical in his argument, suggesting that the ongoing qualifications reform was driven not by the desire to extend opportunities to the socially excluded, “but to ensure that qualifications (particularly vocational qualifications) are made more responsive to the needs of industry and commerce.” (Wilson, 1999: 1) From the debates of the Moser working group to the present day, the value of the adult literacy tests has been hotly contested, both in terms of what form they might take and whether they should exist at all.

During this period of policy development, a further report was published from the original IALS survey (1998) and correlative evidence on the relations between adult basic skills and other factors continued to emerge from the CLS, providing further grist for the claims relating adult literacy levels and the social exclusion agenda.

#### 5.4 May 2000 – March 2002: Action

<b>The Context of the Problem</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Second term of office for New Labour prioritising adult literacy</li> <li>• Setting up of LSCs</li> </ul>
<b>Initiatives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consultation on first draft of <i>Skills for Life</i></li> <li>• Publication of <i>Skills for Life</i></li> <li>• Roll out of training to tutors</li> </ul>
<b>Measures and Evaluations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Achievement target set of 750,000 by 2004</li> <li>• Approval of new qualifications by QCA</li> <li>• Pathfinder projects set up</li> <li>• Inspection regime extended to all funded providers of basic skills</li> <li>• Raising adult literacy levels as key objective of LSC</li> </ul>

Table 5.5 Overview of the action period

##### 5.4.1 The Context of the Problem

In the elections of 2001, New Labour again won by a large majority. Prior to the 2001 election, the New Labour manifesto had placed the issue of adult literacy as the number one step in ‘Steps for a Better Britain.’

The Government has consolidated this strategy by making basic skills their first requirement for an inclusive society. This new found status has triggered increased investment. This investment is being used to improve quality.

(Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit 2001)

This prioritisation was reflected by the LSC which adopted the need to raise the literacy and numeracy skills of 750,000 adults by July 2004 to fourth place in their five key objectives. The LSC established both a specialised national unit on adult basic skills and a specialised member of staff working in each local council dedicated to this issue, and in January 2002, the LSC launched their Adult Literacy and Numeracy Delivery Plan. The policy culture around adult literacy was changing: no

longer one small aspect of the much greater policy field of adult education, this had become an area demanding substantial policy attention in its own right.

As I will discuss in the next chapter, the policy language surrounding adult literacy changed during this time, as more dramatic claims were made around the consequences of low levels of adult literacy, and as responsibility was increasingly shifted onto the individual. In his launch of the consultation copy of *Skills for Life* in December 2000, David Blunkett, then Secretary of State for Education and Employment, stated:

We have a moral and economic imperative to do something about [poor basic skills]. We cannot tolerate a situation in which millions of our fellow citizens lack the skills they need to play a full part in society, to obtain a job and help their own children to succeed.

(DfEE 2000: 1)

This language suggests that the government was becoming more assertive and the dominant discourse on adult literacy was becoming more normative; whereas Moser's committee suggested a tolerant approach which allowed that the learner ultimately should have the free choice of whether to develop their literacy skills or not, this discourse has become less tolerant. While Blunkett is stating an intolerance of illiteracy at a societal level, at times it appears that this view leaks over to an intolerance of the illiterate individual who is not working towards gaining literacy. Alongside these more normative claims, the metaphors of 'missions' and 'crusades' become more ubiquitous, lending religious overtones to the government's approach. Society is perceived not as the paternal benefactor of the 1970s, but as a determined

combatant against the evils of illiteracy. The choice and effect of language is discussed and analysed in more detail in chapter six.

By the end of the first term of New Labour's administration, the language of quality and standards had extended throughout the entire government discourse on adult education. It is interesting to reflect on how relatively new these concepts are. At the time of *A Right to Read* the concepts of quality and standards are absent: as one interviewee, who had been involved as a practitioner and who has subsequently worked within policy since the original campaign, pointed out: "quality as a concept – quality assurance, quality assurance systems, the whole emphasis on quality assurance in that sense did not, I don't think I was aware of it, until the last three years of the 1980s" (3Po8). By the period addressed in this chapter, there is the assumption that the strategy cannot be developed outside of the standards drawn up by the QCA. These standards, marking what adults should be able to achieve, are seen as essential to a coherent strategy and are necessary as the foundations for building any future policy (Moser 1999). This formalises the concept of literacy in the debate and standardises future measurements and pedagogies. The discourse of quality and standards is unique neither to the adult literacy strategy nor to education policy: it extends through the political discourse on other public services and relates government thinking to business models of effectiveness. The pervasiveness and effects of quality control and standards will be explored in chapter seven.

### **5.4.2 Initiatives**

The Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit (ABSSU) was formed in November 2000, although Susan Pember was initially seconded to head this unit four months earlier in July 2000. This unit was created to lead the development and implementation of the government's adult basic skills strategy, in partnership with the Learning and Skills Council and other partners. This wording implies that a strategy already existed, although it does not clarify whether this strategy was articulated within *A Fresh Start* or whether it was located behind the work of the TIG which had been carrying out work since March 1999. In interview, Susan Pember explained that the first part of her job was to research exactly what was going on in the field – “you can't manage something unless you know what you are managing”, which suggests that there was no clear strategy for her to set about implementing. During her period of secondment between summer 2000 and the setting up of the unit in November, Pember looked at stakeholder requirements and checked the relevance of the Moser recommendations. In interview she referred to that as the “first base”, and this process can be seen as a period of information gathering prior to the development of the strategy. In November 2000 the first draft of *Skills for Life* was written followed by a six-week period of consultation. The strategy was redrafted, both within the unit and at the level of the Prime Minister's Office, prior to its launch by the Secretary of State on March 1<sup>st</sup> 2001, World Book Day.

The strategy was developed from the top-down in the sense that it was being written within the DfEE. Different judgements emerged in my interviews over the merits of an adult literacy strategy being developed within the government. The civil servants I interviewed and DfEE documents boasted that this awarded that strategy importance:

it was very much the voice of the government – all the way up to Tony Blair. As Susan Pember commented in interview, “without the involvement of Number 10... we wouldn’t be where we are”. A key point of the strategy is that it is not the sole domain of any one government department: ABSSU feeds into the whole range of departments represented in the cabinet. The influence of the Prime Minister was assumed by several interviewees to guarantee the success of the strategy: the strategy has been awarded substantial policy status and, they suggested, has, therefore, gained a symbolic value and will not be allowed to fail. Some journalists, however, took a cautious view of the government’s close relationship with ABSSU,

That might be seen as an advantage in a job where nothing can be achieved without the commitment of minister. But this closeness, combined with the fact that [Pember] is not a traditional basic skills expert, has fuelled fears that even now the government is not ready to think the radical thoughts that the experts say need to be thought.

*The Guardian*, November 14, 2000

This view was upheld in interviews with some of the practitioners and civil servants who had been involved in this area of education for a long period who argued that the government, politicians and civil servants were not necessarily the people with the appropriate and necessary expertise and knowledge to be able to address the problem of adult literacy. One policy player voiced exasperation that the area of adult literacy has been taken over by politicians rather than by practitioners, “I get annoyed when people haven’t read the stuff, haven’t met people with literacy problems, don’t visit the programme, but will then say things that are not necessarily true.” (1Po4)

ABSSU has attempted to remedy its lack of expertise in this area through seconding practitioners to work in the unit, rather than expecting civil servants rapidly to develop expertise, as is expected in most policy. As Pember explained,

Although it is in the civil service, it has got a different feel about it because it is structured differently. In other words, I have drawn experts into the unit so that they could be up and running from day one. These are external people to the civil service brought in at the different levels. Some stay a few weeks, do a job and go away; some stay a year or two years or four years depending on the staff. ... The unit is seen as a sort of exemplar for delivering things.

The notion of “joined up” work between departments, as well as the recruitment of seconded experts to develop the strategy rather than depending on civil servants, are two aspects of modernising government: ABSSU is one of the areas which is piloting best practice in this area. I hypothesised in one of my evaluative interviews with a policy player that part of the contrast between ABSSU and the TIGs was the contrast between the modernising style of government and the old-style civil servant led agendas. The interviewee agreed:

I guess that that is a paradoxical situation for civil servants –so I think there probably was a tension between would this be an ordinary civil service roll-out with different civil servants taking different roles, or would this be a new dedicated, focussed unit which is a new way of doing things? And the TIGs probably did represent the attempt by, whether conscious

or not, of civil servants to keep a hold of it in their different decisions.

But this person continued by suggesting that whereas I was talking about governance, a more suitable focus would be upon delivery:

I think that the new model is a new model of governance, but it also very quickly stops becoming strategic and becomes about a delivery unit. It becomes a contract manager of implementation and delivery – and it is now, in a sense, a delivery unit because the strategy is done. If it wants to be strategic, the strategy would be evolving the policy into something different – saying that we have done this now and it hasn't worked, so we are going to do this, or the next three years will see us do that and it will be different because this is what the past three years have told us. At the moment there are no signs of that, at the moment the focus is on delivery of Skills for Life.

(3Po8)

This interview took place in the autumn of 2003, and this quote offers a glimpse of the progress of the strategy and ABSSU following from the chronological endpoint of this case study.

The range of implementations that rapidly take place within this period will be discussed in detail during my analysis of the strategy in chapters six, seven and eight. The quality of delivery was addressed through rolling out teacher training to tutors who taught more than six hours a week: by the end of 2001 more than 7,500 tutors



had been trained in the use of the new curricula (Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit 2001). This was a short-term measure which was implemented fairly rapidly; in the longer term it was assumed that the new teaching qualifications would serve to further professionalise teaching staff.

Around the time that staff training was being delivered, a national advertising campaign sought to drive up demand amongst potential learners. Launched in September 2001, the campaign broadcast a series of radio and television advertisements depicting people's fear of their lack of literacy and numeracy skills in real life contexts as Gremlins. Through their website, ABSSU ensured that partners and service providers had access to campaign materials and information, suggesting that although the campaign was national, it could be reinforced at a local level. There was substantial controversy over these advertisements, both in terms of the presentation of the people with the problem, and in terms of the concept of literacy and numeracy being depicted: these shall be discussed in more detail in chapter seven. ABSSU also sought to publicise the development of the *Skills for Life* strategy through the newsletter, *Updates*, which was first published six months after the launch of *Skills for Life*. This is a glossy production with readable targets to inform practitioners and managers of the strategy's progress and how it relates to their practice. This is part of the sophisticated management of the media by ABSSU, although it is of interest that media attention was directed more towards some areas than others. For example, there was little media focus on the setting up of the NRDC whilst the Gremlins received substantial attention at both a national and regional level.

This period also marked the decentralisation of the BSA. The remit of the BSA changed substantially and the agency moved from its previously central role to the periphery of the strategy. Whilst the BSA was responsible for publishing the national curriculum with the QCA, they had no input into the formation of the national standards which defined the literacy on which their curriculum must rest. Their funding remit for adult literacy courses was gradually handed over to the Learning and Skills Councils and the research responsibilities of the agency were subsequently taken over by the NRDC. ABSSU developed its own notion of quality, independent from the BSA Quality Mark, and although BSA was heavily involved in the Moser Committee and the writing of *A Fresh Start*, it had no input in the development of the strategy document *Skills for Life*. This change of role for the national agency can be interpreted as symbolic of ABSSU marking a new approach to adult literacy; the movement away from the national agency can be interpreted as evidence of the governmental desire to break from the history of events in this field. A more cynical view of the marginalisation of this organisation would suggest that the rise in statistics from two million adults (BAS 1974) lacking literacy skills to as many as seven million (Moser 1999), suggests that the national agency had been unsuccessful in their alleviation of this situation, and that it was now time for a fresh start.

#### **5.4.3 Measures and Evaluations**

*Skills for Life* created the attainment target of improving the literacy and numeracy skills of 750,000 adult learners by 2004, and maintained the participation target of 500,000 learners by 2002. The research survey on need, recommended by the Moser group and commissioned by the DfEE, had not produced results by the end of this period of history, leaving us with these targets which are rooted in estimation rather

than evidence. At best, the targets can be used as a measure of the success of the strategy, but, I will argue in chapter eight, their innate value is questionable. Other possible forms of evaluation also began to be developed at this time. Prior to the publication of the strategy document, seven Pathfinder projects had been set up. The Pathfinder projects were driven by ABSSU's desire for emerging policy to rest upon evidence of best practice. The Pathfinders implemented the national standards, used diagnostic assessment tools and the new national curriculum both of which were mapped to these new standards, carried out intensive teacher training, and introduced national tests for learners at Levels 1 and 2. This meant that the impact of these mechanisms could be observed at a small scale prior to being implemented across the whole country. The requirements for evidence had changed from focussing on the problem of basic skills, whether through looking for correlations with other social factors or through seeking to measure the extent of basic skills deficiencies, to trying to evaluate the best solutions and define best practice within the definitions of the new standards. ABSSU also moved away from the notion that the individual should have the free choice of whether to develop his/her basic skills or not. The sense that individuals held responsibility for their lack of literacy skills increased. One of the first things introduced by ABSSU through the Pathfinder Projects was the extension of compulsory basic skills screening of Job Seekers Allowance claimants. Working with the Department for Work and Pensions and the Employment Services, ABSSU introduced pilots that involved earlier screening of basic skills, the testing of new screening tools and the use of compulsion and incentives in different Pathfinder areas. The use of compulsion was a particularly contentious issue and marked the first time that coercion was applied to potential learners. Despite substantial concerns being

expressed by practitioners, this was passed through government before the summer recess in 2001.

In 2002, a National Research and Development Centre for Adult Basic Skills (NRDC) was set up as a consortium between the Universities of Sheffield, Nottingham, Lancaster and the Institute of Education, at the University of London, managed by ABSSU. The theme of joining things together also resonated at the research level and the setting up of the NRDC marked an attempt to create a common ground and focal point for researchers in this area.

During this period, QCA approved a series of new qualifications by examining bodies at Entry Level and Level 1 and 2. The dissent between some examining bodies and QCA resulted in the Entry Level qualification being teacher-assessed and externally verified rather than summatively assessed through an externally marked examination. From September 2002, all adult literacy and numeracy qualifications would be based on the national tests, which directly related to national standards. Alongside the use of tests as a means of measuring the outcomes of basic skills courses, a guide to the Common Inspection Framework (CIF) was written for adult basic skills practitioners and their managers. The changes to the inspectorate, including the setting up of an Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) in the Learning and Skills Act (2000) meant that all publicly funded adult basic skills provision was subject to inspection, which had never previously been the case, although local authority provision had been subject, in theory if not in my interviewees' recollections, to inspection by the FEFC and previously by HMI.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has moved from the time of the election of New Labour when literacy was not seen as a separate issue, let alone a separate area of strategy, to the anniversary of the *Skills for Life* strategy when adult literacy had become one of the major policy areas of this government. Adult literacy became an area of significant interest because of its relevance to the discourses of lifelong learning, economic competitiveness, and social exclusion, and because of the predisposing factors of international comparative data on national performance on basic skills, and the success of the national literacy strategy in schools. These three chapters have provided three different sets of foundations to contextualise the analysis of the strategy in the next part of this thesis: chapter three provided foundations in the literature and concepts of literacy; chapter four provided a historical foundation of previous literacy campaigns and initiatives in England, and this chapter has served to provide the social and political foundations which contextualise the strategy.

## Chapter 6: Presenting the problems

### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the second of my research questions: “Why has tackling levels of adult literacy become a policy priority at this time, and what are the key drivers behind the strategic agenda?” My hypothesis is that the ‘problem’ with adult literacy levels is neither self-evident nor inevitable. Policy texts are a form of rhetoric; they are speculative, providing a vision of the future and outlining one set of means to get there (Edwards and Nicoll 2001). Rhetoric is a response to an obstacle or obstacles (Leach 2000). In *Textual Politics: Discourse and Social Dynamics*, Jay Lemke (1995: 58) analyses the “transformation of discourses of expert knowledge into discourses of social policy”, demonstrating that technocratic discourses present policy as if it were directly dictated by matters of fact. This is seen to deflect attention away from the values and choice being made within the strategy. Lemke (71) studies how a case of education policy in the Reagan-era US explicitly cites and condenses research evidence to use the “prestige and mystique of science” to persuade readers, without requiring that the cited research is made meaningful to the reader:

In every case, technocratic discourse begins with an action it covertly wants to recommend as policy, and then cites ‘research evidence’ and ‘studies’ which show that this action is a necessary cause of something else that is positively valued by those to be convinced. No argument is made concerning the value of the outcome, nor any as to value choices regarding means. The

argument is only that the covertly recommended means are necessary to the unargued ends.

Within the case study presented in this thesis, policy serves to market the problem of adult literacy as a justification for expenditure on this area of education. The policy costs must be seen to be justifiable to the Treasury, and to be an area of priority at a time when different policy areas compete for limited funding. There is also the sense that the wider public audience is being persuaded to think that this policy is a good thing because the problem that it addresses is substantial and has detrimental effects on both individuals and upon the country as a whole.

Low levels of adult literacy are presented as an obstacle to the government's vision of a future high skills, competitive economy and a socially inclusive society. A variety of evidence is used to support the claims of the adult literacy strategy, a variety of evidence is also omitted from the strategy – particularly that which might refute some of its claims. That the level of adult literacy levels in England should present a major problem for the economic competitiveness of the country or the government's agenda for social inclusion is not self evident:

... there is little evidence that ordinary people worry about issues of adult literacy. Similarly there is no evidence that millions of people see themselves as illiterate, or that ordinary people are missing buses, taking the wrong medicines, or are baffled by their shopping as a result of their literacy difficulties. To pursue its policies the government has to persuade people to care about this and to worry that there are millions of illiterates in their midst.

(Barton 2000: 13)

Adult literacy levels are endemic; the government attention to this issue has not been prompted by a sudden deterioration in literacy levels across the adult population. Furthermore, the government has made different claims about why the country should address adult literacy levels as a matter of policy priority. The aims of this chapter are to explore how the problem of adult literacy levels is presented across the different policy texts that form the Skills for Life strategy; to evaluate the strength of the evidence that informs this presentation of the problem; and to consider how the presentation, language and style of these policy texts impacts on our understanding both of adult literacy levels and of those individuals who have low levels of adult literacy. This chapter will develop my argument that the presentation of adult literacy levels as a problem is manufactured to some extent within the policy texts. Figure 6.1 presents the progression over time of the policy texts. On the left of the diagram are the policy influences of the social and economic debates which, I will argue here, influence how the problem of adult literacy is framed. To the right are the three main data sets that are used to inform the Moser working group and are subsequently cited in the following texts. As the diagram shows, the data which informed *A Fresh Start* trickles down through the policy texts: new evidence is not drawn on from outside the policy texts, rather the same evidence is reread through the policy texts, rather than being read anew.



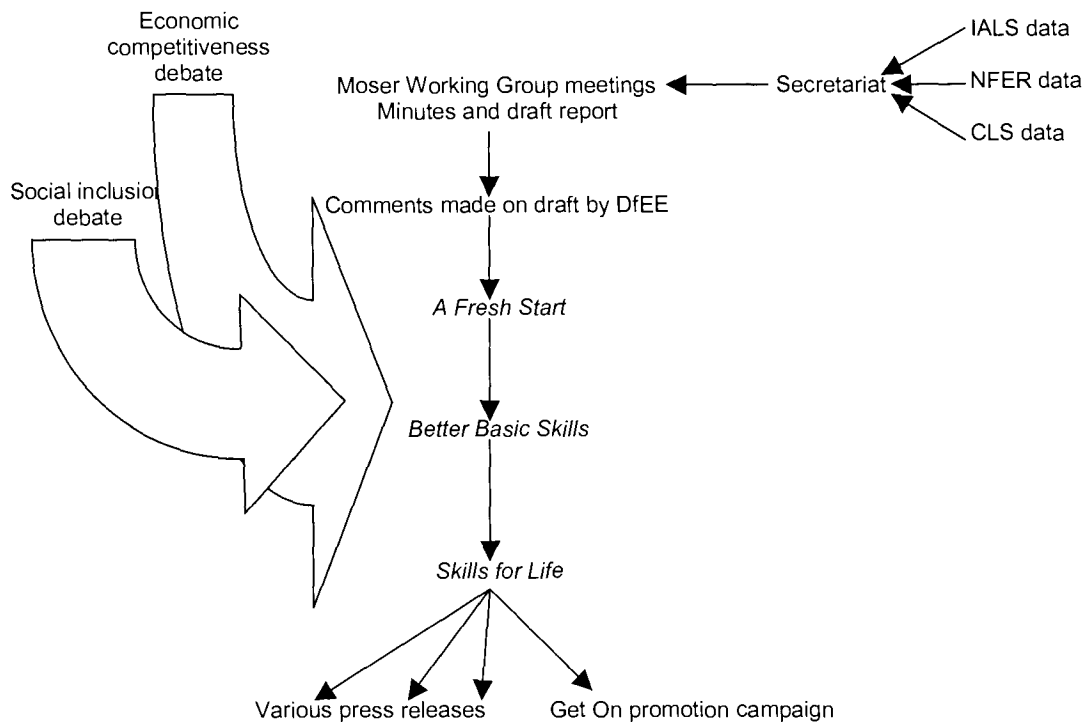


Figure 6.1: The Flow of Influence in the Construction of the Problem

The first section of this chapter explores the content of the problem through the evidence that informs the government thinking on this issue. I will analyse this evidence in the context of the academic debate over the meaning of the IALS data. Through tracing the evolution of the problem from the minutes of the Moser working group through to the *Skills for Life* (2001) policy document, I will consider how the subtly different uses of the same evidence highlights the ideological shifts in the policy agenda. The second section of the chapter focuses in more detail on how literacy is personified and pathologised within the policy texts. Through analysing the language, imagery, and presentation of these texts, insights will be provided into how the problem of adult literacy has been constructed.

## **6.2. The Extent of the Problem**

Evidence is used for dramatic effect within policy texts. The majority of evidence which informs the Moser group and, in turn, the strategy is drawn from the BSA or from the IALS surveys and much of this was presented to the group through summaries of the research content scribed by Jim Pateman, part of the secretariat for the working group. At their 6<sup>th</sup> meeting, the working group agreed to accept the figure of 15-20% as the estimation of the level of adults with basic skills need (1998, 6th October), although the final draft of their report works with the estimation of 20% rather than this slightly more modest claim. At the same meeting it is noted that “Sir Claus [Moser] maintained that the Group should seek further macro evidence about the positive benefits of a population with improved basic skills in order to add weight to the group’s argument” (1998, 6th October). The bibliographic annex to the report shows that evidence has been drawn from NFER research, the IALS data, and the CLS work. There is no reference throughout the report and its bibliography to research from outside of the BSA or the DfEE. This bias is also reflected in later government reports, “[BSA/ALBSU commissioned research has] tended to be the more significant, quantitative and worthwhile research works.” (Brooks et al 2000: 6, my emphasis). Members of the Moser working group were provided with the BSA commissioned research to inform their thinking, alternative research documents were not provided by the secretariat, and this evidence is heavily cited within *A Fresh Start*. There could be several reasons why the selection of research was limited in this way.

- The time limit placed upon drafting the report might have meant that there was not sufficient time to carry out a comprehensive literature review. The minutes from the first meeting recognise that “a lot of information existed about the scale of

need. The focus of the Group should be on recommending action rather than undertaking additional research, for which there was not time anyhow. But all efforts would be taken to provide the Group with the necessary facts.” The BSA commissioned research was readily accessible due to presence of the BSA within the secretariat.

- The style in which the BSA and IALS research was written may have been more readily accessible to a working group who were not experts in this area (although members of the working group included some who had been involved in adult literacy provision, the majority had no previous experience, and possibly no previous interest, with adult literacy). One academic who was interviewed for this research commented: “the academic circulation of ideas within the social sciences is often different from the research that is circulating within a policy area.” (2Ac2) Certainly policy appears to be more achievable if it is based around apparently indisputable evidence rather than around the more complex nuances and subtleties of definition that often appear around qualitative research. Furthermore, the academic element of the working group tended towards statisticians rather than towards qualitative researchers and influence may have played a role in what was considered to be important research in this area. Although John Bynner was among the working group members, none of the New Literacy Studies researchers from Lancaster had a role in either the Moser report or in the drafting of *Skills for Life*. When I mentioned this omission in an interview with one member of Moser’s working group, he commented that there had been “some problems with the Lancaster research” (1Po3) before swiftly changing the subject.

- In interview in autumn 2001, John Bynner suggested that another reason why the BSA commissioned CLS evidence was used to inform the policy was because it matched the concerns of the government:

‘It Doesn’t Get Any Better’ was the straight report of the findings... and again showed that this basic skills problem not only was much the same as the earlier cohort, but also related to lots of things later on in adult life, like a poor labour market record, difficulties in the family life, lack of participation in politics and things like that. They correlated into this basic skills problem. And that of course ties in then with another growing interest: the notion of social exclusion, which the New Labour government in 1997 really picked and ran with in a very major way.

Hamilton and Barton (1999: 14) suggest that this research is popular in informing policy thinking because it is already tailored to the policy vision of the future:

Both OECD and the [IALS] research uncritically support the new work order vision of global capitalism and encourage people to see this as a fixture around which we need to adjust our lives and national policies, rather than as something which literacy might help shape according to a more humanitarian order.

Whatever the reasons behind the omission of a sizeable amount of research from this policy area, the consequences mean that the evidence informing the adult literacy strategy is predominantly statistical. This evidence is concerned with the measurement of adult literacy through close-ended exercises, and drawing out the statistical correlations that emerge from the analysis of this data, rather than exploring

in more qualitative detail how individuals might perceive their own literacy levels and needs. Whilst this bias is being rectified to some extent through the new projects being funded by the NRDC (which will be discussed in chapter seven) the problem of adult literacy has been largely framed from these foundations.

Comparison between the drafts of the Moser working group report (stored in the BSA archives) and the final publication of *A Fresh Start* show that the descriptions of the problem of adult literacy levels evolved over time and have been changed through the editing process. This process reflects the claims made in chapter two that policy is “a cannibalisation of multiple voices” (Ball 1994: 112) and that not all voices are powerful enough to be heard. During my data collection, I interviewed four people who had held positions of seniority on the working group, but each of them voiced a similar moral commitment to their involvement in this strategy:

“... My concern is about the waste of pure human dignity and human worth. And it is about the individual person, and it is about that and it is not even about social exclusion and all that because there are a lot of people with literacy problems who do not see themselves as excluded. I think it is just wrong that people should get a raw deal, and should continue to get a raw deal because they haven’t got any power... they should have a voice and they should have a say.”

