The best days of our lives? Experiencing literacy inequalities: the continuing impact of literacy inequalities on a group of individuals, who failed to reach their desired level of literacy at school.

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This thesis results entirely from my own work and has not been offered previously for any other degree or diploma. I declare that this thesis comprises 43,928 words and it does not exceed the permitted maximum.

Contents

Abstract

This thesis explores the feelings and experiences of a small group of adults, educated in the English state school system, who either did not achieve a pass (grade C/grade 4) in English language GCSE (or equivalent) by the time they left school, or who struggled with the acquisition of literacy during their school years. It considers why some adults feel that they have not been able to access the knowledge and skills they need to achieve the literacy level they would like, and the ways in which this has affected them.

In investigating the experiences of adults who have encountered literacy inequalities, this thesis aims to contribute to filling the gap in the existing literature on the experiences of adults who are often underrepresented. It critically considers current approaches to the position of adults who do not have the level of literacy they require. The research reflects on how those experiences affected them in later life and the motivation behind those who returned to education as adults to study GCSE English. It also considers the implications of these findings for future educational policy and practice.

The findings indicate that the participants felt difficulties with literacy had negative effects on their lives, affecting their self-confidence, causing them to have feelings of low self-worth and limiting their career choices. It offers an insight into an important area of study and may be seen as a starting point for future research in this area. The intention was to gather the rich, personal experiences of the participants' literacy journeys and provide a voice for those

who have experienced feelings of not having achieved a sufficient level of competence in English for their needs. The results of the feelings and opinions they expressed suggest there may be benefits in addressing certain failures in the English education system, which can have a profound effect on children and on their lives going forward into adulthood.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Introducing the research

School is often referred to as the best days of our lives – a carefree time with few responsibilities and plenty of opportunities to learn, to play, to make friends and to grow from child to adult. But it is not always like that if school does not give you the one skill that it is hard to live your life without, the ability to be literate. A number of young people leave school every year without passing the exams they need to go on to higher or further education, or without being able to access the training course or apprenticeship for the career they long to pursue. Whilst it is commonly accepted that not everyone will leave school with all the qualifications they want, and may have to reconsider their plans, nothing may be as significant and limiting as not learning to read and write adequately. Desirable careers often require education and training, which is not accessible without adequate literacy. The majority of courses are not available unless you have specific qualifications for example, if you wish to take an apprenticeship to become a motor mechanic you need to pass English GCSE. If you are one of the 30% (Statista, 2021) who leave school without a pass in GCSE English, having limited literacy leaves you with few, if any, choices for your career - whichever area you want to go into adequate literacy is essential.

As an adult literacy teacher for over 20 years, I was aware there was an ongoing need for literacy tuition beyond school (which could become pressing at any time in a person's life) as a steady stream of adult students, aged from

16 to 81, joined the classes over the years. However, it was the day when Cathy, who I had taught some years before, brought her 16-year-old son Martin into the classroom, that I realised just how serious the problem was. How could this still be happening a generation later? It was then I knew I needed to try to understand more about what was happening.

This thesis investigates the experiences of a group of adults who left school without reaching the level of literacy they wanted, and it reveals how the effects on individuals of not having a sufficient level of literacy can be both damning and far-reaching. Existing research tends to focus on income and careers (Sutton Trust and the Social Mobility Commission, 2019) or on the effects of low literacy on children (Francis and Wong, 2013; Clifton and Cook, 2012; Cassen and Kingdon, 2007). However, surprisingly little research has been carried out on the detrimental emotional impact that inadequate literacy can have on adults. This lack of research shows how easy it is for those without voices to be marginalised. Their voices need to be heard.

This chapter introduces the study by providing a summary of the journey, the research context and the problems and questions that stem from a critical review of the literature. In addition, it illustrates how the contribution made by this thesis is linked to specific research gaps found in the literature. The chapter summarises the theoretical orientation and methodology employed in the study and finishes with an outline of the structure of the thesis.

1.2 Justification for the research

By investigating individuals' experiences of the literacy inequalities which they have encountered the research will add to the current literature on the effects of literacy inequalities for example, Barakat (2016), Duckworth (2014) and Robinson (2005). It offers more information on both the individuals' thoughts on their literacy journeys and on the reasons for the literacy inequalities. My aim is for this research to contribute to the field of adult literacy and that it could be used to inform policy to improve literacy provision. It can do this by giving insights into the consequences of literacy inequalities and by offering suggestions on how their impact may be lessened in future. It also serves the purpose of allowing the participants in this research, who have experienced literacy inequalities, to have their voices heard and to appreciate that their feelings and experiences are valued. In this way the research can offer hope to others, who had similar experiences, that what they went through has been recognised.

1.3 Research focus

This research explores the feelings and experiences of two groups of adults, educated in the English state school system, who either did not achieve a pass (grade C or grade 4 from 2019) in English language GCSE by the time they left school, or who struggled with the acquisition of literacy during their school years. To do this, it investigates the perceptions of the literacy inequalities experienced by the two groups, one group who is attending a further education college in England and a second group whose members have expressed dissatisfaction with their acquisition of literacy. The research contributes to less-investigated areas of literacy acquisition by focusing on

these experiences and feelings, and so contributes to what is missing from the existing literature.

In the literature review in chapter 2, the research identifies how there are different definitions of literacy and how success and achievement in literacy are characterised in different ways. I look at the number of people affected and at how levels of literacy are measured. I then go on to explain how certain groups are positioned in society and why they have problems accessing adequate literacy. The literature review then focuses on the work of three theorists Sen, Bourdieu and Bernstein and their alternative approaches regarding the reasons for inadequate literacy.

I had originally intended to research the experiences of those adults who wished to improve both literacy and numeracy, as both these basic skills are important for accessing many careers and for taking a full part in society. However, it appears that lacking adequate literacy, rather than maths, has a far greater emotional effect on individuals, as there may be a feeling of shame and embarrassment in having literacy difficulties, indeed these feelings may also be associated with not having adequate numeracy skills, but having problems with maths can often be more easily brushed off. Someone may declare with a laugh that they never could do maths, whereas people are less willing to admit not being able to read competently. ‘It is fairly common for people in the UK to openly admit that they are bad at maths whilst very few admit to being bad at other subjects e.g. English’ (Marshall, et al., 2016 p.68). Willis (2010) also found that attitudes to maths include finding it acceptable

to be bad at it, because that is seen as normal.

Throughout, I have concentrated on information given for England, as the focus of the research is on participants educated wholly or mainly in this country. I wanted to distinguish between the English education system and those of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland which are all, to a greater or lesser extent, different from each other and from England. Some of the information used is for the UK as a whole, as it was not possible to extract details relating to England alone when certain reports consider all four countries together.

1.4 Aims and rationale

The reason I chose to carry out research into the experiences of adults who have not achieved their desired level of literacy is, as a further education teacher working in a college for over 20 years, I wanted to be able to hear what had happened to them and to understand their experiences and feelings. I mostly taught adults who had come to classes to improve their literacy skills and gain qualifications. I wanted to research how it felt for them: was there the nagging self-doubt of not being able to spell, not having the means to explain what you want or need to someone in authority? Did they feel humiliation at school when not being able to understand what the teacher was talking about, or when having to put on a brave face and pretend they did not care? Perhaps some of these experiences did not have much of an impact or, do they lead as an adult, to feeling you always have to prove yourself, never feeling quite good enough, and not having sufficient qualifications to apply for jobs which

you believe you are capable of doing? Or does not having the desired level of literacy play an insignificant role in their feelings about themselves and their abilities? All these questions are part of the overall investigation of how it actually felt for the participants.

My particular interest in this area is because I can still remember being the child sitting at the back of the class with paper and crayons, who was told to draw pictures, while the teacher got on with teaching the children who had learnt to read. I remember the humiliation and frustration of two whole years of not understanding anything the teacher wrote on the board, or what the other children were writing. I was not able to read. I did not learn until my mother taught me to read at home when I was 7, when she realised I had been left behind at school. Then the world opened up for me, I could read, school became interesting, and I stopped feeling excluded from what was happening around me, however, the experience has left me with a lifelong deep-rooted feeling of inadequacy.

As a child who started school in the early 1960s, I was surprised, as an adult, to be teaching English language to adults who had been educated in subsequent decades and who had such similar experiences to mine. It struck me as a huge waste of opportunity that people had gone through school from the ages of five to 16 and yet could leave with a level of English which did not meet their needs and few, if any, qualifications. The adults I taught in the 1990s and 2000s were mostly aged between 20 – 40, but by the time I was teaching in the 2010s, I found that, at times, I was teaching their children, who

were still leaving school without qualifications. Talking to the students over the years I became aware that most of them felt ashamed that they had experienced problems with acquiring literacy and that they considered it was their fault they had struggled. It occurred to me that what I was seeing was possibly the tip of an iceberg and that there were likely to be many more people who had similar experiences. Thus, rather than just an analysis of the extent of the problem and a break-down of the numbers involved, this research aims to give a greater understanding of how the participants feel about their experiences and to provide them with an opportunity to offer their suggestions on how the situation could be improved. Thus, the research questions are designed to get to the heart of how it feels to have inadequate literacy.

1.5 Research questions

All the participants had expressed disappointment with their educational experiences and were keen to take part in this research. In fact, they were pleased to be able to tell their stories and have an opportunity to really explain what had happened to them and how they felt. The research questions are as follows:

1. How does a small group of adults describe their experiences of learning GCSE English at school?

This question considers the participants' own views of how they learnt English and how they felt about the process.

2. How does a small group of adults explain the difficulties they faced with GCSE English at school?

The aim of this research question is to get the participants to reflect on the difficulties they had, and to discover at what point they were aware they were having problems and why they think that might have been.

3. In what ways do these early experiences shape later life experiences?

This research question is designed to find out where the participants are in life at the moment, and where they wish they could have been, if they had better literacy.

4. What has been the motivation to return to education and study GCSE English?

The purpose of this question is to ascertain the drive behind returning to study and the reasons for it.

5. What are the participants' views on how the education system could be improved to avoid others having their experiences?

As the research focuses on the participants' experiences of learning GCSE English at school, this research question is designed to analyse the participants' specific experiences of what happened to them and how they have been affected by those experiences. It does this by asking them how they explain and make sense of the difficulties they faced.

1.6 Methodology

1.6.1 The type of study

This study is a narrative inquiry which uses one-to-one interviews to explore how the participants describe their experiences of literacy acquisition and its effects on their lives. The research methods are designed to gain a greater understanding of how the participants see themselves as individuals and how they view their position within society (Bell 2006). I began the process by planning the research design using Robinson's (2014) four-point method of qualitative sampling. I used a convenience sample, that is, I enlisted people into the study who were predominantly local and easy to access, but a drawback of convenience sampling is that any data found cannot necessarily be generalisable. I selected all the prospective participants who met the criteria and who agreed to take part. My methodological approach is qualitative and it uses methods, such as semi-structured interviews, to portray and analyse the participants' own understanding of their experience. My ontological position is that I believe each person's reality is individual to them, since it can be argued that an individual's role in society is derived from and gives meaning to how they perceive the world (Grix, 2004). The epistemology is interpretivist and views meaning as arising from social situations.

1.6.2 Data collection and analysis

The data was collected by carrying out a semi-structured, face-to-face narrative interview with 12 of the participants and telephone interviews with the three participants who live out of the area. All interviews took place at a time which was convenient for the interviewees and were either recorded electronically or by making written notes at the time. The interview questions

were designed so that the participants could talk freely about their experiences and what was important to them and to give them the opportunity to tell their stories. The information from the interviews formed the basis for the analysis of the research data.

1.7 The status of the findings and their significance

This research offers greater understanding of the life experiences of participants who have not reached their desired level of literacy. Literacy is not a fixed set of skills – it changes over time and people's requirements and choices are likely to change over time too (Burnett et al., 2015). However, I believe everyone has the right to, at least, a minimum level of literacy. Many of the students I taught found learning English problematic and often felt ashamed of, what they saw as, their own failings. This lack of self-worth can affect every area of life: family, education, social, work et cetera. The research highlights some of the reasons for literacy inequalities, offers some suggestions for change and also provides an opportunity for ordinary people to have their voices heard.

This thesis makes four original claims to knowledge, which are:

1 For the participants the emotional effects of having inadequate literacy do not just occur while they are at school, but last a lifetime

2 The participants became aware of problems with literacy when they are at secondary school

3 Even getting extra help at school did not necessarily help them very much because it could become a source of humiliation and shame

4 It was important for the participants to get support both at school and at home

1.8 Areas for further research

The findings strongly suggest that it would be beneficial to carry out further research in a number of areas – particular areas to focus on are: early intervention in the education of children who are starting to fall behind or who are likely to do so; finding methods to teach English in more practical ways; looking into how many adults actually take part in schemes which aim to improve their learning; and investigating failings in the English education system.

1.8.1 Early intervention in the education of children

Research (COPE, 2017; Department for Education, 2015; EPPSE 3-16+, 2015; Field, 2010) has indicated that such early intervention is the best way to improve literacy levels and provide children with the literacy levels they need to get the qualifications that will enable them to have fulfilling careers and to live their lives with adequate literacy.

