

## **Literacy Identification and Support Training in France**

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**ABSTRACT** The concept of sharing literacy practice between countries is something that is important and should be brought to the fore. However, this process is not as straightforward as it may appear, and what works well in one country may not fare so well in another. Developing on this, this paper, therefore, focuses on the identification of social or political factors that may be behind literacy development and the implementation of literacy policy. Having a strong background in both England and France, my comparative studies in literacy have been based on these two countries. While the focus of this presentation is to look at Literacy Identification and Support Training in France, various references is made to what the practice is in England to demonstrate how the areas presented compare or are different to what takes place in France. For those more familiar with the system in England, this will provide some elements of comparison.

*Keywords:* Literacy identification, support training, literacy policy, literacy development

## Background Information

To set the background, I shall first present the history of literacy policy in France. This will be followed by three key areas which make up the body of the presentation, notably detection, support and training for literacy in France. While the focus of this presentation, in line with the workshop, will be on young people, I will also be presenting what has been put in place for adults, as some of these developments will affect young people and will give a clearer picture to what is happening in France.

If you lay out side by side the history of literacy development in England and France from the 1960s, you will see that England has both peaks of activity in literacy policy, such as around 1975 (Hillier & Hamilton, 2006; Vincent, 1989) and from 1999 (Hillier & Hamilton, 2006), as well as some dips in activity. France has not had such *visible* activity, however, on closer inspection you will discover a constant progression in activity since the official recognition in 1984 of what France terms *illettrisme* or illiteracy (Espérandieu, Lion, & Bénichou, 1984). This specific term was created to denote a person over the age of 16 who had been schooled, yet was unable to read and understand a text related to their daily life (ANLCI, 2003). People who have literacy difficulties and have never been to school are classified differently. Both groups are, as far as possible, taught separately as they are each considered to have different requirements.

Whereas in England the Ministry of Education has been a forerunner in tackling low literacy skills, in France, this task has been overseen mainly by different Ministries such as the Ministry for Social Order and Poverty and the Ministry for Labour and Training. Formal education in France - from primary to university - is under the jurisdiction of the National Education or Ministry of Education. Adult education and training has a long history in France and comes under a different category of training or education. From as early as the 1970s, law was passed whereupon training to improve and keep one's working skills up-to-date became a right for each employee. Work-based training became a lucrative sector in France, with a current annual value of €27 billion as of 2012 (DIRECCTE, 2013).

In France, several reports and laws have been passed either directly relating to literacy or as part of a greater law which makes mention of people with literacy needs. Key laws and reports include:

### *1984 Government report Des illettrés en France (Illiterates in France)*

This was the report in which the French government formally recognised that low-literate adults existed in France. It was in this report that the term *illettrisme* was formally adopted for the first time. In the run-up to this report, campaigning had been ongoing for many years, calling on the government to acknowledge that illiteracy or low-literacy existed in the adult population in France. Five years earlier, in 1979, France along with Germany and Luxembourg replied to a European questionnaire that “*there was no illiteracy in their countries*”. The report following this survey was published in 1982 (Arnove & Graff, 1987; Lahire, 1999; Viehoff, 1982).

*1987 Wresinski report on poverty*

Father Joseph Wresinski, played a key role in the recognition of illiteracy in France, having founded the organisation ATD Quart Monde, which led the campaigning throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. In 1987 he published a report on poverty and social exclusion, also the main focus of his organisation. The report mentioned the term *illettrisme* more than thirty five times, clearly demonstrating the effect of illiteracy on poverty, employment and access to adult education (Wresinski, 1987). The focus of the report was on being able to ensure one's human rights whatever one's financial situation.

*1998 Law against exclusions*

The Wresinski report was behind the adoption of the 29<sup>th</sup> July 1998 law against exclusions. One of the provisions in this law was to make the 'fight against illiteracy' a national priority and that this would be given its own place in continuing and further education (Lahire, 1999). The term *illettrisme* also appeared in two other by-laws in the same year (Lahire, 1999).

*1998 Reform on military service*

In 1998, as part of a reform of the national conscription system of military service, the French Government launched a new programme called JAPD - *Journée d'Appel de Préparation à la Défense* (Call-up Day for Defense Preparation) and renamed in 2010 as JDC - *la Journée Défense et Citoyenneté* (Citizen and Defense Day). As this would become a key way of identifying young people with literacy needs, this system will be described in further detail in the section on identifying people with literacy needs.

*2003 National Framework on Literacy*

In 2003, the French National Literacy Agency (*ANLCI – Agence Nationale de Lutte Contre l'Illettrisme*) published a national reference and framework for literacy provision in France (ANLCI, 2003).

*2004 Law on literacy and lifelong learning*

This 4<sup>th</sup> May 2004 law inscribed provision for the 'fight against illiteracy' within the framework of lifelong learning and professional training (JORF, 2004).

*2010 Framework Agreement between the State & Pôle Emploi (National Employment Agency)*

In 2010, a two-year framework agreement was signed between the State, ANLCI and Pôle Emploi (National Employment Agency) to raise awareness among Pôle Emploi agents to identify people with literacy needs, to train agents to take on cases of people with literacy needs in the framework of the HR policy development of Pôle Emploi,

among other things (Pôle Emploi, 2010).

#### *2013 National Grand Cause*

At the beginning of 2013, it was announced that *illettrisme* had been chosen as the national cause for 2013.

