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## **Socialising Young Literacy Learners into a Discourse of Failure: Dominant Discourses in Literacy Teaching and Assessment and their Impact on the Progression of Young Literacy Learners into Employment**

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**ABSTRACT** This paper argues that contemporary literacy programmes are a mismatch for the expectations of both the government and employers as well as the goals of learners. It submits that the dominant discourses in literacy provision have led to the emergence of a learning culture which not only fails the learners but is also incapable of meeting the aspirations of both the government and employers. To support this argument, the paper reports a small scale research project that analyses the perceptions of learners, teachers and employers who were involved in a work placement scheme for young literacy learners in a college of further education. Data for the study were collected through focus group and face to face interviews and analysed using the framework of discourse analysis provided by Gill (2000) with findings codified and analysed thematically. The study found that teachers were aware that their learners were not adequately prepared for the world of work because of the demands of the dominant discourses of quality and performance measurement which were most obviously manifested in their assessment, teaching methods and the attitudes of learners. It found that employers perceive young learners as inadequate in terms of the workplace expectations. Learners in the study revealed that their workplace culture and expectations were totally different from the culture to which they had been socialised in their studies. The study concludes that unless the dominance of these discourses is ameliorated, young literacy learners will continue to be socialised into a discourse of failure.

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## **Background**

Since the adoption of the recommendations of the Moser Committee (DFEE, 1999), the government in the United Kingdom has spent billions on the improvement of basic skills. The House of Commons Public Account Committee (2005-2006) confirm that by 2006, at least £3.7 billion pounds would have been expended on the scheme. Given that the term basic skills was used to represent literacy and numeracy, it is safe to assume that a substantial part of this amount must have been spent on literacy. Evidence from the audit of the Skills for Life (SfL) programme which was initiated following the recommendations of the Moser Committee indicate that a substantial part of this fund was spent on young people (16-19) who themselves had had substantial mainstream schooling (NAO, 2004). Given that one of the major drivers of the recommendations of the Moser Committee and indeed, the government's response to it was the drive towards employability and skills upgrading (see Ade-Ojo 2008, 2009; Fowler 2005; Hamilton and Hillier, 2006), it is logical to assume that the expansion of the huge outlay to cover young learners is also driven by the desire to get them into gainful employment and to upgrade their skills through further education.

Evidence from employers, however, suggests that the success of literacy programmes from which young people have benefited in terms of meeting the goals of both the Moser Committee and the government has been rather limited. This conclusion is supported by a range of reports and informed opinions by highly respected and relevant organisations like the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and The National Literacy Trust. In its report of a survey of employers, the CBI (2007) noted that:

Over half of employers are dissatisfied with the literacy and numeracy skills of school leavers', 'Nearly nine out of ten employers (86%) think that ensuring young people leave school with basic literacy and numeracy should be the government's top priority', 'Too many school leavers are failing to develop the proper foundation for their future employability in a flexible and fast-changing economy. Without the right basic skills they will find their employment prospects limited, making it difficult for them to contribute to the economy and society (p. 29).

In another report, The National Literacy Trust (2009, p. 1) claims that: ‘More than four in ten employers are disappointed with the basic literacy and numeracy skills of today’s school leavers’. Other indicting comments include: ‘Employers remain concerned about the basic skills of new recruits—over half (52% are dissatisfied with literacy skills of new workers... As a consequence, 15% of employers give new recruits basic numeracy training and 13% provide training to improve literacy’ (CBI, 2007, p. 1), ‘More than half employers surveyed had tried to recruit a school or college leaver in the previous 12 months but barely 14% had been successful. The four most common deficiencies were poor literacy or numeracy, in a fifth of cases’. (Kingston, 2008). All of the preceding comments suggest that the success anticipated by the government in its implementation of the SfL programmes has not materialised significantly in the area of employment.