(1Po4)

“... It should be fundamentally about the democratic goals of everybody being able to participate to the same extent in society.”

(1Ac1)

“I would see it as a basic human right”

(3Pr4)

“I always thought that it was a kind of human rights question.”

(1Po3)

These positionings of the adult literacy statistics with a sense of human rights and human dignity is partially in evidence alongside the other more politicised agendas in *A Fresh Start* but has been largely lost in subsequent policy texts.

One possible reason for the silencing of these voices in the texts can be seen through the editing processes to which the drafts of *A Fresh Start* were subjected by the DfEE. One example can be used to illustrate this point. In the final draft of *A Fresh Start* reference is made to the bottom line benefits of improving health and safety in the workplace through upskilling workers’ literacy levels, but this is a much weaker suggestion than the statement made in the first draft that “health and safety regulation **should** be strengthened so that all employers **must** ensure that their employees are able to read and understand written instructions.” (Moser working group 1998, my emphasis) The suppression of this statement and others like it is not a coincidence: in their comments during the drafting of the report of the Moser working group, the DfEE suggest that the report should “refer to the best of what employers are already doing rather than impose a structure” and they recommend that “the tone should be softened and the criticisms of employers cut.” (Everiss 1999). Whatever the reasons behind these changes, and these are beyond what I have been able to research within

this thesis, this provides evidence on how the policy texts are constructed, and how carefully the problem of adult literacy has been manufactured.

### 6.3 Economic Considerations

Both *Skills for Life* and *A Fresh Start* relate the consequences of low levels of adult literacy to the economy and to the potential competitiveness of employers. *Skills for Life* presents the argument that there are global changes in the work patterns and economies of countries: “the growth of the knowledge economy and the spread of information technology are having a more profound and more rapid effect on our work and home lives than any other social change since the Industrial Revolution” (DfEE 2001a: 1.7) The consequences attributed to low levels of adult literacy are more dramatic than the previous policy arguments: whereas the Moser report claims that a lack of literacy is “**one of the reasons** for relatively low productivity in our economy” (Moser 1999), the DfEE asserts that low literacy “weakens the country’s ability to compete in the global economy” (DfEE 2001a).

These consequences need to be contextualised in terms of both national and international policy thinking. Through gathering policy data and critiques of this, the ‘policyscape’ (Ball 1994, and chapter three of this thesis) which informs this thinking can be made more explicit. In relation to wider government thinking within the UK, the contribution of learning to economic development has been a focus of policy for the past decade (Howard 2001) and the New Labour government has seen the development of skills to be central to economic competitiveness (Hodgson 1999). *The Learning Age* (DfEE 1998a), the white paper which sets out the UK government’s vision for a “a learning society in the learning age”, sees learning to be the key to the

country's prosperity and the central tenets of lifelong learning can be related directly to the argument that increasing skills will enhance economic competitiveness. (Coffield 1999) Whilst being able to influence the development of skills, the government does not perceive itself as being able to control the changes in the new work order. The 'new work order' is summarised in the observations made by the OECD of the work practices of their member states:

Over all OECD countries, from 1970 to 1991, low technology, low skill and low wage industries saw their share of total employment decrease, while that of high technology, high skill and high wage manufacturing expanded.

(OECD 1995: 22)

Although the observed changes may be related to changing technologies, changing work practices, and to shifts in the main industries from manufacturing to the service sector, all of which are aspects of what Colin Lankshear (1997) terms the New Work Order, a country's effective response to these changes is seen to be dependent upon the skills, knowledge and inventiveness of a country's people (DfEE 2001a). And, whereas traditionally the compulsory education system could have been relied upon to provide a supply of suitably skilled workers, changing demographics are resulting in the need to target low-skilled adults, the majority of whom are in the workplace (OECD 1995). A government, it is therefore suggested, can enhance a country's competitiveness within the global market through upskilling the workforce: governments can indirectly influence the economy through education policy (Garmarnikow and Green 1999), and across OECD countries there has been an upsurge in policy documents linking education to global competitiveness (Holland, Frank et al. 1998).



These changes are presented as rapid while at the same time globalisation is seen to have decreased the ability of governments to intervene directly in the economy, and within these observations is the implication that governments need to respond to these changes with rapidity. Edwards, Nicoll et al (1999) suggest that the policy texts present change as ‘out there’ and inevitable, not something that the country can change but something to which the country must respond as a matter of urgency. This pragmatism can be observed in *The Learning Age*:

We stand on the brink of a new age. Familiar certainties and old ways of doing things are disappearing. Jobs are changing and with them the skills needed for the world of tomorrow. In our hearts we know we have no choice but to prepare for this new age, in which the key to success will be the education, knowledge and skills of our people.

(DfEE 1998a: Foreword)

The government focus on education and learning is seen, within this policy, as necessary to respond to global changes.

It is only recently that this argument has emphasised the value of addressing basic skills needs in the adult population. As was explained in the previous chapter, adult literacy can be seen to have emerged as a serious issue on the UK policy agenda in the late 1990s following the publication of the IALS findings for the UK (OECD 1997). The issue of adult basic skills rapidly snowballed. By 2003, the impact of adult literacy skills was judged to be a key factor in the estimated success of that country’s economy: the World Bank claims that a literate population is one of the most important indicators of whether a country has the potential to grow economically

(World Bank 2003) and Scott Murray, economist for the OECD and Statistics Canada robustly claims that “Literacy and numeracy are key determinants of social and economic development in all countries, developed and developing... Each country has a literacy ‘problem’ – it is only a matter of degree.” (Murray 2003). At both national and international levels, adult literacy levels have become a component part of the policy connection between workforce skills and national economic competitiveness. The perceived need to improve the country’s literacy levels is augmented by the observation that the literacy requirements of jobs are not static: the development of new technologies, new work practices and the growth of the service sector requires people to have more sophisticated literacy skills in order for them to be effective workers (Gee 1997). As the knowledge content of jobs change, and as workers are expected to handle and process increasing quantities of information, there is an increase in the literacy requirements of the workplace. The OECD also notes:

Persons who are more literate are not only likely to have jobs with higher productivity and increased earnings; they are also less vulnerable to long-term unemployment. Higher levels of literacy make learning more efficient and, thus, allow workers to more easily adapt to changing job requirements.

(OECD 1997: 46)

### **6.3.1 Questioning the Economic Claims**

The vision of the future presented in both international and national texts is powerful and persuasive. Edwards et al (1999) suggest that globalisation has resulted in a homogenisation of policy development around the globe, across different countries similar visions of the future are adopted and similar means for getting there are

outlined: this repetition enables policy documents to authoritatively state the problems to be addressed as facts (Edwards, Nicoll et al. 1999). Examining adult literacy within this agenda means that the consequences of low levels of adult literacy are seen to have an impact upon the whole country, not just upon the individuals who have low literacy levels, and this prepares the ground for individuals with low levels of adult literacy to be seen an implied threat to the country's economic competitiveness. Addressing the problem of adult literacy becomes an economic imperative: if we fail to do this, the policy texts imply, it will disadvantage each of us through disabling our economic competitiveness. Some critics have challenged the UK policy focus on the impending doom and failure if we do not respond to these changes. As Ursula Howard (2001: 2) points out,

Concern stems from the conviction that there is a deficit in the skills and qualifications needed for sustained economic competitiveness. Despite evidence that the UK is the fourth largest economy in the world and that it is a low inflation economy, and despite claims that growth is sustainable and full employment is still a realistic goal, there remain concerns about both skills and productivity compared to our competitors across the world.

Howard presents a contrast between the UK's pessimistic focus on the potential poor performance of the economy due to the low levels of adult literacy skills and the more up-beat message encapsulated in Irish policy, although Ireland has a much higher rate of low literacy levels across its adult population.

There seems to be a missing link between the estimation of need provided by the IALS data and the policy claims that improving adult literacy levels will improve the

global competitiveness of the workforce. Arguments about the consequences of low levels of adult literacy present claims of causation, but there have been no conclusive causations drawn from the relationship between literacy levels and the effectiveness of workplaces or the economy. The DfEE attempts to bridge this gap through drawing upon additional sources of evidence:

Employers cannot compete in an increasingly global, knowledge-based economy without a workforce able to add real value at every level. One in five employers reports a significant gap in their workers' skills. And over a third of those companies with a literacy and numeracy skills gap say that they have lost business or orders to competitors because of it. Industry loses an estimated £4.8 billion a year because of poor literacy and numeracy skills.

(DfEE 2001a: Section 3.4)

This quote is misleading because these claims do not estimate how many of the employers who reported skills gaps referred specifically to a skills gap with adult literacy and numeracy skills. Campbell's research (2001) has demonstrated that basic skills have become more important to employers, but this research also shows that basic skills are considered to be less significant than generic and IT skills. Methodologically, Campbell raises a further problem with existing research by suggesting that there is a research bias: whilst employers will consider basic skills to be important to them if they are asked directly about them, employers do not independently raise them as important issues (2001). Concerns have also been expressed in relation to the adult literacy agenda that the benefits for the country might not be the same as benefits for the individual. Although there is some evidence which suggests that increasing one's literacy skills at Level 1 will result in an increase

in one's income (Campbell 2001), Bynner et al's statistical analysis of the national cohort studies for the DfES (Bynner, McIntosh et al. 2001) shows that the returns to the individual of improving literacy skills at level 1 are marginal for one birth cohort and not significant for the other birth cohort once other related factors are subtracted from the analysis. This appears to challenge the earlier claim made in *A Fresh Start* that 'both literacy and numeracy have a profound effect on earnings' (Moser, 1999: 3.5). In interview Lord Moser suggests that the economic concerns and benefits were mainly being discussed in terms of the country as a whole,

... from society's point of view, the fact that there are these perhaps millions of people who are not contributing to the economy – looking at it not from the individual's point of view but from the government's point of view – not contributing to the economy as much as they could if they were literate or numerate...

The policy approach to up-skilling the workforce also has critics who suggest that the focus on Level 1 skills might not be the most effective way of improving the economy. The rates of return for improving skills at Level 3 have been seen to be higher than those from increasing skills at Level 1 and the success of economies such as Hong Kong and Singapore, both of which have high levels of illiteracy, raises questions over the dependency of economic competition upon literacy skills (Robinson 1997). More critically, Frank Coffield questions the very assumption made about the links between the economy and education: "the alleged link between investment in education and economic performance is a belief rather than an established research finding. Despite extensive research, no causal connection has been found and yet the skills growth model remains the central plank of government policy on education and employment." (Coffield 2000: 8) Coffield recognises the

popularity of this form of thinking but he is critical of its theoretical and empirical claims. Considering the question of why the thesis should be so popular if it is so poor, he suggests that “the consensus continues to be referred to reverentially on public platforms as though it contained articles of unquestionable faith” (Coffield 1999: 486).

While there are many and diverse criticisms of the claims that have been made of the economic consequences of the country’s literacy levels, the policy texts do not acknowledge or respond to these criticisms. Debate is not entered into, and the claims do not become more carefully evidenced as the criticisms crescendo. There are also instances, within the policy discourse, where the evidence is misrepresented. One example of this was made by David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education and Employment, in his speech to launch the Skills for Life strategy. Blunkett stated that,

People with poor basic skills earn an average of £50,000 less than those with GCSE level qualifications over their working lives, and are more likely to have health problems or to turn to crime... As a country we are around 20% less productive than the Germans (measured by real hourly wage) and we estimate that around two thirds of this shortfall (13% of the 20%) is due to our weaker literacy and numeracy skills.

This is not evidence; this is estimation and surmise couched in persuasive language. The use of emotive language and dubious statistics mythologises the problem of low levels of literacy.

## 6.4 Social Claims

Low literacy skills are seen to be an obstacle preventing individuals from being able to help themselves and increasing their dependency on others. Unlike the claims made around economic consequences, there is substantial correlative evidence which informs this thinking. *A Fresh Start* extensively uses Bynner et al's findings from the cohort studies to show that compared to those with 'adequate' skills, adults with poor basic skills are less likely to be healthy, more likely to be homeless, less likely to be involved in public life or vote, and are over-represented in prisons and young offenders institutions. *Better Basic Skills* (DfEE 1999a), the government's response to *A Fresh Start*, escalates these claims "poor basic skills are **one of the main contributory factors** to a cycle of poverty and disadvantage which is passed on from generation to generation" (2, my emphasis). Returning to the correlative evidence from the cohort studies, David Blunkett states in his foreword to the *Skills for Life* strategy that "people with low levels of basic skills are more likely to have health problems, or to turn to crime". He goes on to estimate that the combination of the benefits to the economy and the reductions to the welfare state which would be accrued from improving adult basic skills levels could amount to as much as £10 billion. (DfEE 2001a, Foreword)

As was discussed in the previous chapter, social exclusion can be seen as a major preoccupation of the new Labour Government since 1997 and education has been seen to be a major policy tool for tackling this: "education is seen as one of the main powers left to national government... and there is a view that this power should be exercised in such a way as to promote social justice and social cohesion." (Hodgson and Spours 1999: Preface) While New Labour is seen to accept the economic logic of

capitalist globalisation, they also recognise the requirements on the state to provide support and opportunities for people to help themselves. Garmarnikow and Green (1999) describe New Labour's policies as being a combination of economic and social considerations:

... empowering individuals, families and communities to lift themselves out of poverty, unemployment and social exclusion by a combination of individual responsibility, education, social support and welfare to work initiatives.

(Garmarnikow and Green 1999: 105)

The lack of literacy skills in the adult population is also seen to have potential consequences for the effective improvement of literacy levels at schools because of the need for parents, grandparents and other carers to have the necessary skills to aid literacy development in children,

... it is likely that parents with limited basic skills will be less able to give their children a good start, or to help them if they have problems. Failure to address the skills needs of adults, particularly of parents and grandparents, would therefore undermine the Government's National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies.

(Moser 1999: 3.8)

Internationally, the OECD finds that while the direct costs of not developing human capital are seen to be a lack of productivity and competitiveness in the workplace, "human capital investment can also give rise to a wide range of non-economic benefits, including greater social cohesion, lower crime and better health" (OECD 1998: 53), and the "poorly trained adults who cannot adapt to new conditions and labour market demands face increased risks of social alienation and economic



exclusion” (OECD, 1995: 22) The consequences of low literacy skills are seen to extend beyond the impact upon the individual’s ability to learn and the individual’s contribution to the workplace: low levels of literacy are shown by the IALS data to correlate with many factors of social exclusion which result in associated welfare costs to the state. Improving adult literacy levels is, therefore, seen to have a positive impact upon the economy because people are seen to become less dependent upon welfare benefits as they become more employable and contribute to the state through increased tax revenues. In terms of the expenditure on the welfare state, the macroeconomic modelling of the birth cohort surveys (Bynner, McIntosh et al. 2001) recognises “the fact that as earning and employment levels increase tax returns improve and benefit levels reduce” (7). The recommendation is that literacy should be a critical element in designing policies to lessen the economic burden associated with increasing dependency costs to the state (OECD 1995: 22), and this recommendation has clearly been embraced within the *Skills for Life* strategy.

#### **6.4.1 Questioning the Social Claims**

The 1997 IALS survey importantly states that low skills are not just evident among marginalized groups but also across significant proportions of the adult population. The figure of £10 billion in benefits to the country if adult literacy levels are improved (Foreword, *Skills for Life*) is estimated from research carried out by the consultants Ernst and Young in 1993. There are two main problems with the appropriation of this research to provide policy evidence. Firstly, literacy has been prioritised as an issue in the late 1990s due to the rapid changes in society at the end of the twentieth century, but these claims are taken from data collected at the beginning of the 1990s. The enormity of the changes both observed and predicted

within the policy texts suggests that the figure will be at best outdated, at worst obsolete. Secondly, the computation of the statistic has been reached through the combination of the costs of lower incomes, reduced productivity, poorer health, and the consequential costs of benefits and welfare services. This seems to be a portmanteau statistic which assumes that low literacy levels are a cause of these costs, rather than considering that low literacy levels may exist alongside these other social costs of poverty.

Whereas *Skills for Life* concentrates upon the negative consequences of low levels of literacy, *A Fresh Start* emphasises some of the non-economic benefits that increasing levels of literacy will have for the individual. These hypothetical benefits include understanding letters from the council, parents being able to read printed health information relating to their child, or “one of the most powerful needs for literacy remains the ability to read a newspaper” (1999: 6.11). Some of these examples can be traced forwards into *Skills for Life*, for example “whether we are reading a newspaper or the instructions on a medicine bottle, using a bus or train timetable, or working out whether we can afford to buy something, not being able to understand written words could make our day a source of worry, uncertainty or stress.” (DfEE 2001a: 3.1), but although these examples are similar, *Skills for Life* focuses upon the problems for the individual of not being able to do these things, rather than considering the benefits of being able to do them. Whereas *A Fresh Start* looks at the benefits of being literate, *Skills for Life* looks at the detrimental effects of lacking literacy. This may allow similar examples to be cited, but one offers a positive picture, the other describes the negatives. Being able to carry out these tasks independently is a form of empowerment.

Writing for the NIACE journal *Adults Learning* in 2001, Malcolm Wicks, then Minister for Lifelong Learning, states that economic benefits are not the only concern of the Labour Government's commitment to lifelong learning, "In today's world, learning is an economic and social imperative, as well as something we cherish in its own right for the value it brings to our lives." While the social and economic imperatives are strongly stated in the *Skills for Life* strategy, there is a lack of statement on the value that learning literacy might have in "its own right".

### **6.5 Notions of Responsibility**

The notion of responsibility for the lack of adult literacy skills can be seen to alter between the appointment of the Moser working group and the publication of *A Fresh Start*, and this seems to mark the end of an extreme shift from the discourse of *A Right to Read* (1974) which emphasised strongly the state's responsibility for this state of affairs. In his foreword to *A Fresh Start*, Moser describes how the working group were "stimulated throughout by the feeling that we were dealing with something 'big'" and the report rests on the premise that a 'civilised society' should not have failed so many of its people. There is a sense of moral outrage that the compulsory schooling system had failed so many people and the strategy presents the need for the state to address its previous failing:

It is a shocking state of affairs in this rich country, and a sad reflection on past decades of schooling and policy priorities over the years.

(Moser 1999: Foreword)

Although in *Skills for Life*, the Government states that “the aim of any civilised society... must be the virtual elimination of poor literacy and numeracy” (DfEE 2001a: 1.7), thereby keeping some sense of a moral agenda, the responsibility for the problem has shifted from the society to the individual. At the launch of *A Fresh Start*, the report of the Moser committee, Claus Moser emphasised the social impact of poor literacy and numeracy skills upon the individual and the responsibilities that the country carried for these individuals,

The fact that perhaps as many as 7 million adults in England have more or less severe problems with literacy and numeracy is staggering, and indeed shocking in this rich country.... It is a sad reflection on decades of poor schooling and past government priorities. The consequences are devastating – for society, for the economy, and above all for the individuals and families concerned. For many of them it spells a direct path to social exclusion.

Press release from the Working Group on Post-School Basic Skills,  
25<sup>th</sup> March, 1999. Taken from BSA archives.

Moser’s choice of language and syntax make a clear distinction between the individuals who lack the basic skills and the deficiency of basic skills. A lack of basic skills is a problem, whether to the individual or to the society, but the individual lacking basic skills is not, within the phrasing, the problem. It is the lack of basic skills which “spells a direct path to social exclusion”, not the individual. This contrasts with later policy texts where the individual who lacks basic skills becomes both the problem and the cause of their problem.

The Moser report acknowledges that a problem of motivation exists, but this is attributed in part to factors which are not the fault of the individual, and the final report as well as the minutes from these meetings strongly indicate that the state should set about rectifying the problems it has caused these individuals by failing to develop their literacy skills at school. In pronounced contrast to this, *Skills for Life* opens with the comment that “inertia and fatalism – not least among low-skilled individuals – are our chief enemies.” (DfEE 2001a: Foreword). Rather than seeking to understand the lack of motivation, as *A Fresh Start* does to some extent, the strategy text states that “there is evidence that some unemployed adults still have a deep-seated reluctance to address their literacy and numeracy needs.” This expectation which is being placed upon learners seems to be a logical extension of the argument that improving people’s literacy skills is an economic imperative. Whereas the Moser report stressed the choice to take up learning opportunities should rest with the individual, *Skills for Life* anticipates that “identifying the one in five adults with literacy and numeracy skill difficulties, and bringing them back into learning, is critical to our success.”

Alongside the shift in the notions of responsibility within these reports, one can observe the gradual development of what is seen to be the “typical” adult with low literacy levels. The statistics are written into the texts as though the correlative claims are representative of an individual with basic skills, rather than being features of a cohort of people within the survey. This serves to generate a narrative conceit of a “poorly literate everyman”. This individual, who has a propensity to crime and ill health, doesn’t earn as much money as his or her contemporaries, and is crippled by inertia and fatalism (to refer to just some of the characteristics that are developed in

*Skills for Life*) contrasts with real people who might have low literacy levels but who are unlikely to display this accumulation of social and economic factors. Perhaps, as one of my interviewees pointed out, the personification of the average illiterate from the statistics remains unchallenged by the policy makers because many people involved in the development of the policy have never met any adults with low levels of literacy. This interviewee was particularly scathing of both the strategy and the lack of practitioner representation on the Moser working group: “Why don’t they use young teachers and learners? What is it that makes somebody like Claus Moser, who can’t have ever met anyone who can’t read or write, think that he knows better than me?” (3Pr4) One possible answer to this point could be that the working group focused upon recruiting members who were seen to have some level of political influence and clout, this would explain the presence of five professors, two senior members of local authorities and two senior members of industry. It is relevant that the membership of the Moser working group did not have any current practitioners – three members were principals of colleges, and two members had previous basic skills teaching experience, but none of the members was a current practitioner. Two expert seminars were held with practitioners near the start of the Moser group’s consultation, but the content of these meetings does not appear to have been disseminated back to the main group through the minutes, agendas or research reports which can be accessed in the BSA archives. The member of the Moser working group quoted above reflected that “really nobody was interested in these meetings or in what the teachers had to say”(3Pr4). The lack of practitioner involvement can perhaps explain why the Moser report does not have a particular focus on pedagogical issues: another member of the working group recalled, “I thought we would spend far more time on the pedagogical questions: what is it that enables adults to get out of these problems?

How can you compress years of schooling into two or three weeks?” (1Ac1) Instead, the report focuses on the infrastructure of a possible strategy to address a problem which is presented in detail.

In *Skills for Life* and the surrounding policy texts published through DfES and through the press releases to the media, the consequences of low levels of adult literacy are depersonalised from their relevance to the individual and increasingly described in terms of their impact upon the country’s economy and society’s cohesiveness. This depersonalisation results in the strategy seeming to have relevance to each and every one of us: with improved literacy levels we will all be more affluent, the strategy seems to imply, because the economy will be more competitive; with improved literacy levels society will be safer and there will be fewer criminals and unemployed people to present negative social costs to the welfare state. In contrast, the cause of low levels of literacy have been personalised, marking a shift from assuming that the “state” is to blame for failing to provide sufficient levels of compulsory education, to inferring that those with low levels of literacy skills have only themselves, and their “inertia and fatalism” to blame. This shift relates to changing the changing concept of the state by New Labour. According to the 1997 manifesto, New Labour intended to design a modern welfare state based on rights and duties going together (The Labour Party 1997). These duties are seen to be “imposed” by an inclusive society upon “individuals and parents as well as on society as a whole” (Blair 1998: 131), leading to the sense that individuals have a responsibility to their society, as well as that society having a responsibility towards them. Inherent in this is the change in the concept of the welfare state from a safety net to a spring board. A key element of the adult literacy strategy is the notion that the state will

encourage people onto the “springboard” through the publicising of opportunities (through the Get On advertising campaign), through highlighting where the individual has problems (through the screening of JobSeekers and other benefits claimants), and in some Pathfinder areas through offering rewards and sanctions relating to individuals’ involvement, or lack of involvement, on courses.

### **6.5.1 The Gremlins**

In addition to the strategy presenting the problem of adult literacy through policy texts, there was also a large-scale national promotional campaign to raise public awareness of the effects of low levels of literacy. A long-term national promotion campaign was launched in September 2001 on both television and radio. Real life situations, such as needing to look up train times from a timetable or joining in a karaoke-singing competition, were depicted and the feelings of the person lacking literacy or numeracy skills were personified as small deformed men in boiler suits, who were labelled as Gremlins. The primary purpose of these advertisements was to motivate people to “get on”, to combat their Gremlins through taking action to improve their levels of basic skills (Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit 2003). The advertising campaign was developed by St Luke’s Advertising Agency. When I spoke to Stuart Barnes, at St. Lukes, about this campaign, he explained that market research had shown that different things motivated different people but that a common theme across these different groups of adults was their feelings of frustration and fear when they needed to do something demanding reading or writing skills. These feelings were where the idea of the Gremlins came from. Personifying feelings as Gremlins was intended to remove any personal sense of failing: the person could blame their “Gremlin” rather than blaming themselves. The advertisements advised adults to call



a hotline telephone number. People who contacted this number were sent a 'Get On' video which offered a practical overview of what people could do to improve their skills levels. By taking action to improve literacy skills, the adult could then combat their Gremlin. The balance between humour and menace in the advertisements was intended to motivate the non-learner by making them feel uncomfortable about the situation.

Matthew Lumby, the communications officer for ABSSU during my research, made slightly more ambitious claims for the advertisements. Although presenting individuals with basic skills difficulties, he suggested that they were intended to appeal to a much wider audience than the 7 million who were estimated to have basic skills needs; they were also intended to raise the awareness of the general public whose colleagues, friends or families might have basic skills needs. By the time of our telephone interview in the autumn of 2002, Matthew Lumby felt that this strategy had been successful: a large number of adults had telephoned the hotline number, and recognition of the advertisements had been sufficiently substantial so that they were parodied on a mainstream television comedy show. Lumby also suggested that the promotion campaign also had a broader social aim which was to alter the general public's awareness of basic skills in the UK: again this is difficult to evaluate, but suggests that ABSSU also had a more ambitious consciousness-raising agenda alongside its focus on increasing the skills levels of a proportion of the adult population. In interview, Lumby was able to claim that "Market research shows that [the Gremlins] are now recognised by 91% of the public", but the only response that I could find through an internet search which excluded practitioner responses was the following:

In the UK we have some TV adverts for adults who can't read or write... and they say they've got 'reading gremlins' who cackle "YOU CAN'T RE-EA-AD!" when someone asks you to fill out a form .. according to the advert. I find it funny anyway... Peace out.

