

Family literacy in England

A very brief policy history, told through the lens of programme evaluations

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for adult literacy and numeracy

Springtime for Family Literacy

- [Family Literacy Works](#)
- Mid-1990s
- Greg Brooks, NFER
- Basic Skills Agency [Demonstration programmes](#)

A comparatively lovely summer

- [Learning literacy together](#)
- Investigated the “impact and effectiveness of family literacy on parents, children, families and schools”
- 2007-09, NRDC
- National family literacy programme, growing out of a national family literacy policy
- Various policy “owners”, with articulated aims
 - Quangos = quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations
 - *Learning and Skills Improvement Service*
 - Family Learning Impact Fund: £30m over three years, 2008 – 2011
- 42 local authorities, 74 family literacy courses, **short (30-49 hours) and long (72-96 hours)**
- Also other programmes and funding streams, e.g. Bookstart

Is now the winter of our discontent?

- Ongoing NRDC study of Family Literacy impacts
- Good research design **BUT the programmes no longer exist** – the field has been decimated
- Local authority contacts from previous study: only a few remain. **Expertise lost**
- Not even short courses left – most are only 8-10 hours long
- A hodgepodge of wildly **heterogeneous** courses, often running only a few hours and with no clear outcome objectives
- Huge differences in programme **quality** – e.g. instructors who've never worked w/adults
- In a few short years, England has moved **from having a national programme shaped by relatively coherent (albeit tension-filled) policy to disconnected local projects existing in the absence of national policy**

How did this happen? Policy lessons

1. Lack of a policy home

- a. Falls “between stools”: no department sees FL as central to its remit
- b. This problem is not unique to England. See EU report on Family Literacy (Carpentieri et al 2011) re policy barriers and challenges

2. Current government’s lack of interest in FL programmes (+ economic crisis)

- a. Booktrust’s 2010 Christmas gift from the new government: [100% funding cut](#)
 - i. Settled on 50% cut after [public outcry, twitter campaign](#)
- b. Massive cuts to libraries

3. Almost complete lack of government interest in (& perhaps even antipathy towards) policies aimed at “**Creating a More Literate Environment**” (High Level Group recommendation 1). Short-term policy focus on “Better Skills Now!”

How did this happen? Policy lessons

4. Very heavy use of **summative (not formative!) evaluations**

5. Reductionist **programme theory** and general theory of change
 - a. E.g. not interested in findings on long-term proficiency effects of improved reading engagement or practices
 - i. (What are the outcome variables for FL programme quality?)

Questions

- In the “evaluative state”, is there likely to be **tension** between:
 - High Level Group (HLG) recommendation 1 (**Create a more literate environment**) and
 - HLG recommendation 2 (**Improve programme quality**)?
- Does the latter encourage skills-focused, short-term-focused summative assessments of a sort that are inappropriate for the former?
- How to define programme quality? What are programme objectives?

Improving policy? Family Learning Inquiry (2012-13)

Focus on:

- Addressing policy challenges, especially re gaining policy traction
- Expanding policymakers' theory of change, w/in context of overall focus on improving literacy proficiency