What could then be responsible for this chasm between expectations and reality? This paper argues that although young people have been provided tuition in literacy, the provision has been in the context of a learning culture that does not tally with the cultural expectations of employers in terms of the required skills. It argues further that the deficient learning culture which young literacy learners have imbibed, especially in further education institutions, has itself being induced by the dominant discourses on teaching and assessment imposed on teachers in the sector. The result, it is argued, is that learners go through their literacy training with a perception of what employment will expect of them that is at variance with the reality. The result is that many learners continue to experience failure in the workplace in spite of the fact that they had been considered successful in their literacy training. By the same token, employers continue to view young people as unsuitable for and incapable of fulfilling roles in the employment industry.

### **Dominant discourses, teaching and assessment and the learning culture in literacy provisions**

Some of the most dominant discourses in the provision of SfL revolve around the notions of regulatory funding, quality assurance and performance management (Derrick, Gawn and Ecclestone, 2008; Ade-Ojo, 2008). Directly linked to the above is the issue of assessment and qualification specifications ‘which are extremely standardised within a high-stakes policy environment’ as ‘they are so integral to funding and performance measurement systems that teachers are acutely conscious of how classroom decisions affect their organisation’s performance’ (Derrick et al. 2007 cited in Derrick, Gawn and Ecclestone, 2008, p.174). Put together, therefore, the former list of factors constitutes the dominant dis-

courses in literacy teaching and from the view point of teachers, is most obviously reflected in the nature of assessment and teaching strategies.

The predominance of these discourses informs the teaching behaviours of teachers and ultimately impacts on the learning of learners. Torrance et al. (2005) conclude that these factors, in the context of SfL assessment, are responsible for a 'vertical community of practice through standardising and bureaucratising practice in a context where teachers work in more informal settings and teach for more less time than in other sectors' (cited in Derrick et al. 2008, p.174). In effect, SfL teachers have had their practice and its understanding coloured by the dominance imposed by these discourses. SfL teachers' view about their teaching methods and strategies, nature of assessment and how it is to be implemented is significantly coloured by their anxiety on how to respond to these dominant discourses. As such, assessment activities, methods of teaching and learning might not necessarily be dictated by the need to meet learners' needs for progression but by the urge to meet the requirements of regulatory systems for funding, quality assurance, and performance measurement which are all steeped in a prescriptive approach to accountability. Derrick et al. used the administration and understanding of formative assessment to illustrate this tendency. They concluded that in the context of SfL, formative assessment is often seen 'as compulsory, teacher-led techniques for feedback, diagnosis and review' (p.174). Borrowing from the analysis by Marshall and Drummond (2006), they concluded that this approach merely adheres to the 'letter' rather than the 'spirit' of formative assessment. In essence, while formative assessment is generally integrated into learning programmes, it is usually not used for the purpose it is designed. The effect is that this limits the potential of students to become the type of independent critical learners advocated by Derrick et al. (2008) and who can only be developed if teachers followed the 'spirit and letter' of a formative assessment framework that is designed and used essentially as assessment for learning. Such a use of formative assessment will rely on a framework of 'high organisation based on ideas' and will focus on 'promoting pupil autonomy'.

What then are the implications of this preponderance of the dominant discourses in SfL teaching, learning and progression? The first negative effect of the total reliance on the dictates of these discourses is the creation of a learning culture that is potentially a mis-match to learners' needs and goals and, ironically, the [unintentional] goals of the policy makers. Learning culture as used in this context draws from the concept developed by James and Biesta (2007, p.18). It sums up learning culture as 'social practices through which people learn'. Iterating this notion, Derrick et al. (p.175) defines it as 'a particular way of understanding a course/programme by emphasising how the interactions and practices that take

place within and through it are part of a dynamic, iterative process in which participants and (environments) shape cultures at the same time as cultures shape participants.' In essence, therefore, a learning culture is an evolving state which is created by a combination of inputs from different sources. Standing out in this respect is the practice of teachers in teaching and assessing learners. Because these elements are so integral to the entire learning process, it becomes inevitable that the learning culture imbibed by learners and which they take on to the next level of interaction (employment and studies) is significantly coloured by them. This converges with the cultural understanding of learning culture presented in Ecclestone (2007) which draws into the equation contributors ranging from teachers through managers and inspectors to awarding bodies. More importantly, Ecclestone highlights the fact that it is this interaction that helps to establish or shape expectations of learners.