The advertising campaign was primarily influenced by a deficit model of adult literacy, concentrating attention on what people were unable to do due to their lack of skills, rather than addressing what they could do. The advertisements presented aural and visual representations of the feelings of inadequacy and embarrassment that a person was imagined to feel in relation to tasks that they were unable to do. This approach contrasted with the more practical and positive approach taken in the supporting video sent out to people who contacted the hotline number. The use of shock tactics and the representational device of the Gremlins provoked substantial consternation amongst many practitioners. Through their comments on a range of practitioner-focused email discussion groups, some practitioners acknowledged that their learners had been motivated by the advertisements, for example "I think that the Gremlins adverts are good in that they show 'people like me' in everyday situations at home and work who have a hidden secret that bothers them... I do think this encourages those who can identify with [the figures in the adverts] to get to grips with the issue and take action"; but the vast majority of practitioners voiced their concern over the choice of the Gremlins and the negative tone that had been adopted towards basic skills problems. Quotes taken from the email discussion groups included concern over the visual characteristics of the Gremlins (for example: "The frightening Gremlin image is quite inappropriate"); matters of discrimination in the personification ("They are people with different skin colours and physical

characteristics – including a “vertically challenged” actor. They are clearly adults who laugh and poke fun at other adults and this is not the role model that should be encouraged”); and comments over the “patronising and offensive” content of the advertisements. Although practitioners had had no input into the development of the adverts, their response to the broadcasts was monitored by the DfES: the liveliness of the electronic debate led Matthew Lumby to interject that the extent of the conversation amongst practitioners was an example of the success of the campaign: “Well, the one thing that you can’t say about the Gremlins is that they don’t get people talking!”

In the sense that it is difficult to evaluate the success of the advertisements in reaching the target of reducing the number of adults with basic skills problems, the relationship between the strategy and the promotion campaign is problematic. Although brand recognition can be tested and the numbers of people who telephone the hotline can be counted, this does not reflect the numbers of individuals who will then enrol upon an adult literacy or numeracy course, or who will achieve a basic skills qualification in the future. Several practitioners voiced their concerns over the email discussion groups that they had not received the anticipated increase in student numbers following the advertisements: “from our point of view we seem to get a trickle, say an average of one a month – referrals from the basic skill referral line... I know the figures being bandied about eighteen months ago suggested we should be getting much higher numbers.” Although some practitioners also felt that more people had enrolled on courses, there seemed to be no rigorous way distinguishing how many people developed their skills as a consequence of the adverts. There seems to be a tension here between the determination of many aspects of the strategy to measure

outcomes, for example through accreditation or inspection, but the decision to not put in place any means of evaluating the outcomes of the advertising campaign. Furthermore, this marketing strategy was in tension with research carried out by the NFER which had found that the most successful method for promoting programmes was through personal contact, rather than through advertisement. (NFER 2003)

## **6.6 Conclusions**

This chapter provides evidence for four main claims:

1. The ‘problem’ and extent of low levels of adult literacy is contentious and open to debate.
2. Policy focus has shifted from the causes to the consequences of the low levels of adult literacy.
3. Recent policy texts seek to persuade rather than inform the reader of the seriousness of the problem.
4. The prioritisation of the problem of adult literacy complements other buoyant policy concerns.

One of my interviewees from the first set of interviews, a policy player who had been working in policy for many years, observed how the problem of adult literacy was being used to generate a need:

There is a hell of a lot that is kind of Saatchi-driven, and if it looks good and it is glossy and it has got a website and a mug and a t-shirt it is fine! It is like Adrian Mitchell said about poetry: “Most people ignore most poetry because most poetry ignores most people”. It is a bit like that with education. I think that it is, to use the market terminology, supplier-driven, it’s not demand-led. It is

the providers who have got a service who want to sell it, rather than the customers having a need and being able to vocalise that.

And that is part of the problem.

(1Po1)

I have argued in this chapter that the adult literacy strategy has discursively constructed the problem of adult literacy at this moment in history, alongside constructing initiatives to tackle this problem; the tools of this construction have included the selection of evidence, the choice of language, syntax and metaphor, and the design and presentation of the policy texts.

## Chapter 7: The Content of the Strategy

### 7.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an analysis of the structure and the content of the Skills for Life adult literacy strategy. As Bowe et al (1992) have demonstrated, policy is a process rather than a linear communication of concrete ideas from the policy maker to the practitioner; however, in order to analyse the adult literacy strategy through a case study approach, meaningful boundaries must be used to contain this process. My thesis employs three different boundary frameworks:

- (1) Chronological boundaries of the time-span covered in this case study (1997 - March 2002), as was explored in chapter four;
- (2) The textual boundaries which contain the discursive construction of the strategy (Figure 2.3 outlines the different texts that have been drawn on in this thesis);
- (3) The boundaries of the content of the strategy.

This chapter concentrates on the third of these and seeks to map the boundaries of the content of the strategy. Unlike chapters six and eight which use analysis to deconstruct elements of the strategy, the problem and the solution respectively, this chapter uses analysis to construct the content of the strategy into a whole. This is not a reconstruction because there is no one detailed construction of the Skills for Life strategy that contains all of the initiatives - any construction of the strategy that exists in policy texts is limited by its perspective within the strategy. Through drawing upon the diversity of viewpoints offered by my interviewees, I aim to bring together these different perspectives to offer a comprehensive view of the strategy from the outside.

As will be discussed in chapter nine, this construction is not easy and does not offer a neat and coherent model. The messiness of the strategy and its internal tensions and contradictions are part of the findings of this thesis.

Mapping out the structure of the strategy causes several dilemmas in terms of what to include and what to exclude. I have felt that it is important to condense the strategy into manageable areas for the purposes of analysis, but recognise the tensions between this condensation and the need to maintain an awareness of the broader policyscapes of national and international policy (see chapter two). A basic skills strategy forms part of the panoramic vision for education presented in *The Learning Age* (DfEE 1998a) and, within this context at least, basic skills form part of the wider agenda for developing a learning society. This joined-up approach to policy pervades the whole adult literacy strategy: speaking to the Parliamentary Select Committee in November 2001, John Healey, then Minister for Lifelong Learning, explained that:

Adult basic skills is an area where joint work is not just an advantage, it is essential. Adult basic skills was the number one of twenty-five pledges we made in the manifesto in June, it is and will remain my number one priority as a minister. I have responsibility for meeting that target but restricted control over being able to do so, because delivering that will depend on what the new Job Centre does, the Prison Service does, the Army does, the NHS does.

Similarly the *Skills for Life* document (2001) refers to every Government department having responsibility to tackle low levels of adult basic skills, and this is again reinforced by Malcolm Wicks: “What is to be done? The Government have clear views about that, but we do not have a monopoly of wisdom. As I shall explain, we

need the assistance of many institutions and individuals to help us with the crusade that we must mount.” (Wicks 2001). The influence of wider government departments and initiatives has been identified and discussed in chapter four, and in the discussion of influences upon the presentation of the problem of adult literacy in chapter five. One key area of this chapter is the extent of consultation or negotiation between different organisations which has taken place during the formation of different aspects of the strategy.

## **7.2 Thematic Structure**

There are few attempts to provide an overview of the strategy. The two main models that I have been able to access have both been developed internally by ABSSU. In interview in October 2000, Susan Pember showed me a diagram of the structure of the strategy which was in use within ABSSU at that time; this project management-style diagram was being used in the development of the strategy, rather than as a descriptive overview of the strategy. Figure 7.1 offers a condensed version of this diagram, demonstrating how the model conceptualised the structure of the strategy according to its three main aims: increasing recruitment; improving retention; and promoting higher achievement.



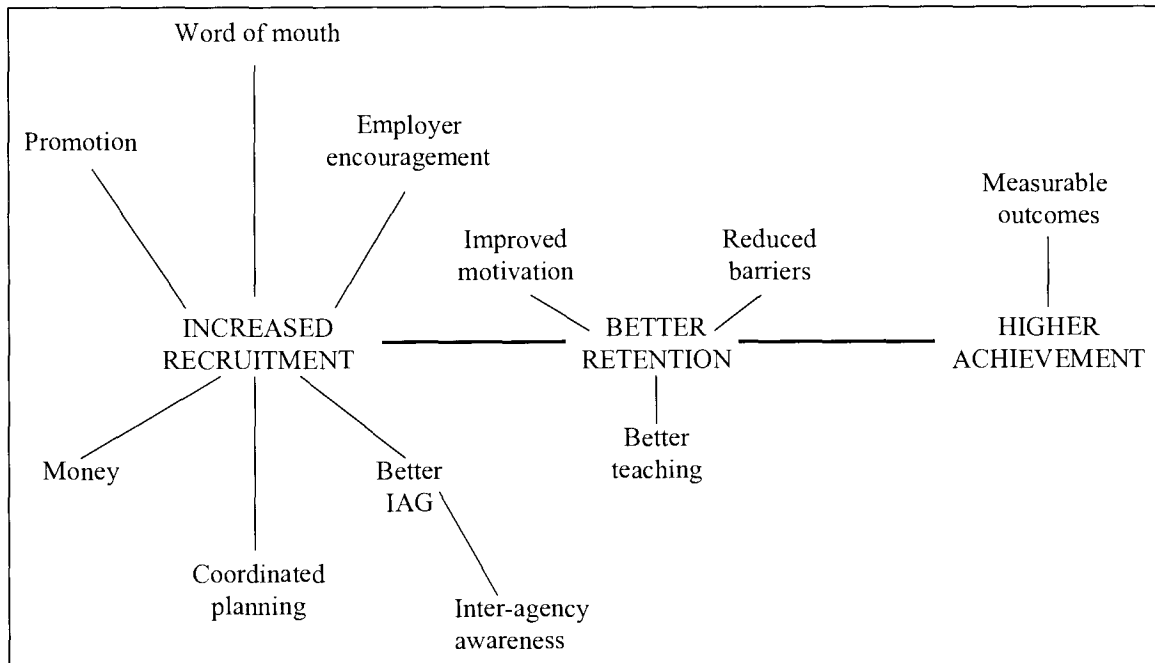


Figure 7.1: Simplified adaptation of ABSSU map of the *Skills for Life* strategy

This model usefully conceptualises the development of the strategy, and organises the different initiatives which were already underway, but it does not provide a sense of the relationships between these different elements. The individual initiatives which form the tools to achieve these objectives are missing from the diagram.

An alternative to this model, also developed by ABSSU, was used to market the strategy in a range of documents following the publication of *Skills for Life* (2001). This model is depicted in Figure 7.2 and divides the strategy into four main areas: boosting demand, ensuring capacity, raising standards, and learner achievement. These areas are used to contain the objectives of the strategy (for example, securing funding, co-ordinating planning, and improving the quality), but again these are not used to organise the separate initiatives into one whole.

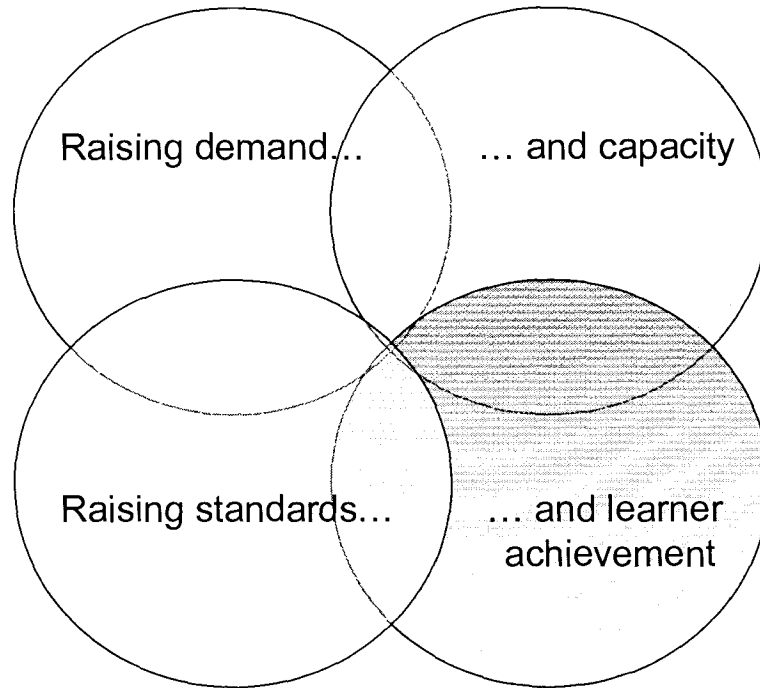


Figure 7.2 Structure of Skills for Life strategy (DfES 2003: 6)

Both of these models can be seen to provide thematic structures of the policy, but they do not co-ordinate the various initiatives of the strategy. Rather than using either of these models, I have sought to create a model which plots out the various initiatives of the strategy, and brings them together into one whole which enables one to understand the relations between them.

### **7.3 Developmental structure**

Rather than adopting either Figure 7.1 or 7.2, I have devised a diagram of the main components of the strategy (see Figure 7.3 below). This diagram visually demonstrates how the different initiatives have been built upon the foundations of the national standards. The block arrows represent direct influence; the curved dashed arrows show how information from some initiatives has been fed back into other areas of the strategy. It is relevant to note at this time that none of the curved dashed arrows

feed back into the curriculum or the standards, neither of these areas is informed or evaluated by the experiences of the different initiatives. Each of the headings will be discussed individually below.

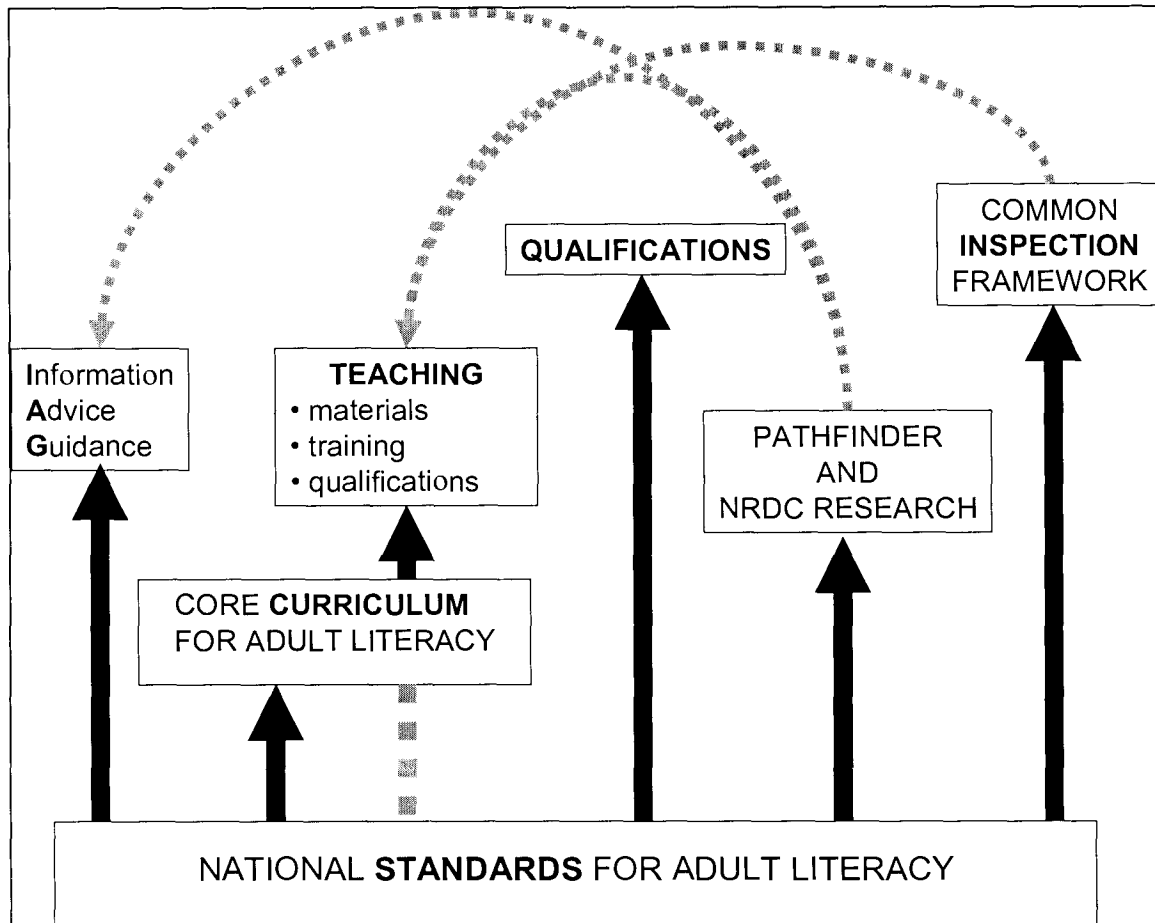


Figure 7.3: Internal structure of the strategy<sup>6</sup>

### 7.3.1 National Standards

The first action taken in developing a national adult basic skills strategy, following the publication of *A Fresh Start*, was the commissioning of the QCA to develop national standards for both adult literacy and adult numeracy. This agenda had already been anticipated in *The Learning Age* (1998a) where it was stated that clear targets for

<sup>6</sup> The large dotted line on the diagram, linking the standards and the curriculum, is intended to show that the teaching materials, training and qualifications are influenced by both the curriculum and the national standards. The smaller curved dotted lines indicate communication and influence between different areas of the strategy.

skills and qualifications would be formulated and a qualifications system would be built which “is easily understood, values both academic and vocational learning, meets employers’ and individuals’ needs, and promotes the highest standards” (DfEE 1998a). As such, as I discussed in chapter five, the development of standards for literacy, numeracy and English as a second Language were part of a wider initiative to rationalise standards across the whole of education and to enable mapping to take place across different educational arenas.

The vocabulary of standards is confusing: the use of the term varies across documents and carries different connotations. *Skills for Life* relates the need for the strategy with “poor educational standards” which are part of the problem faced by deprived communities (DfEE 2001a: 9) and *A Fresh Start* (Moser 1999) reflects that not only are there no clear standards of “what teachers should teach and what learners should learn” (27), but that the standards demanded by the inspectorate (at this time this was Further Education Funding Council, the Training and Skills Council and Ofsted) were “insufficiently rigorous” (14). Slightly confusingly, the Moser report also states that “standards of literacy and numeracy provision have been too poor for too long” and that employer involvement has been discouraged by “inadequate and confusing standards” (48). Similarly, other policy texts talk both of raising standards and of establishing standards: the terms standards has two main uses within these contexts:

1. Standards represent a criterion, something that has been established by an authority in the area as a general model
2. The term ‘standards’ is used as a kind of yardstick to generalise how things are against an ideal notion (which is unexpressed) of what a good standard would be.

Although the publication of national standards was one of the recommendations made by the Moser working group, this was made within the context of recommending a new national basic skills curriculum (recommendation 16); the standards were not seen to have precedence over the curriculum, as became the case later within the strategy. In *Better Basic Skills* (1999), the Government's response to the Moser Report, three main stages are identified as necessary to develop the strategy for adult basic skills. These are:

- Building a firm foundation
- Building capacity
- A step-change in participation and achievement

The metaphor of a “firm foundation” is apt for the role that the national standards take in the adult literacy strategy: this notion of standards is related to setting up a criterion or definition of the skills that one would need to be classed as literate at the different levels. This metaphor is developed in later policy texts that develop similar architectural metaphors, such as the standards representing the underpinning of the strategy (DfEE 2001a), and has been used earlier in the Moser report where the standards are referred to as an important ‘cornerstone’. Figure 7.3 represents the national standards as the foundations upon which the other areas of the strategy rest.

The first step of building a firm foundation can be seen to consist of establishing a clear and coherent system of basic skills education and this, in turn, is dependent upon having a clear understanding of what adults should be able to achieve. The standards are the outcome of a review of similar frameworks including the national literacy strategy for schools, the national curriculum levels for English and the key skills of

communications; therefore the foundations of the literacy strategy derive from a broader context of literacy and communication across the compulsory and FE areas of education. The standards produced by the QCA map onto each of these areas as outlined in Figure 5.3. While adult literacy, as a field of educational practice, has a history quite distinct from compulsory schooling, as I demonstrated in my overview of the history in chapter four, the national standards fix adult literacy to the context of compulsory schooling. This has ramifications for the entire strategy.

As was discussed in chapter three, the national standards define literacy as the “fundamental skills that every adult needs to be able to progress at work and in society in general” (QCA 1999: 1) and seek to “specify the full range of skills required for an adult to communicate confidently, effectively and efficiently” (2). The choice of the vocabulary of confidence, effectiveness and efficiency is not explored in more detail, although the standards provide a specification of all the skills that are seen to form “literacy”. The standards assume a linear definition of literacy: a learner can progress through the various levels to reach a functional proficiency. This conceptualisation is similar to that criticised by Street (1997) as the evolutionary pyramid approach to adult literacy. The standards underpin other developments in the adult literacy strategy including the curricula, qualifications, national tests, screening and diagnostic assessment materials, national baseline survey of need, and the new teaching qualifications. In interview for this research, Susan Pember explained that the national standards were vital for consistency and coherence across the strategy, they presented a means of making sure that “we are all singing from the same hymn sheet”.

Importantly, while the QCA standards represent levels of attainment that are consistent with the levels of attainment across compulsory and post-compulsory education, they are not consistent with the earlier levels of attainment set out by the BSA. This reflects the process through which they were developed. As I discussed in chapter five, the standards were created by the QCA, not as a response to the Moser working group report but as part of a wider remit of changes in education. In interview with Alan Wells, I was informed clearly that the BSA had nothing to do with the development of these standards. Although some public consultation took place over the standards, none of my interviewees were able to clarify what happened to consultative responses that were given to the QCA, and the time span within which these responses needed to be made was extremely tight. Furthermore, as is represented in Figure 7.3, the experiences learnt through the implementation of different areas of the strategy will not feed back into the standards: the standards will be reviewed in 2007, but until then they are, to return to the architectural metaphors, set in stone. As Susan Pember explained, this is a necessity if the strategy is going to be consistent and coherent:

The standards are the standards, right... They are not flexible. They are not flexible but they will be reviewed, because we need some basis to work with. We also need a base because the qualifications are set on that. ... the standards have to stay as the standards.

However, as I shall argue in the next chapter, if the standards are fixed and are not open to review, then the success of the strategy becomes defined by something that has itself been set up within that strategy: this risks circularity. One example of this circularity is illustrated by the relationship between the test, the national targets, and

the standards. The standards are used to justify the value of the national test: the national test is seen to provide a clear assessment of what an individual can achieve through direct reference to the content of the national standards. The national test is used as a measure to meet the national targets, for example 750,000 adults are expected to achieve level 1 or level 2 in the national tests by 2004 as a measure of the success of the strategy. But this measure of the strategy's success rests the levels categorised in the national standards, rather than any kind of external measure. This circularity is returned to in the next chapter. If one does not accept the categorisation of literacy set out in the national standards, then it might become difficult to become engaged in any element of the strategy. To extend the metaphors above, if the foundations of a building are underdeveloped or unstable, then the whole building will lack stability. If one is unable to improve the foundations, then it becomes unlikely that one can improve the rest of the building with any substantial degree of effectiveness. Outside of the policy borrowing from the school strategy, there is no clear theoretical rationale for the concept of literacy which is made in the national standards and which, in turn, informs every aspect of the strategy. This point has been made in chapter three and will be returned to in the conclusion of the thesis.

### **7.3.2 Core curriculum**

The report from the Moser working group identified a new curriculum for literacy as a crucial element in its proposed adult literacy strategy, and the adult literacy curriculum was developed following the publication of *A Fresh Start*. The purpose of the curriculum is described in the opening of the document:

It sets out the entitlement to learning for all adults who have difficulties with literacy and numeracy. It describes the content of



what should be taught in literacy and numeracy programmes. .. It assists teachers to meet the individual needs of adults through the selection and teaching of skills appropriate to those adults' needs. For the first time, adults and the teachers who work with them have a clear set of skills required to meet national standards, together with the knowledge and understanding that underpin those skills, supported by sample strategies to develop them.

(Basic Skills Agency 2001: 1)

The core curriculum was developed primarily by the BSA and Cambridge Training and Development (CTAD). The introduction to the curriculum suggests that it is intended to be used as a tool, clarifying what learners should achieve to meet the national standards. The curriculum also provides examples of pedagogic exercises, and acts to regulate practice by laying out the entitlement to provision for all learners (Basic Skills Agency 2001). Tensions can be observed here between the normative, regulatory purpose of the curriculum, and its use as a creative and supportive pedagogic stimulus. Although the core curriculum closely cross-references the national standards, and is also influenced by the national curriculum for English in schools, key skills and their curricula, and initiatives that have been developed in other countries, my interviews with people within the BSA suggested that the curriculum had greater similarities with previous BSA curricula, such as WordPower, than to the QCA standards.

Whereas the national standards “have been devised primarily for use by designers of qualifications, developers of curricula and those who are responsible for providing

training and support for adult literacy and numeracy” (QCA 1999:1), the curriculum is primarily aimed at practitioners, and is therefore written in a more accessible way. As I discussed in the earlier methodology chapter, Bowe et al (1992) borrow Barthes’ distinction between texts which are “readerly” (that is resistant to interpretations other than those intended by the author), and texts which are “writerly” (able to generate new interpretations and meanings through the reader’s context). This distinction seems to be apt for a comparison of the national standards which contain relatively fixed meanings, in which sense they are “readerly” texts, and the curriculum which is aimed at developing teachers’ ideas for their own practices, in which sense it is a “writerly” text. In the conclusion to this thesis, I speculate on the future of the strategy and suggest that the model of literacy within this strategy might be altered as the strategy gains a greater presence in the ‘context of implementation’ (Bowe, Ball et al. 1992); the confidence to use the curriculum as a creative tool might prove to be a spur in this appropriation and change of the strategy, converting the strategy from being “readerly” to becoming “writerly”.

### **7.3.3 Information, Advice and Guidance**

One of the recommendations published by the Moser working group was that people might not be in programmes of study, even if they know about their existence, because of a lack of knowledge of what might be at stake for them personally and what they could potentially gain by improving their basic skills. Alongside the general marketing of the strategy through learndirect and the Get On campaign (discussed in the previous chapter), the Skills for Life strategy also attempted to ‘personalise’ the message. Key priority groups were identified and government staff who worked at the “front line” with members of the general public were trained so that they were able to

recognise basic skills problems and provide suitable information, advice and guidance to these adults. This training initially focused upon staff working in Job Centres and Neighbourhood Nurseries, which reflected the focus on developing awareness of skills need amongst the key priority groups of parents and the unemployed.