1.8.2 Teaching English in more practical ways

Teaching English in more practical ways seems to provide real benefits to students. It allows them to become more physically involved in what they were studying (Posner and Pantoine, 2009; Donnelly and Lambourne, 2011; Golding et al., 2016; Malvilidi et al., 2018). Such research has indicated that for many students a hands-on approach to learning is beneficial and

preferable to just sitting at a desk. More differentiated methods of teaching could be investigated to see what effect they have on the students.

1.8.3 Investigating the importance of targeted literacy intervention for adults

Being taught literacy in isolation may not be enough for adults to improve their skills sufficiently as they may lack motivation because of negative experiences at school and may not want to learn in a classroom setting. An answer to this could be to offer literacy provision in places which are more relevant to them, such as in the workplace. This should help identify and focus on those who would benefit.

1.8.4 Weaknesses in the English education system

Many of the conversations with the participants suggest that there are particular weaknesses in the education system which should be dealt with. For example, the participants spoke of how they felt the system was not necessarily aware of their problems and so did not pay sufficient attention to their individual needs. Thus, it is important that those who are dissatisfied with the education they received have an opportunity to say how they think the education system could be improved. Whenever changes in the education system are proposed young people and adults should be asked for their opinions, as it is essential to ask those affected and not just depend on the views of policy makers.

1.9 Thesis structure

The thesis is divided into six chapters in total and this section provides an outline of the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2 looks at the existing literature in this area and is in two sections. The first section explores the definitions of literacy and on the numbers involved. This section shows how much of the literature is concerned with the technical aspects of defining and measuring literacy but there is little on the emotional effects on adults who lack adequate literacy. The second section of this chapter is concerned with the reasons adults can lack adequate literacy and describes the three theoretical lenses which inform this research.

Chapter 3 explains the methodology used in the thesis and gives an overview of the research design and an explanation of the choice of research questions. It then describes the type of study being carried out and explains in detail the decisions reached to arrive at the research design. It then goes on to describe how the data was collected and analysed. Finally, it covers the theoretical perspective used, and considers the ethical position.

Chapter 4 begins the discussion of the findings. It shows the ways in which the participants describe their experiences of learning GCSE English at school and the difficulties they faced, while also giving them the opportunity to explain why they think they had problems with learning.

Chapter 5 continues the discussion of the findings and explains the ways in which the participants have been affected by having insufficient literacy for

their needs and investigates what has motivated those who have returned to study. The final section of this chapter asks the participants to reflect on ways in which the education system could be improved so that others may avoid their experiences.

Chapter 6 is the conclusion which discusses how the findings answer the research questions. It clarifies the contribution this thesis has made to increasing knowledge in this area and how it fills in the gaps in the existing literature. It also offers some suggestions for further research in this area.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This research is concerned with the experiences of adults who feel they do not have adequate literacy skills for their needs and, on the impact this has on their lives. There is a lot of literature on the way literacy is defined, the number of people involved and on how literacy levels are measured, but there is little literature on the ways in which individuals may be affected by the emotional aspects of a life with an inadequate level of literacy.

The chapter is divided into two main sections - the first section considers the ways literacy can be defined and measured. It begins by explaining the current definition of literacy used in England and then explores the existing literature on different definitions of literacy and demonstrates why literacy is important. It then looks at how approaches to literacy have varied historically and it also considers how the number of people affected by not having adequate literacy for their wants or needs is calculated. It shows that there is far less written about the emotional impact of literacy issues on adults, in comparison with the amount that has been written on the more technical matters of defining and measuring literacy. This establishes the need for this study, as there is a lack of literature regarding the emotional impact. Having discussed the different reasons behind the lack of literacy, the second section of this chapter then goes on to consider why the attempted current solutions have not been wholly adequate in getting to the root of the problem. It investigates different reasons behind why there have been, and still are,

problems in improving literacy. It offers alternative solutions to certain of the issues by outlining three theoretical lenses which inform this thesis.

2.2 What is literacy?

The current definition of literacy, from the website of the National Literacy Trust (2017a, What is literacy?), is that ‘literacy is the ability to read, write, speak and listen in a way that lets us communicate effectively and make sense of the world’. I decided to use the definition above for this study, as I felt it was the most useful for the participants sinc it was the closest match to what they wanted to use literacy for. However, defining literacy is not completely straightforward, as no definition can be considered separately from its significance for individuals and society. The concept of literacy is created by society and its meaning changes over time depending on who is defining it, Rintaningrum (2009). It can be argued that literacy is not just an individual skill which a person may have, but also requires different kinds of knowledge about what is being read in order to have a context in which to understand it. This socio-cultural approach to literacy argues that becoming literate is not an isolated action but takes place within the wider social groups that an individual belongs to (Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986). Such groups have their owns ways of communicating and interacting and also their own value system. The literacy practices of a group are woven into the wider practices of their regular interaction and so cannot be seen in isolation (Gee, 1992).

Indeed, as the thesis shows, the participants (although none could be classified as lacking literacy entirely) had been considerably affected by

having a level of literacy which was not adequate for what they wanted or needed. In addition, as the National Literacy Trust (2017b) points out, thousands of children continue to complete their school education without the literacy skills necessary for getting a decent job, which reduces their ability to do well in life and the way in which they interact in society.

2.3 Why literacy is important

Not having the necessary literacy skills can have a negative impact on a person throughout their life (National Equality Panel, 2010; Field, 2010). The National Literacy Trust (2017a) points out that without adequate literacy a child will not be able to succeed at school, will not have full access to jobs, and as a parent, will not be able to support their own children in their education. This cycle has an effect on social mobility and makes it harder to achieve a more just society. A person with poor literacy skills may not be able to read newspapers, understand road signs or bus timetables, or fill in forms or use the internet. They may be unable to access a range of employment options, and this will limit their ability to take a full and active part in society. As the findings in the data analysis chapters show, literacy difficulties can have profoundly negative effects on adults' feelings of confidence and self-worth.

Research by the National Literacy Trust (2017a) on the importance of reading found the following: there are increased academic benefits the longer children keep enjoying reading, for example a keen reader at age 10 has a reading age 1.3 years higher than other children in their age group who do not enjoy

reading. The difference in reading ages is 2.1 years higher at age 12 and 3.3 years higher at 14. The research also showed that children who enjoy reading are generally happier and are three times more likely to have good mental health than children who do not like reading. Thus, many of the participants in this study were already at a disadvantage by the time they came to sit their GCSEs, if they had a below average reading age.

Hamilton and Pitt (2011) also highlighted the extent of the problem and used the term, *literacy inequalities,* to describe the position of those who make up around 10% of the UK population (Hamilton and Pitt, 2011, p.596). Few adults or young people leaving school are illiterate as such, but for 10% of the population their literacy skills are not adequate for the demands of everyday life and work. It is worth noting that it can be argued that what is regarded as literacy 'inequality' is dependent on who has the power to define what counts as literacy, and so 'inequality' is not a given but a construct (Street, 2011). The opinions of those receiving literacy are relevant because if they feel their literacy is inferior to formal literacy practices (as they have accepted the dominant view of what literacy is) then others have defined literacy and imposed inequality on them (Gorard et al., 1998; Duckworth, 2014). However, the figure of 10% takes no account of the feelings of those involved and any damage to their self-worth they may experience.

2.4 How approaches to literacy have changed over time from the 1940s.

This literature review begins with an overview of definitions of literacy and the number of people affected, in order to give an idea of the extent and nature of

the problem. I show how limited attempts to get to the root of the problem began in the 1940s but were only systematically organised into a workable solution in England, when the government's Department for Education and Skills published Skills for Life: *The national strategy for improving adult basic literacy and numeracy skills* (2001). This report summarised the extent of the problem and explained how the government would tackle it. I have emphasised the historical aspects of literacy to show how it had been such an insurmountable problem for many decades. Much of the existing literature in this area is, by its nature, descriptive both in terms of the numbers of people who lack a satisfactory level of literacy for their needs and on the levels of literacy they have reached (Barakat, 2016; Hamilton and Pitt, 2011; Robinson (2005), but it is difficult to find literature on the feelings adults may experience due to their initial, and on ongoing, literacy experiences. The chapter offers definitions of literacy over time to the present day and considers their importance.

2.4.1 The historical position

Discussions about what literacy actually is have been examined at various times from the 1940s onwards (Brooks, 1997). Here I show how these definitions have developed and changed over time to the present day. Literacy was never seen as having a fixed, definite meaning but a concept which could change depending on who did the defining and the time period it occurred in.

Going back to the 1950s, Madge (1955) was asking whether it was necessary to have a specific standard of literacy and questioned the nature of a society

which demands a particular standard of literacy and asked: ‘Who are 'we'? And what is 'society' which requires a given standard of literacy from its members?’ (Madge, 1955, p.4). There was no general consensus about what literacy was or how it should be measured. Later, writing in 1994 about the situation in the 1970s, Withnall (1994), argued that literacy success may be defined in different ways and that it is necessary to consider what it means to be literate and how to measure levels of literacy. He referred to a conference, held by the British Association of Settlements (BAS) in 1973, which considered the importance of literacy and reflected on its meaning. BAS then published ‘A Right to Read: Action for a Literate Britain’ 1974 in Withnall (1994), which asserted the link between literacy, rights and active participation in society. The paper argued that in order to participate and exercise certain rights, such as to choose between alternatives and to solve problems, people need the basic skills of listening, talking, reading and writing. BAS promoted ‘A Right to Read: Action for a Literate Britain’ (1974) through the setting up of a larger group of interested people and this eventually became known as the National Committee for Adult Literacy (Withnall, 1994).

Writing in the 1970s, Kedney (1975) was also concerned about how literacy should be defined, and he argued that establishing a definition of literacy would need to take into account aspects of the nature of literacy both as a collection of learnt practices and as a tool to be used. Kedney (1975) devised the following classification of the type of statements used to define literacy, although he acknowledged that such definitions also had limitations. They are not precise or particularly detailed, but there appears to have been little else

available at that time.

- Statements which use quantitative terms, for example, in terms of years of schooling or levels of reading attainment.
- Statements based on needing literacy skills to carry out certain tasks expressed in either specific terms such as the ability to read newspapers or complete forms; or based on functional tasks expressed in general terms, such as being able to read and write for daily life.
- Statements concerned with an analysis of the operations involved in acquiring literacy skills, such as reading, or reading, writing and/or spelling.

By the 1970s literacy had come to be seen as necessary, both for the individual and for a country's economic growth and development, as it weakens a country's ability to compete economically (National Literacy Trust 2017b) and this led to the development of the concept of *functional literacy*. In 1978, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) gave this definition of functional literacy: 'A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group and community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his own and the community's development' (Education For All Global Monitoring Report 2006, p.154).

I was surprised to find there was so little clear information about how literacy was defined and measured historically and how there was no precise

chronology. Not only was it difficult to establish a clear-cut definition of literacy, but it was not possible to discover how many people lacked adequate literacy and what level of intervention was needed. It was not until the late 1990s, that the British government acted decisively in order to determine the extent of the problem and to do something about it, by implementing a national policy (Skills for Life, 2001), which I pick up again later in section 2.8.

2.5 The number of people affected by not having adequate literacy

Attempting to determine the number of people affected by not having adequate literacy has been a long slow process to get to the present day and the literature shows how the process was long and involved. Historically attempts were made to estimate the number of people needing help with literacy, but it has always been difficult to assess accurately (Brooks, 1997). This was not helped by the fact that the samples taken of people studied tended to focus on the groups which were easiest to sample, such as school leavers, those in prison or army entrants, et cetera. It is necessary to be very cautious before generalising about the population as a whole as a result of these tests (Kedney, 1975). They were not standardised, or consistently applied and different criteria were used in the reading tests, which might vary from individual tests of word recognition or group tests of reading comprehension. There was also a considerable variation in ages and sexes taking part in the tests (Kedney, 1975), which again made it difficult to get an accurate picture of the situation. However, Kedney (1975) did point out that the samples of the adult population taken showed that between 10% to 30% of adults were classified as ‘backward’ readers, having a reading age of a nine to twelve-year-old and that, whatever

standard of literacy was used, other than complete illiteracy, there was a considerable problem. Brooks (1997) also commented that surveys of literacy skills have been carried out in the UK since 1948 and the main findings from them were that literacy levels had changed little from that time to the present day and that a significant proportion of the population have low literacy skills.

In 1999 the government determined to get a more accurate and definitive understanding of the extent of the problem and requested that Moser (a statistician) carry out a review of adult literacy in England. Moser (1999) found that approximately seven million adults (one in five of adults in England) were effectively illiterate in terms of their ability to function successfully in society and could not, for example, find the page reference for plumbers in an alphabetical directory. He compared the adult results with the reading levels of schoolchildren and concluded that this meant that one in five adults had less literacy than an 11-year-old child. I suggest that this does not account for the fact that adults have greater life experience than children and may well have found many ways to adapt to and overcome their problems of inadequate literacy. Moser acknowledged that the figures, although based on official surveys, were estimates but that, nevertheless, there was a significant problem (Moser, 1999). He published a simple table at that time (Table 2.1 below), giving the following example taken from the Office for National Statistics data in 1997, which showed a startlingly low rate of literacy in Britain, indicating that there had certainly not been any improvement in the problem since efforts were made to assess the extent of the problem in the 1940s. It was at this point that the government decided to act and published Skills for Life (2001).