### **Identification of people with literacy needs in France**

In France, a lot of focus and research has been given to the identification of people with literacy needs. Research in this area took place in the 1990s and has increased noticeably in the last decade (Rivière & Bentolila, 1995; Levent, 2004; Vinérier, 2004; CNDP, 2005; Vinérier, 2010, Pôle Emploi, 2010; CNFPT, 2011).

A key area of detection started in 1998 with the reform of the military conscription system and the introduction of the previously mentioned JAPD, now known as the JDC. This is a mandatory one-day programme in citizenship and defence for each boy and girl of French nationality to attend between their 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. As part of the programme, a series of tests are given, some of which are designed to evaluate young people's French and their literacy and numeracy skills. Each participant is given a hand held device. The questions are projected onto a screen and using the device, the user selects what he or she considers to be the correct answer. The results are made available at the end of the day. The follow-up to the results will be developed in the section on support.

The JDC days serve to measure young people's literacy rates as well as identify those in need of further education or training. In the last five to ten years, more focus has been put on identifying adults with literacy needs. One area has been among adults who are in employment, looking at ways managers can identify employees with literacy needs and also to inform managers that these needs may exist among their employees (CNFPT, 2011). A second area has been for people who are unemployed, training employment agents to identify employment seekers with literacy needs, among other things (Pole Emploi, 2010).

### **Support for people with literacy needs**

In France, support for people with literacy needs can take different forms and is often separated according to whether the person is classified as a young person or as an adult.

The JDC programme is a good example of support given to young people. On the day of the tests, the results come through immediately. Each young person whose literacy and numeracy skills fall below a certain level are called aside privately. The results are explained to them and they are informed of the different options open to them to get help. It is entirely up to the youth in question whether they pursue help or not.

One of the main structures which works closely with the JAPD is the *Mission Locale*. They have been in existence since 1982, following the 1981 government report by Bernard Schwartz on social and professional insertion among young people (CNLE, 2010). The main focus of the *Mission Locale* is to help young people acquire the skills they need

to get into work. They do not hold training itself, beyond workshops to prepare young people for interviews and write CVs, but rather direct young people to training centres, schools or associations where they can find courses that correspond to their needs or projects.

For adults, a key place of support comes from the social worker or the national employment agency *Pôle Emploi* for those in unemployment. These two structures can direct people with literacy needs to the help they need. For *Pôle Emploi*, this is often in the form of training courses either organised by *Pôle Emploi* or outside structures offering the required courses. Social workers will direct people to local structures offering the necessary help or who may know where help may be found.

Other forms of support come from initiatives to help train employers to identify employees who may have literacy needs so as to offer them training, as well as the best ways to present those training opportunities. There are also structures, often on a small scale, that help people to write various correspondences which they may not be capable of doing themselves. Many of these programmes were presented during the National and European Conference organised the 13-15<sup>th</sup> November 2013 in Lyon as part of the *Illiteracy: Grand National Cause 2013*.

#### *Training for people with literacy needs*

Before I discuss training, it is important to note that France is a very traditional country with long established structures both in administratively and socially. As has already been presented earlier this week, the education system is very encompassing and also has a broad offering up until and including university. Until the age of 25 (or 28 for university students and an unlimited age for people with a disability), education is free for all (minus administration fees for university). Education is expected to take place during this age period and measures are in place to give financial support in specific cases.

After the age of 25, education is no longer termed education, but rather *formation continue* or *formation professionnelle*, meaning professional or in-work training. This is most often covered by one's employer or the *Pôle Emploi* for those unemployed. While this may lead to a recognised qualification, this is not the usual outcome. Some may choose to follow a university course as part of their chosen training. By going through an employer, or if you qualify, through *Pôle Emploi*, there is the possibility to maintain an income during your training period.

Coming back to the question in hand, in France, it is very difficult for a person with low-literacy skills to enter a training course which gives a nationally recognised qualification. Many of these courses, particularly vocational courses, require one to pass a short written test during the application process, which may prove a challenge to a person with low-literacy. If, for example, such a person goes to *Pôle Emploi* and asked to follow a vocational course with a qualification at the end, if they do not pass the screening test, they will first be invited to pass a basic skills course, possibly lasting several months, before they can get on the course they initially wanted to take. At times, this can be circumvented, but this is on a case by case basis and depends not only on the school, but also the teacher in charge who may non-officially adapt the course to ac-

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commodate the applicant. These are most often exceptions to the rules. Unlike the UK, qualifying vocational courses where the person can have additional classes in basic skills enabling the person to attain a qualification while improving his or her basic skills do not exist.

Many of the basic skills classes are set up by local associations. The associative sector is large in France, employing over 1 million people. A system is used where associations can bid on public tenders called *appels d'offres*. More recently there has been an increased focus on offering training with a qualification, so we will see where this can lead in the basic skills sector. There is another recent development whereupon several associations can come together to make a group bid on an offer which they may not be able to take on alone.

Regarding basic skills training itself, in France it goes further than just improving the basic skills of participants. Focus is given to the whole person and their individual needs. Classes are designed to meet the participants' needs, not only in basic skills, but also in social skills as well as life skills. The process may be long and slow at times, but treating the person as a whole and not on the basis of whether or not he can read or write is seen as important here in France. It is in this way that training and support is also fully intertwined.

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