New diagnostic tools were also commissioned as a means of assessing adults' needs so that potential learners could be best directed towards appropriate provision. These tools were intended to give "a thorough indication of not only which level an individual needs to be placed within for each subject, but also which specific areas of work they need to improve on." (Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit 2003b). The diagnostic tools referenced the national standards, maintaining coherence with the strategy as a whole in the notion of what skills the individual had and which skills she/he needed to develop. *Skills for Life* also recommended that all courses should include an individually monitored action plan for each learner. As with the IALS tests, these measuring tools provide an assessment of need as defined by the tool rather than an assessment of the individual's perceived needs: the assessment is of rather than with the individual. This distinction is referred to again in section 7.4.2 when I discuss the differences between perceptions of problems.

The IAG elements of the strategy were relatively vague and undeveloped during the time span of my case study and it is worth hypothesising why this area of the strategy wasn't a priority: one could perhaps argue that there was less policy concern about where people were initially slotted into the strategy, and more focus on the measuring of outcomes associated with the strategy, the points where people exit. This would

suggest that the strategy was ends-oriented, a hypothesis that might be worth further analysis in future research.

### **7.3.4 Teaching**

#### **7.3.4.1 Teaching materials**

*A Fresh Start* presented the need for a wide range of provision in basic skills using the broadest range of technology to ensure the greatest flexibility of location: the ideas in the report included the use of digital television and internet to provide tailored learning in the learner's own home. Similarly, *Skills for Life* envisages a range of provision of adult basic skills courses including dedicated provision through, for example, family literacy programmes for parents; full-time courses, including intensive 'booster' courses; part-time courses; and self-study, 'mentored' learning. Following the emphasis on choice that is expressed in *A Fresh Start*, the strategy document suggests that learning will be available in a wide range of informal settings, outside traditional classroom locations, including, for example, shopping malls, libraries and pubs. One strategic aim is to place learning closer to people's homes, in a non-threatening environment that reinforces their confidence and helps to maintain their interest and motivation. However this aim appears to be in tension with funding methodologies which demand quality control mechanisms that FE is better able to meet because of the experiences, expertise, and size of the institutions. This means that smaller community organizations are likely to be more vulnerable to not being able to meet the quality criteria demanded by the LSC. Thus, though the strategy is prioritizing a diversity of provision in one way, it is restricting diversity in other ways.

The issues around teaching materials is another example of the tensions between the notions of flexibility and quality. The development of amateur teaching resources by practitioners was seen to have been a previous weakness in this area:

For many years, teachers of adult literacy and numeracy have had to draw teaching materials from disparate sources. This is not only inefficient, it can also lead to inconsistent quality. To ensure uniformly high standards, the Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit, working with National Training Organisations and other relevant national bodies, will commission a bank of professionally produced materials for use by teachers across the country.

(DfEE 2001a: 125)

One practitioner, who was interviewed towards the end of my case study, voiced mixed feelings around the professionalisation of teaching resources; while recognising that “the packs have been produced so far from this project are quite useful... Even if you are not going to use it, you can develop it, and you can see that as a form of review”(3Pr5); this practitioner questioned the pedagogical adequacy of these materials. The professional appearance of the materials was admired but the theory upon which they rested was considered, by this practitioner, to be inadequate. The practitioner’s reservations related both to the concept of literacy and to the pedagogy assumed to be good practice in the texts. The focus upon the quality of appearance was seen by ABSSU to be an important aspect of motivating students:

Our literacy and numeracy skills strategy is designed to give those who need to improve their literacy and numeracy skills a flexible

and high quality learning experience which will motivate them to achieve.

(DfEE 2001a: 111)

Professionally produced materials have the advantage of being glossy, something that is normally lacking from photocopied work-sheets, but their use also alters the role of the teacher from a developer of teaching materials and pedagogy, to a “curriculum courier” to borrow a metaphor from Michael Fielding (1994). This raises issues of how a strategy can use standardisation as a means of ensuring quality while simultaneously promoting diversity and flexibility.

Other teaching materials include the development of a website (readwriteplus) by ABSSU for tutors, learners, and others to enable people to communicate their ideas. A further website was commissioned from the BBC to provide on-line teaching resources for learners and tutors (Skillswise). At the time of this case study, the BBC site was more dynamic and personalised towards the learner, including a weekly email to subscribed users and changing articles; in contrast, the ABSSU site was more static. In part, this was due to its attempt to provide an information site for practitioners and other stakeholders, as well as a place to stimulate learners and provide information on the national tests. These resources are referenced to the national standards. The plans for using digital television have not been realised due to the limited extent of this technology.

#### **7.3.4.2 Teacher training**

A major priority in the development of the adult basic skills strategy was to develop the skills of the tutor. The *Skills for Life* strategy has a consistent focus on quality and improving the quality of the learning experience was seen to be dependent upon improving the quality of the training and support available to teachers. (DfES 2002). In interview, Susan Pember described the situation prior to the strategic changes as follows:

So when you actually analyse this group of tutors, as you probably know already, they have the least training over the past 10 years, they have had no professional support, they really are not a profession, not all of them are qualified, if they are qualified they are not qualified in literacy or numeracy, the poorest cases are when people have not even got a GCSE in English Language or in Maths, and they are teaching up to level 2 work. In maths particularly, they don't even know the principles of calculation and multiplication, so how on earth can they actually teach it? They know themselves how to maybe do multiplication, but they don't understand the principle underneath it so they can't break it down to the learner. The same with language, they are actually not capable of doing the grammar, it is not brilliant themselves, therefore how.... They might be able to read, but how are they getting those points across to the new learner? So that is why this area of work – why the change needs to be with the tutor and then with management, because why has management let this position come about? Why has management not appreciated 10 years ago

that they had a workforce that wasn't how they may wish in this area of work?

The tutor can be seen to be positioned in different places within the strategy texts. On the one hand, the tutor is often positioned as non-professional and in opposition to the aims of the strategy: for example, the Get On campaign was considered to have disproved practitioners' reservations of using the Gremlins, as I discussed in the previous chapter. Across press releases during this case study, the teachers' role was generally absent, although reference was regularly made to improving teaching materials. In contrast, at the keynote speech to the RaPAL conference in July 2001, Susan Pember talked about "laying down the gauntlet" for practitioners: it was their responsibility to make the strategy work now that ABSSU had provided funding and improved the infrastructure for delivery. In some of these references the practitioner seems to be presented as a tool within the strategy, often a tool whose existence is taken for granted and therefore not mentioned, but in other references, for example in Pember's speech, the practitioner is addressed as a partner within the strategy. While the variation in this might relate in part to the context of the reference (Pember was speaking to an audience which contained a large number of practitioners), there is distinct shift in viewing the practitioner as a deliverer or developer of the strategy.

The curriculum and the national standards were new to this area of education and specialist training was provided, co-ordinated by ABSSU, in the use of these tools. The short-term intensive training courses in the new standards and curricula closely imitated the delivery of similar courses to primary school teachers at the time of the introduction of the national literacy and numeracy strategies in primary schools. Between January and March 2001 around two hundred people attended 'Training the



Trainers' events for adult literacy and numeracy across England. During these events the training materials remained in draft format to allow for potential revision following the delayed publication of the national curriculum and the official launch of the *Skills for Life* strategy. By September 2001, these recently trained trainers delivered short courses on the new curriculum and standards to over 6,000 tutors who taught adult basic skills for more than six hours a week (DfES 2002). The prioritisation of training prior to the publication of the curricula or the finalisation of details on the new inspectorate, demonstrates the urgency in rolling out the vision of the strategy into the practicalities of the classroom. My own experiences of this training as a practitioner demonstrated how challenging this roll-out programme was in reality. As a secondary school teacher I had spent a year studying full-time for a PGCE, and a large part of this time was developing my use of the national curriculum as a scaffolding and quality control tool for my teaching. By the end of this time I was able to use the curriculum confidently, but I also felt confident in recognising weaknesses in the curriculum and using my judgement to sort "the wheat from the chaff". In contrast, as an adult literacy practitioner I attended a two-day training course on the use of the new curriculum which was not sufficient experience for most practitioners to go away and use the curriculum confidently in their own practice. The two curricula, that is the adult curriculum and the school English curriculum, were sufficiently similar for me to apply my PGCE training to my use of the adult literacy national curriculum. I recognise that the training was a short-term measure needed to get teachers up to speed on the new strategy, but my concerns are that a poorly delivered tool will hinder rather than enable practice.

These concerns are alleviated in part by the longer-term intentions of the strategy to provide professional training for adult literacy practitioners. Part of the wider government proposals for adult education at this time stated that all FE teachers were expected to work towards teaching qualifications and, in the period between *A Fresh Start* (Moser 1999) and *Skills for Life* (DfEE 2001), a DfEE/FENTO led steering group began the development of new teaching qualifications for adult basic skills practitioners. This steering group included representation from the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA), Ufi, the Association of Colleges (AoC), BSA, the new Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI), and the University Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET). Consultation was also extended through the publication of the draft teaching standards. The minutes from these meetings state that,

In most subject areas, the FENTO 'generic' standards at the appropriate level combined with an appropriate professional/industry qualification will provide the necessary teaching qualification but for basic skills there are no nationally recognised qualifications to equate with those for e.g. engineering or hairdressing. Consequently, DfEE commissioned FENTO and BSA to develop an initial teacher training standards framework specifically for basic skills teachers.

(Minutes, 28 September 2000)

The minutes from the meetings of the DfEE steering group demonstrate the ongoing conflict of language and one interviewee spoke of the substantial confusion between members over the definition of the term 'standards' and its relevance in outlining

teachers' competencies. Whereas FENTO were committed to the use of the term to refer to the content or knowledge base of a discipline, dissenting voices, for example Ursula Howard, then director of research at the LSDA, felt that the term was too rigid and emotive. Unlike the national standards which were established with only a short period of written consultation, one member of this group, interviewed for my research, felt that the process of consultation, both through the internal make-up of the committee and through the process of external consultation, had been able to change things fundamentally, particularly with reference to the choice of vocabulary:

... the main thing that we changed was from the standards being all about how good people are at reading and writing .... So the standards have moved dramatically from being almost totally absorbed with people's own skills at reading and writing to people's understanding and knowledge about the uses of literacy and language in life and the way in which literacy and language... theoretical and practical frameworks to understand how we acquire literacy... And even better in a way because it is so trivial, they are no longer going to be called standards, they are going to be called subject specifications. And I like that! Because you know that you can't get away from the fact that in our game the word standard is a hot word – you know you are sub-standard, below standard..... You are just wrong and you are not up to standard and all that value judgement about it move away when you talk about this being a description of what a good teacher of adult literacy and numeracy needs to be knowledgeable about.

(1Pr1)

The new framework of qualifications for adult literacy and numeracy teachers, based on these subject specifications, took effect from 1 September 2002, building on the FENTO requirements for all teachers in the post-16 sector which came into effect from September 2001. Teachers in adult literacy were expected to work towards the new qualifications and all new teachers of adult literacy and numeracy were required to work both towards the new level 4 Certificate for Adult Literacy Subject Specialists and a full teaching qualification, such as a Certificate in Education or a Post Graduate Certificate in Education. In *Skills for Life* the intention to put into place a programme of accredited continuous professional development for teachers of adult literacy and numeracy skills is also voiced. In interview, Susan Pember voiced the vision that, rather than being the Cinderella of education, these new changes would be the start of professionalizing the area of adult basic education and the teachers within it,

... beginning to make people wake up, and we are all quite excited about seeing the different adverts that have been in TES lately, some have been asking for coordinators over £40k for basic skills. Now that level of salary has never been available to people before, so over the past 18 months we are beginning to professionalise it, we are beginning to make management sit up, thinking if they are going to be part of this – to get extra funds, to get extra provision – they really have to think of the structure within their institution. And also we want to professionalise the whole activity,

A major criticism of the *Skills for Life* strategy from policy makers and members of the Moser working group was that it rapidly became too college focused in terms of

delivery. To an extent, this was inevitable. ABSSU's management of delivering the strategy depended upon providing incentives and levers to promote changes in the provision. The major lever is funding and, therefore, change and quality control were closely linked to funding requirements. Within this context, ABSSU had the greatest influence on courses which were being funded by the LSCs, and very little influence on more flexible models of learning that were not dependent upon the LSC for funding. Some flexible provision was provided but this does not seem to extend to the scope envisaged in the strategy document.

If one combines the role of the core curriculum, the changes in teaching materials and the focus of professional training and development, then Gewirtz's claim (2000) that teaching practices are being increasingly instrumentalised, and Fielding's argument that teachers are increasingly expected to "deliver" learning seem plausible. Gewirtz (2000) was writing within the context of changes in compulsory schooling at a time when teachers were being increasingly expected to deliver against externally specified standards, for example the national literacy hour in primary schools and the national curriculum in secondary schools. This context has been influential upon the adult literacy strategy, as I argued in chapter five, and Gewirtz's observation that "the official view of good teaching is now therefore one with an increased emphasis on outcomes rather than process and a more utilitarian, test-oriented, didactic approach" (363) is resonant in the emerging adult literacy strategy. This relates to Bowe et al's 'context of influence' in their policy triangle: the context of changes in compulsory schooling, and their apparent success when judged from the perspective of outcomes and inspection requirements, can be seen to have shaped the emerging initiatives that form the adult literacy strategy.

## **7.4 Other key initiatives**

Initiatives within the strategy did not only focus on the provision of learning, but also focused upon the recruitment of learners to the strategy. A major project was the Get On marketing campaign which has been discussed in the previous chapter. The identification of key priority groups who could be targeted in terms of recruitment was another significant element of the strategy, introduced in the *Skills for Life* consultation document (DfEE 2000d). Alongside identifying key priority groups, the majority of which the government had some kind of access to either as an employer or through the provision of state benefits, the government also introduced pilots to test the effectiveness of using sanctions and rewards to motivate jobseekers with literacy needs to participate in basic skills classes. These two initiatives, key priority groups and the reward and sanctions pilots, are discussed in the following two sections.

### **7.4.1 Key priority groups**

Whereas the Get On advertising campaign sought to generate awareness of adult basic skills difficulties across the whole UK population, the development of key priority groups sought to target provision at certain groups of people. The notion of constructing different groups of learners from the seven million adults is recommended within *A Fresh Start* as a means of tailoring provision to the different needs that people have: this was an outcome of the realisation that adult literacy learners were a heterogeneous group with different learning preferences. A wide variety of different people have low levels of adult literacy and it would be erroneous to assume that one approach would be successful with all potential learners: this is a position with which a social practices approach to literacy might have some sympathy. However, while *Skills for Life* identifies separate groups, these categories

are not informed by research on different learning preferences or from a sense that the statistics are formed from a heterogeneous population; the rationale behind the creation of key groups in the Skills for Life strategy is drawn from evidence which showed that certain sections of the population had higher levels of needs than others (Bynner and Parsons 1997; OECD 1997), and from the more pragmatic realisation that the government has greater access to individuals who work for the government, those who are claimants of state benefits, and those who are in custody in prisons than it does to other adults who might have basic skills needs:

By targeting our efforts where needs are known to be high and particularly where we have good access to the individuals concerned, we will be able to allocate resources effectively and focus government departments and agencies in engaging key client groups. This will ensure that those who face the greatest disadvantage receive help soonest.

(DfEE 2001a: paragraph 19)

The key priority groups targeted in *Skills for Life* are:

- Unemployed people and other welfare claimants
- Prisoners and those supervised in the community
- Public sector employees
- Low skilled people in employment
- Young adults
- Other groups at risk of social exclusion<sup>7</sup>
- Parents
- People who live in disadvantaged communities.

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<sup>7</sup> This was a relatively undeveloped group within the *Skills for Life* document but its inclusion can be attributed to the consultation process. In Annex B the following refers to the consultation process from the draft strategy: “It was felt that we should do more to target drug users, homeless people, speakers of English as an additional language, ex-offenders and travelling families.” These groups seem to be brought together in the 2001 strategy within the blanket term of “other groups at risk of social exclusion”.

The setting of target groups was an area where the Government consulted in detail: nearly a third of the consultation copy of *Skills for Life* (DfEE 2000) explores the different characteristics and rationales for identifying these groups, and the response made to the consultative document can be seen to have influenced the final strategy to some extent: for example, in the final report the unemployed and other benefit claimants become combined as a group and more is included on describing groups who are seen at risk of social exclusion.

The strategy is informed by the underlying assumptions that it is possible to categorise people according to need, that the needs of the individuals outweigh their learning preferences, and that needs are common across categories. These assumptions were challenged during the consultation period of *Skills for Life*. During this consultation period (November 2000 – January 2001) the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) warned that,

... potential learners will not necessarily see themselves in terms of priority groups... They will be individuals with a range of different skills, needs and interests. Their ‘disadvantage’ may not be a common denominator.

(Learning and Skills Development Agency 2001)

NATFHE similarly drew attention to the dangers of adopting an “unsophisticated approach” to different groups (National Association of Teachers of Further and Higher Education 2001), the National Literacy Trust expressed concern that “the tone of the document implies that the strategy can be delivered by a top down approach targeted “on” key groups (National Literacy Trust 2001), and NIACE emphasised the “absence of any notion of a learner driven agenda” (NIACE 2001). There is also the



risk that imposing a top-down categorisation upon a group of adults might impose labels upon individuals that do not match their own sense of identity.

One example supports the view that the development of key priority groups was not primarily driven by the aim to target provision where learner need was greatest; this can be seen in the exclusion of older people as a key priority group within the strategy. The Moser working group stressed that the group with the lowest levels of literacy and numeracy was older people, but these people are not included as a key priority group within the government strategy. This omission is commented upon in the NIACE response to the *Skills for Life* draft but no response is made to this criticism in the final draft. I have concerns over the apparent creation of a hierarchy of need within the strategy: a brief example might help to illuminate my worries. Mrs Brown is a 64 year old widow and her only daughter, son-in-law and eight-year old grandson have recently emigrated to Australia. Mr Fletcher is 32, cohabits with his partner and works occasionally as a bricklayer or labourer on local building sites. Mr Fletcher does not consider that his writing difficulties pose him any problem: although he combines his work with periods of unemployment, this is partly through choice and partly through the availability of labouring work. He normally works cash-in-hand and considers that his reading skills are sufficient for him to claim relevant benefits. Mr Fletcher has built up a reputation locally for his knowledge of greyhound racing (mainly gleaned through word-of-mouth and experience; although he sometimes peruses the *Racing Post*, there aren't many books published in this area). In contrast, Mrs Brown has reached a point in her life where she considers her lack of literacy to be of enormous consequence: she doesn't feel confident trying to write letters to her daughter's family and she struggles to read the letters that they send her.

However, she considers herself to be too old to do anything about her lack of reading and writing skills. While many courses and much advice and guidance is targeted at Mr Fletcher, in his role as a benefits claimant rather than in relation to his other identities, Mrs Brown does not have this interaction because her pension is cashed each week at the post office. The personal benefits for Mrs Brown in improving her literacy levels might be vast, but they have little relevance to calculations which focus on the economic and social costs to society. The *Skills for Life* strategy, it could be argued therefore, focuses more upon the costs that basic skills problems present to society and less on the individual needs of the learners. Although the rationale for the key priority groups, as it is explained in *Skills for Life*, suggests that these groups have the greatest level of need, based upon research evidence, it could perhaps also be suggested that these groups present the greatest “problem” to society. As was discussed in the previous chapter, the majority of the costs to the country associated with low basic skills levels are seen to derive from the skills of the workforce and the costs of those who claim welfare benefits. In contrast, older adults (who have not become a key priority group within the strategy despite research evidence showing a high level of need) are likely to have retired from the labour market, are unlikely to be parents, and will, in all likelihood, continue to claim the same level of welfare benefits through old age pensions and sickness, as they would if their skills levels were improved.

The evidence which suggests that the strategy can best tackle the attainment target of improving achievement by 750,000 adults by 2004 also needs to be subjected to further analysis. The dramatic differences between the figures cited in the consultation document (DfEE 2000) and the final *Skills for Life* strategy (DfEE 2001a) suggest that

the body of evidence which informs the development of the key priority groupings is not, perhaps, rigorously developed. The consultation draft states that in addition to the estimated 300,000 unemployed people who have literacy and numeracy needs, a further 2.4 million adults who are in receipt of other working age benefits are estimated to have literacy and numeracy problems. In pronounced contrast to this, the final document states that 32% of the 870,000 unemployed adults have literacy and numeracy needs (this figure equals 278,400) and that 40% of the further 3.5 million adults in receipt of other working age benefits have difficulties: this calculation results in the total of 1.4 million adults rather than 2.4 million. The estimation of adults with needs in these two priority groups has, therefore, dropped by over a million in the five months between the documents, although the target for raising the levels of 750,000 by 2004 remains constant. The effect of this change in statistics would seem to imply that the choice of these priority groups may not be the most effective means of reaching the overall achievement target.

#### **7.4.2 Piloting rewards and sanctions**

In her interview with me, Susan Pember, head of ABSSU, explained that one of the challenges of the Skills for Life strategy was that “the majority who need support don’t perceive that they have got a problem”. This position correlates with that taken by Sticht, and Hamilton and Barton (1999), but whereas the academics suggest that if the majority perceive that they do not have a problem with literacy in their everyday lives, then it would be valid to state that they do not have a problem with literacy in their everyday lives, Pember’s argument is that if the majority do not perceive that they have a problem, then they need to be shown that they are mistaken and encouraged to enter into some form of basic skills learning. The identification of key

priority groups, the investment in a national advertising campaign, and the education of front-line workers to provide IAG are all ways of motivating individuals to address their basic skills need, and ABSSU also decided to take the more strident route of piloting sanctions and rewards as a means of providing increased incentivisation for people to become involved in the basic skills provision. The pilots put into action the use of financial rewards for jobseekers who attended courses, in some Pathfinder areas, and the use of financial sanctions through reduced allowance payments to jobseekers who did not attend courses they were deemed to need in other Pathfinder areas.

These moves marked the most controversial area of the strategy during the time span of my case study. Because the pilots risked having an impact upon adults' benefits levels, agreement from Parliament was necessary and a Social Security Advisory Committee met to consult with a range of organisations prior to the pilots being presented to the Houses of Parliament. Importantly, the Advisory Committee reported severe reservations over the pilots going ahead:

We do not find persuasive the case for including a sanctions regime in the proposed pilot... Set against the risk that a punitive regime implicit in the threat of sanctions might deter those who already find it hard to engage with society, we do not believe that the potential benefits outweigh the disadvantages.

(Hansard Archives, July 2001)

One might assume that the Advisory Committee report reflected the consultation responses it had received, but this is difficult to verify not only because I was unable to access the consultation responses for my research, but also because the publication

of the consultation responses was so rare that they were referred to as “gold dust” by the House of Commons Standing Committee. Through the Standing Committee, both Houses voiced reservations about the pilots; but, nevertheless, pilots were still introduced in September 2001.

This marks an example of the adult literacy strategy being explicitly developed in tension with consultative responses. This more mandatory approach towards the learner, reflecting the New Labour concept of responsibility discussed in chapter five, marked a movement away from the voluntarism stressed in *A Fresh Start*: “whether [the individual]... decides to participate is, of course, up to them” (Moser 1999: 11) This change of approach links to earlier claims in this thesis that while *A Fresh Start* placed the main responsibility for the problem of adult literacy upon the state, *Skills for Life* shifts responsibility onto the individual. Within the ideology of the strategy, individuals who are reticent in addressing the problem of their basic skills need are incentivised by rewards and sanctions. Therefore, the pilots are coherent with the wider vision of the strategy which refers to the responsibilities of the learner, even they are not in agreement with the majority view of the organisations which consulted with the Advisory Group. This leads into a consideration of the role of consultation within the strategy.

## **7.5 Conclusions**

The strategy does not take a consistent approach to practitioners or learners across its different initiatives. In places the strategy has positioned the practitioner as an expert who should be encouraged to develop their own practice, for example through the focus on professional development and in the development of the core curriculum as a

market place for ideas and good practice. At other times, the strategy has sought to constrain and limit the teachers' practice, for example through the rigorous implementation of national standards, which are not related to existing practice in this field and which, through specifying a narrow range of skills, represent what the literacy teacher should aim to develop in their learner. Some of the strategy's initiatives will be changed through their use by the practitioner, for example the increased funding available for provision and many of the new teaching materials, and these initiatives can be seen to empower the practitioner. Other initiatives will potentially disempower the practitioner, for example the focus on outcomes rather than on pedagogic process (this is returned to in the next chapter). Some initiatives position the practitioner in conflicting ways: for example the core curriculum can potentially constrain practice if it is used as a normative framework for what should be taught, or it can liberate practice through providing stimulation and provoking new ideas in the practitioner. Similarly the curriculum might support practice through providing pedagogic examples, but might also challenge the practitioner who does not feel confident in the use of this tool.

The learner is also differently positioned through different aspects of the strategy. Table 7.4 indicates some of the ways in which the learner is situated.

SITUATION OF LEARNER	ELEMENT OF STRATEGY
Attracting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Publicity and marketing</li> <li>• IAG</li> <li>• Glossy teaching materials</li> <li>• Increased use of ICT</li> </ul>
Supporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• IAG</li> <li>• Training and awareness raising with front line staff who interact with members of the public</li> <li>• Core curriculum</li> </ul>
Enforcing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Piloting of sanctions</li> <li>• Identification of levers to promote involvement of individuals in key priority groups</li> </ul>

Table 7.4: Positioning the Learner

The majority of the strategic initiatives are directed at attracting and supporting the learner. While the pilots of sanctions and rewards are hugely significant in terms of the controversy that surrounded them and the shift in ideology which they represent, they have an impact, at the time of this case study, upon only a very small group of learners. As the strategy matures, it will be interesting to observe whether the majority of the strategy continues to aim to voluntarily attract learners into provision, or whether the use of sanctions and rewards is further extended. The latter relates to New Labour's perspective that people, as well as the state, have responsibilities that they must satisfy (this was discussed in chapter five); the emphasis on voluntarism has roots across the history of adult literacy initiatives. Because participation figures are part of the government targets through which the strategy will be evaluated (this is discussed in detail in the next chapter), the recruitment of learners has gained a significance beyond the benefits that provision might offer to the individual adult.