Germany	12%
Canada	17%
Britain	23%

Adult Literacy in Britain, ONS, 1997 in Moser (1999, p.8)

Table 2.1 Percentage of adults with low literacy 1997 (identical questions in all countries)

The Skills for Life (2001) policy advocated the importance of measuring an individual's level of literacy precisely in order to be able to provide good support so, in addition to efforts to determine the numbers of those who lack adequate literacy, a system of levels was devised in England (which could be used with both children and adults) to determine the precise level of literacy an individual has reached has been devised by the National Literacy Trust (2017c). This classification is used as a national standard and is explained in 2.6.1 below.

2.6 How literacy levels are measured currently and how success and achievement in literacy are defined

The importance of an accurate way of measuring literacy is vital for determining the extent of effective intervention and the funding support necessary to bring any intervention about (Patrinos, 2016).

2.6.1 The way in which literacy is measured in England

Literacy can be measured in different ways although, whichever method of measuring literacy is used, a significant proportion of the population in England has literacy skills which are insufficient for its needs (Moser, 1999). In England adult literacy is usually measured using the framework formulated by the National Literacy Trust (2017c) which considers the levels of reading, writing and communication skills a person has achieved, which equate to the age at which a child is expected to reach that level. There are five levels which are:

- **Entry Level 1** is equivalent to literacy levels at age 5-7. Adults below Entry Level 1 may not be able to write short messages to family or read a road sign.
- **Entry Level 2** is equivalent to literacy levels at age 7-9. Adults with below Entry Level 2 may not be able to describe a child's symptoms to a doctor or read a label on a medicine bottle.
- **Entry Level 3** is equivalent to literacy levels at age 9-11. Adults with skills below Entry Level 3 may not be able to understand labels on pre-packaged food or understand household bills.
- **Level 1** is equivalent to GCSE grades D-G. Adults with skills below Level 1 may not be able to read bus or train timetables or understand their pay slip.
- **Level 2** is equivalent to GCSE grades A*-C. Adults with skills below Level 2 may not have the skills to spot fake news or bias in the media, (National Literacy Trust (2017c).

The first section of this chapter examined the nature of literacy and established

that inadequate literacy is still a significant problem in England. Therefore, if there are clear definitions of what literacy is, a reasonably accurate idea of the number of people who do not have adequate literacy, and ways of measuring the levels people have reached, the only thing missing is a solution to the problem.

2.7 The reasons people may find themselves without adequate literacy for their needs

As explained in 2.8 below, the government believed the answer was going to be found by applying the remedies in their policy document *Skills for Life* (2001), but this has not happened as there are various issues involved which reduce the chances of adults accessing the literacy provision they need. Therefore, the following section explains different aspects of the challenges involved, in order to explore alternative ways of looking at adult literacy issues. It provides a foundation for considering solutions and does this by focusing particularly on the work of three theorists Sen, Bourdieu and Bernstein who each offer new approaches to looking at different aspects of the reasons behind having inadequate literacy. This section of the chapter considers the following reasons for a lack of adequate literacy:

- Lack of individual motivation
- The way a person is positioned in society
- How an individual may accept a lack of literacy as something to be tolerated
- The role of class inequality in accessing literacy

- The lasting effects on children when their attitude to school does not conform with what is expected of them
- The way in which literacy is taught
- How the type of language used affects a child's readiness for school

2.8 Lack of individual motivation

As outlined above, the first attempt in the twenty-first century to offer a solution was *Skills for Life* (2001). In this document David Blunkett, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, wrote 'We are tackling under-achievement in schools. Today children are reading, writing and using numbers better than at any time in the past. Adults must be able to make the same progress. Our mission is to give all adults in England the opportunity to acquire the skills for active participation in twenty-first century society and to engage their energy and commitment ...' *Skills for Life* (2001, p.4). Thus, the government had put a strategy in place which would finally tackle the inequity of literacy deficit. However, when a review of *Skills for Life* (2001) was carried out in 2008 by the National Audit Office - Skills for Life: *Progress in Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy* (2008) it discovered that since *Skills for Life* (2001) focused on improving qualifications, this had led to many people joining the courses who found them easy to complete. They were often people who had the necessary skills to be counted as literate but, did not have a certificate to prove it (2008, p.9). Fewer enrolled on the lower-level courses and many of those with poor literacy skills were the least likely to attend classes. The review considered the reasons people might not join the classes and found that they were generally not motivated by getting qualifications. Being a better parent

was the main reason they gave for returning to education to improve their skills, as they wanted to be able to help their children with homework, et cetera and to support them to succeed in life. The motivation was essentially personal and so without specific motivation they did not take up the opportunity to enrol in the classes. As explained below, this is demonstrated by Sen's concept of the capability approach: people want to be the best they can for a reason. If they have no reason to improve a skill, they can ignore that capability (Sen 2005).

Sen's theory of the capability approach (Sen, 2005) can be seen as offering a different way of viewing the issues concerning a lack of literacy as it shows the effects of inadequate literacy on the quality of a person's life and how their wider freedoms may be limited by an inability to fulfill educational goals and achievements (Maddox, 2008). The focus of the capability approach is on whether someone may choose to do something and also whether they are actually in a position (have the capability) to act. It can also be used as a basis on which to examine how a lack of capabilities causes adults to experience the effects of literacy inequalities. The theory goes to the heart of the problem, since adults should have been able to acquire literacy as children and not be placed in the position, after the age of sixteen, where they are trying to make up the lost ground. Sen believes every person has the right to flourish and be the best they can be, and the capability approach argues that we should look at each person, not as a means to economic growth or social stability, but as an end in themselves.

He uses the concepts of 'functionings' and 'capabilities' to demonstrate the

difference between actual achievement and the freedom or opportunity to achieve. The concept of functionings concerns the various things a person may value doing or being, whereas capabilities are the actual opportunities or freedoms to achieve the things an individual considers to be valuable. Norwich (2014) clarifies this by explaining how the capability approach encompasses human progress on a global scale since its emphasis is on social justice which embrace different forms of diversity. Norwich writes: 'For Sen, a capability depends on a *functioning* which he defines as 'an achievement of a person: what she or he manages to do or to be' (Norwich, 2014, p.17). Therefore goods (or what Sen terms *commodities*) are the resources available to the person, which support them to enable functionings. Commodities need to be converted into functionings to be of use, so even if people have the right to the same resources, they need to be able to access them to gain equal benefit. If a person is less able to access the commodities this lack of ability will not enable functionings.

This distinction that Sen makes between functionings and capabilities emphasises the difference between the aspirations a person may have and the actions they may need to take to achieve them. Thus, this implies that people may have capabilities that they can choose not to use. This does, however, raise the question of how to account for the values that people place on the commodities which lead to functionings. Sen (2005) also points out that a functioning will not come about without the means to achieve it, so a person could have a right to be free from hunger, but this is of no use if they do not have any food. This is relevant to this research because, even if a child lives in

a country where there is a right to education, what Sen termed ‘unfreedoms’ can stop the child benefitting fully from receiving the education they are entitled to. The social and economic conditions into which a child is born and brought up are likely to determine whether or not the child has access to a suitable education.

For Sen education is a capability which allows people freedom to achieve the things (functionings) which are valuable to them. The capabilities approach helps to understand the way literacy affects well-being because seeing literacy as a functioning enables it to be viewed as a social practice, which embodies literate social identities. Sen argues that people need to have the agency and freedom to decide for themselves about the benefits of their education and to be able to convert what they want from their education into achievements that they value (Unterhalter, 2003). This highlights the importance of having sufficient literacy for your needs in order to be able to make choices (Wolff and de-Shalit, 2013). Therefore, if a child struggles with literacy when young, and the means to intervene and reduce any difficulties are not there, that child is likely to be left disadvantaged.

Thus, Sen (2008) advocates the importance of adult literacy provision both because it is of benefit in itself and also because it enhances people's capabilities. However, it has been argued that literacy capabilities indicate the set of functionings available in the future, as they are concerned with what a person might use literacy for (Maddox, 2008). Having both reasons can be seen as ambiguous since it raises the question of whether the function of

literacy is to provide benefits or whether it is a fundamental good (Sen, 2008). Nussbaum (2006) also endorses the capability approach but sees literacy as crucial for living a good life and lists it as one of her ten essential capabilities. Unlike Sen she views literacy as essential in itself and not necessarily because of the benefits it may bring. In her work Nussbaum takes a more humanities-based approach than Sen, in order to take into account individuals' hopes and motives rather than Sen's more empirical economics-based approach (Robyns, 2006). Both Sen and Nussbaum argue for the importance of sufficient adult literacy provision because having adequate literacy allows for people to have a fulfilling, worthwhile life and increase their capabilities. Education policies need to ensure that adult literacy provision is sufficient and provided effectively, as children may not have benefitted from school education and need to be placed in a position where they can overcome this (Maddox, 2008).

Using the capability approach allows for the assessment of equality of opportunity for people and not just access to resources. Tikly and Barrett (2011) suggest that Sen sees education as having an important role in income generation, satisfactory lifestyle, individual self-confidence and as having intrinsic worth as a capability in itself. It is therefore necessary to overcome the barriers to success that a child may encounter and be aware of the social practices which can cause those barriers. Only then can children access the educational resources they should have and convert them into capabilities and functionings. This concept sums up the situation of the participants in this research, who did not gain the capabilities they needed at school to achieve a level of literacy that would enable them to make many choices of career as

adults. They may then be positioned within society as a disadvantaged group from which it is difficult to escape (Nesbit et al., 2006). This situation is considered more fully in the next section.

2.9 The way a person is positioned in society

The way adult learners of literacy are positioned in society is indicative of the way they are viewed, that is, as a problem to be addressed (Nesbit et al., 2006). Ideally, adult education is seen as a means to improve disadvantages but, may unintentionally highlight the disadvantages without really improving them (Nesbit et al., 2006). This can lead to a situation where certain groups continue to be marginalised and their voices not heard. Research carried out by Rabušicová and Oplatková (2010) considered a hypothetical model of an adult who lacked adequate literacy skills. They concluded that their subject used coping strategies in their daily life and that not having adequate literacy skills meant it was only possible to access a limited choice of careers (van Bergen et. al., 2016). Also, their lack of literacy skills caused them to avoid placing themselves in positions where they might fail. This situation may then be repeated by their children and grandchildren throughout the generations and thus, the cycle of inadequate literacy skills would be perpetuated (Boeren and Holford, 2016).

Bourdieu (1986) in considering this issue, took the approach of considering why certain adult learners are placed in a position where they can become trapped in a cycle of being unable to get what they want and need for success in life. His approach has similarities with Sen's as it concerns not having an

opportunity to access what someone wants or needs. It does, however, consider wider societal attitudes about who should profit from advantages in life. Certain groups in society, such as adult learners of literacy, have been viewed in different ways by societies which often allocate them roles as distinct ‘types’ to be classified in certain ways to suit the needs of society at a particular time (Collins and Blot cited in Cutler, 2006). The dominant policy view in society currently is that inequalities of opportunity cause an individual to have literacy deficit and that literacy deficit reinforces those inequalities of opportunity (Hamilton and Pitt, 2011).

Literacy inequality has often been seen in terms of socio-economic status, which assumes an unequal society where there is a disadvantaged group with literacy needs. Those adults are still constructed as a particular type of citizen within national policy documents in the UK (Brown, 2003; Dunne and Gazeley, 2008; Hamilton and Pitt, 2011) and, even though there has been higher educational achievement generally in recent decades, there has been little social mobility (Francis and Wong, 2013). *Skills for Life* (2001) had the effect of giving the impression that those with literacy inequalities were deficient in some way. The policy explicitly states it is designed to deliver: ‘A prosperous and fair society, in which all individuals have an opportunity to fulfil their potential’ (Skills for Life, 2001, paragraph 6), but then goes on to define the priority groups for literacy intervention as those who tend to have negative classifications for example, the unemployed, single parents, benefit claimants, the low-skilled, and prisoners et cetera. This has the effect of making it appear that the individuals in those categories have a duty to make the effort to

become literate rather than literacy being seen as an inherent right. The targeting of specific groups allows the government to both control and to support them. This underlines Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital which put forward the theory that, without the necessary cultural capital, certain groups can be put in a position where it is difficult for them to access what should be theirs by right. Bourdieu used the concept of cultural capital to explain how the unequal educational achievement of children from different social classes is due to the way cultural capital is distributed between classes.

Cultural capital has three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalised (Bourdieu, 1986). Embodied cultural capital is the knowledge that is gained over time through socialisation and this includes linguistic cultural capital; objectified cultural capital which are the cultural goods, such as books, pictures, instruments, which can be sold for economic profit and which suggest the owner's cultural capital; and institutionalised cultural capital which is formal recognition of someone's cultural capital, such as academic awards or professional qualifications. The importance of the effect of the unequal distribution of cultural capital goes against the idea that academic success is a result of natural ability and Bourdieu (1986) stated that it is the dissemination of cultural capital in the home from the start of socialisation which determines educational achievement. The education system contributes to the reproduction of the social structure by endorsing the inherited cultural capital of certain students. Academic 'ability' and 'talent' are actually the result of the cultural capital invested by the family which leads to the child being able to benefit from education. Cultural capital may be acquired unconsciously, but it always

remains recognisable through its earliest origins. These more or less obvious features it passes on (such as the particular pronunciations characteristic of a class or region), help to give it its value. Bourdieu (1986) argued that any sought-after cultural competence leads to it having a value because of its rarity and this then leads to the holder having access to material and symbolic profits, that is, both in financial and status terms. Children from families who have strong cultural capital have the advantage of being able to accumulate it straightaway from birth. They have the opportunity to have a lengthy time period to acquire the cultural capital free from the need to start earning money at the earliest opportunity. By not having the economic and cultural capital to enhance and extend their child's education beyond the minimum, the child, when it reaches adulthood, is fated to enter the labour market at a low level and only have access to low paid and low status jobs (Bourdieu, 1986).