The second implication, which follows on from the first, is the establishment of potential mis-match between learning cultures and work/study culture for SFL learners. In a situation where learners have been conditioned into a particular learning culture over a period of time, the expectations of learners are understandably conditioned by this culture. In the context of the prevalent discourses in SFL teaching and learning and which have conditioned the practice of teachers and inevitably, the learning culture of learners, it is important that the congruence between this culture and the desired/expected cultures in further studies and employment be examined. To what extent has the learning culture into which literacy learners have been socialised prepared them to succeed in their engagement with employment and further studies? This is what is explored through the small scale research reported in the next section.

### **Research subjects, method of data collection and analysis**

Data for this small scale research were drawn from two sources. The choice of these sources is informed by the need to ensure triangulation of data (see also Cresswell 2003; Cohen et al. 2000; and Robson 1993). Research activities were originally sequenced on the basis of the author's desire to confirm evidence collected from each group through an exploration of the same set of issues with members of the other group. However, the sequence was sometimes changed in situations when there was the need to subsequently revisit subjects in order to seek for fuller clarifications. The first group consists of six young literacy learners who as part of their programme in a college of further education have undertaken a brief work placement period. Common to all of these learners is their inability

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to make a success of their placement experience. Table 1 shows the demographic features of these learners.

*Table 1: Demographic features of learners*

<b>Learner</b>	<b>Age range</b>	<b>Industry of placement</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Level of study</b>
A	17-19	Health and social care	F	Entry 3/L1
B	17-19	Health and Social care	F	Entry 3/L1
C	18-19	Security	M	Entry 3/L1
D	18-19	Security	M	Entry 3/L1
E	18-19	Retail	F	Entry 3/L1
F	18-19	Retail	M	Entry 3/L1

#### *Group 2*

This group consists of three members of staff who had direct responsibilities for the design and delivery of literacy programmes to the learners in group 1 in their FE college.

#### *Group 3*

This group consists of three members of staff in different establishments who had supervisory responsibilities for the learners during their placement. The number is limited because of the issues of relevance and interviewee consent.

### **Methods of data collection**

Two methods were employed in collecting data for this report. The first was a focus group interview which was used with members of groups 1 and 2 at different times. This method was chosen in recognition of the fact that group interaction is one of the prominent features of the learning culture into which the subjects have been socialised. As such, the interaction was effectively among the participants rather than with the interviewer leaving room for the views of the participants to emerge. As noted by Cohen et al. (2000, p. 288), 'it is from the inter-

action of the group that the data emerge’.

Focus group interview is often considered limited because of the ‘unnaturalness of the setting’ (Cohen et al. 2000, p.288). This refers to the reversed situation in which the interview agenda is substantially dictated by the group being interviewed and the fact that the interaction is more between participants than with the interviewer. This leaves room for a number of potential limitations. First, there is the danger that the agenda of the interview might be dictated by participants thus leading to a lack of focus. In the context of this research, this problem was surmounted through the provision of a clear thematic boundary from the onset. Although there was the occasional tendency to want to dictate the themes of the interview by members of group 1 in particular, the researcher was able to gently guide the discussion back to the established themes. Thus, a significant volume of discussions emanating from the groups was focused on the relevant themes and therefore revealed significant information which might have been hidden.