## Chapter 8: Constructing Measures of Success

### 8.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the fourth of my research questions: “How will the effectiveness of the strategy be measured in the short term, and what alternative measures might exist?” To contextualise my analysis, I will begin by explaining the development of the strategy’s dominant targets during the time span of my case study. As the strategy developed, the achievement targets were publicised as the dominant measure that would be used to judge the success of the adult literacy strategy. My first cohort of interviews alerted me to the precedence that the targets were gaining over other aspects of the strategy, and my own involvement in the field highlighted the lack of understanding by practitioners of what these targets meant and the burgeoning controversy over whether the achievement targets would, or indeed could, reflect the strategy’s success. While explaining the need to present “very clear evidence of achievement – and that is all the business about progress chasing and setting milestones”, one interviewee, who bridged the worlds of research and policy, observed in December 2001:

“In three years, the department and the unit will be asking “Has it worked?” and they will be asking that about the whole of the Skills for Life strategy in general... in three year’s time, they would have the opportunity to say “Finish. It’s not worked, no more money”.

(1Ac3)



This interviewee is explicitly linking the evaluation of the strategy with funding: a correlation to which several of my interviewees alerted my attention. While this particular interviewee was positive about the potential for developing clear evidence, the majority of my interviewees from the world of practice made far more scathing observations:

“The strategy is being driven by targets, isn’t it? The strategy is being driven by a government that is bent on saying that as a nation we must be able to compete better. We’ve got to show that spending the money that the taxpayer is giving us achieves results.”

(1Pr1)

In his discussion of the achievement targets set by the strategy, Tuckett (2004) acknowledged the targets as a mixed blessing: positive in the sense of providing a focus for providers and a lever in resourcing discussions with the Treasury, but negative because of the inherent risk that provision might be distorted to meet these externally determined targets (Tuckett 2004).

Using the concerns emerging from my interviews to interrogate the textual data, I systematically investigated what measures of success were being built into the policy texts over time, how they were positioned within the texts and the significance that this awarded them, and the validity of the claims made over the value and meaning of these targets. In addition to textual analysis, I have also drawn upon philosophical argumentation to better understand what is meant by assessment. The majority of my interviewees felt that there was a clear need to carry out some kind of evaluation of the strategy, few agreed that the use of achievement targets would provide this.

The main policy target of improving the skills of 750,000 adults by 2004 is problematic in several ways: there is no clarity over what 750,000 adults must have done to improve their basic skills or how they can publicly demonstrate this, and there is no coherent sense of what the benefits of 750,000 people improving their basic skills would be; furthermore the intended identity of this group of adults shifts markedly during this case study from those with the greatest need to those whose participation can be affected by levers and incentives within the strategy. Section 8.2 will analyse these problems and inconsistencies. Alternative means through which the strategy could be evaluated have been suggested by practitioners and researchers, both through my interviews and through contemporaneous discussions. Section 8.3 explores the potential value and problems of using participation targets: the method apparently favoured by practitioners, and then in section 8.4, I shift focus from learner attendance and performance as a measure of the strategy's success to consider other means of evaluating the strategy. This chapter does not intend to offer an evaluation of the strategy's success (that is not possible within the time span or empirical scope of this study), but it intends to provide insight into the potential means through which the success of the strategy might be evaluated: both those which have been internally constructed within the policy texts, and those which might offer a perspective from outside the strategy. My intention in this chapter is to show why different stakeholders disagree over the relative value of the benefits, and the level of responsibility that the strategy can claim for these successes. The relationship between what constitutes success for the individual and what constitutes success for the strategy will be scrutinised.

## **8.2 Evaluating success through measuring achievement in the National Tests**

The longer-term aim throughout this strategy, and the longer-term aims of all the earlier initiatives documented in chapter four, is the virtual elimination of literacy and numeracy difficulties:

The ultimate target should be the virtual elimination of poor basic skills. This is highly ambitious, but must be the long-term aim if we want to rid society of the frustration that these problems bring. But the strategy must have clear milestones towards this long-term aim, these targets should be strictly monitored over time.

(Moser 1999: 36)

From this principle, and influenced by the success of the national targets driving the literacy and numeracy strategies in schools, the Moser working group recommended milestones including the target, set by the working group, of halving the number of adults of working age with low literacy by 2010. The remit set by the Government for the working group was to “help 500,000 adults a year by 2002” (Moser 1999: 6) and *A Fresh Start* recommended that in addition to this participation target, the Government should set specific basic skills targets for adults and for young people to be achieved by 2005 and 2010 (recommendation 2). The Government response to this report, *Better Basic Skills* (DfEE 1999), anticipates that “Local Learning and Skills Councils will set clear objectives and participation and achievement targets, reflecting advice from the Lifelong Learning Partnerships” (DfEE 1999: 3). This report does not attempt to predict these targets. However, it is not with the LSC that the dominant target for the strategy emerges, but with the DfEE. For the launch of the *Skills for Life* consultation document in December 2000, David Blunkett, then Secretary of State for Education, stated “We have now set a target to reduce the number of adults who have

difficulty with literacy or numeracy by 750,000 by 2004” (DfEE 2000). This statement links the “single minded pursuit of excellence in provision” to the raising of school standards, which suggests that the use of targets of achievement in the school strategy has been influential in the decision to establish targets of achievement for the adult literacy strategy. On the same date, Blunkett’s article in the Guardian refers to the target mid-article following claims that national prosperity is suffering because of weak skills in the workforce and prior to a statement detailing new spending commitments to address the problem (Blunkett 2000). Interestingly, the target is not further developed within either text, suggesting that it is not of primary importance; there is no textual indication here of how powerful this achievement target will become during the development of the strategy. At the launch of the *Skills for Life* strategy on 1 March 2001, no mention is made of any target in the press release materials (DfEE 2001) and focus rests instead on the investment of at least £1.5 billion over three years. But within the *Skills for Life* strategic document (2001) the initial aim “that 750,000 adults will improve their literacy and numeracy by 2004” is again stated. This target then gained further visibility through the objectives of the newly set-up LSC where aiming to improve the “literacy and numeracy skills for the 750,000 adults with the most serious problems by 2004” is the fourth of their key objectives. By the first annual review of the strategy, the target is referred to as a “vision” that 750,000 adults would have better basic skills by 2004. Through repetition across policy documents, this target can be seen to become the primary marker of success, discussed at length at conferences and cited in the majority of texts emerging from ABSSU. In July 2002, shortly after the end of my case study, this figure began to be referred to as a Public Service Agreement (PSA) target following the comprehensive spending review by the Treasury.

On one level, the government target of improving the literacy and numeracy skills of 750,000 adults by 2004 appears to be an unproblematic means of measuring success. Assessing achievement can be seen to be a straightforward proposition. Christopher Winch presents a persuasive concept of assessment, arguing that if teaching is a purposive activity, guided by aims relating to what a pupil should learn, then teachers should wish to see whether and to what extent they are meeting those aims” (Winch 1996). This position is intuitive and presents assessment as a teacher-led agenda. Winch goes on to suggest that if one rejects assessment one must take an alternative position of epistemic pessimism from which it becomes impossible to say whether someone has learned something or not. This seems to be a similar position to that set up within the adult literacy strategy: it is inferred that one needs to be able to see whether and to what extent learners are developing their literacy skills and this is achievable through assessment. The use of this notion of summative assessment has a logical appeal: if we accept that assessment will measure that an individual can do  $x$ , and that a good strategy will increase the number of individuals who can do  $x$ , then one might expect that a successful strategy would be reflected by a quantitative improvement in the results of that assessment. Within this framework, assessment would offer a measure of the individual’s literacy skills, of the teacher’s delivery skills (in successfully providing those literacy skills to the students), and of the strategy itself. This chapter deconstructs and analyses these claims. In section 8.2.1, I will explore what learners are expected to develop if they are developing their literacy skills; as was discussed in chapter three, this is not necessarily something that all people would agree on, and the claims for summative assessment through the national tests rest on a decontextualised skills-based model of literacy. Within the adult literacy strategy, the main measure of achievement is through the national tests and

the qualifications which are related to these. Section 8.2.2 explores the problems inherent within this process. There is a lack of clarity within the strategy around the intended identity of the 750,000 adults and section 8.2.3 brings to light the inconsistencies in this across policy texts. Section 8.2.4 uses textual analysis to assess the claimed benefits which become attached to the targets for learner achievements.

### **8.2.1 What is meant by ‘achievement’ in the context of the adult literacy strategy?**

*Skills for Life* conflates the notion of assessment with the process of external accreditation. Davis anticipates the slipperiness of the concept of assessment when he observes that “any substantial attempt to think about assessment in education must be located in a social and political context” (Davis 1998: 8), and the government’s move away from a teacher-informed assessment towards external testing can be seen to have precedents in the National Literacy Strategy in schools, which is assessed primarily through SATS (Beard 2000). As I discussed in chapter six, *A Fresh Start* was informed by measures of adult literacy carried out through the IALS survey and through the use of statistical data collated by the CLS. Following the publication of *A Fresh Start* (1999) and as part of a wider context of changes to rationalise education, the QCA defined and published a set of national standards for adult literacy, from Entry Level through to Level 1, and these have been explored in chapter seven. The target of 750,000 adults improving their basic skills by 2004 was referenced against the national standards, and the majority of these learners were expected to demonstrate their improvement through passing the national tests, which are referenced against the QCA national standards.

The framework designers of the QCA national standards for adult literacy recognise that “each adult is unique; a complex mixture of confidence and ability that is influenced by past experience” (QCA 1999: 1), and that adults have ‘spiky’ skills profiles: for example, while one might be at level 1 for the majority of one’s reading skills, one might achieve level 2 for speaking and listening, and demonstrate a variety of skills ranging from entry level through to level 2 in one’s writing. The aim of the adult literacy standards is “to specify the full range of skills required for an adult to communicate confidently, effectively and efficiently” at each level (QCA 1999: 2). The descriptors which constitute part of the standards text claim to provide “objective, unambiguous criteria at which level and capability can be assessed” (4), and achievement, in the context of the standards, is something that can be externally judged using these objective criteria. This is in tension with the model of literacies used by the New Literacy Studies which considers literacy to be embedded in social contexts, and that many of the things that constitute the literacy practice are not externally observable. This tension has been discussed in more detail in chapter three, but its ramifications for the national achievement targets are significant: before one attempts to clarify how achievement might be measured, the very notion of what achievement in adult literacy might be becomes open to question. However, the space to question the national standards is not present in the policy documents: the national standards are presented as objective and not open to debate: they are not discussed within the policy texts, they are stated.

### **8.2.2 How can ‘achievement’ be measured in the context of the adult literacy strategy?**

Although the target period began in April 2001 (Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit 2002), during the time span of this case study there was a lack of clear guidance on how learner achievement would be judged in relation to the national targets. Questions were repeatedly asked at conferences, training events and through the email discussion lists over whether each of the 750,000 would be judged through their performance in a national test, or whether teacher assessment of students’ achievement would be allowed to contribute to the target figure. ABSSU placed emphasis upon the validity of a national test over teacher assessment, but allowed that some part of the target figure might be measured through teacher-assessed portfolios of work for lower levels of achievement. The level at which 750,000 adults were expected to achieve was similarly vague.

My interviewees from practice tended to voice reservations over whether the use of an externally marked national test was the best means of measuring this group of learners’ achievement. One interviewee, who was involved with an examination organisation, stressed the importance of adult literacy qualifications being achievable as a natural part of the learning process so that the learners don’t feel that they are being assessed and examined in an unnatural way: this was seen to have particular relevance when the learners in question are those who are liable to have had negative experiences of education in the past. These perspectives were grounded in a position of empathy with the learner. In contrast, *Skills for Life* (2001) stresses the importance of a national test to “provide a clear and reliable measure of a person’s achievement” (48), here the focus is with “measuring” on a large-scale rather than reflecting on the



micro-perspective of learners' prior experiences. This theme can be traced from the report of Moser's working group, which recommended the introduction of new tests which would "allow adults to demonstrate, through the passing of a test, that they have acquired the basic skills by means of a single test-assessed qualification available on demand" (Moser 1999: 69). These national tests (capitalised within the strategy documents emerging from DfES, but referred to in lower case letters by the QCA) take the form of "objective questions with a single right answer" that are presented in the style of multiple choice questions, delivered through either paper-based or IT media. *Skills for Life* compares this type of test to the theory test which is taken as part of one's driving tests. Inevitably, this kind of test relies upon reading skills: the learner does not do any writing as part of the national test. This artificial format of the test also results in assessing literacy in a decontextualised way, it is not a natural extension of the everyday literacy practices of an adult. Although the standards recognise the spiky profile of learners across their reading, writing, speaking and listening skills, the national tests measure literacy through evaluating reading skills.

A slightly different problem, which I will refer to in more detail in section 8.2.3, is that the achievement of the learner might not relate to the literacy provision undertaken by the learner. For example, it is useful to return to Mr Fletcher. In September 2001, Mr Fletcher enrolled upon a twelve-week adult literacy programme at his local college. He attended the whole of the first class, missed the next three sessions, and then attended two more classes (arriving one hour late, and forty minutes late respectively). He didn't attend any more classes because he was working full-time on a labouring job, but he decided to take the national test from a sense of

personal curiosity. He passed the Level 1 test. However, this achievement might not demonstrate that he has gained anything from his basic skills course (and his attendance record suggests that this is highly likely). Unless achievement includes some kind of awareness of distance travelled, then there is no way of knowing whether achievement is measuring something that has been gained and the extent to which it has been gained relative to the level the learner was at the point of entry, or whether the test is measuring something that the learner could already do.

### **8.2.3 Who are the adults who are meant to improve their literacy skills?**

There is a subtle shift of meaning from the aims of the Moser working group, which claims as its top priority those adults below Level 1 in literacy, to the amended and, possibly, more pragmatic priority of the Skills for Life strategy “to improve the skills of those groups where literacy and numeracy needs are greatest and where we can make most impact” (DfES 2001a: 6, my emphasis). This shift is reflected in the tension between the LSC’s target to improve the “literacy and numeracy skills for the 750,000 adults with the most serious problems by 2004”, and the wider DfES target to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of 750,000 adults. If we accept that the 750,000 adults will be those with the most serious problems, then the evidence of achievement runs into several problems. The second annual report of *Skills for Life* (Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit 2003b) reveals that although 300,000 adults had improved their literacy and numeracy skills between April 2001 and July 2002, programmes for Jobseekers (one of the key priority groups) helped only 3,500 adults to improve their basic skills (Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit 2003b). This suggests that less than 2% of the achievement target can be attributed to the key priority group of Jobseekers, who form a large proportion of those who are unemployed. The

relationship between those who have the greatest need and those who contribute to the achievement of the target is not otherwise clear from the data.

A more serious problem of meaning arises from the fact that the estimation of need was measured against different criteria to the levels used to measure achievement. The level of need (the figure of 15-20% of the adult population which informed the Moser working group) was not based upon the national standards. The IALS use of levels to measure adult literacy can be seen as a statistical tool which is part of the logic of the survey (Hamilton and Barton 1999), whereas the QCA national standards have their roots in the context of national literacy strategy and national curriculum levels in schools and in key skills. The levels have been designed with different rationales to do different things. Importantly, the national standards do not refer to the IALS surveys. In addition to the slightly higher demands made by the QCA national standards for reading and writing skills at Level 1, a major difference is that both the IALS and CLS levels refer only to reading and writing skills, whereas the QCA national standards also include speaking and listening skills. This means that, between *A Fresh Start* (1999) and *Skills for Life* (2001), the things that an adult would be expected to do to be proficient at Level 1, for example, have changed. One would assume from this that the level of need would therefore be inflated by the imposition of new needs, but this is not mentioned in the strategy. Criteria for speaking and listening are part of the foundations of the Skills for Life adult literacy strategy, but they are not part of the criteria for assessing need: they are not part of the problem which has been used to market the strategy.

In interview, Alan Wells, head of the Basic Skills Agency, stressed this point. Using various metaphors, he demonstrated the futility of setting a target that doesn't correlate to the problem:

“If you find that seven million people are overweight, you don't spend a lot of time on trying to make them taller because they weren't tested on whether they were taller, they were tested on whether they were overweight. Or if you find that seven million people can't swim, you wouldn't spend a lot of time testing if their first aid skills were OK, because actually that is not what they were doing.”

He continued by explaining that he wasn't against the idea of having a speaking and listening curriculum, but felt that,

“... if you are going to do the simple thing, which is what Moser said really, which is that we have got seven million people who have got problems with literacy and numeracy, we need to reduce this seven million people one way or another, not just by tightening up the schools system, and we need to assess whether we can reduce them. Simple as that. Well, if it is a simple as that, then you actually need to know what they couldn't do, you have to teach them those skills or knowledge that they couldn't do, or give them opportunities to learn those, and then you have to assess whether they have learnt them to know whether you have actually managed to reduce the numbers”.

*Skills for Life* acknowledges that a baseline survey should be carried out to assess need, and that this is necessary for the targets to have meaning (DfEE 2001a: paragraph 88) but this initiative became one of the most delayed of the various strategic initiatives, and the report of this survey had not been published within the time frame of my case study. In terms of the chronology of policy development, this suggests that the targets have been prioritised whilst the research needed to make sense of these targets has not been a priority. If the achievement target is seen to be generated from an awareness of need, which its positioning within the policy texts often implies, then the value of the target risks being hollow.

One might also assume that the strategy's success will be measured through adults achieving a level of literacy which they were not capable of achieving prior to their involvement in the strategy. However, the national tests are open to anyone and do not reflect the progress that one has made through one's involvement, if one has in fact had any involvement, with the strategy. This point was encapsulated in the earlier example of Mr Fletcher.

#### **8.2.4 What would the realisation of the achievement targets mean?**

When DfES states that its initial aim is that 750,000 adults will improve their literacy and numeracy by 2004 (DfEE 2001a), this aim is intended to signify something more than the fact that 750,000 adults will have passed a test of their reading skills according to the competence model of literacy adopted by QCA. Through the discursive positioning of the target amongst statements of the negative correlations between low levels of adult literacy and other factors, one is led to assume that improving 750,000 adults' levels of literacy will have an impact upon the economy

and the country as a whole. I will draw upon a few examples to support this claim and to demonstrate the similarities in structure when the targets are mentioned.

When launching the consultation version of *Skills for Life* (DfEE 2000), Blunkett's speech made reference to the achievement target following two paragraphs concerning the correlations between poor basic skills and low-paid jobs, unemployment, and poor physical and mental health problems. These two preceding paragraphs concluded with reference to evidence from the National Skills Taskforce that link raising numeracy levels with quantifiable increases in the gross domestic product. The context of the problem and the potential for financial savings precede the statement of the achievement target. Another example of this discursive structuring is offered through Malcolm Wick's presentation to the House of Commons in January 2001. The adult basic skills strategy has only rarely been presented to Parliament, and on this occasion Malcolm Wicks, Minister of Lifelong Learning, opened the debate regarding the introduction of schemes to pilot the use of sanctions and rewards to job-seekers who were deemed to need to improve their basic skills levels. His speech employed many rhetorical flourishes, in keeping with the genre of parliamentary debate, and he extended some of the metaphors and imagery that had been introduced in the earlier policy texts. He spoke of basic skills being the "backbone of almost any worthwhile activity in modern life", and drew attention to the claim that "the Government's vision of a prosperous and decent society" will not be achieved while a large number of people lack basic literacy and numeracy skills. Having set up this context within his speech, Wicks then quoted the fact that "seven million adults are struggling with reading and writing", and drew upon the correlative claims from earlier policy (I discussed these in more detail in chapter six) for three paragraphs,

prior to stating the initial target of reducing by 750,000 the number of adults with weak literacy and numeracy skills by 2004. This was immediately followed, in the same paragraph, by a statement of investment levels from the Government over the next two years.

The interrelationship between the constructed problem, the target, and funding has implications for what attaining the target means. The persuasive use of correlative evidence in the policy documents to present the repercussions of the problem of adult literacy, which was discussed in chapter six, and the juxtaposing of the problem with suggestions of the potential financial benefits to the economy and to society if the problem is addressed, are repeatedly used to situate the achievement target within the different policy texts. If 750,000 people are assessed to have developed skills at Level 1, one is encouraged to infer, that among other benefits, they will have greater employability and earning power, the potential educational achievement of their children will have been increased, and the likelihood of their committing a criminal act will have been diminished. This suggests that the country will benefit from being both more economically competitive, and from having fewer dependents on the welfare state. It is not possible for the policy texts to contain a quantifiable aim for any of these factors as a result of the adult basic skills strategy: for example, one could not state a claim that the government will aim to save the economy £70 million through reductions in the costs of social exclusion through the improvement of adult literacy education across the country. But in tension with this, is the apparent desire within the texts to justify expenditure through providing quantifiable predicted outputs. The discursive “sandwiching” of the quantifiable target with the implied financial benefits implies potential quantifiable, financial benefits.

In addition to the problems with the implied claims that literacy skills accrue financial benefits, is the problem with the assumption that literacy skills are accumulative. The period of time covered by the target is from April 2001 to July 2004. However, if literacy and numeracy skills are not regularly used then they diminish (Bynner and Parsons 1998) which suggests that achievement does not accumulate with a linear progression over time, and the claims that one could make at the time of the test being passed might be different from the claims which would be valid a year hence: if someone took a literacy test in January and passed at Level 1, this score would not necessarily reflect their range of literacy skills by September of that year. Therefore, although 750,000 adults might achieve Level 1 between 2001 and 2004, this does not mean that 750,000 more adults have literacy skills at Level 1 in 2004 than the number in 2001. This raises further problems for any attempt to extrapolate economic and social benefits from these figures and illustrates how the targets fail to reflect the complexities of measuring literacy skills.

The short third person narratives of individuals such as Angela Black and David Revell are used to illustrate the claims made in *Skills for Life* about the benefits for individuals once they improve their literacy or numeracy skills. We are told that Angela Black's confidence increased, her eating disorder became more manageable and she has become involved in volunteer work. David Revell has been developing new skills with the purpose of enhancing his employability. None of my interviewees would disagree with the claim that improving one's literacy skills might offer a whole range of benefits; but this is a different claim from the notion that improving one's adult literacy skills will improve one's life. Having achieved his Level 1 in adult literacy, Mr Fletcher did not find himself with more money in his pocket or with



better health. Following the time span of my study, there was the increased policy recognition that the national tests needed to have their value marketed to employers: for the national test to hold value for the individual in terms of their employability, the national test needed to be valued by employers; for employers to value this new qualification, the national tests needed to be marketed to employers as part of the strategy. The value of the qualification is not inherent to the test, but something that the strategy needs to market as a thing in its own right: effectively the value of the test needs to be constructed through the marketing of the test within the adult literacy strategy.

### **8.3 Participation**

Section 8.2 has discussed some of the weaknesses in the meaning and value of the national targets and the national tests. Rather than focusing on the outputs of learner achievement, one possible alternative, I would suggest, is to focus on the participation of adults in the strategy. Having voiced their resistance and objections to measuring achievement through externally marked tests, a general consensus emerged from the interviewees who were located within practice that participation rates provided a better method to evaluate the success of the strategy. This general consensus was summarised by one practitioner who explained:

“I don't know anybody who thinks that the targets can be achieved... the only targets that are worth setting are ones of participation. Keep people participating, don't try and measure the outcomes because it is too difficult.”

But, while achievement targets are problematic, as I have shown above, measuring participation is not unproblematic: Helena Kennedy points out in her report *Learning Works* (1997) that measuring participation and achievement in post-16 education and training is not straightforward, and ABSSU consider that participation rates do not provide a sufficient measure of the success of the strategy: "... it is not enough that people are on courses. They also need to improve their skills." (DfEE 2001a: 87)

It is necessary to consider carefully how participation can be measured and what such a measurement would represent. Let us return briefly to the example of Mrs. Brown. As with Mr Fletcher, Mrs Brown enrolled on a twelve-week adult literacy programme at her local college in 2001. She attended each of the classes, arriving early and being amongst the last to leave. She enjoyed the social factor of being part of a group, but she didn't complete any classroom assignments and failed to provide the tutor with any work for assessment. She didn't focus very much on the content of the lessons, preferring to chat with her peers. She decided not to take the national literacy test, but she went on to enrol on a computer course, which she first heard about through her literacy class. Mrs Brown writes more regularly to her daughter in Australia because she has made a friend at college who helps her with the letters, and she has also started to email her grandson using the college computers. The *Skills for Life* strategy equates participation with enrolment figures, but the earlier example of Mr Fletcher begs the question of whether enrolment reflects attendance: as with any area of voluntary education, the register of enrolments at the start of the course does not necessarily reflect the number or group of students who attend the course. The case of Mrs Brown suggests that physical attendance does not necessarily represent the attendee participating in the content of the lesson.

A participation target is also shaped by the extent of provision: a weakness of the Right to Read campaign was that the number of people who wanted to participate was limited because there was not sufficient provision (Clare 1985). This is, perhaps, a lesson that has been learnt by the new strategy because the initial terms of reference to the Moser working group included the target “to help 500,000 adults a year by 2002”, a target which focuses on provision rather than participation. By the time of the first annual review of the strategy, the paragraph reviewing participation rates is linked to enrolments:

Participation in basic skills courses continues to increase. In the 2000/01 academic year, there were 670,000 enrolments in literacy, language and numeracy courses, up by over 200,000 enrolments on the year before.

(Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit 2002: 6)

The measurement of enrolment figures would seem to have a greater relation to the effect of the strategy in attracting people into learning, rather than measuring the benefits that they will gain from their experience of the strategic content. As I discussed in chapter six, enrolment rates might have been affected by the advertising campaign. It is also likely that participation targets have been affected by the development of key priority groups, which I discussed in detail in chapter seven. The idea that there are groups of adults where the government is able to make more impact than others is part of the rationale behind the identification of nine key priority groups within *Skills for Life*. Although the introduction to key priority groups is related to “existing research that literacy and numeracy difficulties are more common among certain groups” (2001a: 11), this is followed by the observation that “for those groups in regular receipt of state support, such as jobseekers and benefit claimants, as well as

for those detained in penal institutions, the Government can act quickly to identify literacy and numeracy skills needs and to remedy them” (11). Additionally, the Government employs two million plus workers, and the strategy commits the public sector to lead the way in policies to address literacy and numeracy shortfalls in its own staff. One would assume that by being able to use levers upon and access to certain groups of adults, participation targets could be affected.

