



The imagined learner in adult literacy education policy research: An international comparison

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Accepted: 9 June 2022 / Published online: 14 July 2022
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Abstract

This article provides a comparative analysis of the ways in which learners are portrayed in researchers' descriptions of adult literacy education policy. Although adult learners are rarely referred to directly in policy or in policy research, a range of assumptions about them may be inferred through close analysis of related research literature. This analysis draws on an earlier meta-synthesis (prepared by the first author and Amy Pickard) of adult learner portrayals in qualitative research which identified a typology of “learner characters” that were predictably employed in descriptions across a large variety of texts. They argued that these learner types were likely to “drive the action” in terms of further research, policy and practice just like characters drive the plot in literary narratives. Asking “Who are the (imagined) learners in research that describes policy documents pertaining to adult literacy?”, this article takes this line of thought further by demonstrating that identifying learner types in policy analysis research can inform thinking about who the policy is really for, what is valued, and who benefits. This, in turn, can provide researchers with a distinctive lens for policy analysis and critique. The authors of this article identify five types of imagined learners: *the Problem*, *the Pawn*, *the Afterthought*, *the Competitor*, and *the Competent Citizen*.

Keywords adult literacy · comparative policy analysis research · international, symbolic policy interpretation

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Résumé

L'apprenant imaginé dans la recherche sur les politiques d'alphabétisation des adultes : une comparaison internationale – Cet article livre une analyse comparative des portraits d'apprenants dans des descriptions que font les chercheurs des politiques d'alphabétisation des adultes. Bien que les politiques ou les recherches sur les politiques renvoient rarement directement aux apprenants adultes, une analyse attentive de la littérature scientifique sur le sujet permet de déduire tout un ensemble d'hypothèses. Cette analyse repose sur une métasynthèse antérieure (préparée par la première autrice et Amy Pickard) portant sur des portraits d'apprenants adultes réalisés dans le cadre d'une recherche qualitative qui identifiait un type de « caractéristiques de l'apprenant » que l'on pouvait s'attendre à retrouver dans les descriptions d'un vaste éventail de textes. Les autrices avançaient qu'il est probable que ces types d'apprenants seront un moteur pour approfondir les recherches, la politique et la pratique, à l'instar des personnages d'un récit littéraire qui font progresser l'intrigue. En se demandant « Qui sont les apprenants (imaginés) dans les recherches qui examinent des documents politiques relatifs à l'alphabétisation des adultes? », l'article pousse la réflexion plus loin et démontre qu'identifier des types d'apprenants dans la recherche sur l'analyse des politiques peut fournir une orientation à la façon d'envisager ce que les politiques visent réellement, ce qu'elles valorisent et à qui elles profitent. Cette réflexion peut permettre aux chercheurs d'envisager l'analyse des politiques et leur critique sous un angle distinct. Les autrices de l'article identifient cinq types d'apprenants imaginés : le problème, le pion, la réflexion après coup, le concurrent et le citoyen compétent.

Introduction

While there is plenty of research into demographic characteristics of adult learners, and population studies of literacy skills have been undertaken time and again, they do not and cannot portray the diversity of learners and the full range of resources, experiences and challenges they bring to the classroom. A systematic description of learners' characteristics has been called for in order to gain a richer and more complex picture of them as a way to better meet their needs (Comings et al. 1999; D'Amico 2003).

In a meta-analysis of the qualitative research literature, the first author of this article and Amy Pickard (Belzer and Pickard 2015) analysed and interpreted descriptions of adult learners in response to this identified gap in the literature. They found that these portrayals could be categorised into five learner types which they called *the Heroic Victim*; *the Needy (Problem) Child*; *the Broken (but Repairable) Cog*; *the Pawn of Destiny*; and *the Competent Comrade*. They observed that these character categories were rather one-dimensional and that relying on them (however unconsciously) could perpetuate stereotypes. It is unsurprising that researchers tend to highlight specific, narrow aspects of adult literacy learners that lead to these stereotypes being reified. Lisa Rosen explains that

the conduct of research is fundamentally shaped by what a researcher has chosen to pay attention to and the theories and methods he or she draws upon to gather and interpret evidence. It may also be shaped by his or her political commitments, social position or identity (Rosen 2009, p. 279).

She goes on to point out that this can lead to over-simplification of complexity, contradiction and ambiguity. This has consequences. For example, descriptions of adult learners that are “flat” (Forster 2010 [1927]) or stereotyped, failing to reflect their realities because of this tendency, can drive the formation and design of policy, research and practice similar to the way in which characters in fiction help drive the narrative plot (Propp 1968). Given this subjectivity (which also plays out in quantitative research), Belzer and Pickard (2015) argued that it is important to reflect critically on the questions asked about and the ways in which adult learners are described.