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital may nonetheless, be challenged, as it can be argued that, as access to qualifications has increased, there is greater competition for jobs and it has become more difficult for the middle class to use their cultural capital in ways which give them the advantage over others (Brown et al., 2014). This then questions the importance of the relationship between cultural capital and economic success in the present day because of the changes in class composition (especially the expansion of the middle classes) and the opening up of higher education.

2.10 How an individual may accept a lack of literacy as something to be tolerated

However, the individual who only has access to low paid and low status jobs may accept their situation as inevitable and unalterable. The literature suggests that there is also a strong link between problems accessing literacy and acceptance of other forms of inequality (Flemmen, 2013; Sullivan, 2001). It appears that those who have problems accessing literacy often find themselves in a position (from the start of school onwards) where, although highly aware that their literacy skills are behind those of their peers, they accept the inequality as something they have to put up with (Bourdieu, 1986). They do not challenge the status quo because of the entrenched behaviours and practices they have acquired through their life experience, what Bourdieu (1986) calls habitus. Habitus is an important part of social reproduction, which allows the reproduction of social inequalities through the generations, as it plays a central role in governing the practices making up societal relationships (Brown et al., 2014).

The way in which people live is a reflection of those relationships and the surroundings they live in. People are predisposed to what they are exposed to and thus their cultural and social preferences are influenced by what is available to them Bourdieu (1986). A society's class structure is influenced by the distribution of different forms of capital, economic, cultural and social and the relationships between them. Thus, an individual's position in society is related to their different cultural tastes, preferences and viewpoints and these differences and inequalities can form the bases for the formation of classes (Flemmen, 2013). As Sullivan (2001) explains, having familiarity with the dominant culture, and especially being able to use and understand the type of

sophisticated language used in education, gives automatic advantages. One of the most effective ways of continuing the class structure in a society is through education because education acts both to justify and to reinforce the existing social structure. Education has a strong influence on the way someone develops both as an individual and socially (Nesbit et al., 2006). The extent to which people in society possess cultural capital differs, but it is taken for granted within the education system. This results in the children who have the most valued cultural capital in a society being able to succeed at school because they know how they are expected to act (Sullivan 2001). Whether or not a person is successful in terms of education, employment and social status is highly dependent on their social class but, as argued by Nesbit et al., (2006), class is difficult to define, and it is only by looking at the effects it has on people that it can be analysed and categorised.

2.11 The role of class inequality in accessing literacy

Because certain groups are excluded from the decision-making processes in education, they are unable to decide what the goals of education should be. These goals are influenced by social class and control how and where education is delivered and who participates in it (Nesbit et al., 2006). Research carried out by the Sutton Trust and the Social Mobility Commission (2019) reinforces the importance of class, as it reported that social mobility in the UK is low and is not improving. The report looked at the backgrounds of more than 5000 people in important and influential positions in society. It found that these positions are dominated by the 7% of the population who attend independent schools, and the approximately 1% who graduate from Oxford and Cambridge

universities. The report found that:

- Two fifths (39%) of the elite group as a whole were privately educated, more than five times as many as the population at large, while a quarter (24%) had graduated from Oxbridge.

- Politics, the media, and public service all show high proportions of privately educated in their number, including 65% of senior judges, 59% of civil service permanent secretaries and 57% of the House of Lords.

- Thirty-nine per cent (39%) of the cabinet were independently educated, in stark contrast with the shadow cabinet, of which just 9% attended a private school.

- Findings reveal a ‘pipeline’ from independent schools through Oxbridge and into top jobs. An average of 17% across all top jobs came through this pathway, but this figure rises as high as 52% of senior judges, and one third of regular newspaper columnists.

- Sport (particularly football), the arts and local government were areas with the lowest numbers of those coming from socially exclusive educational institutions, (Sutton Trust and the Social Mobility Commission, 2019, *Elitist Britain*, report overview p.1).

These figures give some indication of the significance and importance of the roles played by the privately educated within society. The report argued that encouraging social diversity would enable everyone, not just a small minority, to use their skills for the benefit of society and, in order to do this, various forms of positive discrimination would allow a more level playing field. It recommended that employers should collect information on the socio-economic background of their employees, as they already do on gender and ethnicity, to monitor the situation. They should also be aware of candidates who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and make allowances for that. Employers should be mindful of any barriers to progression within their organisation and best practice should be shared. At the same time, it is necessary to prevent financial barriers to entry to certain careers and so unpaid internships or very low wages have to be examined. The report also suggested that universities should contextualise admissions to recognise the applicants' different situations and that high performing schools should admit more children from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Comprehensive careers advice from well qualified advisers was also considered vital for the benefit of young people (Sutton Trust and the Social Mobility Commission 2019).

Such social and educational inequality are shaped by what Francis and Wong (2013) term, material and social capital. Material capital being the means to pay for enhanced educational opportunities over those of state education, such as private schooling or tuition, educational resources, the financial means to move into the catchment areas of good schools et cetera. Social capital means both having an understanding of what is needed to support a child through the

education system and having the confidence to negotiate it. It also means having networks and connections to others who can offer support such as internships. Whether or not a child's family has access to these capitals can make a vast difference to the child's life chances. There are other reasons for the socio-economic gap, such as gender, ethnicity, et cetera, and these may all interact to affect attainment, but they mostly relate to matters of material and social capital and the way these interrelate with the organisation of the education system. However, a child's socio-economic background is the main predictor of achievement (Francis and Wong, 2013). They give the example of a working-class child starting school who is already behind the middle-class children: the child may struggle to keep up and soon sees themselves as not as good as the others, which may affect their whole future learning and aspirations. In order to benefit from the school curriculum children need to have sufficient literacy and numeracy, but about one fifth of children fail to reach level 2 in literacy and numeracy (Clifton and Cook, 2012). Poor literacy skills affect the capacity to succeed in all subjects and there needs to be a concerted effort in primary schools to ensure children have a basic proficiency in literacy before they start secondary school (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007).

This educational inequality starts in the first years of a child's life; the existing social and financial environment into which they are born affects how they develop and how ready they are for school (National Equality Panel, 2010; Field, 2010). Children in the UK from the poorest one fifth of families are on average already 11.1 months behind those children from middle income families in vocabulary tests by age 5, when they start school (Waldfogel and

Washbrook, 2010). Family characteristics are strong predicators of exam success and the greatest influence on GCSE scores is the qualification levels the parents (especially mothers) have achieved (Waldfogel and Washbrook, 2010). Socio-economic status and family income were found to be important, but not as important as parental education (Waldfogel and Washbrook, 2010). However, socio-economic status was still found to be highly important in exam results, since students from poorer families achieved lower GCSE grades in English and maths than those better-off families; those living in poorer areas had more anti-social behaviour; and family was the main source of guidance for students deciding what path to take post-16 (Effective pre-school, primary and secondary education project, EPPSE 3 -16+, 2015). Children who were encouraged by their parents to take part in extracurricular learning had greater success generally (EPPSE 3 -16+, 2015). Thus, unequal learning opportunities are there at birth and often increase as a child grows up. Differences in families' abilities to help their children (such as getting them into good schools) affect the children's achievements. Children from higher income families generally gain better skills at reading and problem-solving and are more likely to complete post compulsory education (COPE, 2017).

In the UK the concept of social mobility supposes that people may move up or down within society depending on what they have accomplished and therefore any existing inequality is based on merit (Morrison, 2018). Thus, in the ideal meritocracy, society benefits from a system where people take up employment which is suited to their ability. Those deemed less able will take the less-skilled jobs and those deemed most able take the highly skilled, influential jobs.

People can move up or down depending on their achievements or lack of them. Even in the light of changes in class and the growth of access to higher education in the UK (Reay, 2004) social inequality has increased while social mobility has reduced, and the reason for this is the extent of the deprivation of those from low socio-economic groups compared to the considerable privilege of those from higher socio-economic groups (Francis and Wong, 2013). The education system is meant to prepare young people with the knowledge and abilities they need to be productive members of society and the workforce (*Skills for Life,* 2001) but children themselves may be disinclined to conform to what school expects of them.

2.12 The lasting effects on children when their attitude to school does not conform with what is expected of them

A factor influencing the extent to which children do well in the school environment is their attitude towards it. A study of working-class boys found that they had no interest in school and did not intend to put any effort into their time there, as they expected to get jobs in areas of work which did not need qualifications (Willis, 1978). Their identity was bound up with showing that they did not care about school, as it had no relevance to their lives (Willis, 1978). Research has also shown how not only did the boys' laddish behaviour make them appear cool, but the behaviour was a way of dealing with any possible failure so that, if they actually failed, they would not lose face (Jackson, 2006).

In a study of how boys see themselves, Frosh et al., (2001) found that, generally, boys could not be both popular and do well academically. Further

research has been carried out to investigate why some children respond to the school system better than others, such as that of Smith and Wilhelm, reviewed in McGlinn (2003), who carried out a study on teenage boys' use of literacy and found that boys like activities which they can be successful at and also that social relationships are very important in the way that they act. The researchers found that the boys had different ways of being literate, but all valued reading and school education for their significance in the future. They spoke with enthusiasm of their music, sport, hobbies and art, but they saw reading at school as a task that had to be carried out to get on in life. Also, the boys distinguished between different forms of literacy: literacy at school, which they did not feel competent doing and literacy at home, which was immediate and dealt with the present. Literacy at school was seen as something to be used in the future and as a means to an end, but it had no connection to their current lives. Literacy at home was seen as something for the here and now and so the boys read at home with a goal in mind. When they found what they wanted in a text they felt competent and were often supported in their reading by their friends, who shared information and resources (Smith and Wilhelm, reviewed in McGlinn, 2003).

These social relationships influenced the boys' choice of reading material, as they wanted to read books recommended by their friends which they could discuss together. Unlike the literature they had to read at school, what they read socially was not viewed as something to be studied for some obscure reason but had a purpose. Smith and Wilhelm, reviewed in McGlinn, (2003) argue that all students (male and female) want to be involved in the type of

learning that means something to them and so schools should reflect this to achieve better outcomes for the students. In addition, research (Zarrett et al., 2009; Fraser-Thomas and Côté, 2009; Gadbois et al., 2019) stressed the importance for students' development of the group interaction which occurred in certain non-academic lessons. This has implications for literacy as it is vitally important to find ways for young people to be fully engaged in their learning.

2.13 The way in which literacy is often taught

2.13.1 Combining literacy with physical activity

Combining literacy with physical activity may offer a solution to the way literacy is often taught, but the underlying problem is that literacy is too often taught in isolation in the curriculum. If it were delivered in the wider curriculum, it may be of much greater benefit for students. The idea of combining literacy with other activities is linked to research which has found that sport, like literacy, is generally seen as a discrete subject which is taught separately. A series of studies carried out in primary schools in the USA explored the relationship between physical activity, body mass index and academic achievement (Donnelly and Lambourne, 2011). The studies found that taking short breaks for some type of physical activity in academic lessons led to positive changes in classroom behaviour, such as increased attention to academic work, greater time spent on the work and better concentration. The studies suggest a link between physical activity, academic achievement and cognitive function and did not find any evidence that increased physical activity at school decreases academic performance or achievement (Donnelly and Lambourne, 2011).

It can be argued that, as less time is devoted to physical education due to the demands of the academic curriculum, students spend more time in the classroom which could allow them the opportunity to increase their physical activity in that setting (Donnelly and Lambourne, 2011). Other research has shown that taking part in regular physical activity can have considerable cognitive and intellectual benefits for young people and is considered beneficial for their physical and mental health (Mavilidi et al., 2018). Yet in schools, physical activity and intellectual activity are usually viewed as unrelated activities, although Mavilidi et al. (2018) suggest it would be possible to integrate physical activities into academic settings and so improve educational practice. This echoes the results of a 2016 study by Golding et al., into whether dance classes at school accelerated learning found that movement helped cognitive development and that developing physically has a link to the development of the brain. The study found that enjoying the lessons plus the multi-sensory nature of the activities played a part in the children having positive learning outcomes and recommends that dance and movement activity be part of an integrated curriculum. There are potential benefits for dance to improve attainment levels because of the time and concentration necessary and that this has particular relevance as arts provision has been reduced in the core curriculum (Golding et al., 2016; Posner and Pantoine, 2009).

