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Researching literacy policy: Conceptualizing trends in the field

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Abstract

The Literacy Policy Project examines the trends in UK government policy interventions into literacy curriculum and pedagogies in schools in England. We undertake a policy scholarship methodology to read policy texts through a conceptual framework that frames policy interventions with functional, realist or socially critical purposes. We identify how successive UK governments have primarily adopted functional policies and research relating to literacy in schools in England. We argue that policy is dictated by, and serves, a growing marketplace for educational solutions, making the case that more prominence should be given to facilitating socially critical approaches to literacy policy.

Keywords: literacy, policy, intervention, functional, critical, socially critical

Introduction

This article reports on research from the Literacy Policy Project. Policy texts produced by successive UK governments for reform to schools in England were investigated regarding the purposes and practices of literacy policy interventions. Literacy has been the focus of repeated critical commentaries, a media narrative of a 'national level of "illiteracy"' (Mansell, 2013: 133) or 'literacy crises' (Soler and Openshaw, 2006), with a focus on the relationship between basic skills and global economic competitiveness. Apple (2006) outlines 'the right's' dominance in education, while Cushing (2019: 425) identifies 'linguistic conservatism' of 'language policies'. Recent interventions include English Hubs (DfE, 2017) and a Centre of Excellence for Literacy Teaching (DfE, 2018). The COVID-19 lockdowns ensure that literacy remains high on the agenda, with £1bn of catch-up funding (DfE, 2020) to address 'learning loss' (EEF, 2020a).

In this journal, Brundrett (2015: 49) raised how expert views on the primary curriculum have been 'dismissed' in favour of 'a limited and instrumentalist view'. Debates around 'powerful knowledge' have taken place, questioning the privileging of certain types of knowledge over others (White, 2018, 2019). McNiff (2020: 440) cites the 'narrow, one-dimensional' school curriculum. With such calls coming frequently from researchers in this and other publications, it is important to question the dominance of functionality, particularly in light of societal change which rightly calls for curricular decolonizing. Flores and Schissel (2014: 454), for example, argue for 'heteroglossic language strategies' as an alternative to 'standards-based reform' based on 'monoglossic language ideologies'. In a diverse society, literacy policy for schools in England emphasizes 'standard English' as pre-eminent.

Deploying a policy scholarship methodology (Grace, 1995), we have analysed the major policy texts and interventions through a novel and tested framework for

questioning the scoping, design and impact of policy regarding functional, realist and socially critical features (Raffo et al., 2010; Raffo and Gunter, 2008) developed through a range of studies (Courtney and McGinity, 2020; Courtney et al., 2018; Gunter et al., 2013, 2015). We demonstrate that a functional agenda dominates and continues despite low levels of literacy not being resolved.

Numerous studies have called for socially just literacy solutions. Moss (2016: 928) argues that 'best practice, benchmarking and policy borrowing wear increasingly thin', and yet they pervade. Our contribution is to identify why. We assert that private business, not individual learners, is the beneficiary of literacy policy in England. Consequently, we provide a conceptual analysis that speaks to policy matters in education systems internationally, where the role of business in the school leadership field is being charted (for example, Gunter, 2012; Saltman, 2012), but where more work is needed.

Researching literacy policy

The first stage was to establish a timeline of policy interventions and texts, listed in Table 1.

Table 1: UK government literacy policy for schools in England from 1988

Year	Document
1988	Education Reform Act www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/40/pdfs/ukpga_19880040_en.pdf
1988	Black Report: <i>National Curriculum Task Group on Assessment and Testing</i> www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/pdfs/1988-TGAT-report.pdf
1989	Cox Report: <i>English for Ages 5 to 16</i> www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/cox1989/cox89.html
1990	House of Lords debate on International Literacy Year: Promoting skills https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1990/apr/04/international-literacy-year-promoting
1991	The Education (National Curriculum) (Assessment Arrangements for English, Mathematics and Science) (Key Stage 1) Order 1991 www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/1991/2169/made
1992	Education (Schools) Act 1992 www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1992/38/contents
1993	Education Act 1993 www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1993/35/pdfs/ukpga_19930035_en.pdf
1994	<i>The Warwick Evaluation of the Implementation of English in the National Curriculum at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 (1991–1993)</i> www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/warwick/warwick1994.html
1994	The Dearing Review: <i>The National Curriculum and its Assessment: Final report</i> www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/dearing1994/dearing1994.html
1996	Ofsted: <i>The Teaching of Reading in 45 London Primary Schools</i> (Ofsted, 1996)
1996	Tony Blair's leader's speech to the Labour Conference in Blackpool www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=202
1996	Tony Blair's Ruskin College lecture www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/000000084.htm
1997	Tony Blair's leader's speech to the Labour Conference in Brighton www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=203
1997	<i>The Implementation of the National Literacy Strategy</i> (NLS) www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/literacytaskforce/implementation.html