The focus on enrolment figures perhaps reflects to some degree the emphasis that the strategy places upon the responsibilities of the learner to enrol upon available courses: for the strategy to be successful, these targets would seem to suggest, the adult with difficulties needs to take on the responsibility of becoming a learner for themselves. In this way, the responsibility for the success of the strategy is deflected from the strategy itself onto the learner. Figures around participation and achievement are both deflected from the strategy to an extent and onto the practitioner and the provision. In her presentation to the 2001 RaPAL conference Susan Pember talked about “throwing down the gauntlet to the practitioner”, clearly implying that the success of the strategy rested with the practitioner. ABSSU was seen to have provided the funding, it was for practitioners to make the strategy work through improving their practice, with help from the various initiatives that were available in terms of professional development and improved learning materials. The potential failure of reaching the participation targets would therefore lie at the door of the one in five adults who are seen to have problems or the adult literacy practitioner, rather than being judged to be an intrinsic failure with the strategy itself.

This section has demonstrated some of the weaknesses of measuring participation as a means of evaluating the success of the strategy: whereas achievement seems to measure outputs from the strategy, participation measurements through enrolment records seem to measure input. I would argue, that it is necessary to consider a third element which links the input, for example of enrolment figures, and the output, for example achievement targets: that is the process of learning itself and the quality of what the learner experiences through the provision.

#### **8.4 Inspection**

All of the practitioners interviewed for this research were passionate about the subject of their work and each of them voiced their pleasure that substantial investment was at last being made in this area of adult education. But each of these people also had concerns over the strategy's preoccupation with targets and measurements, with the preoccupation that value was something that could be measured through the assessment of predefined outcomes, and with the notion that adult literacy was essentially a technical range of skills which could be stipulated. For the interviewed practitioners, adult literacy was not this straightforward and, therefore, what an adult literacy strategy would be able to achieve would be similarly complex. One practitioner provided an example from the early 1980s of how pre-TOPS courses had attempted to evaluate their success by measuring how many people progressed to TOPS courses (see the earlier history chapter), and this interviewee used the example to show how unanticipated outcomes could also be markers of success, even if the student did not achieve what had been anticipated:

“The official purpose of prep courses was to give people the literacy and numeracy skills to be able to handle TOPs courses,

some of which were quite demanding in those terms, such as TV engineering had quite a lot of maths in it. But what happened on the courses in fact were that lots of people started thinking about their own career and their own potential, and went off and did things like social work that wasn't necessarily what the MSC wanted but was a result in another way."

Relating the current strategy to his experiences in the late 1970s and 1980s, this practitioner went on to reflect that the weakness of both the pre-TOPs and the current adult literacy strategy was their focus on predetermined outcomes and their inability to appreciate unexpected outcomes. This interviewee advocated a shift away from focusing on outcomes to concentrate more upon the process.

Historically, there has been very little evaluation of provision in the field of adult literacy. It is interesting that even the practitioner who was most cynical of the strategy during her interview for this research, acknowledged the historic lack of accountability and quality control in this area of education, and saw this as a weakness in adult basic education provision:

"... there was virtually no serious evaluation, there might have been descriptive and qualitative evaluation, but not systematic, no-one really paid attention to... there was no emphasis on data whatsoever. I am not aware that ILEA ever counted how many students it had – we certainly didn't know how many students we had. We collected registers so it could have been done, but there were no computers and none of this stuff was collected really, and

certainly nothing about outcomes because, by and large, in adult education we didn't have any."

The practitioners I spoke with and interviewed welcomed the opportunity to improve the quality of their practice – on the whole they were forward-looking, welcoming the chance to use the new tools of the curricula and to participate in training. Optimism was expressed that the local LSCs would provide the opportunity to network with other practitioners. One practitioner articulated this tension between wanting to accept many of the principles of improving practice, and wanting to keep hold of her reservations over the content of the strategy:

"There is always part of me that wants to not be sour grapes-ish about changes OK. Just because I am x years old doesn't mean that I have to start saying that everything new is wrong, but I recoil from nationalising all this stuff. I just recoil from it. If it is making things more intelligible and more transparent for learners and teachers – fine, that's important. We need to articulate what it is we are doing. It is a responsibility of teachers to try and make clearer to their learners, and for funders to make clearer to their teachers too, what it is we expect to be happening here. What is the new game from coming to this new programme or course? What is it I undertake to offer you and what is it you undertake to take part in?"

This interviewee's focus is on the process and on what is happening, and this receives a degree of support within the infrastructure of the strategy. Unlike the national standards, which will not be reviewed until 2007 and involved only marginal consultation with practitioners, the guide to support the Common Inspection

Framework (CIF) has been responsive to feedback by practitioners (DfES 2002). The first copy of the Guide was developed through an Advisory Group on Quality which included representation from the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI), Ofsted, LSC and BSA. The guidelines are intended to “help providers self-assess the quality of their provision” (my emphasis). Unlike the achievement targets, which focus on a quantifiable short-term target judged through outcomes in the national tests, CIF judges achievement by the extent to which learners receive appropriate support to enable them to complete their primary learning goals and progress, to complete their literacy learning plan, and to improve their work carried out as part of the main learning programme (DfES 2002: 10). The focus here is on process rather than outcomes, and the standards which are set reference not only the national standards set by QCA, but also the learners’ individual learning plans. Learners’ progress is relative to their prior attainment and potential (17).

The problem with the more flexible and learner-led agenda of the inspectorate is that its benefits are longer terms and less tangible than numbers of learners passing examinations. Therefore, it lacks the lever that Tuckett (2004) observed might be used in resourcing discussions with the Treasury. What the inspection framework does seem to provide, which is lacking from more quantifiable attempts to evaluate the success of the strategy, is the space for consultation with practitioners over good practice. The inspection framework is not ideal, but it has provided greater opportunity for communication between the worlds of practice and policy, in terms of the guidelines for good practice. This perhaps broadens the notion of what will constitute success for the *Skills for Life* strategy by offering a wider conceptualisation



of good practice, and also seems to provide a more flexible definition of literacy than the reading skills tested in the national tests.

### 8.5 The importance of different perspectives

This chapter has documented some of the different perspectives that emerge on what a successful adult literacy strategy must achieve if it is to be considered a success, and perhaps inevitably different stakeholders seem to demand different things as constituents of success. Drawing on the interview data and on research literature in this area, table 8.1 summarises these different perspectives on what should be measured, how it should be measured, and what the measurement would represent.

		<b>Theory of literacy</b>	<b>Concerns</b>	<b>Evidence</b>	<b>Measures of success</b>	<b>Timespan</b>
<b>POLICY</b>		Skills based, deficit model	National social and economic consequences	Large scale quantitative surveys. Correlative	Measurable pre-determined outcomes	Short
<b>RESEARCH</b>	NRDC	Skills based (working with national standards)	Developing the strategy	Combination of quantitative and qualitative	Improved practice and knowledge	Short / Medium
	New Literacy Studies	Complex set of practices	Increasing academic understanding	Self report, ethnography	New knowledge and improved understanding of social uses of literacy	Long
<b>PRACTICE</b>		Experience of practice <u>and</u> use of policy standards	Well-being of individuals	Teaching experience, learner outcomes	Learner centred. Provision of opportunities	Ongoing

Table 8.1: Comparison of different perspectives.

The table is divided into my three main categories of policy, research and practice, although research has been subdivided to reflect research within the strategy (mainly

in the form of NRDC funded projects) and research outside the strategy. None of these categories are exclusive, for example, NRDC have funded a project on Adult Learners Lives which is being carried out from a new literacy studies perspective, but the table is intended to provide a useful overview of some of the major differences over what constitutes success.

These different perspectives are what Colin Bell and David Raffe (1991) would call “normative worlds” and relate to the differences between the worlds of policymakers, practitioners and researchers. Notions of what constitutes research and what forms valid knowledge are embedded within a social infrastructure of norms and principles, and tensions may emerge between these worlds which raise awkward questions for the conduct of research and its purposes. Frank Coffield (1999: 6) helpfully develops Bell and Raffe’s argument as follows:

Tensions are created because each group has a different definition of what constitutes good and bad research and a different conception of the objectives, appropriate time scales and the management and control of research. Three different cultures with conflicting sets of expectations, criteria and requirements are likely to clash, particularly if their differences remain implicit or are only partially understood.

I would include evaluation as a form of research within the premises of these arguments, and the findings from this chapter support the notions of different normative worlds: some parties seeking to improve the quality of provision (for example, through their focus on professional development), some arguing that good provision would target the neediest (for example, through drawing upon evidence

from the CLS correlative data to justify the benefits of achievement targets), some measuring the outcomes from any adults taking the national tests (for example, through the policy focus on the participation target of 750,000 adults by 2004). The many different normative worlds of the policy maker, the practitioner and the researcher become visible within these attempts to define the successes of the adult literacy strategy, although, as I argued in earlier chapters, these are not neatly discrete groups – different normative worlds exist within, as well as across, the boundaries of policy, research and practice.

The movement towards more rigorous forms of evaluation reflects the wider agenda being developed by the New Labour government, and this seems to focus very much upon anticipated outputs. The strategy's vision of success seems to have been translated into realistic targets that can be objectively measured. Those strategic aims that are not measurable, for example well-being, are assumed to have an inevitable correlation with that which is measurable. Meeting targets is seen to be particularly important as a justification of the extent of government expenditure in this area of policy. Also part of this policyscape of context and influence are the use of SATS tests to measure the success of the National Literacy Strategy in schools, and the historic linking of outcomes with funding in Further Education following the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. Michael Fielding (1994) considers that the focus on the measurable and the quantifiable is a consequence of "the current obsession with the market as the supreme arbiter in human affairs". (Fielding 1994: 22) The normative world of the policymaker can be seen to be shaped by preoccupations with market forces and commodification. Within this discourse, learning is described in a mechanistic way, using the language of packages, delivery and so forth. Learning

becomes “a transaction located within a dominantly commercial world in which something made by someone else is, by virtue of being delivered, assumed to result in ‘learning’.” (24) Fielding is making an extreme case, but elements of this approach can be observed in the adult literacy strategy: the strategy seeks to reify literacy as a discrete set of skills which can be effectively measured and delivered<sup>8</sup>. The concept of literacy in the strategy is concrete – there is no space to review the standards, any evaluations which take place are expected to use the QCA standards as their definition of literacy, and this excludes the recognition of other practices which, for example, the New Literacy Studies people might consider to have value. Alongside this transactional approach, the focus on measurable outcomes might also be seen to be related to the limited time and resources that are available to evaluate the strategy’s success in more complex way: the strategy is not an academic exercise but a real project which has an impact upon real people’s lives, and, as several policymakers explained, there is an urgent need to make improvements as rapidly as possible. Within this policy discourse, subtle forms of evaluation become a luxury which the strategy cannot, perhaps, afford.

Academic knowledge does not fit easily within the policy maker’s normative world: for example, the first set of Pathfinder evaluations was commissioned from CRG<sup>9</sup>, a group of professional consultants, rather than from academic researchers; the lack of influence that independent research had upon the Moser working group has already been discussed in chapter six. Similarly the voice of the practitioner seems to be lost. Maurice Kogan (1999) suggests that this is common to the wider policyscape of education policy in the New Labour context, drawing attention to the lack of “hot

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<sup>8</sup> This has been discussed in detail in chapter three where definitions of literacy have been explored.

<sup>9</sup> This name is not given in full in the report.

knowledge”, that is “the developing knowledge generated by professional practitioners who have to ‘deliver’ the curriculum, who face the client groups and whose vision of reality may be quite different from that of the central curriculum makers and inspectors.” (15) The normative world of the policymaker appears to create a lofty perspective from which one is able to look down upon the landscape of literacy practice – as with the window seat on an aeroplane, one is able to observe the major marks within this landscape, but one is not able to access a more personal, humanistic, or reflective perspective; one is not part of this landscape. In interview with W. John Morgan, Sir Ron Dearing commented that in terms of his review of the national curriculum, “I had the great advantage of knowing very little indeed about education. I say a great advantage because, in the event, I didn’t start with preconceptions about the answers...” This suggests that it is an advantage to begin by observing a world which one is not familiar with or part of, and this seems to have been true of the majority of the individuals who were appointed to the Moser working group. However, Helena Kennedy (1997) does not share the opinion that coming from a perspective outside of education is necessarily beneficial in the development of policy: “there is an appalling ignorance amongst decision makers and opinion formers about what goes on in further education. It is so alien to their experience.” (Kennedy 1997: 1) This further begs the question of who has the authority or influence to develop a vision of the future against which the strategy can be evaluated. As the earlier chapter on the problems of adult literacy demonstrated, different perspectives perceive different problems and therefore different solutions.

Four of the five academic researchers interviewed for this research commented on the tension between taking a view of adult literacy which did not engage with the

government strategy and operating within the overall structure of this strategy. While measures set up to evaluate the strategy are informed in part by what is going on in schools, they are not informed by academic research on education or literacy. Few of the academics felt that the adult literacy strategy was a good thing, but all felt that it had good aspects. To not engage, therefore, with the strategy was seen to reduce oneself to “sniping from the sidelines” and raised the issue that “if you don’t join in you certainly won’t make an impact.” In contrast, however, these researchers realised that by accepting the overall structure of the strategy they were unable to voice their visions of alternative strategies, although they might be better able to engage with and influence the emerging shape of this strategy. As Kogan points out, “if it is wisdom that accords with the views of those currently in power then it will certainly be listened to.” (Kogan 1999: 12) In the infancy of the Skills for Life strategy the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) was seen to represent a potential means of improving the communication between research and policy. Certainly the researchers who became involved in the NRDC at its inception included those such as David Barton whose academic work had been lacking from that which had informed the Moser working group or ABSSU. In their strategic document, the NRDC states the need to both “influence policy positively” and to “transform research into practice”. Within the time span of this case study, the NRDC is seen as an opportunity to promote communication between the different normative worlds of practice, policy and researcher: the extent to which it can achieve this is an area ripe for research in the future. I would also be interested in investigating whether research carried out without the patronage of the NRDC has the potential to be heard, or whether the communication of research findings is limited

to that research which corresponds with the notion of literacy held by the national standards.

All except one of the practitioners interviewed for this research (the exception spoke at length about her excellent experiences consulting with ABSSU over their dyslexia strategy) felt that their perspectives and experiences had been neglected in the development and initial evaluations of the strategy. Their lack of influence has already been explored in previous chapters and was further illustrated by the lack of the historical context of practice in the development of the strategy. These practitioners were all firmly committed to investment in their learners, and some of the dominant forms of evaluation discussed here (particularly the extensive investment in developing national tests) was seen to be in tension with the investment of these resources into improving things for the learner in the first instance. For this group of interviewees, the use of limited resources to pay for evaluations was seen to be less of a priority than the need to improve the immediate situation for the learner. Furthermore, the measurement tools were not seen to be particularly effective, as I discussed earlier in this chapter: “I do think we have to measure value for money, there do have to be performance measurement criteria, I just think a lot more work has to go into deciding what they should be.” Connecting these observations that there was substantial investment in the development of measurements at the expense of investment in the learner, and the sense that the measurement tools were not particularly good at measuring what the learner had achieved, was the suspicion that the evaluation of the strategy was not for the benefit of the students, but for other political purposes:

“... objective levels between the standards and measuring is nothing to do with students and all to do with trying to demonstrate that public money has been spent effectively in a way that Labour continually want to do. I think that is their primary objective - they want the boxes to have figures in and they don't really care that much about what the figures say.”

In conclusion to this chapter, I would like to argue that in the same way that the policy texts discursively construct the problem of adult literacy, they discursively construct the notion of a successful solution, whose contentiousness I have presented above, which frames and shapes the development of the strategy.

## **8.6 Conclusions**

Any attempt to evaluate the success of the strategy needs to engage with the different normative worlds of the practitioner, researcher, policymaker and learner. On the whole, the differences in these normative worlds have been ignored and excluded by the policy attempts. These attempts to move away from the complexities and tensions between different perspectives risk promoting measures which provide inadequate evidence of the strategy's success, as has been demonstrated by the achievement and participation targets. The discursive positioning of the achievement targets in policy texts implies a connection between the achievement target and financial and social benefits. Furthermore, the repetition of the targets across policy texts serves to make the targets increasingly non-negotiable: this intertextuality bestows a meaning to the achievement targets that they are unable to meet in reality, and I have presented the limitations of the achievement targets in the first part of the texts. Alternative forms of



measurement, which have also been discussed in this chapter, are consistently absent within the policy texts.

Every interview ended with me asking the interviewee about their view of the future. Despite all the different reservations that had been discussed during the different interviews, every interviewee expressed some degree of optimism about the future – whether they linked this purely to the effects of the substantial financial investment or whether they had wider hopes from the strategy. This suggests that there can be some degree of reconciliation and shared values between apparently oppositional perspectives. Part of the problem of communication is that the different normative worlds share different perspectives on what adult literacy is and why a lack of it might be a problem. All interviewees agreed with the principles of evaluation and it will be interesting to observe whether different forms of evaluating the strategy grow from within the strategy, presumably located within the NRDC, or from without the strategy. I would argue that whatever form the evaluation takes, it is important that the measures have inherent meaning, rather than relying upon discursive positioning and persuasive evidence to lend meaning to something which is, in itself, only a number.

## Chapter 9: Conclusions

### 9.1 Introduction

This research has described the events leading up to and following the publication of the Skills for Life adult literacy strategy in England. The conclusions here respond to the five research questions which were detailed in the opening chapter:

1. If Skills for Life is a strategy to promote adult literacy in England, what might be meant by literacy?
2. Why has tackling levels of adult literacy become a policy priority for England at this time, and what are the key drivers behind the government's strategic agenda?
3. What is the strategy and how do its constituent parts fit together?
4. How will the effectiveness of the strategy be measured in the short term, and what alternative measures might exist?
5. What lessons might be learnt from a study of the Skills for Life strategy?

These research questions are themselves part of the much larger question which motivated this research: how is the problem of adult literacy politically constructed? The main body of my thesis has focused on deconstructing events to understand how things have happened, revealing and evaluating the dominant drivers behind the policy, and constructing a comprehensive model of this strategy; the focus of the first part of this conclusions chapter will explore possible reasons for why things have happened in this way.

The first section of this chapter will propose four preconditions that can be seen to catalyse the adult literacy strategy within the policy-making context of the New Labour government. Initially, each precondition will be justified, and then their influence upon the decision to set up a new agency to drive forward the adult literacy strategy will be considered, exploring the puzzle of why a new government agency was needed in this area when a government-funded organisation, the Basic Skills Agency, was already receiving funding to carry out work with practitioners and researchers to address the problem of adult literacy. I will then argue that these preconditions have moulded what is meant by literacy within the strategy. Having detailed the four preconditions, I will propose that future research might want to study whether the convergence of these preconditions has been a necessary condition for the prioritisation of other areas of policy by the New Labour government.

The latter part of this chapter summarises the methodological and theoretical conclusions drawn from this research. Methodologically, I will reflect upon my use of interviews and textual analysis as a means of eliciting contrasting perspectives on a phenomenon. The final section will offer an evaluation of the effectiveness of using Bowe et al's policy triangle as a tool when studying contemporary New Labour policy. Having looked through this lens to contain and organise my data, I will use my reflections on this research as a means of analysing the lens. While the policy triangle has been conceptually useful, I will make recommendations for how it could be amended to improve its effectiveness in relation to New Labour's style of policy-making.

## **9.2 The correspondence of four preconditions in the prioritisation of the strategy**

I propose that four preconditions can be identified in the time leading up to the publication of, and substantial investment in, the Skills for Life strategy. These offer a possible explanation of why adult literacy became a priority area of New Labour policy. These preconditions might also offer explanations for why a new agency and a radically new way<sup>1</sup> of addressing the problem were established. Although the preconditions are presented individually in the following sections, I argue that they are mutually dependent and that the synchronicity between them galvanised the government to prioritise this policy agenda. They are outlined here as quantifiable evidence, significant consequences, workable solutions, and clear measures of returns on investment.

### **9.2.1 Quantifiable Evidence**

None of the evidence informing the adult literacy strategy claims that adult literacy levels have deteriorated drastically over the past four decades; however, new evidence (OECD 1997) suggested that levels of literacy across the adult population were lower than had previously been thought: the change is in the perception of the numbers, not in the numbers themselves. The 1997 IALS survey produced macro-statistical data on the extent of literacy levels in England. This new evidence can be seen to have “jump-started” the strategy, in the same way that the estimate of two million adults being functionally illiterate at the time of the Right to Read campaign in the 1970s was seen

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<sup>1</sup> The claim that the strategy is radical is made in the policy documents and in press releases surrounding the launch of the strategy. As I have discussed in previous chapters, the extent of its radicalness is open to debate.

to have been a major factor in generating policy and public attention (ALBSU 1985). The IALS estimate of seven million adults lacking functional literacy and numeracy skills was accepted by the Moser Working Group. Earlier in this thesis, using Bowe et al's notion of context of influence, I discussed the figures of influence on the Moser Working Group and noted that the Working Group had a large representation of male academics from statistical backgrounds (Sir Claus Moser, Professor John Bynner, Professor Richard Layard, and Professor Michael Barber). There was no representation on the Working Group by academics from qualitative research backgrounds, most noticeably academics who take a social practices approach to literacy. It is possible that academics favour research which sits comfortably with the paradigm within which they work, and we should, therefore, not be surprised that these figures of influence preferred statistical evidence on the nature of literacy. Interestingly, following the publication of the report of the Moser Working Group, Alan Wells drew upon Thomas Sticht's work in the USA to question the validity of the seven million statistic and was quoted in the Guardian newspaper as stating that the figures informing the adult literacy strategy were "an absolute myth" (Kingston 2001). From their academic standpoint, Hamilton and Barton (1999) challenged the validity and reliability of the IALS figures. However, despite these challenges from a policy player and from academics, the statistics continue to be frequently cited in policy and media texts, and remain unchallenged within the policy discourse.

I suggested in chapter six that quantitative evidence appears to be more easily comprehensible and readily digestible than the more complex data presented from qualitative research. This accessibility of the data might be a factor in its greater influence upon the government: policymakers do not have the time to read

exhaustively around issues and in many cases policymakers do not have a history of experience in the field where the policy is being made (for example, only a small minority of the Moser Working Group had previous experience working, studying or researching in this field). The attractiveness of the IALS data for policymakers may have been in their simplicity; for the media, the dramatic impact of one-in-five adults being “functionally illiterate” was well aired in news stories in the late 1990s. The IALS data effectively presented data that looked like a league table, even though the report states in its introduction that it is not intended to be used for international comparisons (OECD 1997). Quantitatively, England was seen to have a larger problem than most of its international competitors. It is possible that the comparative nature of this data might also have acted as a catalyst upon policymakers, although the comparison was only possible because literacy had apparently been objectively measured in each country. This treatment of literacy is in keeping with autonomous approaches to literacy (these were discussed in chapter three and will be returned to later in this chapter) assuming that literacy can be discretely measured outside of the social context of reading and writing. This distils literacy from the concept of complex practices that involve values and identities, times and spaces, purposes and particular ways of doing things, (for more on this approach to literacy see Barton 1994, for example) to a reduced concept of skills that can be discretely and objectively tested.

On the one hand, the use of quantifiable evidence has been influential in informing policymakers that many adults have low levels of literacy, thereby driving forwards policy in this area. On the other hand, the treatment of literacy as a set of discrete skills has limited policymakers’ understandings of what literacy is and, as I have

argued throughout this thesis, this means that the adult literacy strategy rests on a foundation which contains an impoverished understanding of literacy. It is relevant that each of my interviewees stated that they valued the government's investment in this field; none of my interviewees suggested that it would have been preferable for literacy to have received less government funding if that would have been a consequence of not providing the quantitative data with which the policymakers were so ready to engage. The dilemma here is between the use-value of a statistic (in offering an easy-to-grasp representation of a situation) and the conceptual value of a more complex understanding of a phenomenon.

### **9.2.2 Significant Consequences**

Adult literacy levels in England have not suddenly dropped, however the perceived consequences of existing levels of adult literacy in England are seen to have become more serious. As I argued in chapter six, low levels of adult literacy are presented as an obstacle to the government's vision of a future high skills, competitive economy and a socially inclusive society. Many influential organisations and figures of influence are making the same claims about human capital, national economic competitiveness and the need to invest in skills, and across OECD countries there has been an upsurge in policy documents linking education to global competitiveness (Holland, Frank et al. 1998; Gee et al. 1996). The merging and interplay between these arguments means that the claims gain an apparent validity through their repetition: within the discourse linking investment in education to economic competitiveness, few dissenting voices can be heard. Although this evidence is relatively scant, its repetition across the policy texts amplifies these claims so that

they become difficult to challenge and critique: a substantial amount of time in this research was spent in tracking down the origins of citations, tracing them back through the intertextual maze of policy papers and press releases, through their interpretation in papers presented to the Moser working group, to their original sources. I have argued that the presentation of the evidence is made more persuasive through the personification of an “illiterate everyman”: the various factors associated with low levels of literacy converge in a mythical individual who is described as excluding him or herself and his or her family from “advantages others take for granted” (DfEE 2001a). Evidence is being used for dramatic effect: for example, the *Skills for Life* text (DfEE 2001) owes stylistically more to journalistic writing than it does to formal research reports. The problem of adult literacy is further exaggerated through the choice of emotive language and metaphor that describe the problem. This leads to what Barton (2000) refers to as the presentation of a moral panic.

I would argue that for an area of policy to become prioritised there need to be persuasive arguments that the situation described by the quantitative data is significantly problematic. The precondition of quantifiable evidence on the extent of low levels of literacy has been conjoined with this evidence which suggests significant consequences for the country. Importantly, these consequences dovetail with the two main areas of New Labour interest: national economic competitiveness and social inclusion. While presenting at the 2003 RaPAL conference, I parodied the *Skills for Life* strategy text by replacing the subject of literacy with that of cycling proficiency. I suggested that it would be quite possible to carry out a survey on a sample of the English population and, through testing a few discrete cycling skills, show that one in five adults are unable to ride a bike as well as the average 11 year



old. Translating this estimation of cycling skills into an argument which shows the significance of the consequences of not being able to ride a bike would, I argued, be necessary to turn the statistic into a “problem” demanding policy action (in my example, I drew upon government interest in burgeoning obesity levels, environmental problems associated with too many cars being on roads, and the failure of the public transport system to get people to work on time, therefore presenting costs to employers). My example had been intended to show that once a problem has been in some way measured, the measurement needs to be given meaning which has relevance for policymakers.