In this article, we apply a similar analytic lens to policy research. In doing so, we draw on a symbolic interpretive stance which assumes that “policies are inherently ideological and subject to contestation” (Searle 2004, p. 82). A symbolic interpretive approach directs analysts to pay attention to and interpret more than the surface meaning explicitly stated in policy texts as well as in research on policy texts. Given the tendency to let cultural assumptions direct attention towards particular aspects of experience, which in turn shapes action (Rosen 2009), it is important to look beyond the policy descriptions that seem straightforward and neutral.

Rosen (*ibid.*) organises symbolic policy analysis into the “expressive” and “constitutive” elements of policy discourse. The former unpacks the ways in which policy communicates cultural values and beliefs; the latter digs down into the ways in which policy constructs reality. She observes that constitutive processes create categories and labels which often reinforce existing inequality.

Although a symbolic interpretive stance is normally applied to policy analysis, we use it here to look at the research literature on policy. For the purposes of this article, we take up the category of the adult with low literacy skills – the target of adult literacy education policy documents as interpreted by the authors of the articles we reviewed. While it is true that there is often a significant discrepancy between stated policy and actual implementation at the programme and classroom levels (Abbott et al. 2020; e.g. Maruatona 2011; Smythe 2015), and comparing interpretive research on the policies creates an additional layer of distance between policy documents and practice, the characteristics of adult learners that seem to be imagined there matter because they construct and contribute to “truths” about adult literacy learners (Taylor 2008). These “truths” in turn can influence important policy decisions. Thus, our analysis is guided by the question “Who are the (imagined) learners in research that describes policy documents pertaining to adult literacy?”

We begin with a literature review, followed by a brief description of our methodology. We then present our findings, with dedicated subsections for each of the five learner types we identified. Finally, we wrap up with a few concluding remarks.

Literature review

There are many factors that influence policy formation (Ade-Ojo and Duckworth 2017), but over the past 25 years, large-scale population studies of literacy levels in particular have had a significant impact on national adult literacy policy strategies (Sava and Schemmann 2020, p. 9). At national level, this process started with the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) conducted by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) in the United States (US) in the 1990s. The first international comparative literacy assessment was the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), conducted by international organisations coordinated by Statistics Canada; data collection for it also took place in the 1990s. The United Kingdom (UK) offers an example of how population survey findings, together with supranational strategies like the European Union's focus on social equality, drive policy. The IALS results and a subsequent related study led directly to the launch in 2001 of the *Skills for Life strategy*, the British government's ambitious national plan to raise the literacy and numeracy skills levels of 2.25 million adults.

Around the same time (in 2000), France established an agency along with several specific strategies to fight illiteracy (Agence Nationale de Lutte Contre l'Illettrisme [ANLCI]), and launched a survey to assess changes in literacy levels in 2004. Germany launched a survey to assess literacy levels in 2010 (Grotlüschen and Riekmann 2012), which contributed to a national strategy and the goal of improving skills within a decade (BMBF and KMK 2016; BMBF 2012). The survey was repeated in 2018 (Grotlüschen et al. 2019).

Findings from international population studies have also given rise to extensive scholarly interpretations and critiques (Gabrielsen 2011; Pugsley 2011; Rubenson 2011; St. Clair 2011). One key observation that emerged from this work is that international comparisons are not necessary for adult literacy education advocacy. For example, England, France and Germany generated robust policy activities based on national surveys. Although international assessments framed these activities, scholars have been more likely than policymakers to actually use them for purposes of analysis. Others have noted that national literacy strategies do not necessarily have an impact on the improvement of population data. Either they are not funded at a sufficiently high level to make a substantial difference in skill levels, or the impact is not measurable in the typical short-term cycle of data collection (Reder 2011). Another observation is that when data are released after changes in political power, negative results are often blamed on previous governments. This may lead to funding cuts as programmes are seen as inefficient and ineffective (Gabrielsen 2011; Pugsley 2011).

Not only do large-scale adult literacy population studies impact policy, they also influence public perceptions of adult learners. This is because these studies are often reported on by the media, which have a tendency to repeat stereotypes in news reports (Hamilton 2012) that are not supported by the survey data. The stereotypes include the notion of a poorly educated, unemployed, lonely, somehow impaired or non-native, sometimes socially excluded, lazy or even delinquent persona (Grotlüschen et al. 2015; Hamilton 2012). By contrast, overall and repeated findings, aggregated in a European High Level Report and in a thematic report prepared for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), indicate that the majority of

adults with low literacy performance are native speakers, hold a formal qualification as well as a job, and live a family life (EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy 2012; Grotlüschen et al. 2016).