Table 1 (continued)

Year	Document
1998	The National Literacy Strategy: Framework for teaching https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100603153934/http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/primary/primaryframework/literacyframework
1998	Tony Blair's leader's speech to the Labour Conference in Blackpool www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=204
1999	<i>The National Curriculum: Handbook for primary teachers in England</i> https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/18150/7/QCA-99-457_Redacted.pdf
2001	<i>Education Action Zones: Meeting the challenge</i> www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2001/01/0001130.pdf
2001	<i>Schools: Achieving success</i> (White Paper) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/355105/Schools_Achieving_Success.pdf
2001	<i>Schools: Building on success</i> (Green Paper) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/250873/5050.pdf
2002	Education Act 2002 www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/32/pdfs/ukpga_20020032_en.pdf
2002	<i>14–19: Extending opportunities, raising standards consultation document</i> (Green Paper) https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/4502/7/14-19-extending-opportunities-raising-standards_Redacted.pdf
2003	<i>Watching and Learning 3: Final report of the external evaluation of England's National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies</i> https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED472213.pdf
2003	<i>Key Stage 3 English: Roots and research</i> https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/7577/7/aa2e7850a64ca77f0dd2440c5df4f753_Redacted.pdf
2004	<i>Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners</i> www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/pdfs/2004-five-year-strategy.pdf
2004	<i>The National Curriculum: Handbook for secondary teachers in England</i> www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/pdfs/2004-nc-secondary-handbook.pdf
2004	<i>Primary National Strategy: Primary Framework for literacy and mathematics</i> www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/pdfs/2006-primary-national-strategy.pdf
2005	The Clackmannanshire Report: <i>The Effects of Synthetic Phonics Teaching on Reading and Spelling Attainment: A seven year longitudinal study</i> www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/36496/0023582.pdf
2005	Education and Skills Select Committee: <i>Teaching Children to Read: Eighth report of session 2004–05</i> https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200405/cmselect/cmmeduski/121/121.pdf
2006	The Rose Report: <i>Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading</i> https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/5551/2/report.pdf
2007	<i>Raising the Bar, Closing the Gap</i> www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/pdfs/2007-conservative-policy.pdf
2008	Michael Gove's speech to the Centre Forum think tank: 'Making opportunity more equal' https://conservative-speeches.sayit.mysociety.org/speech/599674
2009	Children, Schools and Families Select Committee: <i>National Curriculum: Fourth report of session 2008–09</i> https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmchilsch/344/344i.pdf
2009	Liberal Democrats: <i>Equity and Excellence: Policies for 5–19 education in England's schools and colleges</i> www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/pdfs/2009-libdems-policy-paper-89.pdf

Table 1 (continued)

Year	Document
2009	<i>New Opportunities: Fair chances for the future</i> (White Paper) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/228532/7533.pdf
2010	Michael Gove's speech: 'All children will learn our island story' https://conservative-speeches.sayit.mysociety.org/speech/601441
2011	Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) established www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Lords/2017-02-01/HL5176/
2011	<i>The Framework for the National Curriculum: A report by the Expert Panel for the National Curriculum review</i> https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130103131245/https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/NCR-Expert%20Panel%20Report.pdf
2014	<i>The National Curriculum in England: Framework document</i> https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/381344/Master_final_national_curriculum_28_Nov.pdf
2014	House of Commons Education Committee: <i>Underachievement in Education by White Working Class Children: First report of session 2014–15</i> https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmeduc/142/142.pdf
2015	Nicky Morgan's speech: 'Improving child literacy in England' www.gov.uk/government/speeches/nicky-morgan-improving-child-literacy-in-england
2016	<i>National Curriculum Assessments at Key Stage 2 in England, 2016</i> https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/549432/SFR39_2016_text.pdf
2016	OECD: <i>Building Skills For All: A review of England</i> www.oecd.org/unitedkingdom/building-skills-for-all-review-of-england.pdf
2016	Department for Education: <i>Educational Excellence Everywhere</i> https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/508447/Educational_Excellence_Everywhere.pdf
2016	'Government drive to help more children become confident readers' (Government announcement of 'phonics roadshows' to share best practice.) www.gov.uk/government/news/government-drive-to-help-more-children-become-confident-readers
2016	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills: <i>The Impact of Poor Basic Literacy and Numeracy on Employers</i> https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/497544/BIS-16-36-impact-of-poor-basic-literacy-and-numeracy-on-employers.pdf
2017	Department for Education: <i>Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential: A plan for improving social mobility through education</i> https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/667690/Social_Mobility_Action_Plan_-_for_printing.pdf
2017	Nick Gibb's speech: 'Reading is the key to unlocking human potential' www.gov.uk/government/speeches/nick-gibb-reading-is-the-key-to-unlocking-human-potential
2018	'New Centre of Excellence for Literacy Teaching and investment in phonics programmes to boost early reading and language skills' www.gov.uk/government/news/boost-for-school-standards-with-primary-literacy-drive
2020	'Billion pound Covid catch-up plan to tackle impact of lost teaching time' (COVID-19 lockdown catch-up funding announced, including measures to address literacy, such as one-to-one tuition programmes.) www.gov.uk/government/news/billion-pound-covid-catch-up-plan-to-tackle-impact-of-lost-teaching-time