The need to tailor the consequences of the problem to existing areas of government interest and concern relates to the need to market the strategy to the Treasury. The Treasury has limited funds to invest in policy and, as Susan Pember explained to me, different government departments compete for funding for the policies that they want to promote. The Skills for Life adult literacy strategy has been remarkably successful in becoming a policy priority and receiving substantial amounts of funding from the Treasury. I have argued in this thesis that the marketing of the “problem” of adult literacy to the government has been a major factor in this success. As Lord Moser explained in interview for this research, the main audience of *A Fresh Start* (1999) was the government, because it was important that the government accepted the seriousness of the problem if the strategy was to “get anywhere”. The two preconditions that I have presented here suggest that the problem was politically constructed through quantitative estimates of adult literacy levels, and through evidence and argumentation that suggested the problematic nature of existing literacy levels.

### **9.2.3 Workable Solutions**

The New Labour government has a commitment to policy being carried out across many different departments and partners; this style of working forms part of their commitment to modernising government by making policy-making more joined-up and strategic (The Cabinet Office 1999). The fact that ABSSU represents one of the showcase agencies for modernising government is of substantial importance here: the adult literacy strategy has importance not just because of the nature of its content but because of its style of working. The proposed solution for low levels of adult literacy anticipated working with many agencies in *A Fresh Start* and further develops this commitment in *Skills for Life*. Hajer and Wagenaar (2003) observe that the movement towards multi-agency work in policy is common across many countries and their book, *Deliberative Policy Analysis*, provides empirical case studies of different areas of policy in different countries that use this “networked” approach to policy-making. Within the Skills for Life strategy a raft of organisations are involved in identifying low levels of adult literacy (for example, through screening at job centres); encouraging people to take up opportunities to improve their basic skills (for example through telephoning learndirect, which is a component part of the Ufi); making provision for people with low levels of adult literacy to improve their skills (for example through provision in the workplace); working with the QCA, awarding bodies and private enterprise such as CTAD to develop qualifications to demonstrate attainment in literacy; monitoring the quality of provision through inspection of Ofsted and ALI; and delivering funding through the local LSCs. Even within the government, as Susan Pember stated in our interview, every department has some involvement in the strategy.

The solutions presented in *A Fresh Start* and *Skills for Life* fitted comfortably with wider policy initiatives in education, such as the Ufi or the anticipated funding infrastructure provided by the local LSCs. There is a timeliness to the solutions presented in these strategy documents. The recent success of the school National Literacy Strategy may have further enhanced the perception that the adult literacy strategy offered a workable solution to a significant problem. For the government to invest in an area of policy, I would argue that motivation needs to be provided both through the extent and significance of the problem and through evidence of the workability of the solution. The presentation of a solution that recommends the government's favoured style of working, ties neatly with new government initiatives, and emulates a recent piece of successful policy might well have been influential factors in persuading investment in this area.

There are clear benefits to be had from involving many agencies and organisations: the strategy has access to a wider range of individuals than would be possible by the involvement of only one or two partners, and if one approach is not successful, other approaches are also available. In effect, the strategy is not putting all its eggs in one basket. However, the consequence of this style of working is that communication across the wide range of partners becomes more challenging because the strategy involves many differently located organisations with different worldviews. To ensure that these agencies are able to share the same agendas, the agendas must be kept relatively straightforward, which could provide another explanation for the simplified version of literacy which forms the foundation to the strategy.

#### **9.2.4 Measures of Returns on Investment**

Since the time of their election in 1997, the New Labour government has voiced an ongoing commitment to the effective management of public investment (see the Spending Reviews and Budget reports since 1997). The Treasury works to the principle that public services do not just depend on how much money the Government spends, but also on how the Government spends that money (HM Treasury 2000). For the government to prioritise policy in adult literacy, there was the need for some kind of tangible evidence that investment in this area of education was having a positive effect. This leads to the fourth of the preconditions that catalysed investment in the adult literacy strategy: clear markers were included in the strategy that would provide evidence of whether the investment was 'delivering the goods'. The strategy provided these most noticeably through the target of 750,000 adults improving their basic skills by 2004. Subsequent to this case study, the adult literacy targets have become part of the public service agreements (PSAs) for this policy area.

The consequence of setting up measurable targets based on outcomes through a qualification is, as I have argued in chapter eight, that the benefits of investment in adult literacy become understood in terms of how many qualifications have been attained - a problematic measure that does not appreciate the distance travelled by individual learners or the more complex benefits that literacy classes might offer for an individual (I used the example of Mrs. Brown communicating more frequently to her family as one small possible example of this). Measuring the value of investment through counting achievements in a qualification that primarily tests reading skills results in the concept of literacy within the adult literacy strategy becoming further impoverished because only a proportion of the national standards are assessed through

the national test. Having distilled the notion of literacy to something measurable as a means of communicating the problem, I would argue that the notion of literacy is further distilled by the need to provide measurable outcomes from investment in the strategy.

Again there seems to be a dilemma here between the need for a strategic sensitivity to the wide range of benefits that investment in adult literacy might afford, and the need to provide macro-evidence of the returns to investment in this area of education. Perhaps this dilemma is further aggravated by a historical perspective that could claim that previous investment in the area of adult literacy has failed to make any significant impression on the scale and effects of the problem. I appreciate that if a problem is presented in an overly complex manner or if the solution to the problem is overly complicated then the benefits bought by the funding might not be clearly tangible, and to fit with New Labour's emphasis on value for money, the benefits need to be tangible. Anxieties about the implications of the impoverished model of functional literacy need to be balanced against a pragmatic realisation that this "double distilling" has effectively commandeered substantial funding from the Treasury.

### **9.3 The importance of synchronicity between the four preconditions**

I have argued in this thesis that one of the major weaknesses of the Skills for Life strategy has been its overly simplified notion of literacy and the minimal amount of research that informs its thinking. The four preconditions I have outlined above explain possible reasons why this simplification of literacy has occurred. I have referred to this simplification in terms of a "double distilling" necessary to make the

problem easy to understand and the solutions easy to measure. The timing of these preconditions is important: the statistics were published at a time when evidence had become available that low levels of literacy had a correlative relationship with factors relating to the government's concept of social exclusion; the strategy was presented with a roadmap that was in harmony with the government's commitment to modernisation; targets were presented which seemed to afford reliable measures on returns on investment. Whilst I have articulated the problems of each of these preconditions, their co-occurrence was efficacious for the presentation of a strategy to the government; to borrow a metaphor, there was the need for the strategy to strike at the Treasury while the metal was hot. Pragmatically, this might explain why the time was not available to examine the evidence more carefully or to problematise in more detail the ramifications of using qualifications as the primary measure of returns on investment. I will return to the theoretical importance of considering the impact of time upon policy in section 9.8.

#### **9.4 Possible explanations for the shifting role of the BSA**

The BSA held a key role within the Moser Working Group, acting as a joint secretariat alongside the DfEE, but the Skills for Life adult literacy strategy is being led by the newly created government agency, ABSSU, whose remit has overlap with the work previously carried out by the BSA. The BSA was commissioned to write the national curricula for adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL, but the national standards, which form the foundations of the Skills for Life strategy, were formulated with no input from the BSA. The correlative research by the CLS, which proved so influential for the Moser Working Group and which continues to be cited in policy texts in this

area, was commissioned and published by the BSA; however, part of the Skills for Life strategy was to set up the NRDC as a new research body to manage and coordinate research into adult basic skills. Having been central to adult literacy policy since the Right to Read campaign, the BSA appears to have been usurped by the new government agency: the four preconditions outlined above offer a series of interrelated reasons as to why this might be the case.

The first of my four preconditions suggested that quantifiable evidence was necessary to jumpstart government interest in this area of education and the use of the IALS data by the Moser Working Group has been particularly influential. However it is interesting to note that Alan Wells, the director of the BSA, has subsequently sought to distance himself from this macro-statistic. Evidence on the significant consequences of the problem also drew upon the BSA published data showing correlations between adult literacy levels and factors of social exclusion (Bynner and Parsons 1997, 1998). However, the discursive presentation of these research findings in policy documents implies causal relationships between low levels of adult literacy and factors such as unemployability, crime, and poverty. As I have argued in chapter six, this normative discourse shifts blame onto the individual who has low levels of basic skills rather than holding society responsible for low levels of basic skills across the adult population. This view of the individual contrasts with that held in BSA texts. These are two different normative worlds: the mindset of the policymakers is grounded in New Labour thinking about the roles and responsibilities of individuals within the Welfare State (I explained this thinking in chapter five), while the mindset of the BSA seems to be grounded more in the history of practice (although, even then, four out of the five practitioners I interviewed observed that the BSA could also be

overly critical of both learners and practitioners). There is a tension between these mindsets; for example, while the BSA voices a commitment to the voluntarist nature of learning, ABSSU has piloted forms of financial coercion to bring those deemed to have a need into basic skills provision. Another example of contrast between these two agencies is shown by BSA's view that work with basic skills is ongoing, whereas the strategy has used the quantitative evidence on scales of need and a long-term project management model to suggest the eventual elimination of the 'problem'.

In terms of the third of the preconditions, it would be difficult to see how the BSA could have offered the same potential for interagency work as a government unit located within DfES. The agency has fewer contacts and opportunities for networking than an internal government unit. The interagency style of working also contrasts with the popular perception that the BSA is synonymous with Alan Wells, whose remarkable energy and commitment to this field had been visible since the late 1970s. This style of working is not in keeping with New Labour moves towards modernising government. More cynically, the BSA style of working can be seen to have been ineffectual in addressing the problem of adult basic skills, as one policy maker (1Po1) pointed out in our interview:

... as people say about the BSA – it was formed 10 years ago, so we had x million people who couldn't read and write, now we have got x million plus people who can't read and write. So what happened? It's not because the people in BSA are bad, there has been something missing.

This policy player stressed that there was the need for new blood within this area, reinforcing the policy discourse that advocates a new and radical approach. Of interest here is the fact that the strategy repeatedly stresses that it is new and radical; it marks



a conscious dislocation from a field of practice that is seen to have been unsuccessful in tackling the problems of adult literacy in the past. The language of change and innovation resonates throughout the policy texts – the word “new” is used sixty three times in the *Skills for Life* policy document (2001), being used to describe a new quality framework with new curricula, new standards and new learning materials; new funding and planning arrangements; and a new quality framework which will deliver this new service to the new learner. This desire to build something new relates to the sense that the history of adult basic skills is one of limited achievements and ineffective action:

Past initiatives to improve literacy and numeracy skills have produced limited progress and sometimes bred a culture of inertia and fatalism about the ability to make big improvements in this area. Only bold and imaginative policies, engaging those who can make a real difference in the workplace and communities, will change this cultural inheritance. We intend to build for long-term success by engaging potential learners through every possible means and by creating, for the first time, a thorough, high-quality literacy and numeracy skills learning infrastructure.

(DfEE 2001a: paragraph 7)

This sense of the new would not have been possible if it had been led by an existing government agency with a history in this field.

Finally, the BSA has not previously worked with any short-term or long-term targets for reducing the numbers of people with basic skills difficulties in England and, as I

have shown above, these targets were seen by the government to provide a primary means of evaluating the success of investment in this area.

### **9.5 The effects of the preconditions upon the concept of literacy in the strategy**

The dominant model of adult literacy within the strategy during the time frame of my thesis is a deficit, skills-based accumulative model within which one progresses up through the various levels of literacy attainment through acquiring, and demonstrating, more skills. Although my research provides evidence on the construction of an impoverished concept of literacy, the four preconditions outlined above offer an explanation of why this has happened. The concept of literacy encapsulated by the national standards is a discrete set of skills, and the measurement of the strategy is through a reductive style of accreditation that primarily tests reading skills through multiple choice questions. I have suggested that the reasons for this reductive approach to literacy were pragmatic, enabling a readily marketable problem, effective communication between different agencies working in this area, and apparently clear measures of strategic success.

The simplification of literacy as a discrete set of measurable skills has resulted in a limited pedagogic vision. There are some benefits that can be drawn from the narrowness of this pedagogic vision: a standard of provision is detailed which is expected from all areas, rather than provision being a regional lottery where some areas fund excellent work and others have little provision, as was the case in the 1970s; and the use of a finite and discrete map of skills affords the opportunity for provision to be tailored to the needs of the individual by responding to his or her

existing skills profile. However, because provision is expected to be mapped against the national standards, which were developed by the QCA with very little input from practitioners in the field, there is little space provided in the strategy for content which exceeds these foundations. This creates a tension between the narrow policy concept of literacy and the history of adult literacy education which encompasses a broad notion of literacy, rapidly progressing from a focus on reading in the early 1970s to include, for example, creative writing and community publishing (these have been described in chapter five). The form of the strategy at its inception risks the teacher becoming a “curriculum courier” (Fielding 1994), delivering rather than actively developing the curriculum. Furthermore, whereas broader pedagogies might have enabled a responsiveness to the wider needs and interests of the individual, for example placing Mrs Brown in a group setting where people will support her in emailing her grandson, these pedagogies are of limited visibility and value within a strategic framework which is grounded in the individualistic notion of literacy detailed in the national standards.

## **9.6 Recommendations for the future of the strategy**

Returning to the metaphor of the strategy’s childhood, one should not, perhaps, be too scathing of the naiveté of the policy thinking and its limited understanding of literacy. This thinking was developed within a short period of time (autumn 1998 – March 1999) by people who were deemed to have some political influence, but who were, on the whole, never assumed to be adult literacy experts (with the potential exceptions of the BSA and DfEE secretariats, and John Bynner and Annette Zera). As I have discussed in this thesis, the need for action has meant that little further research was

carried out prior to the setting up of the NRDC. In its childhood, the strategy may have been poorly informed and occasionally misguided, but I would argue that there is the potential for the strategy to gain wisdom in the future. I will outline below two major ways in which I can see the strategy moving beyond the narrowness of its conceptual foundations.

### **9.6.1 Broadening the policy concept of literacy**

By analysing the policy texts alongside academic literature, this thesis has extrapolated the concepts of literacy which inform the strategy and evaluated these against academic arguments on the meaning and significance of literacy. Chapter three explores some of the literature which has developed concepts of literacy, and these concepts inform the analysis of the presentation of the problem of adult literacy in chapter six and the potential means of evaluating the success of the strategy in chapter eight. This analysis was a response to the first of my research questions: ‘if this is a strategy to promote adult literacy, what might be meant by adult literacy?’ This research shows the policy concept of literacy is limited, assuming a discrete set of skills that the learner is expected to acquire. In the majority of policy texts what is meant by literacy is taken for granted; it is only in the national standards that the meaning of literacy is explained in more detail. This linear, skills-based model has substantial similarities to the autonomous models which imply an ‘evolutionary pyramid’, to borrow Street’s metaphor. In chapter three, I expressed my criticisms of such a linear skills-based model, and this thesis has suggested that the adult literacy strategy is weakened by resting on insufficiently researched and designed

foundations: the strategy suffers, in my opinion, by having failed to draw upon the range of literature available around the meanings and values of literacy.

Although critical of the autonomous approach to literacy (see, for example, Street 1995), the social practices approach was not set up to refute autonomous models of literacy, but to move beyond these theorists' narrow focus on one area of literacy. It is not inevitable that the social practices approach must stand in opposition to the Skills for Life strategy. Instead, as with the theoretical work in the 1980s, a social practices approach to literacy can seek to build upon, and move beyond, the narrow foundations of the Skills for Life strategy. The tripartite notion of literacy, developed by Lankshear and Knobel (2003), is useful in considering how this might be achieved. This model refers to literacy consisting of operational, cultural and critical elements. The national standards within the adult literacy strategy have developed a range of skills which can be interpreted as mainly representing a model of operational literacy. This might be seen to be the starting point of the adult literacy strategy. Future research might broaden the concept of literacy beyond the operational skills detailed in the national standards and counted in the quantitative research to include cultural and critical aspects of literacy.

My research findings on the impoverished concept of literacy held within the strategy leads me to recommend that space needs to be developed within the strategy for the concept of literacy to become more complex. The NRDC has the potential to provide one means of engaging voices from different theoretical perspectives on literacy, and the consortium which won the bid to lead this centre came from different research paradigms and perspectives on literacy, including the New Literacy Studies.

Practically, the NRDC offers potential space where communication of more complex notions of literacy might take place. Recent research, subsequent to the end of my case study, provides an example of how this might be achieved. The Adult Learners' Lives project was funded by the NRDC between 2002 and 2005, and was carried out by researchers based at the Literacy Research Centre at Lancaster University, which operates with a social practices approach to literacy. This research adds the complex dimensions of ethnographic case studies of real learners' lives to the simplified data which has informed policy. If the quantitative tests that were used in the IALS and the CLS data represent operational notions of literacy, then the ALL research, and other qualitative micro-research of this kind, can be seen to be introducing the cultural and critical contexts. This suggests that more complex notions of literacy as a social practice have the potential to become heard within the policy as time continues, and offers the potential to straddle the divide between policy-makers' views of adult literacy and the experiential perspectives of practitioners. This contrast between perspectives is substantial and, as my interview data have shown, has an impact upon the understanding of not only the problem of low levels of adult literacy, but also an understanding of what might constitute success within the strategy and a successful strategy overall.

This is an idealised and optimistic perspective on the potential of the NRDC to broaden the concept of literacy within the Skills for Life strategy. This optimism needs to be tempered with a degree of caution. The NRDC is not a purely academic institution. Although located within the Institute of Education at the University of London, it has responsibilities to ABSSU and, therefore, needs to operate within the auspices of the Skills for Life strategy rather than being able to take an independent

perspective. The Skills for Life strategy has its foundations within the national standards which, as Susan Pember stressed in interview, are not open for review until 2007. This offers a potential constraint on research that might challenge the validity or value of the national standards as a representation of literacy. Furthermore, the extent to which ABSSU's focus on delivery will affect what will constitute valuable research findings might be worth future research.

Lo Bianco (2001) suggests that there is “nothing unique in [the] disparity between knowledge generated for explicit political action (policy knowledge) and knowledge generated for teaching, research and ‘scholarly understanding’ ”(Lo Bianco 2001: 214): the differences that he observed between these different groups of actors led him to suggest that the encounters are as much a function of intercultural communication, as they are political dialogue. Lo Bianco advocates that “academics and teachers of literacy [should] become more immersed in the operations of policy”, and he recommends greater interconnection between literacy research, teaching and policy formulation. While the NRDC offers a potential interconnection between theory and policy, it will be of interest to evaluate the extent to which this centre enables greater interconnections between literacy research, where literacy is seen to exceed the operational foundations of the national standards, and policy.

### **9.6.2 Rewriting the strategy through practice**

The NRDC also seeks to work with practitioners to develop practice in adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL. The deconstruction of the strategy to its various initiatives (in relation to the third research question: what is the strategy and how do its constituent

parts fit together) has highlighted the wide variety of contexts in which the policy is played out. In chapter eight I related the differences in context to Bell and Raffe's (1991) notion of the different normative worlds of policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. My research shows that there have been limited opportunities for communication across interfaces at the start of the strategy and that even when communication has taken place, for example in the consultation process around the draft of *Skills for Life*, the intended messages have not always been heard. Many of the consultation responses to the draft of Skills for Life recommended that older adults should become a key priority group within the strategy, but this response did not become incorporated into the final strategy and was omitted from the Annex where the responses to the consultation were summarised. Table 5.1 summarises the main forms of consultation around different strategic initiatives and the initiatives' responsiveness to the consultation. As the final column of the table shows, these consultative processes had varying impacts upon the development of the strategy. Through the interviews, people outside of policy were most strongly supportive of the areas where consultation had been sought and responded to. For example, one practitioner eulogised about the process of being consulted over the strategy for dyslexic learners and held this up as an example of good practice. Generally, the areas of the strategy which were most criticised were those areas where least consultation had taken place: for example, the implementation of targets without consultation or evidence was seen to risk causing the strategy to fail in terms of the quantity of adults who would achieve in the national test.



AREA OF DEVELOPMENT	EVIDENCE TAKEN FROM:	CONSULTATION	RESPONSIVENESS
National standards	NLS in schools; key skills; NVQ levels	Minimal – led by QCA	Minimal. Not open to evaluation. Not open for review until 2007.
Core curriculum	National standards, Wordpower, curriculum in schools	Some – led by BSA and CTAD	Anticipation that the curriculum will serve as a flexible tool for practitioners.
Teaching standards	FENTO standards for other curriculum areas; national standards	Complex – led by FENTO, DfEE, BSA, and CTAD. Committee members from a range of other organisations	Some liaison with experts in the field.
'Get On' publicity campaign	Market research with target groups.	None – led by DfEE, commissioned through St Lukes (private organisation). Anticipated that teachers wouldn't approve.	None. Teacher criticisms were seen to be misguided.
Key priority groups for the strategy	IALS and CLS data	Substantial. <i>Skills for Life</i> (DfEE 2000) acting as a consultation paper and widely distributed.	Focus on need perceived from the top-down, rather than the need perceived by the individual.
Piloting rewards and sanctions for learners attending or not attending provision	Evaluated through Pathfinders	Substantial	None – pushed through Houses of Commons and Lords despite substantial criticisms.
Achievement targets	Unsupported by evidence	None	None

Table 5.1: Summary of consultation in Skills for Life

But while the achievement target has been used as a lever to justify substantial funding, the narrowness of the target risks other forms of success being ignored in the short term, as was discussed in chapter eight. As one interviewer (3Pr4), sitting uncomfortably on the boundaries of both policy and practice, speculated in relation to the stringency of the national targets: “We are almost bound to fail whilst, at the same time, probably exceeding beyond our wildest dreams.” I would argue that the strategy would have benefited from greater consultation not only over the various initiatives that form the mechanics of the strategy, but also over the construction of the problem(s) associated with low levels of adult literacy, and the forms of evaluation which inform these initiatives.

My case study has been framed by a chronology in which most action was taking place at the level of policy players. Between the election of the New Labour Government and first anniversary of the publication of Skills for Life (2001), policy action had predominantly taken place at the level of government organisations and the new ABSSU. Subsequent to my case study, the Skills for Life strategy was rolled-out in greater detail at the grassroots level of the practitioners. Therefore the following conclusions are hypothetical, predicting a possible future for the strategy rather than observing events that have already occurred. My predictions are based upon Bowe et al’s (1992) model of policy in which multi-directional communication is anticipated between the context of practice and other policy contexts. Policy is, within this model, an ongoing process rather than a discrete moment in time; therefore, policy continues to be ‘made’ as it moves into the context of practice, rather than being delivered to the practitioner. I hypothesise that once the funding has been secured and the first set of

learner targets achieved, greater communication and reflection might become possible within the strategy's development.

Bowe et al's research (1992) on the 1988 Education Reform Act shows that appropriation and transformation of policy is possible as it moves into the context of practice. This leads them to argue that some policy texts are 'writerly', that is, they can be creatively reinterpreted and appropriated by the reader of the text (I explored this Barthesian concept in more detail in chapter two). Within the Skills for Life strategy some of the policy texts, particularly the core curriculum, are potentially 'writerly' in the sense that the reader (in most cases, the practitioner) can use the text as a springboard for ideas, rather than being constrained and limited by its content. The confidence to do this will emerge, in part, from the practitioner's professional development and training. This provision is a key initiative within the strategy; the crux will be whether the roll-out of the training will enable practitioners to develop their own practice, or whether the training will focus on developing the practitioner as a 'courier' of the core curriculum and national standards; whether practitioners will be able to 'write' these policy texts through their practice, or whether the texts will be 'readerly' and constrain the possibilities for their use. My own experience of teacher training within the secondary context suggests that the first of these is possible, although unusual. Moreover, the opportunities for practitioners to develop the confidence and freedom to reflect upon and develop their own practice might also be constrained by factors such as funding and workload, which might derive more from the political climate of adult education than they do from the actual adult literacy strategy, in addition to the need to ensure that students achieve in relation to the national tests.

As practitioners become more familiar with the tools of the core curriculum and the new teaching materials, and gain the confidence to utilise these tools with creativity rather than being restrained by them, there is the potential that the strategy will carry a much broader and more contextualised notion of literacy related to the contexts of both where the learner and where the practice are located. However, while there is the possibility for the policy concept of literacy to become enriched through practice, this is not inevitable and practical issues, such as funding and workload, might negatively affect the freedom that practitioners have in taking ownership of the strategy. Future research could usefully explore this in more detail.

### **9.7 Methodological Conclusions**

At the start of my research, I assumed that different perspectives on the strategy would be primarily located according to the position from which the strategy was viewed and this informed my initial decision to use interviews with a wide range of people, some of whom were publicly known to hold opposing positions on the strategy while others were located in different areas of policy, research and practice, as the primary data collection method to elicit these different perspectives. At this initial point, I was assuming that my research would be looking at responses to the emerging policy. However, Bowe et al's (1992), Ball's (1994a, 1999) and Fairclough's (2000) approach to policy as a discursive, ongoing practice rather than a discrete moment in history matched my initial findings from the first set of interviews and provided a shift in my conceptualisation of policy from something to which people responded to something that was created by and evolved through people's ongoing responses.

The process of investigating the policy texts revealed also that tensions emerge due to the processes of authoring the texts. Unlike the texts that I studied in English Literature, which tended to have a single author, policy texts are the results of complex processes of writing, often over a relatively prolonged period of time during which texts are written and edited by different groups of people who themselves hold different perspectives, objectives, and degrees of influence. For example, tensions become apparent through analysing the drafting and editing of the Moser report, from its location in the minuted discussions of the Moser working group, through the editing of its drafts within the DfEE, to its final version. Interviews with members of the working group strongly supported the notion that the final report was not representative of the views of all those on the working group. Even when policy texts have been written “in-house” in an organisation, their authoring might have followed different procedures. For example, the national standards were written within the QCA with limited public consultation and in a context of rationalising the qualifications system in England, whereas the national curriculum for adult basic skills was written within the BSA with attention given to the QCA national standards and also to existing curricula in schools, in the international field of practice, and in previous curricula in English basic skills.

My analysis of the policy texts, with its sensitivity to the use of language, needed to be balanced against an understanding of the rationale for this choice of language. Language is a key, and often deliberate, aspect of policy. As my analysis has shown, policy documents are carefully constructed, and they need to be analysed and deconstructed for their presentation of the world and for their choices of language, as well as for their content. Misunderstandings are sometimes a consequence of the

interplay of different discourses and the different connotations and associations that the same language might hold for different people, and by choosing one particular form of language, the policy is implicating a range of associations and connotations. For example, one interviewee (1Pr1), reflecting upon her involvement with the FENTO consultation over professional qualifications, spoke proudly of the effect that the practitioners in the group had upon encouraging the report to move away from the language of standards to the language of specifications, and this has been discussed in chapter seven. For this interviewee, the connotations of these terms were absolutely vital in ensuring an understanding of what the committee was trying to achieve.