It is not just physical activity which is valuable for improving meaningful learning but also the social relationships which develop at school, and these social

relationships also play a large part in particular areas of learning (Zarrett et al. 2009). Research found that these areas of learning were in physical or creative activities such as sport, music, drama, dance and art. A study by Zarrett et al. (2009) looked at the psychological effects on a group of young people who were taking part in various non-academic activities. The students all described how the activities promoted social interaction and had a positive emotional impact, such as a reduction in stress and an increase in self-confidence and self-esteem. Other subject areas were looked at and researchers, such as Gadbois et al. (2019), found that being involved in sport, in particular, has more positive outcomes than not being involved and Zarrett et al. (2009) talked of how involvement in sport was more strongly linked to developing competence and character. Research also found that young people's involvement in sport enabled the growth of many positive developmental skills, such as meaningful adult and peer relationships, initiative, challenge, and a sense of community (Fraser-Thomas and Côté, 2009). This suggests that a different, less formal, approach to teaching literacy could lead to an increase in enthusiasm for studying the subject and, in fact, formal education could be integrated into more informal ways of learning.

A study was carried out of an after-school programme for teenagers which explored whether learning through play could be as successful for their age group as it is in early childhood education (Honeyford and Boyd, 2015) The programme found that creative, visual play had significant implications for teenagers' literacy practices. The students were encouraged to develop their literacy practices through the use of multiple media, such as advertisements,

realia, texts, film, art, music and drama. The students were involved in the design of the project and how the learning goals would be achieved, and they worked collaboratively interacting with each other. The researchers found that opening up the classroom to multiple literacies, combined with the active involvement of the students, allowed literacy to be supported and valued. They argued that what tends to happen in schools is that there is little time or space for such activity and the focus of the curriculum is on acquiring skills such as the decoding and comprehension of selected texts with a particular vocabulary and structure.

Rather than using simplified texts, literacy needs to be expanded into creative and critical spaces where students can play, experiment, and learn using rich materials and texts (Honeyford and Boyd, 2015). The way in which English is taught is often largely desk bound and not physical enough for students who prefer a more hands-on approach. The research carried out has shown how taking part in physically active subjects such as sport, art, music, dance and drama can have cognitive and intellectual benefits and improve attainment in all subjects (Golding et al. 2016; Posner and Pantoine, 2009; Malvilidi et al. 2018; Donnelly and Lambourne 2011). Thus, how literacy provision is delivered needs to take account of the differences between the children being taught.

2.13.2 The importance of early intervention in literacy provision

It has been found that to improve their chances, investment in human capital for all children before the age of five seems to have long-lasting and positive effects (Goodman and Sianesi, 2005). Early education leads to improvements

in cognitive tests, including both maths and reading at age seven; these effects diminish in size but remain significant throughout the schooling years up to age 16 (Goodman and Sianesi (2005). In comparison, research suggests that most North American students who start school significantly behind their peers can never close the gap and in fact, the gap tends to widen as they move through school (Goodman and Sianesi, 2005). (Lee and Burkman, in Engle and Black, 2008) found that children from very low-income families have lower cognitive and academic performance and more behavior problems than children who are not exposed to poverty, partly because of a lack of stimulating behaviors and home experiences among poor families. They emphasise (p.244) that 'School readiness has been shown to be predictive of virtually every educational benchmark (e.g., achievement test scores, grade retention, special education placement, etc). The consequences of early school failure are increased likelihood of truancy, drop out, and unhealthy or delinquent behaviors' (Lee and Burkman, in Engle and Black, 2008). Thus, early years' education appears to be vital in helping to escape a cycle of poverty and I suggest that some children are disadvantaged in the school situation from the beginning and that if they begin behind, or fall behind, they are likely to stay there if there is no intervention. This then limits their life chances to have a fulfilling and well-paid career as they are not able to have the capabilities to do so (Sen, 2005).

A UK government policy on childcare and early education states: 'Providing children with good-quality education and care in their earliest years can help them succeed at school and later in life. This contributes to creating a society where opportunities are equal regardless of background' (Department for

Education, 2015, p.1). This echoes Field's report on poverty and life chances (Field, 2010) which found overwhelming evidence that children's life chances are determined by their development in the first five years of life. The report concluded that if a child has a supportive family background, parental education, good parenting and opportunities for learning and development in the early years it will have a greater significance to children in achieving their potential in life than money does. This reinforces the argument made by Bourdieu (1986) that the way cultural capital is distributed between classes leads to children having unequal educational achievement and they may thus be unable to access the rewards that society can confer on others.

One particular area where cultural capital may be noticeably inadequate is that of language use, as language which is deemed inadequate in some way can have a profound effect (Bernstein, 1960). Differences in language ability affect both how a child is able to participate in the taught curriculum and how comfortable they feel in the school environment, (Bernstein, 1960). He was instrumental in changing the way the significance of language was viewed (Denzin 1975; Nash 2006). Thus, children's early experiences influence the extent to which they identify with the school system and may also influence how teachers perceive the children themselves and their abilities (Hamel, 2003). The subject of language use, demonstrates the difficulties a child may face if their language is different from the accepted norm. If they lack the requisite cultural capital to fit in with the school environment, they may find themselves alienated from the culture of the school.

2.14 How the type of language used affects a child's readiness for school

Different groups in society may use language differently from each other and this can affect how they are perceived and treated (Bernstein 1958; 1971). He argued that there are two types of language: a *formal* language and a more simplified *public* language. A *formal* language uses standard English with complex sentence structures and greater vocabulary, and it does not use informal, casual language. It is the language of governance and authority, however, certain groups in society use a *public* language. These groups, such as unskilled and semi-skilled workers, criminal subcultures, rural groups and teenagers, may find it hard to gain full access to certain parts of society and this limit to access may begin from the moment they start school. The differences in speech types are most noticeable where there is the largest variance in socio-economic status. Our society sets great importance by what people do for a living and their economic status, so the effects of language are highly significant. Such language is characterised by:

1. Short, grammatically simple, often unfinished sentences, a poor syntactical construction with a verbal form stressing the active mood.
2. Simple and repetitive use of conjunctions (so, then, and, because).
3. Frequent use of short commands and questions.
4. Rigid and limited use of adjectives and adverbs.
5. Infrequent use of impersonal pronouns as subjects (one, it).
6. Statements formulated as implicit questions which set up a sympathetic circularity,

e.g. 'Just fancy?', 'It's only natural, isn't it?' 'I wouldn't have believed it.'

7. A statement of fact is often used as both a reason and a conclusion, or more accurately, the reason and conclusion are confounded to produce a categoric statement, e.g. ‘Do as I tell you’, ‘Hold on tight’, ‘You’re not going out’, ‘Lay off that’.

8. Individual selection from a group of idiomatic phrases will frequently be found.

9. Symbolism is of a low order of generality.

10. The individual qualification is implicit in the sentence structure; therefore it is a language of implicit meaning (Bernstein 2010, p.53).

These different elements interact in *public* language and allow verbal responses to experiences that are appropriate within a particular social group. Thus, it may appear that the vocabulary used is limited, but this is because the user is consciously or unconsciously reacting to their experience. Depending on their social group the speaker may use only a *public* language or may have access to both a *public* language and a *formal* language. Language is an important way of reinforcing ways of thinking and behaving which are associated with the user’s social group. Certain ideas are enabled by the language used and a *public* language is identified by the form of the language or the way it is used, rather than the actual vocabulary used (Bernstein, 2006, 2010). A *public* language does not have to have a common vocabulary but does have a common linguistic style within its group, for example particular dialects. Language is one of the main ways of reinforcing thoughts, feelings and behaviour which are related to the social group. It does not in itself limit the communication of particular ideas, but it means that certain ideas are more

valued than others and thus the language used encourages development in a specific way.

The problem with a *public* language from a literacy acquisition point of view is that it does not fit with the mainstream way of teaching which uses *formal* language as using short, simple sentences does not help with the communication of ideas which need to be expressed precisely and may affect the length and type of finished idea (Bernstein, 2010). The use of inappropriate verb tenses and vocabulary (nouns et cetera) may make meaning unclear and if an individual has never learnt another way of speaking or thinking they may be unaware that their speech is not precise enough to convey the meaning they want to convey. If an attempt is made to impose a *formal* language on the speaker, they will try to reduce the *formal* language to their public language. They may feel a formal language is unnecessary, irrelevant or confusing. Since the *public* language has a limited vocabulary with simple sentence constructions, it tends to emphasise things rather than processes and this then affects the nature of the completed thought (Bernstein, 1971, 2010). Using a *public* language to explain what the speaker wishes to say may lead to them not being able to describe adequately to the listener what they want to say, because a *public* language has implicit meanings rather than just spoken ones. A *public* language allows immediate communication by the use of simple language construction and this may then limit the user to descriptive thoughts rather than analytical ones. Whereas a *formal* language allows for subjective meanings to be explained verbally and made clear. A *public* language reinforces the identity of the group using it and may have the effect of excluding

the user from other groups which have a different type of language.

The form of language a child learns is reinforced by a mixture of their environment, surroundings and family (as described in Bourdieu's concept of habitus) as soon as they start to speak Bernstein, 2010). This linguistic form influences what is learnt and also influences future learning and behaviour. Language is intrinsically part of the social structure and the social structure is part of an individual's experience. Trying to change an individual's language from *public* to *formal* means imposing a different type of language, often more impersonal and logical than a more simple, *public* language, which may have the effect of cutting an individual off from their established relationships (Bernstein, 2010). There needs to be a way to keep *public* language, but to find a means for an individual to use *formal* language since society places a greater value on it. Changing their language use may mean that the user has to change the way they relate to others and how they see themselves. What it means to use a particular form of language is likely to have been reinforced from before the beginning of speech. Once a child has become familiar with a particular type of language it is continually reinforced, and this influences what is learnt and how it is learnt and so the user's own experience of how language is used affects their relationship to the social structure. To try and impose a *formal* language can isolate the individual from their established social relationships, as the form of language used affects the nature of those relationships and their own view of themselves (Bernstein, 1971, 2010).

Bernstein argued that seeing certain children as lacking in some way takes

attention away from any failings in the school and puts those failings on to the child. If the child is labelled as linguistically or culturally deprived, it reflects on their parents too (Bernstein, 1971, 2010). What is important to the child and their family outside school is reduced in value and teachers have lower expectations of the child. The child is expected to behave in the way the school expects and so, when at school, has to leave their social identity behind. Although Bernstein's theories are a valuable way of describing the situations a child can find themselves in, they do not in themselves offer solutions and have been challenged by other theorists such as Sadovnik (1991), who argued that it is necessary to examine the relationship between the social class composition of schools, their teaching practices and how these relate to social class advantages. In order to do so he advocates constructing a model to see how the current practices could be used to bring about social change. Nash (2006) stated that Bernstein's theories must be examined critically, particularly with regard to how inequality of educational opportunity arises. Denzin (1975) argued that Bernstein did not take account of the situated elements of speech, that is how people act in response to the changing situations in which they find themselves. It does not show how children from varying class backgrounds accept and adapt to the social world of school and their position in it.

2.15 Chapter conclusion

The aim of this research is to study the effects of literacy inequalities on a group of adults who did not achieve their desired level of literacy at school in order to have a deeper understanding of what the participants experienced. After an examination of the literature, this review offers an alternative way of

looking at the literature regarding adult literacy and it argues that the emotional effects on adults of not having adequate literacy for their wants and needs may often be overlooked. This literature review does this by beginning, in the first section, with a standard overview of definitions of literacy, the numbers affected by not having adequate literacy and how literacy levels are measured. It maintains that the current literature is more focused on the technical aspects of the numbers and measurements involved, rather than the emotional effects of living a life without having adequate literacy and that there is a gap in the literature in this area. In the second section, the review considers the reasons adults may find themselves having inadequate literacy and focuses particularly on the research of three theorists, Sen, Bourdieu and Bernstein, who each offer alternative and, to some extent, complementary theories of how literacy difficulties can affect adults.

The methodology was designed to investigate the emotional impact on a group of adults of a life without adequate literacy. The literature review provides a framework for the data obtained to be integrated into the existing knowledge in this area and to present a greater understanding of the participants' experiences. It is centered around the research of three theorists: Sen, Bourdieu and Bernstein who, I believe, encapsulate many of the reasons for, and the possible solutions to, a lack of literacy. In summary, Sen is concerned with the individual and how their personal freedoms are affected by not having adequate literacy. Bernstein emphasises the importance of family, school and the immediate social setting for language development and class position, whereas Bourdieu concentrates on the wider society and how habitus

influences peoples' outcomes in life. Thus, I was able to consider alternative ways of viewing the issue of adult literacy which offer insights into the nature of the problem. In these ways the literature review contributes to meeting the gap in the literature in this area.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research overview

This study examines the life experiences of two groups of adults educated wholly or partly in English states schools, who have left school without reaching the level of literacy they would have liked to have reached. It asks in what ways, if at all, have their feelings about themselves been affected by any perceived lack of literacy as they have gone through life. It also asks those who have returned to education to take GCSE English, why they are motivated to do so. It then invites them for their thoughts on how the education system could be improved. This is an in-depth qualitative study which allows me to examine their experiences in detail.

Those included in the study population had either failed to pass GCSE English at school or, if they had passed, had voiced disappointment and dissatisfaction with their experience of learning English at school. Thus, although the groups could be divided into those who had passed GCSE English and those who had not, both groups were united in their emotional experiences. This gave a richer selection of participants as all had been deeply affected by their experiences.

I conducted one-to-one interviews with the two groups: one a group of post-16 students who attend GCSE English language classes at a further education college in England and the other a group who, although most had passed GCSE English at some point (either during or after compulsory education),

were dissatisfied with their school experience. The literacy level of the students attending the classes at the college has been assessed as being below Level 2, which is equivalent to GCSE English language grade C/grade 4 (that is, a pass).