The second potential limitation revolves around the issue of focus. Because the dynamics of the interview is not structured in the same way as the traditional interview structure of a forth and back nature between the interviewer and interviewees, there is the tendency for the interview to loose focus. In the context of this research however, this problem had a minimal impact because there was an agreed focus from the onset. More importantly, only insights and revelations that have been consistently presented by the subjects were admitted as part of the data. In effect, progress was only made after there was a clear occurrence of data saturation. Overall, therefore, although these limitations were considered, it was felt that the strengths of the focus group methods such as the potential for focusing more intensely on an issue, the potential for yielding more insights and the fact that it is economical (Morgan, 1988) by far outweigh these limitations.

### **Individual interviews**

This method was used to collect data from members of group 3. Although the use of the focus group method might have promoted a comparison of experience, it was felt that because learner experience is likely to differ from one establishment to the other, the individual interview method would be more suitable. This method was, therefore, chosen in preference to a focus group interview in recognition of the difference in setting. Prior to meeting the three groups, all subjects were briefed about the nature and purpose of the interview and every attempt made to them feel at ease with the researcher taking the view that the interviews were social, interpersonal encounters and not merely a data collection exercise

(Kvale, 1996). Also, other ethical issues such as informed consent, guarantees of confidentiality and the beneficence and non-maleficence (Cohen et al. 2000; Tisdall et al. 2009) were all highlighted and catered for. In the case of members of group 1, who were considered to be young people, consent was sought both from parents and teachers before the interview was conducted.

One minor problem with the use of this method was the issue of what Cohen et al. (2000, p. 279) describe as the ‘cognitive’ problem. This examines the sufficiency of the knowledge of the interviewee about the subject matter. In this case, the extent to which one interviewee in group 3 was comfortable with the meta-language of literacy and linguistics was an issue. Nevertheless, the problem was surmounted because the researcher had considered this as a potential problem prior to starting the interview and had prepared paraphrased descriptors for the linguistic concepts. As such, on the few occasions that the problem arose, it was speedily dealt with.

### **Data Analysis**

While the analysis of data in this research draws significantly from the principles of Discourse Analysis in general (Van Dijk, 2006; Fairclough, 2003), it draws on the methodology presented in Gill (2000) in particular. For many researchers, the concern of discourse analysis is an ‘interest in discourses in their own right’ rather than “getting at” some reality deemed to be behind them’ (p. 174). Drawing from Gill’s model, data collected from interviews were transcribed. This was particularly useful in understanding the responses as semi-structured interview responses are usually less formally constructed. This was followed by a period of sceptical reading which, as advocated by Gill (p. 175), enabled the researcher to ‘purge myself’ of my assumptions. Having become familiar with the transcribed data, the data were then subjected to a process of coding using the parameters of negativity and positivity of comments on each aspect of the questionnaire. In the course of this process, recurrent terms were identified and these were used to initiate the next step which involved a search for patterns and themes within the data. The emergent themes and patterns then formed the basis for reporting the data collected.

### **Findings**

The focus group discussions were governed by four key issues [research questions]

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to be investigated. These are:

1. Why have the learners been unsuccessful in their placements?
2. Were there skills required of them in their placement that their training had not prepared them for?
3. Were their unsuccessful placements due to a lack of ability or a lack of willingness?
4. Would they have been more successful if they had learned other skills?

Table 2: Four issues at the centre of focus group discussions

Interview focus	Aggregate majority response	Minority views
Focus 1: Why learners felt they were unsuccessful	(1) Subjects predominantly felt that many of the tasks they were required to carry out were 'too difficult' for them. They cited specifically 'writing case report' in the Health and Social Care placement 'end of shift report' in retail and security placements. (2) All subjects felt that what they were required to do was different from what they did in class. (3) Some respondents claimed that some of the tasks they were given 'felt like examinations' but totally 'different from all the tests they had in college.' (4) Some respondents felt that the tasks were difficult because they had no support from their superiors and colleagues.	(1) 2 respondents felt they were unable or unwilling to carry out most tasks because they were boring.  (2) One respondent felt that the attitude of their supervisors was responsible for their failure.
Focus 2: Required skills	(1) All the participants agreed that writing voluminous texts is a skill they lacked. (2) Some participants felt that the problem was their inability to work independently. (3) Some respondents felt that the problem was with their understanding of some of the words they had to write about.	
Focus 3: Was failure due to lack of ability or lack of will?	(1) All participants felt that a lack of ability was more responsible for failure (2) Some participants claimed that the lack of ability also led to a lack of will.	
Focus 4: Would a different form of training have made them more successful?	Majority of respondents agreed that they would have been more successful if they had been exposed to a different form of training.	2 respondents did not know if this would have been the case.