In a comparison of eight countries' adult literacy policies based on three decades of testing and policymaking,¹ Richard Desjardins (2017) found that in many countries, adult education participation rates have risen substantially in the past two decades. While more highly educated individuals participate the most, rising participation overall also seems to include adults with lower levels of literacy. However, Desjardins' work indicates that countries' understanding of who is included in the target adult literacy population differs quite a bit. For example, most countries cater for immigrants, school dropouts and low-literate parents by offering immigrant language provision, second-chance schooling and family literacy programmes. However, these programmes are sometimes implemented beyond an official literacy strategy. While they exist in most of the eight countries Desjardins studied, they are not necessarily regarded as being provided within *literacy* education policies or they do not count as *basic* education (Grotlüschen et al. 2018). This means that who is being regarded as as the target of a country's adult literacy education in national policy strategies is not very clear and definitely not comparable from country to country. This state of affairs also makes it difficult to compare policy documents rigorously.

However, comparative studies continue to be made and adult literacy strategies are encouraged by supranational organisations (Grek 2019, 2020). While the OECD has now largely taken over leadership in this area, previously the field was headed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which was mandated to track literacy levels globally (Elfert 2019). The question of how the learner is imagined in adult literacy strategies therefore remains highly important. However, there are reasons – discussed in the next section – why we decided not to analyse primary source policy documents in pursuit of our research question.

Methodology

Rather than comparing actual policies, we drew on researchers' descriptions of policies. While conceding that investigating secondary instead of primary sources is a somewhat unusual research method, we opted for this approach for pragmatic reasons. Because adult education/lifelong learning policies are often spread across a number of documents and are frequently updated and revised due to social, political and economic shifts (e.g. Gadio 2011; Kenea 2014; Sayilan and Yildiz 2009; Walter 2002), for some countries it can be near impossible to know which national policy to focus on and feel assured that it is the most current and relevant. Instead, we relied on scholars' knowledge of which policies are important and what particular context gave rise to them. This often meant differentiating between these scholars' policy descriptions and their stance on the policies, and interpreting their interpretations. In our analysis, we focused on the former. However, it soon became apparent to us that

¹ The eight countries considered in this study were Denmark, Finland, Norway, the Netherlands, Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States and the Republic of Korea.

there are rarely descriptions of learners in the policies or in researchers' descriptions of them. In fact, we found that the learners are more implied and imagined than actually described in concrete terms. Thus, our analysis draws on symbolic constructions in the policies.

In order to address our research question, we employed a “meta-synthesis” approach. This interpretive strategy can help “make meaning from existing qualitative studies viewed in aggregate” (Major and Savid-Baden 2010, p. 2). In contrast to a literature review which is summative and descriptive (Sandelowski and Barroso 2007), a research synthesis focusing primarily on interpretation is a way of making “connections between existing studies [and] ... identify[ing] gaps and omissions in a given body of research [which] enables dialogue and debate” (ibid., p. 3). We see this approach as appropriate for the purposes of our study, where we applied a symbolic interpretive stance to policy analysis (Rosen 2009). As recommended by Claire Major and Maggi Savin-Baden (2010) and Margarete Sandelowski and Julie Barroso (2007), we began with a research problem, or what the former call a “meta question”, created inclusion and exclusion criteria for selecting data, identified a search strategy, established our sample, summarised the data, and then followed standard qualitative data analysis methods (constant comparison, coding, and identification of themes) to derive our interpretation (Coffey and Atkinson 1996; Creswell 2007).

To locate relevant sources for our study, we conducted an online search using the Academic Search Premier and ERIC databases. Our search was aimed at locating policy research that provides descriptions and critiques of key policy moments, documents and influences in adult literacy education published in peer-reviewed journals between January 2000 and February 2021. We used the search terms “adult literacy education”, “adult basic education”, “functional literacy” and “education policy or strategy” and their variants in various combinations in the Academic Search Premier and ERIC databases. We narrowed our search by eliminating studies that did not provide descriptions of policies specifically addressing adult literacy. We ended up with 33 sources, which we evaluated as providing relevant policy descriptions from 22 different high-, medium- and low-income countries (Australia, Botswana, Canada, Ethiopia, Finland, India, Mali, Nigeria, Nepal, New Zealand, Pakistan, Portugal, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sweden, Tanzania, Thailand, Timor Leste, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States, Zimbabwe) and also included four transnational studies.

For our analysis, we used a modified version of the constant comparative method of data analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967) because we started coding the policy descriptions using the previously mentioned typology identified by Belzer and Pickard (2015) as a “start list” of analytic codes (Miles and Huberman 1994). However, when aspects of the policy descriptions were not well aligned with these codes, we used an open coding approach, labelling significant chunks of the policy descriptions according to what they seemed to us to imply about learners. This was followed by axial coding which involved connecting up codes and identifying particular learner types that seemed to be described by these codes. In some cases, the character types overlapped with our start codes, but in others we saw something new and identified different imagined learner character types.