	Name (pseudonym)	Age range: 17-29	Age range: 30-39	Age range: 40-59	Age range: 60+	Gender	GCSE English passed at school	Occupational category (as determined by parental occupation)
1	Debbie	X				F	No	5-9
2	Anna	X				F	No	5-9
3	Thalia		X			F	No	5-9
4	Stevie			X		F	No	5-9
5	Marie	X				F	No	5-9
6	Mia	X				F	No	1-4
7	Rachel			X		F	No	5-9
8	Leon	X				M	No	5-9
9	Jane				X	F	No	5-9
10	Claire		X			F	Yes	5-9
11	Julie			X		F	Yes	5-9
12	Joe		X			M	Yes	5-9
13	Dale		X			M	Yes	5-9
14	Stuart	X				M	Yes	5-9
15	Toby	X				M	Yes	5-9

Table 3.1 The participants

The final column, which shows occupational category, uses The Office for National Statistics (ONS) classification system for categorising occupations, which it ranks from 1 to 9 as follows:

1. Managers, directors and senior officials

2. Professional occupations

3. Associate professional and technical occupations

4. Administrative and secretarial occupations

5. Skilled trades occupations

6. Caring, leisure and other service occupations

7. Sales and customer service occupations

8. Process, plant and machine operatives

9. Elementary occupations

(Office for National Statistics, 2010).

3.2 Research questions

An explanation of the research questions and the reasons for their choice may be found in the introduction on page 7, point 1.5.

3.3 The type of study

This study is a narrative inquiry which uses participant interviews to investigate how the participants felt about their experiences of literacy acquisition and its effects on their lives. I used semi-structured narrative interviews as they allow a relationship between the researcher and the participant to develop rather than the participant being expected to answer rigid predetermined questions. I avoided a primarily dialogic approach because I felt my personal knowledge, having shared some of their experiences as a child, could intrude into conversations, whereas I was consciously being empathic, but as neutral as possible, as it was the participants' stories I wanted to record. I did not want to take the approach of an active interviewer by introducing any elements which could challenge what they told me. I wanted them to feel I accepted and valued what they said.

The research methods are designed to gain a greater understanding of how the participants see themselves as individuals and how they view their position within society (Bell 2006). The questions use qualitative methods as the research is of a broadly subjective nature, for, as Bell (2006 p.5) says: ‘Researchers adopting a qualitative perspective are more concerned to understand individuals’ perceptions of the world. They doubt whether social ‘facts’ exist.’ I want to learn more about the effects on an individual who has not achieved the level of literacy they wanted or needed by the time they left school. I am interested in how this affects their perceptions of themselves and their position within society and whether they feel their life could have taken a different course if circumstances had been different.

As the study uses a convenience sample based on participants who meet the required profile it allowed the selection of participants who were available to take part but is not specifically representative of a group (Frey 2018). The advantages of convenience sampling are practical in that it does not necessarily require a large study population and it has benefits with regard to travel, cost, and time, as the participants can be geographically close and can be accessed quickly and easily. The disadvantages of such a sample are that its characteristics, such as the participants’ age or socioeconomic level, may be different from the whole population. Further, since the participants had already been told of the nature of the research before I interviewed them and they had agreed to speak to me, it is likely they had distinct views on the topic rather than if they had been selected at random.

The research is based on a small-scale qualitative study whose objective is to capture the voices of the participants so that they can tell their particular stories of what it was like for them to experience literacy inequalities and this is the value to research, as the findings challenge teaching practices and educational thinking for developing learning.

3.4 The research design

The design uses the four-point approach to qualitative sampling put forward by Robinson (2014). This approach is as follows:

1. Define a study population - who to include and/or exclude.
2. Decide on a sample size - which is a combination of what is ideal and what is practical.
3. Devise a sample strategy - determine how to carry out the sampling.
4. Source the sample - recruit participants from the target population.

I used a convenience sample, and I selected all the participants who met the criteria and who were available to take part.

3.4.1. Defining the study population

The study population comprised two groups: one a group of students at a FE college and the other a group not connected with the college. All the study population have been educated wholly or predominantly in England under the state system and are above school leaving age, which for the majority of participants, was 16, the age at which GCSEs are usually taken. The students at the college have enrolled on the course for a variety of reasons, but all are there by choice, for example, to improve their job prospects or to gain a

qualification which has previously eluded them. The class comprises a mixture of students born and educated in England and students born and educated abroad who are living in England now. The study includes only those students who were educated wholly or largely in England (students educated entirely abroad will be excluded). Everyone who came within the criteria and who wished to take part, was included in the study. I chose the local further education college as the location to carry out the interviews with the students. All students who met the criteria I had set, and who wished to take part, were accepted.

3.4.2 Deciding on the sample size

This was determined by what was a reasonable number of participants to interview and the number of participants I had access to. At the start of the academic year 2018/2019, I had intended to draw a sample of 15 to 20 adult participants from my local further education college in the south of England where I had previously taught Level 2 English and was familiar with the English classes. The intended participants attend one of several weekly GCSE English classes for post-16 students who have an academic level in literacy which has been assessed as being below Level 2, which is equivalent to GCSE English language grade C/grade 4 (that is, a pass). As the college was running fewer classes than in previous years due to lack of enrolments, the number of participants who fitted the sample criteria, and who were willing to take part, was eight. I was fortunate that a further seven participants, who were either known to me, or who had heard about the research, were also willing to take part. The extra seven external participants drawn from the wider

population, gave the research a greater cross-section of society and a greater geographical dimension.

It could be claimed that a small sample size may be a limitation to the research, however, it has been shown that, in qualitative research, the first six in-depth interviews often produce the majority of new data, (Guest et al., 2006). My intention was to keep the sample small enough for the individual voices to stand out, as is demonstrated by Robinson (2014 p.29): 'Interview research that has an idiographic aim typically seeks a sample size that is sufficiently small for individual cases to have a locatable voice within the study, and for an intensive analysis of each case to be conducted'. I felt that keeping the sample small allowed each participant to have a clearly recognisable voice.

The intention of this research was to gather the rich, personal experiences of the participants' literacy journeys and it did not attempt to quantify these experiences, but rather provide a voice for those who have experienced feeling that they have not achieved a satisfactory level of skill in English for their needs.

3.4.3 The sample strategy

All participants were given both a written and a verbal explanation of the research project and they provided signed consent before being interviewed and their responses recorded. These interviews took place in October and November 2018 and the participants were encouraged to share experiences

only if they felt comfortable doing so. In addition, interviewees were informed that at any time they could stop the interview. An additional group of seven adults were interviewed: six were known to me and had expressed their disappointment with their educational experiences in previous general conversations and one, who was unknown to me, had heard about the research I was conducting at the college and wished to be interviewed. They were interviewed between December 2018 and May 2020. All participants were asked their names (pseudonyms have been used), age, and their current occupation. They were then encouraged to talk about their upbringing when they were young, for example, where they lived, where they went to school and what their parents did for a living.

Active listening techniques were used to give the participants an opportunity to be heard, to ensure they felt at ease when talking about their experiences and were able to feel the listener was empathetic with regard to what they were talking about. Weger et al., (2014) describe active listening as having three main elements, the first is by showing that the listener is interested in and understands what the speaker is saying, this may be by a combination of nodding, facial expression or using affirmative words or expressions, such ‘yes’ or ‘I see’. The second element is to reflect what the speaker is saying by paraphrasing what they have said without making any judgments about what they are saying. The third element may involve asking questions so that the speaker can give more detail about their views or experiences.

3.4.4 Sourcing the sample

I contacted the local further education college, where I had previously been a teacher, explained to the ex-colleague teaching the English GCSE course about the research I was carrying out and that I would like to interview some of her students. She agreed and initially she approached the students on my behalf to ask if they would be willing to be interviewed and eight agreed to take part. I then proceeded to obtain the necessary approvals from the college and from Lancaster University and dates were arranged to interview those who had agreed. Ethical issues are addressed more fully in 3.8 Ethics below.

All participants in the study happen to be white English living in small towns or rural areas. There are 15 participants in total, comprising five men and ten women and they range in age from 17 to 60+. The participants from the college were recruited at the beginning of the academic year 2018/19. Some of the participants have enrolled on the GCSE English course for the first time while others have returned after attending in the previous year(s). The other seven participants were drawn from the wider population in 2018 to 2020. I informed all the participants that I am carrying out research into why people do not always achieve the level of literacy they would like at school. I explained to the eight participants at the college that I would like to carry out some interviews individually with the participants during lesson time and would be grateful if anyone would be willing to answer my questions. I chose to carry out the study at this college because I taught literacy and numeracy there for over 18 years and am familiar with the way courses are run. Thus, I can ensure I keep any disruption to their studies to the minimum by carrying out the interviews at suitable times during the academic year. The other seven

participants were interviewed separately.

I gave each participant, who said they would like to take part, an information sheet outlining the purpose of the research and their role in it (Appendix 1) and a consent form to sign (Appendix 2). I stressed that the interviews would take place in private, would be completely anonymous and that the participants would not be identifiable. I reassured all the participants that they may withdraw from the study at any time before or during participation in the study and at any time within two weeks of taking part in the interviews. Ethics approval was obtained from both Lancaster University and the college authorities as explained in the ethics section 3.8 below.

3.5 Data collection methods

I conducted one semi-structured, face-to-face narrative interview with each of the 12 participants, which I recorded electronically as well as taking notes. For the three telephone interviews I wrote down much of what the participants said as we talked. Eight of the participants chosen for the study had already enrolled on a part-time GCSE English class for adult learners at the college. The college interviews took place during lessons, which was more convenient for the participants, as they would not be required to meet at a separate time. The other seven participants are all in full or part-time employment and four of these interviews took place either in the participant's homes or cafes. Three interviews were carried out by telephone because of the geographical distance of the participants. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Interviews are an effective way to explore a subject in depth and I encouraged

the participants to talk freely about their experiences of any difficulties they may have encountered with their acquisition of literacy.

The advantages of face-to-face interviews over telephone interviews are that they offer such rich data, both because of what is actually said and because of the body language used. Non-verbal communication is important because it allows exploration of areas that would not necessarily have been picked up by, for example, questionnaires. Non-verbal communication reveals itself in the tone of voice used and the intensity of the speech rather than just the words used; it shows in facial expressions which can add more information for the interviewer; eye contact is also important as maintaining eye contact gives the impression of credibility whereas avoiding it can indicate discomfort with the topic of conversation (Ganguly, 2017). I did feel, however, that the telephone interviews went well as all three participants spoke easily and were keen to talk about their experiences. I used a lot of affirmative words to convey agreement and encouragement as the participants could not see me nodding or smiling. I was aware that they could have felt distress when recalling things that had happened in the past, but fortunately they did not. Indeed, as Carr and Worth (2001) point out, the use of telephone interviews is increasing as they are time and cost effective and allow for flexibility.

When I interviewed the participants, I began by first outlining that the purpose of the study was to find out the reasons why people do not always acquire the level of literacy they want or need at school. I explained that by investigating their experiences I hoped the research would offer more information on both

their views and feelings about acquiring literacy, and on the reasons why some people experience literacy inequalities. I wanted to draw the participants out so that they would talk freely about their experiences, and interviews are a recognised way of acquiring qualitative information. I advised them I would be recording the interviews and/or taking notes while we talked and assured them that any information they gave me would be anonymised.

Initially I asked general introductory questions to use as the starting point for discussion with all the participants. The questions encouraged them to talk openly and to gain confidence in me and so allowed me to investigate interesting and valuable areas more fully. The questions (Appendix 3) were designed to be open-ended, in order to facilitate the participants talking frankly regarding their experiences of literacy acquisition. I began the interviews by making general enquiries about where they lived; the sort of occupation their parents had; where they went to school and for how long; whether they had enjoyed being at school; if they could remember learning to read and whether that was a straightforward process for them; whether their parents had helped them, et cetera. I also wanted to know what they thought were the reasons they struggled with GCSE English and any ways that this had affected them. In addition, I asked the college students about their motivation for gaining English GCSE now, at this stage in their lives. Finally, I asked all of them for their views on any failings in the education system and how, in the light of their experiences, it might be improved in the future so that others could have greater success.

By putting the participants at ease, I hoped they would open up to me and that this would enable them to tell the stories of their literacy journeys. I wanted to know how not having adequate literacy skills felt for them, for example, not being able to understand what was written on the board; always being in the bottom set; perhaps experiencing a combination of feeling stupid, frustrated, angry, bored, isolated et cetera. As is apparent from the start of this paragraph, I will always be somewhat of an 'insider' in this research because I cannot completely separate my early experiences from those of the participants. This naturally influenced how I designed the research and how I interpreted what the participants said to me. However, I was aware of the importance of reflexivity, that is, thinking about the way we form and revise our opinions as we gain new knowledge and how this then influences how we carry out the research (Symon, G. and Cassell, C (2012). I was conscious that both the participants and I affected each other throughout the research process and my way of seeing the world has influenced how I have interpreted the data I collected. I recognise that whatever I have found cannot be seen that as an absolute truth, but I did endeavour to make sure that I considered my position in the process. I did this by making contemporaneous notes about what the participants said and about their body language as I recorded the interviews and I also recorded my thoughts and then consciously reflected on the assumptions I had made.