## Findings from group 2

The questions presented to members of this group were mainly informed by the responses of learners interviewed in the focus group. They therefore focused around the following:

1. Did tutors think their learners were adequately prepared for engagement with work?
2. If the answer to the above is no, in what areas did they see their learners, and in effect, the provision offered by the college as lacking?
3. Following from this, why have they not been able to adequately prepare their learners?

*Table 3: Summary of responses from Group 2*

<b>Responses to interview focus 1:</b> Were learners adequately prepared?	<b>Responses to interview focus 2:</b> In what areas were learners lacking?	<b>Responses to interview focus 3:</b> Why have teachers been unable to adequately prepare learners
<p>There was a consensus that learners were generally not totally prepared to engage with the world of work.</p>	<p>Learners' skills were generally inadequate in the areas of:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) Critical and independent engagement with tasks.</li> <li>(2) Engagement with more than bite sized tasks.</li> <li>(3) Engagement with assessment activities that require the generation of full text.</li> </ol>	<p>Reasons for their inability to develop these skills in learners include:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) Teachers felt compelled to teach to assessment requirements.</li> <li>(2) The pressure to get trainees to pass assessments from very early on in their training debars any serious engagement with text generation.</li> <li>(3) Methods that they felt were imposed by the quality and monitoring requirements compelled the over-use of group work and other collaborative methods to the detriment of independent learning skills.</li> <li>(4) The over-use of SMART targets in ILP format imposed on teachers and learners has created a culture which limits the expectations of learners in terms of what they are required to achieve.</li> <li>(5) The overall structure of performance management has compelled teachers to work in a way that prioritised meeting targets over their own professional views and learners' needs.</li> </ol>

### Findings from group 3

Questions posed to members of this group were informed by the responses provided by members of the first two groups. It centred on the following:

1. Why were the learners on placement unable to engage successfully with their placement?
2. In what areas were their skills lacking?
3. What were the effects of the skill gap on their work?
4. How did they think the skills gap could be remedied?

Table 3: Summary of responses from Group 3

<b>Interview focus 1:</b> reasons for learners' failure	<b>Interview focus 2:</b> Areas of learners' skills gap	<b>Interview focus 3:</b> Effects of skills gap	<b>Interview focus 4:</b> Views on possibility of remedying gaps.
(1) Learners were not adequately prepared to work in the industry (2) Learners' expectations of what is required of them are at variance with reality. (3) Learners' attitude towards job not appropriate	(1) Ability to concentrate on tasks for long periods. (2) Learners were reluctant/unable to engage with work independently (3) Learners were unable to engage with the report writing component of their job. (4) Ability to engage with more than a small task at the same time.	(1) Learners failed to complete most tasks allocated to them. (2) Learners were sometimes unwilling to accept tasks allocated to them. (3) Learners were generally unable to function in the roles in which they have been employed.	(1) All participants agree that learners need to be re-trained in two main areas: (a) Attitude towards work (b) Higher levels of basic skills (literacy and numeracy)

### Discussion

There appears to be a convergence in the responses provided by the three groups of participants given the huge difference in their roles. It is clear that from the view point of learners, there is a feeling that they had not been adequately prepared for the tasks they were confronted with in their placement. There was a huge emphasis on the level of difficulty of the tasks. Participant 1 said: 'You can't

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believe what they wanted us to do, sir. Write all of that stuff and still do other things. It's difficult man, it's really hard'. A similar sentiment was expressed by participant 5 who said: 'You know, I saw an example of what they wanted me to write and it is like 4 pages. How can I do that? It is just difficult, man'.