We started at 1988 because of the introduction of the National Curriculum, which was 'driven by an intention to dictate to state schools what was to be taught and how it was to be assessed in an attempt to control from the centre' (Fisher, 2008: 256). We acknowledge important histories prior to this, but wished to keep the cases covered relatively current while showing trends over a significant time span.

The second stage was to search for outputs that have reported research into and about policy interventions and texts. Scopus database searches were conducted using 'literacy AND policy AND England' and 'literacy AND intervention AND England', before sifting for relevance. Hart (1998) and Wallace and Poulson (2003) were followed in reading 79 outputs critically to identify the key researchers and centres and their funders.

The third stage was to examine this critical reading using an approach to knowledge production in education policy that is already tested and appropriate. The conceptual framework is based on the work of Raffo et al. (2010) and Raffo and Gunter (2008), and developed in Gunter et al. (2013, 2015), in which three main approaches to research have been identified: functional, realist and socially critical (see Table 2).

Table 2: Approaches to literacy policy

Problem	Functional	Realist	Socially critical
Scoping	What needs to work better	How people experience work	Why there is inequity
Design	Technical effectiveness	Interpretive improvement	Working against injustice
Impact	Removal of dysfunctions	Values-informed decision making	Opportunities for justice

This approach seeks not only to synthesize, but also 'to identify the conceptual bases' (Raffo et al., 2010: 10) of research. It is a 'configurative review' (Levinsson and Prøitz, 2017: 213) which acknowledges that what is 'brought to the surface by a particular study depends on the study's theoretical and methodological points of departure', and that educational phenomena are multifaceted:

- *Functional* approaches are concerned with identifying 'what works', with clear prescriptions regarding the removal of what does not work in ways that can be measured in order to claim success or failure. The purposes of research are to produce outcomes that can be implemented, and hence practices can deliver the scaling up of those outcomes.
- *Realist* approaches begin with the narratives and meanings people attach to how they do their work and how they relate that to values. The purposes of research are to collect interpretations that shape outcomes and to understand experiences that enable interventions to be relatable to practice in real-life contexts.
- *Socially critical* approaches recognize the need for functionality and realism, but locate that within a wider context of social injustice and inequality. The purposes are to expose the inequities in society, economy, culture and politics that limit literacy and to develop agendas and use opportunities to make the case and to work for a different approach.

This framework is not used to categorize, but to read about a project and to identify how one or more approaches bring new insights. We report our data by focusing on three cases: (1) the National Literacy Strategy, which we argue paved the way for what followed; (2) the government backing of synthetic phonics; and (3) the 'what works' agenda.

Case 1: The National Literacy Strategy

Unveiled by Tony Blair's New Labour government (1997–2010), months into power and implemented by Michael Barber's Literacy Task Force (1997), the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) provided a framework (DfEE, 1998) giving primary teachers termly content at word, sentence and text level for delivery in the 'literacy hour'. Stannard and Huxford (2007: 9) state that the aim was to make 'best practice ... shareable'. The approach was therefore functional and ambitious, pursuing 'national unity and justice' (Bourne, 2000: 32). It saw reading as a 'moral concept' (Cormack, 2011), underscored by targets of 80 per cent of pupils at Level 4 (Blair, 1997) that proved its undoing.