I decided that I would interview students more than once if any responses needed clarifying or expanding after the initial interview. I believe a qualitative approach is best for this type of research as it is flexible and allows for

change. As Cohen et al., (2017) p.288 state: ‘The social and educational world is a messy place, full of contradictions, richness, complexity, connectedness, conjunctions and disjunctions. It is multilayered, and not easily susceptible to the atomisation process inherent in much numerical research. It has to be studied in total rather than in fragments if a true understanding is to be reached.’

Semi-structured interviews enabled me to explore areas which are of particular concern to the participants and to investigate them in greater detail. The information I ask for is personal to the individual. ‘A narrative approach to inquiry is most appropriate when the researcher is interested in portraying intensely personal accounts of human experience. Narratives allow voice … and in this sense they can have the ability to develop a decidedly political and powerful edge’ (Gray, in Bell 2006, p.19). I used open questions where appropriate as they can encourage rich and full replies, some of which may not have been expected (Gray, 2004). These then allowed for probing questions, which I could refine and develop throughout the interview process, to gain further understanding and thus I hoped to get a fuller picture of each participant’s journey. Semi-structured interviews allow the participants to take the interview in directions which are important to them, rather than it just being a set of questions already devised by me. Such interviews allow for adaptability, as fuller exploration and understanding of responses are part of the process. It was important that I clarified any points the participants made which I was not sure of, so that I could get to the exact meaning of what they were saying.

There are some disadvantages with narrative interviews in that they are time-consuming, and the sample chosen may be unrepresentative of the target group as a whole (Anderson and Kirkpatrick, 2016; Thunberg, 2021). In addition, the sample size is likely to be small and so it may be difficult to compare the results of in-depth and unstructured interviews in that they may be very specific to the particular interaction taking place, that is, the research interview itself. However, I found, as I had hoped, that a narrative approach with semi-structured interviews allowed me to discover rich personal data about the participants and really allow their voices to be brought to the forefront.

3.6 Data analysis

The raw data from the interviews recorded what had happened to the participants and how they understood and dealt with the circumstances in which they found themselves. It also noted their opinions on how the education system could be improved. I transcribed the interviews into a Word document and colour-coded them by theme. All the themes were then organised into a table corresponding to the research questions. Had any new themes arisen they would have been added to the table. I used pattern coding, which is a practical way, as recommended by Bennett et al. (2019), to refine how the data was organised, so that I was able to see any patterns and understand more fully the significance of the data in order to note both any similarities and interesting differences between the participants. The process is shown below. I had grouped the interview questions (Appendix 3) into four

main sections shown in Table 3.2 below:

A Their reasons for attending the class/expressing concern about their literacy acquisition. What they did after school.
B Their memories of learning to read and whether they had support at home and at school.
C Their thoughts on how not having sufficient literacy for their needs (including lacking GCSE English, if applicable) has affected them.
D Their opinions on how the education system could be improved.

Table 3.2 Interview question groupings

To carry out the process of analysing the data from the interviews I began by reading through the first five interviews and looked to see which themes appeared in all or most of them. As Basit (2003, p.143) states 'The analysis of qualitative data… is a dynamic, intuitive and creative process of inductive reasoning, thinking and theorizing.' By using different colours to highlight new themes I was able to add additional themes as they arose. I initially used a deductive framework to analyse the data based on the research questions, as I had an idea of some of the likely responses to the questions. However, I anticipated that this was likely to change with the responses to the interviews, thus the approach became a combination of a deductive and inductive framework, as discussed in Rejnö and Berg (2015). Twelve main themes arose which I grouped into four sections. The twelve most commonly

occurring themes grouped into four sections taken from the questions in Table 3.2 above:

1. Needing qualifications for a career 2.Feelings 3.The importance of support: getting help with reading, especially from the mother; remembering learning to read getting help with homework; reading schemes; lack of help at home; lack of help at school; dyslexia 4.Schools expecting a lot from children; lack of satisfaction with education; enjoyment of and satisfaction in practical subjects like art

Table 3.3 The twelve most commonly occurring themes

I then highlighted each separate theme with a different colour. After colour coding I used the patterns to gain a deeper understanding of the significance of what has been said in order to comment on any generalities and interesting differences between the participants.

1. Needing qualifications for a career 2 .Feelings 3.The importance of support; getting help with reading, especially from the mother; remembering learning to read; getting help with homework; lack of help at home; lack of help at school; dyslexia

4.Schools expecting a lot from children; lack of satisfaction with education; enjoyment of, and satisfaction in practical subjects like art

Table 3.4 The twelve most commonly occurring themes highlighted with a different colour

Initially I used the first five interviews to look for recurring themes which gave me a structure so that I could add in new themes as they arose in subsequent interviews. In fact, the same themes occurred repeatedly in the different interviews. To illustrate the process I used part of the interview with Debbie, one of the participants studying GCSE English, as an example. I highlighted the answers to correspond with the table above. The interview questions are in black and white.

1. Why did you decide to come to this class?

I didn't get GCSE English at school. I missed out by one grade and I want to do nursing.

And are you working at the moment?

I am working as a Health Care assistant at the community hospital down the road.

Where would you do the nursing qualification?

At work they have been talking about doing an apprenticeship. I would do exams and they would send me out on placements wherever they were wanted.

That sounds like a really good way of doing it. How long does it take?

I think it's about four years. Hopefully, if I get my grades. Fingers crossed.

2. And do you ever think you would have chosen differently from being a Health Care assistant if you had more, or different, academic qualifications?

I probably would have gone on to nursing if I had had better grades. Um, I think when I left school hairdressing and things like that were the only things I could get into with my grades … Nursing was never thought of when I left school. I just wouldn't have been able to get in.

Do you think it's affected you in other ways?

Not really, but it has made me realise how difficult GCSES are.

3. Do you remember learning to read when you were young?

Not really.

Could you already read when you went to school?

Oh gosh! I remember doing a little bit with my mum, nothing more than at school, I think school was probably the main.

You found it OK learning to read? Was it quite effortless?

Yeah, I've not really had any major problems with English and spelling and stuff.

It has been in the secondary school I think it was lack of attention, I just lost focus for a couple of years. In secondary school the first couple of years were OK, but when we got put to into our bands A B and C, I was in C. And in those classes there is still higher achievers and lower and I think the school concentrated on the higher achievers to get the grades. If I struggled I would ask, if I still didn't get it, then it was like 'oh, you'll pick it up. So then

I got stuck and the following week I was still trying to pick it up from the previous week … I think that was when I switched off.

Was that in all subjects, or just certain ones?

I think it was maths definitely and English a bit. My teacher was brilliant having so many students it was difficult.

How many were in a class?

I think maybe 20 to 30. Other classes such as art and textiles were more relaxed and a bit more free.

What grade did you get in English when you left school?

I think it was a D. I enjoyed English but I don't think I concentrated as much as I should have done.

Did you get other GCSEs at school?

I think I did, I think I got Cs in science and art and textiles, but not much academically.

Is this the last course you have done since you left school?

Straight after school I did hairdressing at college.

Did your mum help you with your homework?

Yeah, we'd go through it together. She was pretty good at English. Yeah that was fun [laughing].

Do you think homework is important, the structure of it?

I think it is, as it keeps you with it. It sort of refreshes you…I think definitely, when I was at school it felt like I had a bit too much. You've been at school and then you have to come home to do it. It just seems like a bit too much. I can see why now you do homework and it does make a difference.

4 When you look back on your own time going through primary school and secondary school, are you satisfied with the sort of education you got. I mean, do you think you were well taught? You said you felt you switched off, so could the school had done more to keep you engaged?

Yeah, primary school was good. In primary school it's more of a game. It's not so much paper and words, you make games from it. You could ask the questions and the teacher had the time. Definitely, I didn't get what I needn't from the academic side.

Thinking about your son now, how do you think education could be improved? [Debbie's son is at primary school]. Do you think it's changed much in the way he is taught?

I think there needs to be more for the less academic. If I could have had more hands on, the is physical way of doing things, I could have got on so much better. There was never really any option and I think that was why I took textiles and things like that. It wouldn't really get me anywhere outside of school. I enjoyed it [textiles] and I learnt.

So much more in the way of practical subjects?

I got a good grade in science and that is much more practical.

Table 3.5 Interview highlighted to show recurring themes

Once I was able to allocate the interview data into different categories I chose which of the participants' quotes I would use to exemplify the findings. I picked quotes which epitomised the themes revealed by the analysis of the data and

used them throughout chapters 4 and 5, wherever they best illustrated the findings.

The findings make no claims to generalisability, but this was not the purpose of the research. The aim was to record and discuss the emotional effect of a lack of literacy throughout a person's life and this is revealed and described in chapters 4 and 5. I cannot claim that everything the participants told me was true, as, even if they believed what they told me, it is possible that they had to some extent falsely remembered what had happened to them, (Roediger, McDermott, 2000; Brainerd, Reyna, and Forrest, 2003). However, the passion with which they told me their stories led me to believe that what they said was authentic. The participants' personalities, the way in which they spoke, their directness and openness all made what they told me sound reasonable and credible and lent authenticity to what they said.

3.7 Ontology and epistemology

My ontological approach is that I consider people's realities to be individualised. As stated by Marsh et al., (2017) p.178 the main ontological question is 'what are the form and nature of reality and, consequently, what is there that can be known about it?' My epistemology is interpretivist as I am trying to understand more about how the barriers to learning have affected these adults, because I believe, as suggested by Cohen et al (2017), that meaning arises out of social situations and is explained by interpretive methods. Thus, behaviour is socially situated and, in order to understand a situation, researchers need to understand the context because 'situations

affect behaviour and perspectives and vice versa; realities are multiple, constructed and holistic; knower and known are interactive, inseparable;' (Cohen et al, 2017, p219).

How people behave cannot be separated from their cultural context (Hamilton and Pitt 2011) and a person with poor literacy skills may have a negative or shameful view of themselves. Bourdieu (1986) used the concept of 'habitus' to show how people construct their own reality from their position in society from birth onwards and, although this reality is subject to change, it may always be limited and restricted by the society they are in (Wagner and McLaughlin, 2015). Thus, my methodology is qualitative and uses methods such as semi structured interviews to describe and deconstruct people's personal understanding of their experience.

3.8 Ethics

I obtained ethical approval through both Lancaster University and the FE College's appropriate channels, and also obtained the requisite written consent from the participants involved. I ensured all the participants understood what was involved by explaining carefully what the study was about and what their involvement would be. The participants' details were anonymised and I allocated each one a pseudonym which has been used throughout. The resulting data is stored securely on the university website. I ensured that the participants were given the opportunity to confirm and validate the data throughout the interviews, so that the interviews show the participants' experiences of their literacy acquisition correctly.

As Warin (2011) points out, it is vital to be aware of the importance of informed consent, that is that the participants understand fully what they are being asked to do and why. It is important to be sensitive to the participants' needs which may affect how the study is conducted. Warin (2011) has said that this type of narrative research has potential problems from an ethical point of view, such as in this research participants' being reminded of unhappy times or having painful memories. I had carefully chosen the questions I asked and was very flexible throughout about what I would ask, as I was mindful that interviews can go in unintended directions. From many years of teaching, I was aware that a seemingly innocuous turn in a conversation could lead to a student feeling uncomfortable because of associations with past or present events. I felt that my prior experience led to me being able to be sympathetic and reassuring to the participants.

Etherington (2007) warns that the researcher must remember their obligations to the participants. I am aware of the need to ensure the participants tell their own stories and that I do not 'lead' them. I have allowed time for my own self-reflection as I am conscious that my values will influence how I carry out the research. I made sure that the participants fully understood why I am carrying out the research and what it is about. This should ensure that all those who take part do so willingly, with a full understanding of the purpose of the research.

With regard to the college students, as a teacher (although I do not teach

these particular students) they may feel I am an authority figure and that they are under some sort of obligation to respond in a way. I want or expect them to. However, I carefully explained to the participants the reasons I was carrying out the research, so they would understand my general aims as recommended by Saldana (2011). The ethos of the college encourages trust and respect between staff and students, and it is a friendly, easy-going and respectful environment, which I believe fosters good relationships. Mertens cited in Lapan, et al., (2012) suggest that researchers can take a transformative perspective to research, which emphasises the belief that there are different ways to interpret reality and that some of those ways may form barriers to promoting human rights and social justice. This perspective recognises the necessity of using research methods which are culturally responsive in order to be aware of the lived experiences of those who face discrimination and oppression in society, such as those with literacy inequalities. The research was designed to be carried out in a way which was respectful and supportive so that I could be flexible and adapt how an interview was conducted at any point. The perspective also emphasises an awareness of the differences in power relationships between the researcher and the participants and how the research may be used to further social justice. I addressed this by assuring the participants that the research would not be onerous or interfere with their lives. I want to make certain the participants recognise that their experiences are relevant both for themselves and may also be important to others now, and in the future, as the research offers insights into how it feels to have literacy inequalities and how those inequalities have come about.

3.9 Chapter conclusion

This chapter describes in detail how the study has been designed to answer the research questions. It explains the process of the research design and how the data was collected and analysed. It also details the theoretical position of the study and the ethical considerations involved.