The findings and method of this research have stressed the importance of combining interviews with textual analysis. Some of the tensions and incoherencies existing in the policy might not be evidenced by either analysing the policy texts or by collecting interview data exclusively. If one studied the policy texts alone then only very limited insight could be gained into the strategic processes leading to them, and the values and aims that had informed them. While textual analysis is vital for understanding what and how the policy texts communicated, it needs to be triangulated with interviews and historical documents to understand, as far as possible, the events leading up to and surrounding the publication of these public texts. There are similarities between my contextualised approach to policy and the social practices approach to literacy. To an extent, my methodological and analytical approach can be seen as a “social practices approach” to policy analysis: policy, as with any other form of text, does not exist in stasis or in isolation from the interaction of people, and as with a social practices approach to literacy (Barton and Hamilton 1998), I have located the policy texts in time, space and discourse. The opportunities that I have had

to contextualise the policy in this way have been aided by the synchronicity between the strategy and my research. I have been in the privileged position of being able to ‘live’ the birth of a new strategy. As I discussed in chapter two, the advantages to this have been that I have been immersed in the strategy rather than studying it through the use of archived materials, but the weakness has been that I have been addressing a “moving target” which has continued to shift even whilst I sought to “pin it down” for closer analysis!

### **9.8 Theoretical Conclusions and Recommendations**

Responding to the changing nature of policy-making, Hajer and Wagenaar (2003: 5) state the need for policy analysis to reveal more about the character of dynamics between the different networks involved in policy-making. My thesis satisfies the authors’ recommendation for ‘empirical investigations’ to see the new manifestations of policy-making, and the case study approach utilised in this thesis has provided a detailed look at one small area of New Labour policy over a discrete period of time. This is in keeping with Hajer and Wagenaar’s aims to “analyse the tensions and conflicts generated by the impact of the newer ‘networked’ forms of policy making”.

The triangulation of textual analysis with interviews generates theoretical recommendations for policy analysis. Central to my research has been the analytical lens provided by Bowe et al’s policy triangle of the three contexts of influence, policy text production, and practice and the continuous interfacing between these. I would argue, based upon the experiences and findings of this research, that the contexts of influence and policy text production need to be further developed in light of policy-

making at the turn of the twenty-first century. Bowe et al (1992: 20) conceptualise the context of influence as the site where policy concepts are established and acquire currency and credence. Within this context, Bowe et al draw particular attention to the struggle between interested parties as they seek to shape the policy agenda, and Ball (1994a) later suggests the ‘cannibalisation’ of their voices within the policy texts: a metaphor supported by my interview data from those involved in the policy-making processes. As I discussed in chapter two, Ball later extends the notion of the context of influence with his concept of ‘policyscapes’ (1999), those global policy paradigms such as the development of theories of human capital within the OECD. I would argue that these concepts require further unpacking, enabling the voices to be more explicitly positioned within the context in which they speak. Unlike the 1970s Right to Read campaign, the Skills for Life adult literacy strategy has not emerged from the grassroots level, but has been generated at the level of senior policymakers and stakeholders. The political context of human capital and social inclusion agendas (visible at the level of New Labour politics as well as in terms of the larger policyscapes of the OECD) have clearly influenced this debate, but so too have the historical contexts of earlier literacy practice (although this is silenced in many of the policy documents, it is influential in the development of the core curriculum) and the conceptual context of what is meant by literacy (influenced by the school model of literacy and the definitions of the IALS survey).

I would also argue, from the experiences of this research, that Bowe et al need to further problematise what they mean by the context of policy text production. While Bowe et al recognise that the texts are constantly being rewritten and that different interpretations are possible from the texts, they neglect the processes through which



the texts are written, edited and presented. As I have shown, the written policy documents themselves offer only a limited representation of the strategic processes leading to them and the values and aims that have informed them. These policy texts do not share common authorship and they are the outcomes of different processes from the wide-ranging final reports of government-commissioned working groups through to the specialised texts of a small group of experts. While Ball's metaphor of the 'cannibalisation of multiple voices' is helpful, I would claim that the evidence from this thesis suggests that this isn't a random consumption, but a carefully selected and presented menu of different voices. Future research might usefully look at these mechanisms and processes of control in the writing of policy texts, although my experiences would suggest that access to the drafting process is difficult. While the BSA allowed me access to the archived minutes and drafts of the Moser report, I was not able to access any of the documents which were used to form the public version of *Skills for Life*.

Related to the need to develop one's understanding of how the policy texts were constructed is the need to pay closer attention to the subtleties of the language and presentational devices of these texts. While Bowe et al rightly recognise that texts can be differently interpreted and potentially appropriated by their audience, theorising this with reference to Barthes' distinction between readerly and writerly texts, they do not sufficiently explore how the text constructs the possible interpretations that can be made from it. As Fairclough (2000: vii) explains, "Language has always been important in politics, but the way New Labour does politics makes it more so"; Fairclough's book explores how language is manipulated in the policy texts to control public perception, an observation supported by my thesis. This 'spin', this careful

construction and manipulation of language, results in the persuasive rhetoric and presentation that has been used to market the adult literacy strategy, both in terms of the problem it addresses and the initiatives it contains, to the audiences of the Treasury, the relevant stakeholders and the general public. Combining textual analysis with policy analysis is one means of addressing the effects of the discursive nature of policy.

Bowe et al's approach to policy analysis is particularly useful in recognising the policy as a dynamic rather than a linear process: they represent constant movement between the three different contexts. It would also be useful to conceptualise speed within this diagram. As I have argued in this thesis, some of the main weaknesses in the Skills for Life strategy can be related to the lack of time for reflection and consultation, and the need for synchronicity between the four preconditions that come together to enable the prioritisation of policy. There has been a real sense of urgency in grasping the moment and pushing through different initiatives. Other initiatives have been developed without this sense of urgency, for example the national standards were developed during a relatively unpressurised period of time between the publication of *A Fresh Start* and the appointment of ABSSU. The proximity of the subject to the research has prevented me from being able to evaluate fully the effect that these different time pressures have had upon different areas of the strategy. This would be a useful area in which to carry out further research to complement this thesis.

## **9.9 Concluding Thoughts**

This thesis represents one means of mapping the journey I have taken through this research, signposted by the different voices of my interviewees and by the policy texts themselves. I recognise that this evidence could have been differently mapped, and I recognise that this end result reflects my, the researcher's, "interpretation and construction of narratives" (Mauthner 2000: 298). The research has categorised perspectives according to the labels of practitioner, policymaker and researcher, but I came to recognise that the majority of the people interviewed straddled these categories in some way (as shown in Figure 2.5). Potentially, it would have been possible to locate these interviewees differently according to a different method of categorisation, and such a construction might offer a subtly different picture of how these groups might interact and communicate, and the potential interfaces between them. The thesis offers the reflexive construction of a wide-ranging journey, but the continent missing from my travels is that of the learner. Future research will hopefully enable me to chart this area. Ultimately, I hope that this journey will enable those involved in the strategy to be able to view recent events from a different perspective, better to understand the rationale and contexts that have driven this agenda, and to be able to consider the potential for increased communication between the different stakeholders. If my thesis has achieved what I hope, it will enable one to look at the strategy from outside the boundaries set by the various policy documents and the foundations of the national standards. Hand in hand with this aim is my intention that this research will prompt a questioning of the problem of "adult literacy" and the evidence upon which this problem, and therefore the strategy, is based, generating a broader concept of literacy located in the lives and needs of real, rather than hypothetical, learners.

Appendix 1: Example of communication with interviewee

>>> Zoe Fowler <ZFowler@sta03.ioe.ac.uk> 10/30/03 12:07pm >>>  
Hello xxxxxxxxx

We met at the RaPAL conferences and you suggested that you might be happy to do an interview for my PhD research on the adult literacy strategy. I wondered if we would be able to arrange a brief interview to talk about your experiences as a practitioner in the area of adult basic skills. I would anticipate that such a conversation would take about 45 minutes. Although I would like to tape this, the transcript would only be accessed by myself and any quotes I used in my work would be anonymised.

I hope that it will be possible to organise this - perhaps in the first part of November.

Best wishes, Zoe

---

From: xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx  
To: ZFowler@sta03.ioe.ac.uk  
Sent: 31/10/03 14:33  
Subject: Re: Request for short interview

Would be glad to do this. However, 1st week of NOV. might be a problem as we are in the throes of re-inspection. (1th and 12th) Maybe you could suggest a date and we can take it from there.  
Regards

---

>>> Zoe Fowler <ZFowler@sta03.ioe.ac.uk> 11/03/03 04:26pm >>>

Sorry to have missed your phone calls yesterday. I am at the Ioe all day on Friday 14th - would that be convenient for you. I have a meeting at 12 but am otherwise free.

Good luck with the inspectors!!

Until soon, Zoe

---

-----Original Message-----  
From: xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx  
To: ZFowler@sta03.ioe.ac.uk  
Sent: 11/3/03 4:41 PM  
Subject: RE: Request for short interview

Sorry, Friday is no good. I teach the level 4 teacher training class virtually all day. Perhaps we might consider the telephone option? I could actually call you from the college. "I don't pay for it" Let me know one way or another.

---

<ZFowler@sta03.ioe.ac.uk> 11/07/03 10:43am >>>

Telephone option would be fine - otherwise, could I come to your college on the Thursday 13th or some time the week after? Ideally I would like to tape the conversation - it should only take about 30 minutes, but I always find it easier to transcribe rather than make sense of my notes.

Hope that the inspectorate are kind.

Zoe  
From: xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx  
Sent: Fri 07/11/2003 10:59  
To: ZFowler@sta03.ioe.ac.uk  
Subject: RE: Request for short interview

If you are happy to come over, that would be fine. just let me know what time you are thinking of.

Regards

Interview with XXXXXX (academic) Summer 2003

### CONCEPTS OF LITERACY

- Different bits of the strategy have different concepts of literacy and different opinions on the values of literacy. For example, the national standards assume a greater heterogeneity of learners than the curriculum; *A Fresh Start* values the ability of being able to read a newspaper for pleasure while *Skills for Life* focuses more on the employability of the learner and the functions of certain literacy skills.
  - From your experience, how are different bits of strategy held together? Do strategies tend to have one author/overseer or many different authors working together?
  - Would the strategy benefit from a clearer concept of literacy?
- The policy texts spend considerable time constructing reasons why a lack of adult literacy is a problem, and anticipating the benefits attached to improving adult literacy levels.
  - Is all policy persuasive rhetoric?
  - How does the language of the strategy impact our understandings of literacy?

### RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE

- The strategy is mainly informed by the findings from IALS and the BSA commissioned research. This evidence is easily digestible, quantifiable, and readily accessible to the policy makers.
  - How can researchers influence policy? Through readability? Tailoring their research findings to policymakers' worldviews? According with dominant views on what constitutes research? Networking?
  - Why has much research been ignored in the formulation of the strategy?

### THE FUTURE

In your opinion, will the strategy succeed? What will be the measures of the strategy's success or failure? And how could the strategy have been improved?

### Appendix 3: Example of communication with DfES

-----Original Message-----

From: Tessa.GRIFFITHS@dfes.gsi.gov.uk  
To: zfowler@ioe.ac.uk  
Sent: 24/04/2003 15:02  
Subject: research - adult basic skills

Dear Zoe

You may remember that we spoke on the telephone a couple of weeks ago about your research on adult basic skills. I've chatted to a few people here and we don't appear to hold records relating to Moser, other than the actual Moser report. The key documents in the development of the strategy are the Moser report, the consultation document and then the Skills for Life strategy document.

Sorry - this probably isn't much help! Do give me a ring if you want to discuss further or if there is any other information you need.

Best regards  
Tessa Griffiths

Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit, Department for Education and Skills, Level 1, Caxton House,  
Tothill Street, London SW1H 9NA  
Tel: 020 72731295  
Email: tessa.griffiths@dfes.gsi.gov.uk

PLEASE NOTE: THE ABOVE MESSAGE WAS RECEIVED FROM THE INTERNET.

On entering the GSI, this email was scanned for viruses by the Government Secure Intranet (GSI) virus scanning service supplied exclusively by Cable & Wireless in partnership with MessageLabs. GSI users see <http://www.gsi.gov.uk/main/new2002notices.htm> for further details. In case of problems, please call your organisational IT helpdesk.

-----Original Message-----

From: Zoe Fowler [mailto:[ZFowler@sta03.ioe.ac.uk](mailto:ZFowler@sta03.ioe.ac.uk)]  
Sent: 28 April 2003 11:38  
To: 'Tessa.GRIFFITHS@dfes.gsi.gov.uk'  
Subject: Reports, minutes and other things relating to adult literacy

Hello Tessa

Thank you very much for asking about the Moser report minutes within your department - they are proving very elusive. Apparently the Basic Skills Agency have archived them and nobody has access to these archives. I am quite naive in the workings of government committees - do you know of any other ways that I could access these? The secretariat who wrote the report were from both the BSA and the DFEE.

Secondly, I am also looking for minutes or agendas for the Technical Implementation Group headed by Baroness Blackstone prior to the setting up of the adult basic skills strategy unit. Do you know if any such records will have been kept in your department?

Again, thank you for providing some help in all of this. Any direction or suggestions are welcome at the moment.

Best wishes, Zoe

-----Original Message-----

From: Tessa.GRIFFITHS@dfes.gsi.gov.uk [mailto:Tessa.GRIFFITHS@dfes.gsi.gov.uk]

Sent: Mon 19/05/2003 10:29

To: ZFowler@sta03.ioe.ac.uk

Cc:

Subject: RE: Reports, minutes and other things relating to adult literacy

Zoe

It sounds like your best bet is the Basic Skills Agency if this is where the minutes were archived.

Sorry not to be much help with this - we can provide you with pretty much any publication from after March 2001 when the Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit was set up but not really anything from before that!

Tessa



#### Appendix 4: Interview transcript of 3Pr5

Z: Well, first of all G, I am interested in how you've reached this position of working in basic skills.

G: How did I end up here? Well, I started my teaching career ... I started out as a teacher of linguistics,  
5 particularly English linguistics. One of the areas which I picked out as an area of research interest just happens to be literacy – a lot of interest from the work of people like Halliday. Ultimately I moved out of HE teaching, and ended up as a trainer, one of these rail companies – a trainer and assessor and all of that. And it was from that that this whole thing about basic skills, the gap, let's say, with various employees that I trained, started to rear up to me.

10 Z: When was this?

G: About 8 or 9 years ago. So essentially really I was meant to be teaching something like communication skills, customer services and all of that, but I found that there was a big limitation in terms of basic skills around work areas. And that kind of opened my eyes to that. So I decided to take a PGCE, and while I was doing that I had the option of focusing on basic skills and ESOL as my areas of  
15 specialisation.

Z: Whereabouts did you do your PGCE?

G: Greenwich University.

Z: Was it quite unusual then to have a PGCE in basic skills?

G: It was, I would say maybe I was perhaps one of the first set of people to do that. I don't know if that  
20 has been done somewhere else but... I remember very vividly that they had a lot of concern about what to do with me. Where to send me, and all of that. And some of my practice teaching, I had to get my students myself. Predominantly they were my colleagues that I was training for the rail company. So I had to get them myself. And also I had to arrange classes, [unclear] I had no reference point or anything. After finishing with that, I had the opportunity to take some specialist courses with LLU –  
25 teaching, performance [unclear] so I was able to get into the real swing of it through those training courses. Over a period of maybe 6 years, since I went into FE, I was able to develop my skills in the classroom, and then did a couple of years at the College of NW London, and moved here four years ago.

Z: And is it getting easier, I mean are there more materials to use in your teaching? Or is it that you  
30 have developed more materials yourself?

G: I think there are more materials, but whether they are adequate is another thing. Because I think that many of the materials that go around have simply been converted from other fields. So you will find quite a few materials, ESOL and basic skills materials, and [unclear] but that is not to deny that fact that there are quite a few materials that are developing – many more books and packages.

35 Z: You must have been in a fantastic position to observe the whole of the S4L strategy.

G: Oh yes. The problem with that – I don't think that too many people have an understanding of what the policy, what direction it is going. I mean people who have been trained, they come over and look at this pack, and this is how to use it, but their understanding of where the policy is actually taking the subject area and indeed the nation, I don't think too many colleagues have an understanding. I mean I  
40 do because, maybe because, I am also interested in literacy as a field of research, but I think that the

need for more involvement of actual practitioners, when these policy things come around, usually is the finished article so people really don't take ownership of it. They just see it as another government scheme, and most colleagues see it as something that people who don't know anything about basic skills have put together. That might not be true, I know that that's not true, but that is their perception and I think they are justified because no-body has involved them in the process of developing this.

Z: Have you been training teachers?

G: Yes

Z: And these are the perceptions that have come out? Have you been training them in terms of curriculum and things like that?

G: Access to all, Skills for Life. That has actually become complemented the scheme of work, and really it is the first thing that I teach them now because my argument is that you are always going to work with this, or through this, so you must know how to use it.

Z: The second area is thinking about your learners. Do you still teach basic skills as well as teachers?

G: I still do.

Z: Does the presentation of the learner in the strategy documents match your experiences of the learner in the classroom?

G: For the ESOL learners – maybe. For the basic skills learners – no.

Z: Why not?

G: OK. I think that there is a new genre (so to say, if I can say that) of basic skills learners. Imagine in the UK now. Many of them used to be ESOL people and the assumption for now is that basic skills learners are predominantly British in their background – not necessarily English as a race, but born here, never spoke any other language or any of that – but I don't think that is the case anymore, because quite a few, indeed 80 or 90 % of my students, have actually emigrated to the UK and all within in the last maybe 7 and 2 years. Because they came in here at a relatively young age, they have been able to acquire the street language, and I use that consciously street language being formative – many of them speak Cockney that is influenced by Patois, Jamaican, you know – but many of them have serious limitations in terms of the written formal. And what has become of this is that whichever schools they went to, nobody picked that up. And because education in the UK is based on age rather than ability, if you are 12 you are put in a class where 12 year olds are, nobody would look at whether your competence matched the ability of those students, and that is what has happened to many of them. They had [unclear] in terms of language and they just put them in the same class as their age group, limitations in terms of building their language, and naturally class was no longer attractive to them so they hung around street corners and they picked the street language – they speak very well and they communicate, but they can't write and they can't do any formal writing. So many of our basic skills students are actually of that background now, but it is the inner city, I don't know what the situation would be outside of the inner city area. But that I know for sure in the inner city that is predominantly these are the kinds of students you will find.

Z: What has motivated them to come on this course?

80 G: Well, quite a few of them are coerced – again I use that word consciously – New Deal, because they are 16. And then I think that there is also the realisation... some of them just want to learn. So a mixed bag really.

Z: Does the Gremlins campaign help at all?

85 G: I am not sure that my clients, I don't think the Gremlins campaign has anything to do with them coming to school because the majority of my students are 16 – 19 year olds. I think for many of them, parental intervention – quite a few of them have taken GCSEs so what next? And many just see FE as the next step – and that is where it comes out that they will struggle with their basic skills. So many of them were actually put there by the college itself. They have come to the college looking to study, and the college has said 'OK, take this assessment' [unclear]

Z: How many hours do they tend to do?

90 G: My students have about 17 hours a week. In my particular area I have something that they call enrichment which takes them out of the actual classroom – all sorts of things organised for them, which I consider to be some kind of value added for them. So that takes about 3 hours or 2 hours of that. So really it is about 15 hours of actual classroom study.

95 Z: What the major effects of the S4L strategy have been upon your practice? Have you had to change what you do a lot, from being on your PGCE before S4L?

G: Not a lot. Maybe it has raised awareness of some issues more.

Z: Raised your awareness or raised wider awareness?

G: Sorry?

Z: Your personal awareness?

100 G: Yes, maybe. Frankly, in terms of actual practice, I don't think that anything has changed. With the exception of the fact that as tutors we now know, as teachers, we have a greater deal of accountability and the money to [unclear]. I think that is the major impact really, that we have to leave a trail of documents. But I also think that the packs have been produced so far from this project are quite useful [unclear] Even if you are not going to use it, you can develop it, and you can see that as a form of  
105 review.

Z: Have you been inspected? Of course, you were inspected last week...

G: We were inspected this time last year and we were graded four – which was terrible. We have had two re inspections since then

Z: Is that for the whole college or is that for basic skill?

110 G: For basic skills. We have had good progress.

Z: Has the inspection been useful for yourself and the students?

G: I feel that indirectly it has been useful for the students, because we have had to do a lot more, I believe, because we know exactly what the inspectors are coming in for now. We have to make more attention to the learning to the students. I would agree with people who would say that the focus had  
115 always been on teaching. I mean, I know the subject area and I understand it [unclear] and I know that it was generally about cognition not about – you teach, but the students don't understand but nobody cares – nobody understood that you had to teach. But with this, instruction has come in more and things

like ILPs and so on and setting targets are now becoming standard practice and this means that the students will learn more.

120 Z: That is a very positive view of inspection.

G: But there is a negative side to it as well. On the one hand, I am not sure about the areas of specialisation of some of these inspectors. For example, I have had an SLDD (severe learning disabilities) person inspecting basic skills – the trail of documentation that such a person would require is totally different from what a normal ESOL or basic skills person would require.

125 Z: And is that inspector aware of the difference?

G: You can't ask questions like that! [laughter] I have read the BSA policy on inspectors and they would say that every inspector should be a specialist in the area that they inspect, but again maybe they have a shortage or whatever.

Z: There is quite a shortage of skilled people.

130 G: Definitely.

Z: Is there still a shortage of teachers? Have you had recruitment problems?

G: Well – [referring back to earlier phone call trying to organise a supply person]

Z: Do see changes in that? With FENTO's new standards and the new teacher training programmes?

135 G: I think half of the problem is that the market is not that attractive to people. And it is not just in terms of pay or anything, it is in terms of the overall policy of FE colleges who have a preference for recruiting people on an hourly basis rather than taking them in full time jobs. Not many people would want to take such gambles –  
[interruption]

140 G: To offer somebody 7 hours or whatever a week [aside about problems of travelling long distances for hourly tuition]. It is just not attractive. And I think that it is the commercial ethos in adult education institutions, the same as in corporations where the staff become... as somebody would say education in FE colleges has become commodified.

Z: So how would you change that? How would you get more teachers?

145 G: The teacher training thing is useful in terms of producing skilled teachers, but attracting them is in the hands of people like me – there has to be an overall policy change. Maybe somebody out there is going to have to say 'look, we will give you additional money to make sure that your teachers are full-time, or at least part-time or whatever you would call it.' Because these people also need to think about their survival, they have got children, they have got family – if you give them 12 hours a week for two or three months and then that is the end of it, then they go on holiday and don't get any pay. So it is just  
150 not attractive enough. Realistically, that is why they are not going to want to do it.

Z: So it is not really a feasible career?

155 G: No. Not for many people, not unless they can get a full-time job. And my programme area has got 5 permanent members of staff, right, and I have about 9 from agencies. So that tells you the kind of balance. That would never attract people seriously... And I have to change staff every two weeks – phoning the agency...

Z: That must be terrible for the learners

G: It is terrible for the learners. That is has been a major weakness of ... and I must say that it used to be much worse.

160 Z: Finally, I wanted to ask you what the measures of success for the strategy would be from your perspective. So, how will we know whether the S4L strategy has been a success?

G: Well, I could go back and talk about what the government wants. 750,000 people... I don't think that we want to measure education in those terms. I bring in my background in philosophy of education into this and I think that it is just a materialist dream – measuring the success – I think that real impact should be in the society. Not just in terms of certification. But for my particular area, my students, I  
165 would be looking in terms of how many of them could actually go on now to HE – that is what would measure their learning for me. OK, so maybe some of them need to serious for their education studies [?] and I use serious – I don't want to see a student after 4 years with me, saying I'm coming back to the college – to study what? – you have them coming year in, year out. And of course they can achieve level one, it is not something that difficult – but what is level one worth? What is it worth in the job  
170 market? Nobody is going to take that as a qualification for a job. Absolutely no way. In terms of education itself, because quite a few of them are coming into basic skills because they want to go on to further studies, how many of them can go on to their studies, whether in FE or HE? That is what would measure it for me.

Z: And your students take these qualifications?

175 G: Yes

Z: And you are being measured on how many students are taking these qualifications as well.

G: Yes, in terms of how many of them have achieved. With these new measures, with this strategy, there has been a shift to external awarding bodies, not internal, we don't award the certificates ourselves. The emphasis has shifted to nationally recognised certificates – but that still doesn't take  
180 anyone anywhere. C&G Level one basic skills – what will that get you? Nothing. I would be happier if we could have a direct link between whatever they achieve as basic skills students and the next step. Something to say that, ok, if you have achieved this level one you should be good enough to do that. But on paper, that is the situation. But realistically, it is not happening, not a lot.

Z: Do your students get a sense of achievement from passing the exam?

185 G: Maybe some do. I think that realistically many of them find that their expectations are different from what the certificates are worth. Do you see what I mean? Many students just love coming to college and studying basic skills, and if they pass this and then they finish that, after 2 or 3 years, and they try to get into Access to Access courses – that is not success for me! [unclear] There are some who would say oh well, when they came in they couldn't write their names, they couldn't do this or that, but I am  
190 not sure on the government spending all that money just so that people can go to colleges and learn how to write their names. I think the instrumentalist viewpoint that the government holds, the reason why they are doing that is either to get people off the dole list because they are now skilled, for those who are already working, to compete with their continental rivals in terms of the ability of their workforce and all of that, and for us to sit here and say that student can now write his name and address  
195 – you know, the expectations... The tragedy is that the expectation on the part of the people who run the policy, make the policy, are very different from those in the class – the students think this is a

serious thing – once I achieve this, I must be able to move onto something else, my certificate should guarantee me the next thing. But oftentimes that doesn't happen.

Appendix 5: Categorisation table used in NVivo.

Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• History</li> <li>• Influence</li> <li>• Policyscape</li> <li>• Values</li> <li>• Vision</li> </ul>
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Definitions</li> <li>• Objectives</li> <li>• Standards</li> <li>• Curriculum</li> <li>• Professionalisation</li> <li>• Accreditation</li> <li>• Research</li> <li>• Media</li> <li>• Funding</li> <li>• Measures of Success</li> <li>• Quality</li> </ul>
Discourse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Examples</li> <li>• Construction of the problem</li> <li>• Values</li> <li>• Imagery</li> </ul>

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