The evidence base – Conservative government (1979–97) reports into the earlier National Curriculum – can also be read as functional. Raban et al. (1994), Dearing (1994) and the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted, 1996) raised concerns over literacy teaching, and the NLS was the prescriptive response. Functionality was further enabled through Labour-commissioned studies. Beard (1999) provided a meta-analysis in support, and an evaluation from Ontario was delivered in three parts (Earl et al., 2000, 2001, 2003). The last claimed 'substantial' improvements to teaching and results, echoing findings from Ofsted (2002). Earl et al. (2003) and Ofsted (2002, 2003) credited the NLS with improving results, with shortcomings being blamed on 'teacher capacity' (Earl, 2003: 7). One evaluator, Fullan (2009: 104), later stated that the NLS was not 'deeply embraced' by the profession.

Research which can be read as realist shows that the NLS altered teacher delivery through 'whole class teaching, the use of learning objectives and changes in seating arrangements' (Webb and Vulliamy, 2007: 561). A restrictive, 'meta-language' for teachers to talk about 'reading', 'literacy' or 'text de-coding' (Gardner and Rea-Dickens, 2001: 162) emerged. The term 'inference' became 'confused' (Williams, 2014: 95), while Carroll (2017) laments the effects of the NLS on students' extended writing. Further research that can be read as realist argues that individual 'theoretical perspective' (Poulson et al., 2001: 290) influences teachers most, 'rather than specific training' (Poulson and Avramidis, 2003: 549). Black (2007: 273) notes that although the NLS, and the later Key Stage 3 National Strategy, emphasized 'interactive whole class teaching', this is problematic in a performative environment, and in practice had 'not been achieved'. Hall et al. (2003: 284) cited 'recitation as a predominant interactional style in these lessons', at the expense of other ways of exploring literacy texts.

Alternatives which could be considered socially critical include Street (2013) on a Brazilian approach with more social uses, while Smith (2011) advocated picture books as pedagogical devices. Daniels (2014: 102) used studies of children engaging in narrative play to assert that attempts to break English down into individual skills undermine the 'interpretive reproductions' and 'cultural agency' that children bring to texts and writing. Such alternatives are important because they use pupil interests and interpretation, rather than prescriptive skills-based pedagogy.

In limiting such approaches, the NLS was a policy seen by Coldron and Smith (1999), Hall (2001) and Wood (2004) as one which silenced and censored teachers. Webster and Feiler (1999: 49) have argued that 'more attention should be paid to teachers' intuitive judgements' regarding reception children. Mills (2011: 106, 107) has examined how 'framing of policy' has left teachers stuck 'between experience, [and] ... adherence to particular policy "targets" or their subscribing to preferred methods or materials' – between functional policies and research and socially critical alternatives.

This notion of subscription to preferred methods and materials is significant. Khan and Gorard (2012) note that the growth brought about by Labour government (1997–2010) funding for schools to make technology-based purchases that occurred

over this period focused on the teaching of reading on the market by 2005. The next case presented further illustrates the links between policy and private business.

Case 2: Synthetic phonics

The synthetic phonics policy can also be read as functional. The evidence base is the Clackmannanshire Report (Johnston and Watson, 2005), a Scottish Executive-funded study tracking about three hundred pupils in a small county that made bold claims that are still cited by ministers (Gibb, 2016). This can be read as functional because it provides a prescriptive method of explicit teaching of letter–sound correspondence, ordered by difficulty. Children work through word sounds lesson by lesson, progressing towards blending.

Research which may be read as realist has challenged the prominence of synthetic phonics. Ellis and Moss (2014: 242) have argued that comprehension is being overlooked, offering that ‘Ofsted guidance cites phonics 130 times to comprehensions’ nine’. Ellis (2007) and Soler and Openshaw (2007) have pointed to more balanced approaches in Scotland and New Zealand respectively. Macleod et al. (2007: 636) have argued for further research into alternatives such as ‘phonological awareness’, ‘working from sound to text’, seeing both as necessary. Price-Mohr and Price (2018: 190) have similarly found that ‘analytic phonics, sight-word vocabulary and oral vocabulary extension in addition to synthetic phonics and non-decodable vocabulary in instructional reading text’ have equal benefits.