This notion of difficulty was corroborated by responses from tutors and employers. On the part of employers, both the claims and evidence were easy to find: Learners simply were unable or unwilling to carry out the required tasks. However, in the case of tutors, they provided a fuller insight into the issue of difficulty. Tutor 1 for instance, in response to why learners found the requirement to write reports difficult said: 'There is no doubt that they must have found that aspect difficult. In their classes, they were not even required to write full essays, not to talk of a four page report'. Tutor 2 shed further light on this limitation saying:

We try and prepare these students to pass their exams. We cannot but do that otherwise, we might lose our jobs. The problem is that their assessment does not require them to engage with in-depth writing. So...

More revealing is the explanation of tutors for the attitude of their learners towards the requirements of the workplace. Tutors suggested that the culture in which they had nurtured their learners did not prepare them for the culture of the workplace. For example, all three tutors acknowledged the fact that their methods of teaching revolved mostly around group discussions and that their learners' outputs were mostly in the form of oral presentations. Explaining why this is the case, tutors suggested that they were compelled to adopt this approach because the monitoring regime in the college compelled them to use these approaches. Tutor 2 claimed:

When you teach a class in which learners are not discussing, cutting and pasting and all such superfluous activities, you are told your learners are not engaged. So, no one talks about getting learners to write essays or any such thing. To be fair, there is hardly the time to do that given the number of learners in our classes.

Tutor 3 takes this further revealing that:

When they come to see your classes, they are always looking for how you plan for learning styles, how SMART your targets are and how engaged and active your learners are. I am not surprised that our students were unable to cope with tasks that require them to be independent.

Another explanation provided by tutors is based on the nature of assessment. In

this respect, tutors highlight the nature of assessment and the purpose for which it is used. In their view, assessment is not used as a measure of learning, but as evidence for securing further funds from the government. Also, the nature of the assessment activities is such that learners go through them successfully without actually acquiring the skills they require. For example, tutor 1 asked: ‘What literacy skills are learners demonstrating through our City and Guilds or EDEXCEL [awarding bodies] tests? Yet, we are compelled to teach our students to these tests because our success rate and funding depend on how well our learners perform in these tests’.

What the on-going suggest is that there is an over-reliance on what on the surface of it might be called token evidence of ‘participative processes’ (Bhola and Gomez, 2008, p. 60). It would seem that the dominant discourses in literacy teaching have enforced a surface level form of participatory process which has as its goal a total elimination of any didactic process. In my view, it is the superficiality of the imposed participatory process together with the total elimination of ‘didactic process’ which is responsible for the mismatch between literacy learners’ learning culture and the requirements of the workplace. As Bhola and Gomez remind us (2008, p. 60),

Before getting into the participatory process, the educators’ team must have completed the “didactic process” of clarifying among themselves the general objectives of the exercise and the specific information and skills that they would want to communicate. It may seem contradictory to use the “didactic process” as a springboard for the “participative process”. But in fact it is not. Participation is not another name for sharing each other’s ignorance. New knowledge, attitudes, and skills from the outside will, of course, have to be connected with people’s lives, critiqued, made relevant, adapted and re-invented in local settings and made congenial to multiple identities.

The failure of the current regime of literacy teaching to young people is the failure to adapt the content to the context. Consequently, the regime of literacy teaching fails to make the teaching ‘congenial to multiple identities’. One of the reasons for this failure, in my view, is the imposition of a regime which is induced by the funding, quality assurance, performance monitoring and assessment discourses.