Because of our decision not to analyse actual policy documents, our analysis is limited to the documents researchers chose to describe and the interpretations they

brought to bear on them. It is also limited by our confinement to peer-reviewed papers published in English only. However, we are not attempting to draw generalisations here. Rather, we are using our analysis to point out some patterns we observed and to create a heuristic that may help policymakers and policy researchers see more clearly how adult learners are framed in policies and how this might be shaping these policies in unintended ways. This kind of insight has the potential to constructively help broaden policies so that they frame learners in ways that recognise the deep complexity of their identities, lives, interactions, experiences and the layers that contribute to and can address low literacy.

Findings

Our coding across 33 policy research articles looked for patterns of evidence that imply an imagined adult learner, and our subsequent analysis led to the emergence of five types of imagined learners: *the Problem*, *the Pawn*, *the Afterthought*, *the Competitor* and *the Competent Citizen*. By identifying these types of “learner characters”, we are not arguing that this is what adult learners are actually like or what they do. Rather, these types are implied as framing visions of them in the policy descriptions we analysed. Moreover, they are neither mutually exclusive in the policy descriptions we examined, nor are all of them present in every description. Thus, none of these character types occur in *every* policy narrative. It is also worth noting that as policies shift and evolve, the character types implied by the policies also shift. In addition, some research articles seem to imagine more than one character type in the policies they investigate (see Table 1). This is generally because a researcher describes more than one policy era, or more than one researcher takes up policies from the same country but focuses on different eras and different policies.

Notably, character types might comfortably co-exist – or they might be in tension with each other. For example, some policies seem to emphasise the human capital approach implied by the Competitor while also espousing a more learner-centred approach implied by the Competent Citizen character. In fact, the “every person for themselves” view implied by the Competitor could align well with the assumption of capacity for agency implied by the Competent Citizen. And yet, how these two views play out in real terms might be quite contrasting and not well matched. Below, we illustrate each character type in the context of policy descriptions and interpretations from several different countries.

The Problem

In some examples, the policy research portrays low literacy levels, and by extension adults with low literacy skills, as the Problem. Typically, the problem is framed as a drag on economic development and a contributor to social ills. In their description of literacy policy planning and implementation in Pakistan from 1959 to 2015, Ashiq Hussain and Naseer Ahmad Salfi provide perhaps the most evocative version of the Problem character among the documents we explored. They stated:

Table 1 Policy character types and examples by country

Policy character type	Country	Example
the Problem	<i>UK</i> (Ade-Ojo & Duckworth 2015; Hamilton & Pitt 2011); <i>New Zealand</i> (Benseman 2006); <i>Finland</i> (Antikainen 2005); <i>Australia</i> (Black and Yasukawa 2016); <i>Pakistan</i> (Hussain & Salfi 2010); <i>Ethiopia</i> (Kenea 2014); <i>Turkey</i> (Sayilan & Yildiz 2009); <i>Canada</i> (Smythe 2015; Walker 2008); <i>Portugal</i> (Carpentieri 2019); <i>USA</i> (Shin and Ging 2019); <i>Timor Leste</i> (Rashid 2020)	“As a response to a perceived gap between people’s skill sets and those necessary for survival in the job place or to function in society, an atmosphere of crisis has emerged pervading public discourse with the call for citizens to engage in lifelong learning ... and to shape-up their ‘inadequate literacy skills’, especially for those at the bottom of the pack ...” (Walker 2008, p. 465)
the Pawn	<i>Ethiopia</i> (Abiy et al. 2014; Kenea 2014); <i>UK</i> (Ade-Ojo & Duckworth 2015; Hamilton & Pitt 2011); <i>Tanzania</i> (Bhalalusesa 2005); <i>Nigeria</i> (Kazeem & Oduaran 2006); <i>Botswana</i> (Maruatona 2011; Mpofu & Youngman 2001); <i>Zimbabwe</i> (Mpofu & Youngman 2001); <i>Nepal</i> (Robinson-Pant 2010); <i>Turkey</i> (Sayilan & Yildiz 2009); <i>Canada</i> (Walker 2008); <i>Thailand</i> (Walter 2002); <i>India</i> (Mandal 2019); <i>Timor Leste</i> (Rashid 2020); <i>Australia</i> (Wickert 2001)	“Five massive literacy campaigns (in the years 1928, 1960, 1971, 1981, 2001) were organized on a national level ... Throughout this period, although the policies of developing literacy were seen as a means of progress and of strengthening the citizen commitment and nationalist political socialization in every period, they have also become tools for different economical [<i>sic</i>] and political interests during different periods of republican history” (Sayilan & Yildiz 2009, p. 736).
the Afterthought	<i>Ethiopia</i> (Abiy et al. 2014); <i>Tanzania</i> (Bhalalusesa 2005); <i>Nigeria</i> (Kazeem & Oduaran 2006); <i>India</i> (Mandal 2019). <i>Rwanda</i> (Abbott et al. 2020); <i>Nepal</i> (Robinson-Pant 2010)	“... heavy emphasis is placed on primary education while adult education, as part of basic education, is only partially mentioned. For example, the section on investment on Education for All since 1990 does not show how much was allocated and spent on adult basic education” (Bhalalusesa 2005, p. 77).
the Competitor	<i>Ethiopia</i> (Abiy et al. 2014); <i>UK</i> (Ade-Ojo & Duckworth 2015; Hamilton & Pitt 2011); <i>Finland</i> (Antikainen 2005); <i>Tanzania</i> (Bhalalusesa 2005); <i>Australia</i> (Black & Yasukawa 2016); <i>Sweden</i> (Loeb & Wass 2014); <i>Turkey</i> (Sayilan & Yildiz 2009); <i>Canada</i> (Walker 2008); <i>Thailand</i> (Walter 2002); <i>New Zealand</i> (Zepke 2011); <i>India</i> (Mandal 2019); <i>Portugal</i> (Carpentieri 2019); <i>USA</i> (Shin & Ging 2019)	“The <i>focus</i> and <i>framing</i> of new legislation [regarding adult education] reflected the human capital development view that the economic needs of the country were undeniably tied to the success of education and employment programs helping youth and adults become employable” (Roumell et al. 2020, p. 803; emphases in original).
the Competent Citizen	<i>Ethiopia</i> (Abiy et al. 2014); <i>Mali</i> (Gadio 2011); <i>Nigeria</i> (Kazeem & Oduaran 2006); <i>Botswana</i> (Maruatona 2011); <i>USA</i> (Shin & Ging 2019); <i>Timor Leste</i> (Rashid 2020)	“The central philosophy of [the National Policy on Education] was the integration of the individual into a sound and effective citizen, and equal educational opportunities for all citizens at all levels, both formally and non-formally” (Kazeem & Oduaran 2006, p. 39).