Research can be read as socially critical where it challenges existing power structures that have led to the dominance of policy. Grundin (2018: 44) characterizes the government position as ‘policy-based evidence, rather than evidence-based policy’. Concerns centre on the phonics screening, including ‘birthdate effect ... articulation difficulties and differences in accent or dialect ... measurement error ... [and] “marking up”’ (Grundin, 2018: 44). Dombey (2013) argues similarly that the test is overly difficult and unnecessary, considering that 80 per cent of pupils attain required comprehension levels by Year 2. Hutchison et al. (2004), Flynn (2015) and Clark (2016) have all found that phonics benefit monolingual children most, worsening social division.

Alternatives which can be read as socially critical are offered by Martin and Stuart-Smith (1998: 253), who argue for practice from ‘parts of the country as well as in Wales and Scotland ... where learners’ home language is recognized and used not only in the classroom but in the curriculum as a vehicle for learning’. Ellis and McCartney (2011) have also cited rising numbers of pupils with English as an additional language when advocating that primary teachers use applied linguistics knowledge for more learner-centred solutions.

Ultimately, UK government policymakers ignore evidence which ‘supports systematic tuition in phonics ... combined with meaningful experiences with print’ (Wyse and Styles, 2007: 40). The new Initial Teacher Education Inspection framework places emphasis on the approach in describing how inspections will cover ‘early reading, including phonics’ (Ofsted, 2021), with no other strategies singled out in this way. We argue that this is because synthetic phonics alone is more easily defined and enabled, measurable and marketable. Clark (2014) and Gunter and Mills (2017) have highlighted that several phonics programme publishers, such as Ruth Miskin of Read Write Inc., Debbie Hepplewhite of Phonics International and Richard Jolly of Jolly Phonics, have acted as policy advisers. These publishers then work ‘in partnership schools to deliver the events’ (Gibb, 2016) and synthetic phonics programmes for schools, which make up a multi-million pound industry. Innes (2021) also notes

the global nature of the industry, illustrated by how Success for All, an American programme founded by Robert Slavin, is strengthening its market share in England through multi-academy trusts. Government has facilitated a dense network of ‘policy actors’ through the synthetic phonics policy, an approach which we argue is developed further by the ‘what works’ agenda.

Case 3: ‘What works’

The ‘what works’ agenda can also be considered functional. Labour government (1997–2010) Secretary of State for Education David Blunkett called for ‘social scientists to tell us what works and why’ (DfEE, 2000). This was developed by the Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition government (2010–15) with the creation of the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) in 2010. This is ostensibly a charity, but it was formed with Department for Education funding to provide evidence-based strategies for teachers. Currently the EEF provides a suite of publications aimed at providing strategies for literacy at various key stages (EEF, 2017b, 2017c, 2019, 2020b).

Since 2016, the EEF has worked closely with the Institute for Effective Education, who in 2014 evaluated the synthetic phonics-based Success for All programme across 18 schools in the Research Schools Network – a study they claimed ‘established that large-scale quasi-experiments involving replicable school-based interventions are possible in the United Kingdom ... [and] suggests that there is a need for more’ (Tracey et al., 2014: 9). This is vital, they argued, at a time when schools have gained greater spending autonomy under the academies programme.

One aim of the EEF and the Institute for Effective Education could be said to be to provide a ‘menu’ of literacy interventions for schools, as in an EEF publication (Gorard et al., 2017) that rounds up seven literacy catch-up schemes, with Switch-on Reading and Accelerated Reader deemed promising. However, Switch-on Reading failed to upscale: ‘estimated effects were at zero’ (EEF, 2017a), with questions in evaluation around consistency of delivery – a significant issue for a functional approach to identifying literacy catch-up solutions. Further EEF-funded research has similarly found summer schools to be ineffective (Siddiqui et al., 2014); so too, the Word and World ‘core knowledge’ reading programme (See et al., 2017). Fricke et al. (2017) investigated teaching assistant-led delivery of oral skills to improve early literacy, reporting some success, but not in reading or comprehension.

A disconnect is apparent between the EEF’s functional approach and enactment. Even while stating the case for the Fresh Start synthetic phonics programme, Gorard et al. (2016) acknowledged compromised results. On the New Group Reading Test, Gorard et al. (2015) concluded that there were difficulties in accounting for pupil attrition, selection problems and school communication. Wyse and Torgerson (2017: 1,021) have questioned the methodological quality of randomized controlled trials in grammar teaching, detailing how investigations into two ‘very similar teaching approaches ... came to different conclusions about their effectiveness’, suggesting that the approach is not as robust as claimed. Wrigley (2018: 364), in research which can be read as socially critical, goes further, arguing that ‘the decision to headline ‘three months additional progress’ on Fresh Start, rather than ‘no demonstrable benefit’, could have been imposed on the research team through direct or tacit political pressure exercised via the funding agency. This again suggests a troubling link between functional, government-backed research and private companies selling ‘evidence-based’ solutions to schools.