In effect, in teaching literacy to young people, we seem to be creating and socialising them into a learning culture that is at variance with their progression route into employment, as this mini-study suggests. In their discussion on ‘Word-to-work transition’, Bhola and Gomez (2008, p. 61) argue that the ‘instructional’ culture is more important than the structural culture since ‘the ability to understand and deal with structures is in itself a process of education’. What appears to

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be learnt in the teaching of literacy to young learners is the element of instructional culture which prepares them for dealing with structural cultures they are likely to meet along their progression route. In effect, these learners are being socialised into a discourse of failure. The dominant discourses seem to have created a culture which stops planners and practitioners from thinking 'about word-to-work transition' and demonstrate the limitations in terms of their plan 'for post-literacy activities both instructional and developmental' (Bhola and Gomez 2008, p. 61).

### **Conclusions**

This study is essentially a preliminary investigation and therefore makes no general claims. Nevertheless, it certainly provides a glimpse into the world of young literacy learners in terms of their potential for progressing in the world of work. While the imposed discourses talk persistently of learning styles, no one seems to remember that we are yet to create a 'working style' for our young learners in the world of work. In order to prepare our learners for 'working and further study styles' it is important that we create learning cultures which encourage them to become creative and independent learners. The dominant discourses at the moment do not appear to be promoting this. Furthermore, it is important that we create an environment which gives teachers the flexibility to respond to the needs of learners rather than the dictates of dominant discourses which are of limited use to learners. This of course calls for policy makers to reflect on the ultimate goals of literacy education—to draw a line between literacy education as a means of justifying outlay, evidence of quantified education which operates to a given form and standard and literacy education as ultimately aimed at meeting learners' needs in different social contexts.

One explanation for this might revolve on the surface of it, around the issue of perceptions of literacy. Predominantly, such an engagement with differing perceptions focuses on the difference between a cognitive and autonomous perception of literacy and a social and ideological perception of literacy (Street 1984; Barton 1994; Barton and Hamilton 2000; Ade-Ojo 2008). While the former insists on the element of standardisation and views literacy as something cognitive, the latter recognises literacy as social and therefore different across social spectrums. It would seem that the dominant discourses prevalent in the teaching of literacy are dictated by the former, while the reality of the work and social needs of literacy learners is in itself a strong reflection of the logic underpinning the latter stand. We are, therefore, confronted with a situation that might be described as conflict-

ing paradigmatic allegiances.

On another level, however, the findings of this study draw our attention to what might be seen as the conflict between policy and practice, and as illustrated in this study, the negative impact that this might have for learners. Previous studies have identified the disparity between the expectations of policy and the realities of practice. For example, Hinzen (1989) notes that, 'misassumptions, inaccurate definitions, misused statistics, unrealistic goals, and the failure to listen to literacy students themselves have resulted in frustrated policies (p. 1, abstract). Similarly, Luke and Carrington (2004, p. 52) invite us to have a glimpse of how 'we might construct a literacy education that addresses new economic and cultural formations' if we suspend our belief in 'current policy driven preoccupations with pedagogical methods with decoding and basic skills ... .' In effect, it is clear that what policy provides might not be the most desirable for practice and learners. Furthermore, as illustrated in this study and as suggested by Luke and Carrington (2004), practice itself might fail learners because of adherence to policy induced principles.

Finally, findings of this research raise the need to respond to the concerns of employers in this study. It seems that the standardised one-dimensional form of literacy imposed by discourses in teaching and assessment is simply not adequate for the progression of learners into different realms. In my view, this calls for a serious consideration of the concept of literacy for specific purposes (Ade-Ojo, 2008) which has the potential to meet the combined needs of employers, learners and the need of policy makers to provide evidence of progress through qualifications. A failure to reflect on the issues raised in this small study is likely to have a much larger significance for practice, learners and society. Indeed, a continued adherence to the regime imposed by contemporary dominant discourses is likely to lead to a situation where we continue to socialise our learners to a discourse of failure.

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