Pakistan falls in the list of developing countries which are facing ... similar problems ... : population explosion and lack of basic necessities of life; housing and medical care; poor standard of living ...; low productivity and high birth

rate; primitive modes of agriculture and lack of modern industrial technology; and shortage of trained manpower which deter socio-economic development ... There are many reasons for these problems but the major cause of all these problems is low literacy ... (Hussain and Salfi 2010, p. 353)

Here, the problem character of an adult with low literacy skills seems blended with the impact of low literacy on the national level. There is no reference, however, to the impact on the individual or the local community, and the causes of low literacy (which some scholars might identify as the policy problem) are generally ignored despite research that suggests they are deeply rooted in poverty and inequality (e.g. Rammstedt et al. 2021). Instead, given that the target of Pakistan's literacy policy includes adults with low skills, the symbolic inference here is that somehow, adults with low literacy skills are the Problem character in the policy narrative. Rather than being driven by the causes of low literacy, the "problem" discourse of the policy assumes its location in citizens with low literacy skills.

Similarly, in high-income countries, the research that analyses policy papers indicates that adults with low literacy skills are held responsible for national economic conditions, and that they are often singled out for services because of the drain on public resources they are blamed for creating (with the assumption that they would use up less if upskilled). For example, in examining the metaphors present in the Moser Report (DfEE 1999) which resulted in the UK's adult literacy education strategy, *Skills for Life*, Nina Taylor (2008) notes that low literacy skills are referred to as "a brake on the economy" (DfEE 1999, p. 9). Potential adult literacy learners are also framed as the Problem by the labels or categories through which they are identified: welfare recipients, low-skilled youth, non-native speakers and other individuals deemed as disadvantaged (Hodgson et al. 2007). In other words, while adults with low literacy skills are not explicitly named as the Problem in some analyses, they are its embodiment. The symbolic communicative and explicit policy discourse here encourages those in the UK with low skills "to view themselves as the enemy of a productive society or the cause of our economic problems" (Taylor 2008, p. 135). Ralf St. Clair (2015) made similar observations when analysing the US Department of Education's *Making Skills Everybody's Business* (USDoE 2015). He points critically to the document's statement that "what adults know and can do – not just how many years of education they complete – strongly affects economic growth" (ibid., p. 5, as cited in St. Clair 2015) – both because it is an empirically questionable claim and because it points to adults with low skills as a drag on the economy.

Between them, the authors of these examples observe a dubious causal link between a litany of social ills and low literacy. In other words, they identify a one-way relationship between low literacy and social and economic ills, when the causality can easily move in the opposite direction as well (see Rammstedt et al. 2021). A symbolic interpretive lens which identifies adults with low literacy skills as "the Problem" takes on a deficit perspective of them. Kapil Dev Regmi, in his analysis of transnational literacy policy as enacted in Ethiopia, Nepal and Sierra Leone, argues that this suppresses the value of adult learners' strengths and capabilities. Instead, he suggests utilising their many resources "as the primary building blocks of literacy programs" (Regmi 2019, p. 240).