Dynamics of literacy policy

These three cases demonstrate that functional approaches have dominated UK government literacy policy for schools in England, but with subtle differences. The NLS dictated what was taught and how; synthetic phonics provides a package for delivery; and 'what works' aims to give teachers confidence in research evidence to inform their practice.

By undertaking a policy scholarship, we have identified not only 'what ideas are present but also what "silences"' (Ozga, 2000: 115). The silences are in the potential policy recommendations with which researchers do not overtly engage. There is a stark divide between researchers who primarily adopt functional or realist or socially critical approaches; a "'reading wars" frame' (Lefstein, 2008: 1,115) well illustrated in a debate between Wyse (2003) and Beard (2003). The former made what can be read as a socially critical questioning of the evidence base and evaluation of the NLS, citing contradictions between the objective-focused approach and less predictable child development. This was challenged by Beard (2003: 925), who countered that 'integration of the word and sentence level is without any theoretical or linguistic justification'. We argue that such polarizations are unhelpful.

A further finding is how a combination of government policies, government-funded research and a highly performative school environment has de-professionalized teachers. 'Attainment targets, league tables and the perpetual pursuit of raised standards to meet the needs of a competitive global economy' (Hoskins, 2012: 6) have resulted in a 'high stakes ... back to basics' (Kell, 2010: 485) regime which Moss (2017: 9) has seen as 'punitive': a 'number driven education system reform' (Moss, 2017: 3) taking no account of social context. 'What works' for one group of learners might not for another, but functional approaches ignore this inconvenient truth.

Conclusion

Our contribution is in identifying that successive UK governments have primarily adopted functional policies and research. This has been so pervasive that realist and socially critical research has had insufficient bearing on policy strategy. Field data are demonstrating that functionality alone is not improving literacy, while it is damaging learner capacity and teacher professionalism.

The obvious solution is more influence for socially critical research. The field offers numerous compelling suggestions. Chen and Derewianka (2009: 240) have argued for 'broadening the focus of literacy to include speaking and listening along with the values of scientific, technological, mathematical and economic literacies'. Studies by Larson (2004), Taylor (2005), Rose and Atkin (2007) and Swain et al. (2014) have all found in favour of family literacy programmes. Scott and Boyd (2016) outline how writing about first-hand experiences of ecological fieldwork can improve children's literacy skills in a cross-curricular approach. Marsh (2007), Goodwyn (2011) and Yandell (2016) have called for the integration of ICT, including the use of blogs and film-making, using tablets in potentially transformational approaches to literacy teaching. All such strategies would benefit from further exploration.

The barrier is that there is too strong a link between private companies supplying phonics-based programmes and literacy catch-up schemes selling 'evidence-based' solutions to schools, supported by government-backed research and policymakers. This position is ideological. Apple (2009: 241) has described how 'neoliberalism creates policies and practices that embody the enterprising and

constantly strategizing entrepreneur'. This is resonant because it can be seen how government policy has created the conditions for private business to offer literacy solutions which are valued over the contribution of educational professionals. Ellis et al. (2020) argue that government spending through the Teaching and Leading Innovation Fund is creating a 'shadow state'. What has previously been public sector school improvement is being 'substituted' by private providers. Watson (2020) has outlined the emergence of a 'New Right 2.0' of 'social conservatives and economic liberals' promoting 'traditional' rather than 'progressive' educational perspectives. This includes individuals such as Tom Bennet and Daisy Christodolou, connected with the ResearchEd movement, which is billed as a 'grass-roots' organization, but which has ties to government through the funding of charities such as Teach First and the ARK Academy Chain. There is a need to chart this and to raise questions about its impact.

New Right 2.0, like its predecessor, is an attempt to create an aggregated passive acceptance of free-market ideology by creating division and indifference, setting one group against another, using the state to reward its proponents and to discipline its objectors.

The conceptual framework used in this article will be useful to teachers, researchers and teacher educators in reading and interpreting literacy policy and related research in critical ways which further challenge links between policy and business. We seek to raise awareness of new ways of looking at literacy by bringing a plurality of conceptual resources to the study of literacy policy.

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Declaration and conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All research has been conducted in line with the University of Manchester ethical approval. The work is original and is not being considered for publication anywhere else, and it has not been published previously in any other form.

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