The Pawn

There are some examples of learners participating in policy and programme design (e.g. the learner-produced *Manifesto* [Eur-Alpha 2012] funded by the EU). However, in the Pawn character type, as implied in some policy descriptions, the imagined learner plays no visible role in shaping adult literacy strategies. Rather than engaging with the needs of learners, every policy description in our sample that includes a *policy history* related to adult literacy education demonstrates that literacy policies frequently shift to reflect changes in political, economic and social contexts (both national and global). These adjustments involve changing resources, priorities and ideologies. Shifts are also influenced by changes in transnational documents intended to drive policy and practice (Black and Yasukawa 2016; Hamilton and Pitt 2011; Kenea 2014; Robinson-Pant 2010; Smythe 2015; Walter 2002). This means that adults' experiences with literacy education are shaped for them by outside forces rather than by themselves, or even with a focus on their needs. Even though learner organisations may have been part of consultation processes, the subset of historical analyses in our sample of 33 articles highlight the influences of major political changes on literacy policies. When it comes to policy formation, although learners are seen as having no agency, it is assumed that, when properly "moved" like chess pieces (hence our choice of the designation "pawn"), they can help countries "win" (e.g. global competitiveness).

Research studies focusing on adult literacy policies in Turkey, the US and Ethiopia offer a picture of how literacy strategies are embedded in wider political interests (Sayilan and Yildiz 2009; Roumell et al. 2020, Kenea 2014). The historical description of adult literacy policy in Turkey, which had five national literacy campaigns between 1928 and 2001, provides a helpful example of this. Fevziye Sayilan and Ahmet Yildiz argue that literacy policies there

have ... become tools for different economical [*sic*]and political interests during different periods of republican history (Sayilan and Yildiz 2009, p. 736).

Each campaign shared some common goals, but also served unique purposes, ranging from modernisation and secularism, to economic development, to increasing gender equality. Elizabeth Roumell et al. trace the history of adult education in the US from a utilitarian and pragmatic approach focused on rebuilding and promoting economic progress after conflicts, to viewing it as a tool for addressing complex social issues during and following the civil rights movement, to a human capital development approach which reflected the assumption

that the economic needs of the country were undeniably tied to the success of education and employment programs in helping youth and adults become employable (Roumell et al. 2020, p. 803).

Ambissa Kenea compared three policy documents, each from a different political period in Ethiopia. According to him, the first initiative triggered a literacy campaign that depended on youth volunteers who were to bring low-skilled adults out of

the “darkness of illiteracy” (Kenea 2014, p. 245). The next initiative was shaped by international donors and was grounded in a functional literacy approach. The third campaign was launched during a revolutionary period and was understood to be ideological and for the purpose of indoctrination. When a military socialist government came into power in the 90s, adult education was not a part of the education policy initiative at all.

These three examples help illustrate that adult literacy education is often provisional in terms of funding, systems, approach, and purpose and goals. Even if more or less permanently institutionalised (for example, in high-income countries), it seems that literacy programmes can be cut and re-purposed at will (Ade-Ojo and Duckworth 2015; Hamilton and Pitt 2011; Hamilton 2014; Hillier 2009). The examples also make clear that, from researchers’ perspectives in these cases, policy decisions are in the hands of those who have the power to move the “pawns” around; in these cases, the pawns are seen as having no say in how their educational needs are met (or not). In some situations, literacy policy is used to further national goals that are ideological in nature. For example, in Turkey literacy was seen as a tool against conservative forces during modernisation efforts (Sayilan and Yildiz 2009), and in Thailand during a period of military authoritarianism, Pierre Walter (2002) claims literacy education was viewed as a tool to strengthen a sense of nationalism. A symbolic interpretive lens which sees the Pawn implied or described in policy research suggests adult literacy learners who have no agency and no control over the educational offerings in which they can participate. In addition, they may be informed and potentially even indoctrinated with regard to the current political strategy by means of literacy instruction (e.g. in post-revolutionary Nicaragua, see Miller 1985, p. 23). While a neoliberal view as captured in the Competitor character type described below would suggest that adults should be responsible for pursuing education on their own, being the Pawn makes that a tenuous expectation given that systems put in place can be removed or altered in a way that could easily disrupt success.

The Afterthought

The Afterthought character type is implied through insufficient funding for adult literacy education and low-quality service provision including educational strategies that do not focus specifically on adults, a poorly or untrained adult literacy teaching force, and curriculum and instructional materials that have not been written specifically for adults (e.g. Abbott et al. 2020; Kazeem and Oduaran 2006; Maruatona 2011). For example, German adult education receives less than 1% of the country’s overall education budget “and adult literacy education must be funded as a share of this already miniscule budget” (Jaich 2014, p. 56). Even more of an apparent afterthought in Ethiopia, adult literacy education provision is described as “highly intermittent” by Ambissa Kenea (2009 ; cited in Abiy et al. 2014, p. 646). Although the policy research descriptions focusing on lower-income countries that seem to frame adult learners as “the Afterthought” generally have a lifelong learning strategy in place as signatories of various transnational educational goal statements, their priority is on basic education for children (Abiy et al. 2014; Abbott et al. 2020; Bhalalusesa 2005; Kazeem and Oduaran 2006; Robinson-Pant 2010). At best, adult literacy education

is marginalised. For example, in Tanzania, Eustella Peter Bhalalusesa (2005) reports that even though the country is a signatory to the Education for All strategy, “heavy emphasis is placed on primary education while adult education, as part of basic education, is only partially mentioned [in the national education strategy]” (ibid., p. 77). Similarly in Nigeria, Kolawole Kazeem and Akpovire Oduaran (2006) observe that adult education policy is embedded in the country’s Universal Basic Education plan. This incorporation has been criticised by some because it makes the policy too oriented towards the education of children (Kazeem and Oduaran 2006). In their inquiry into stubbornly low literacy rates in Rwanda, Pamela Abbott et al. capture how programme provision is shaped by policies that frame adult literacy learners as the Afterthought type:

At present Rwanda’s only provision for adult learners is the first level of adult basic education, equivalent to the first year of primary school ... [Informants] acknowledged: that the quality of adult literacy is poor; that REB [Rwanda Education Board] is unable to supply sufficient textbooks and teachers’ manuals for tutors and learners; and that there are no dedicated classrooms for adult education. Not all centres even have chairs and desks for learners and, where they do, they are not sufficient for the number of learners (Abbott et al. 2020, p. 6).

A symbolic interpretive lens which views the adult literacy learner imagined in policy research as being the Afterthought type frames adults as being less important than children in educational endeavours. Although literacy is repeatedly described as key to development and economic success in policy research, potentially, there is a lack of conviction about the return on investment in adult literacy learners (World Bank 2011; Singh 2020), rendering the investment effort half-hearted, and reducing the importance of adult literacy learners to an afterthought.

The Competitor

Policy descriptions that imply the Competitor character type of adult learners suggest that they fulfil this role at both national and individual levels. On the national economic development level, they are viewed as the players in the competition for economic success. In spite of adult literacy education often being an afterthought in national education policy strategy, literacy skills are also frequently touted as a key engine of development in low-income countries and as an important contributor to the national economy in wealthier countries (e.g. Bhalalusesa 2005; Kazeem and Oduaran 2006; Kenea 2014; Maruatona 2011; Mpofo and Youngman 2001; Walker 2008). In the current turn towards neoliberalism and human capital development, adults seeking to improve their skills can also be likened to game tokens that can be collected and, when their numbers grow, counted as success (e.g. Black and Yasukawa 2016; Hamilton and Pitt 2011; Hamilton 2014; Smythe 2015).

On the individual level, some policy research seems to imagine Competitor-type adult learners as agentive learners who self-sufficiently look out for their own needs in a competition for scarce resources. Judith Walker (2008) argues that adult liter-

acy policy documents published in 2005 and 2010 in British Columbia, Canada, for example, assume that individual efforts to attain an education can reduce poverty, inequality, low employment and other social ills, thus decreasing the governmental role and responsibility to address them. In this scenario, adult learners are expected to join the competition by being self-reliant, responsible for their own learning outcomes, and flexible in terms of addressing social ills through individual effort (Loeb and Wass 2014). This makes them competitors in the race for resources, actively seeking out opportunities to succeed, and to get ahead, regardless of their goals, resources, and personal and community contexts. It also to some extent lets governments off the hook. In this scenario, only measurable outcomes that can be compared matter; success is typically described in terms of the large-scale assessment results described above (Black and Yasukawa 2016) or employment rather than improved literacy skills (Ade-Ojo and Duckworth 2017). This policy character type suggests a standardised instructional approach for which outcomes can be measured; there is then a focus on accountability, monitoring, and demands for return on investment in terms of human capital development in spite of often unstable and limited funding that decreases the potential impact of the policy (e.g. Maruatona 2011).

The Competent Citizen

The Competent Citizen character type implied in policy descriptions assumes that adult learners are capable of meaningful work on behalf of themselves and their countries, and that they are competent, contributing members of democratic societies. On the one hand, this view is an ideal which assumes that adults with low literacy skills are the same as everyone else; we all have strengths and challenges and we all deserve a respected and rightful place in civic life. For example, a description of Nigerian adult literacy policies implies the Competent Citizen character by identifying an education system that believes learning should lead to a “fulfilling life” (Kazeem and Oduaran 2006, p. 35) and contribute to national development (ibid.). In other words, when learners are able to meet their own educational needs and their skill levels rise, they will also serve the nation as a whole. In this scenario, all levels of society are called upon to join forces to reduce or eradicate mass illiteracy in a collective effort. This character type then implies that adult literacy learners have the capacity and should have agency to engage in planning and implementing their educational experiences (e.g. Gadio 2011). In another example, Kazeem and Oduaran (2006) explain that Nigeria’s Universal Basic Education plan’s “central philosophy ... was the integration of the individual into a sound and effective citizen” (ibid., p. 38). Instructors were given a number of directives to enact this philosophy, including “faith in man’s ability to make rational decisions” and “respect for the worth and dignity of the individual” (FRN 1977, 1981, 2004 as cited by Kazeem and Oduaran 2006, p. 39). Similarly, Dessalegn Samuel Abiy et al. (2014) describe recent adult literacy policy as focused not only on human capital development but also on social cohesion and the development of a competent citizenry. When the Competent Citizen is implied in publications about national adult literacy policy, it is assumed that adult learners have capacities to guide their learning and the potential to use education to further their own individual goals as well as those of their country.

However, Jennifer Sandlin and Carolyn Clark point out that there is another side to the Competent Citizen character type that holds adults with low literacy skills responsible for their circumstances. Investigating “the American legislative landscape” (Sandlin and Clark 2009, p. 999), they trace policy documents from the 1960s to the 2000s and note an increasing emphasis on responsibility and self-sufficiency as the social safety net weakened and a sense of civic responsibility to care for all diminished. They observe that in its latter iteration, the US adult literacy policy (along with all social policy) seems to imagine that whether adults are literate or can become more literate (or live in poverty) is due to how hard they work to overcome adversity. This type of Competent Citizen is assumed to be able to lift themselves up with agency and effectiveness. Yet, this assumption can also have the effect of largely absolving society from addressing their needs, while at the same time rendering irrelevant the causes of low literacy and the challenges involved in substantial skill improvement exacerbated by poverty and racism or anti-immigrant sentiments. This type of Competent Citizen reminds us that neoliberalism assumes that all people are equally capable of being successful if only they work hard enough – when in reality not everyone has equal opportunity to succeed.

Conclusion

It is important to note that policy texts and the research they engender do not exist in a vacuum. They are shaped not only by national social, economic and political conditions, but also by external catalysts such as international population survey findings, policy guidance and targets from transnational organisations such as UNESCO, and donors and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with their distinctive agendas and ideologies (Hamilton 2014; Smythe 2015). Despite some overlaps in terms of common ideology, ethos and goals around much of the world, however, each country creates its own scenery in front of which the character types are imagined. Unlike most narratives, the character types implied in policy research are more talked about in abstractions and generalisations than with the fine detail of character-driven narratives. It seems that here, the policy “plot” often drives the characters, forming them without their engagement or agency and with little reference to the reality of who they are, why they are where they are, or what they themselves truly need.

Policy efforts to improve literacy among the adult population that envision more complex and “rounded” (Forster 2010 [1927]) character types can account for the interrelationship between improved (literacy) skills and economic development as well as individuals and their communities in ways that increase agency, equity and social justice and decrease poverty. As a contribution to this effort, Rosen, from a symbolic analysis perspective, suggests that

researchers ... aim to foster broad-based discussion of how ... [policy] problems are constructed or defined in the first place. To the extent that these efforts provoke or support discussion of the values, goals, and assumptions involved in such definitions and the consequences of action on them, policy analysts can

play a more constructive, educative role in policy processes (Rosen 2009, p. 281).

Rosemary Kennedy Chapin (1995) offers a suggestion which is helpful towards making Rosen's ideas more pragmatic. Chapin argues for a "strengths perspective" in policymaking which builds on the resources and strengths of the policy targets rather than their struggles and pathologies. This assumes, however, that policy problems have multiple explanations, are understood to be socially constructed, contested and negotiable. At the very least, we hope our analysis can help policymakers and policy researchers see more clearly how adult learners can be imagined and how this might be shaping policies in unintended ways. These insights can then help make better policies. They can also help broaden policies to frame learners in ways that recognise the many layers that contribute to low literacy and can address it. Perhaps most importantly, adults with low literacy skills should be made visible in national education policies. Rather than being portrayed as an abstract shadow projected on Plato's wall or as a Godot-like character, talked about but never seen, policies should be animated by the actual lives, needs, interests, resources and challenges of adult learners' lives. Such policies are much more likely to successfully meet the learners' needs, increase learning outcomes, and reap substantive individual and social rewards.

Acknowledgements An earlier version (Belzer 2020) of this article was presented at the Adult Education in Global Times Virtual Conference (3–6 June 2021).

Funding The comparative study presented here was supported by a research grant from the German Ministry of Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, award no. W143700B; Anke Grotlüschen, Prof Dr).

Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

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Publisher’s Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

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