4 Findings and Discussion: Part I

4.1 introduction

This research encouraged the participants, who had all expressed difficulties or disappointment with learning English, to describe their experiences of learning GCSE English at school and then to explain any difficulties they faced. It explores the effects this may have had on their lives and asks those who have now returned to education what their reasons were for returning. It then asks the participants their opinions on the education system. I am arguing that certain groups are disadvantaged at school and this disadvantage begins from the moment they start school and may continue long after leaving. Once they are behind, it can be difficult to extricate themselves and catch up, if they do not have appropriate parental and/or school support. The targeting of specific groups, as happened in *Skills for Life* (2001), which is explained more fully in chapter 3, section 3.6.1, allows the government to both control and to support them. This classification of particular groups links to the concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu,1986) which maintains that without the cultural capital they need, certain groups may find themselves in a position where it is difficult for them to access what should be theirs by right.

The distribution of the three different forms of capital and the relationship between them influences a society's class structure. Any cultural ability, which is desired by others, leads to it having value because of its scarcity and this allows the holder access to both financial reward and status within society. Bourdieu (1986) argued that it is not natural ability which determines

educational achievement, but the dissemination of cultural capital in the home, which occurs from the start of socialisation. Children in families with strong cultural capital are in the position of being able to accrue it from birth. They are also in the position of being able to stay in education beyond the minimum leaving age and increase that capital, both cultural and economic. A child in a family which does not have the economic and cultural capital to enrich and lengthen their education beyond the minimum is likely only to have access to low paid and low status positions (Bourdieu, 1986). The education system then reinforces the reproduction of the social structure by endorsing the cultural capital which certain children have inherited.

Bourdieu maintained that academic ability and talent are actually the result of the cultural capital provided by the family which leads to the child being able to benefit from education. This cultural capital may be learnt instinctively and can always be identified by its characteristics, such as the distinct pronunciations of a class or region. Thus, certain children are born into a position where they lack the advantages of more privileged children, and this can adversely affect almost everything they do in society. The main argument, which arises from the data, is that all the participants had wanted to do well at school, not one set out to fail, overwhelmingly they tried to do their best, and yet the system was such that it worked against them. I explore the reasons behind what they perceived as a disappointing and, in some cases, a damaging school experience.

This chapter explains the findings in more detail and is illustrated by the participants sharing their own experiences. The interview questions were

grouped into five main areas which corresponded to the research questions. Each participant is referred to by a pseudonym throughout.

4.2 How does a small group of adults describe their experiences of learning English at school?

What I found really interesting was the intensity of emotion expressed by the participants when they described their experiences of learning English at school, which were still vivid in their memories. I had expected them to feel disappointed or perhaps embarrassed by not achieving what they hoped for, but in fact, many of the participants vehemently expressed their anger and resentment about what they had experienced.

They highlighted how they often had negative memories of feeling stupid in certain classes and the impact this had on their sense of self-worth. In addition, they also stated how their difficulties in learning English impacted on other non-practical subjects, because they were hard to access without adequate reading and writing skills. However, in contrast to the negative feelings expressed about learning English at school, many participants spoke positively of their feelings about taking part in the more practical subjects they had studied, such as art, drama and sport, as opposed to English. These more practical subjects gave participants a chance to excel at something and to a certain extent counteracted their less pleasant experiences. Although the participants viewed their experiences of learning English at school largely in negative terms and despite many having dispiriting experiences of more academic subjects, they had good memories of the freedom and creativity of

practical subjects.

These four main themes that arose from describing their experiences of learning English were: feeling less intelligent or able than other students; being aware that what they had undergone had been damaging to their sense of self-worth; the impact their experiences had on other subjects; and finally, how practical and creative subjects can build confidence. These themes are discussed in more detail below.

4.2.1 Feeling less intelligent or able

When asked to describe their experiences of learning English at school it emerged that the majority of the participants talked about having negative feelings in relation to learning English. They described how they believed those experiences had caused them to feel less intelligent than other students, to feel less able, to feel less smart. Participants spoke with emotion of their experiences, which were still vivid in their memories. For example, Thalia said she wished that she had not been made:

to feel that I was stupid … which was very embarrassing. I hated [secondary school] *… I was made to feel like a really, stupid child. You had to go to 'the unit' to get help from a particular teacher. My needs weren't terrible, but I needed some help, I was kind of in no-man's land. I'll always remember that* [being called out of lessons to go to the unit]. *I started to actually hate the school.* Thalia

These comments were echoed by Toby who was taken out of class three times a week to have extra help with English.

I hated it, it was horrible, I was treated like I was lesser. What I had wasn't celebrated or positively acknowledged. They thought I wouldn't do well. At 14 I worked out I'd have to do a job with my hands. My biggest setback was bullying from year 5 onwards, I felt like the dumbest kid – always my fault for not listening. I still remember as a kid thinking this is just me, my reality, I have to get used to it. Toby

The negative feelings associated with learning English, as felt by the majority of the participants, are consistent with the literature previously discussed (Rabušicová and Oplatková, 2010); (Norman and Hyland, 2003); (McGivney, cited in Norman and Hyland, 2003); (Lave and Wenger, in Hutchins, 1993). The comments of Thalia and Toby were echoed by Joe who spoke disappointedly about how he tried hard to do well all the way through school but was unsuccessful in spite of his best efforts. Even the extra help at school did nothing to lift him out of the bottom sets.

I had extra help at some point [at primary school] *like a session once a week to help me with anything I was struggling with. I was in the bottom set from the age of eight or nine. And that carried on pretty much until I left school at 16. I just did everything wrong* [at school], *but I wasn't trying to do it wrong. I was forgetting something or doing something wrong. The extra help I had* [at school] *made me feel a bit of a loser really. I know it's not meant to be, but it*

felt a bit demeaning. You feel quite pathetic. Joe

Like Joe, Rachel (who left school at 14), was very unhappy with her education and, in addition, suffered from anxiety while at school:

I think, up until the age of thirteen, I didn't read stuff I was interested in and I think it was confidence, there was such anxiety, even if there's a newspaper on the table and somebody is like 'Oh, have you seen that?' The panic and like, am I going to be able to read what that says? Things like that, it definitely created a massive amount of anxiety, not being able to do something which feels like it almost comes naturally to everyone else. You feel like instantly put on the spot. It feels like those lessons… English, and in particular, in secondary school, they would go around the class and ask everyone to read like a page or a paragraph. Yes, it's the only time in my school life when I was disruptive, as I would have to be removed from the class before it got to me.
Rachel

4.2.2 Damage to sense of self-worth

Not only did many of the participants have negative feelings regarding learning English at school, what they had undergone had been damaging to their sense of self-worth which continued to affect them as they went through life. The negative impressions of feeling less intelligent or able, as discussed in the theme above, were experienced by the majority of the participants. None of the participants had enjoyed secondary school and for many, the negative way they felt about school was deepened by a sense of on-going

damage to their own self-worth, which they still had as adults. For many of the participants this feeling of damage had the effect of limiting their ambitions in life in relation to careers and aspirations and made them feel that they would not measure up. Often, they felt humiliated at secondary school if they were finding the academic work difficult and could not get the help they needed. These comments are also reinforced by studies carried out in English schools over 25 years, which found that working-class children often said how they felt stupid or rubbish at school and did not feel they had any importance. For them, the classroom often became a place where they were on the receiving end of humiliation and mortification, which then lead some to feelings of disaffection with school and resentment about their experiences (Reay 2017).

Julie also had also been made to feel less intelligent, but, in contrast to Thalia and Joe, this was mainly due to the specific experience of having to learn the Initial Teaching Alphabet (ITA) method of reading. Julie expressed extreme dissatisfaction with her experiences of learning English at school. She was part of what was, in effect, an experiment which took place in the 1960s and 1970s to teach children to read in a very different way. The ITA used the 26 letters of the alphabet plus 14 characters to represent certain sounds such as ‘oo’ and ‘th’. The children were expected to change to the usual alphabet and spellings when they reached seven years old (that is, year 3 or 1st year juniors). ITA was designed to enable children to learn to read and spell using a logical way of spelling, in which words consisted of the sounds they made when spoken out loud. Thus, ITA would supposedly avoid the difficulties children may have found in learning to read and spell words that are not spelt

the way they sound. The idea was that once children were fluent in ITA they would move on to the normal alphabet, but many children found great difficulties with the transition and struggled to master the regular way of spelling. At the age of seven many of the children were left permanently confused by having to change, which had meant needing to learn to read and write all over again (Lane 2001). Some children (such as Julie) had been taught to read and write by their parents before they started school but, when they started school, were told that their way of spelling was incorrect. This led to much confusion and for some, like Julie, a profound lack of confidence throughout their lives in their ability to spell:

So, I never got to learn, so I remember my first day [aged five] *with new children and they would be chanting the alphabet and I didn't know it, I was looking at the wall thinking how do I chant like everybody else? Thinking I can do that because it's up there, but it wasn't an alphabet I recognised because of the ITA system but nobody in the school thought what it might be like for me, I suppose. They decided to develop a pattern of spelling then, and what was interesting was that at the second top year* [aged 7] *they changed again I think [to the traditional alphabet] and they kept me back a year. I had to go back a year. The education was just repeated for a year and I was really bored. And that's when I got the idea that I couldn't understand it … by the time I got to the second year before secondary school my spelling was not very good and I started to think I was not very bright… By secondary school it was becoming even more noticeable that my spelling was strange. I just couldn't spell, I can see words, but I can't spell them, I was quite articulate, but*

interestingly I've been reading up about it since and a lot of people say they can't spell words beyond five letters. Because [with the ITA] *you never progressed beyond five letters. I think it was just a way to get people reading early on, so if you don't get through the transition you were left. So yeah, its blighted me, I think.* Julie

Interestingly, Stuart was disappointed when he only passed four GCSEs, but eventually went on to take an access course at a further education college which enabled him to go to university. He feels he has to appear knowledgeable at all times, so that people will think he is smart and intelligent. When explaining how he likes to be seen as someone who knows a lot, it is interesting that he only used the word 'adequate' to describe how it can make him feel, as he never sees himself as more than that, not able or clever.

I'm good at trivia. I show off trying to prove I am worthy, I am clever. Why do I do it? Am I trying to prove a point so I can feel adequate? Stuart

Some of the participants spoke of how, in addition to feeling a low sense of self-worth as a result of their negative experiences, they also experienced the effect that it was difficult to access certain subjects without an adequate level of English. This often led to a feeling that many lessons were pointless – they did not feel confident about their ability plus they felt that unfulfilled with what they were required to study which they did not have adequate skills to access easily.

4.2.3 The impact of the participants' experiences on other subjects

For many of the participants their negative experiences of learning English had an impact on other subjects. They spoke of feeling that much of what they did at school bore little relevance to their lives because they were struggling with academic work, which was often taught in a rigid, inflexible way. The situation seemed hopeless to them, as they had no control over what was happening to them and so it was tempting to switch off and not apply themselves. Finding English difficult affected other subjects because they were hard to access without adequate reading and writing skills.

This is exemplified in the comments of Marie and Jane below: Marie spoke of school in terms of something imposed on her, over which she had no choice and which she did not have the skills to take part in sufficiently. While Jane felt demotivated throughout her school career, particularly from the first day at secondary school as she believed she had already been written off as someone who would not be a high achiever. When asked if her school could have motivated her more and made her feel more engaged with learning, Marie said:

Yeah I do think so, I know it's difficult because teenagers are so hard, they're very stubborn and that. When I was at school I don't remember it being very much fun, it seemed like a chore, it was just something you had to do. I think they probably could have made it better, I just remember it being quite strict. Maybe if it was more inviting, a bit more laid back. Marie

Jane also had a strong sense that school was something she had to take part in and not something that would be particularly beneficial to her. Now in her 60s, she remembered how it felt to be told by a teacher at her primary school, just before she sat the 11+ exam, that she was not expected to pass and then, when she arrived for her first day at the secondary modern school, she was also told that the school did not expect much from her as she had a summer birthday. Her overriding memory of school was of one of low expectations and little incentive to achieve very much. She would have liked to study more than just basic level science but did not have the opportunity as the school did not have the resources. She had no choice but to study the subjects the school deemed suitable even though they did not reflect her interests.

Their comments are reinforced by research (Furlong and Cartmel, 2006) which investigated why some children respond to school better than others and found that the relevance of what the children were doing was very important to their level of engagement. If they were engaged and absorbed in what they were doing and they could appreciate the usefulness of it, they tended to get on with it more readily. For example, Smith and Wilhelm, reviewed in McGlinn (2003), carried out a study on teenage boys' use of literacy and found that boys enjoy activities where they can succeed and also that social relationships are very important in the way that they act. The researchers found that the boys had different ways of being literate, but all valued reading and the education they were receiving at school for their significance in the future. They spoke with enthusiasm of their music, sport, hobbies and art, but they saw reading at school as something that had to be

carried out in order to get on in life. The boys also distinguished between different forms of literacy: literacy at school which they did not feel competent doing and literacy at home, which was immediate, dealing with the present. Literacy at school was seen as something to be used in the future and as a means to an end, but it had no connection to their current lives. Literacy at home was seen as direct and relating to the present and so when the boys read at home, they had a goal in mind. The researchers argued that all students (male and female) want to be involved in the type of learning that means something to them and so schools should act on this, in order to achieve better outcomes for the students. This study exemplifies the contradiction between school and personal life with regard to literacy. If what is being taught in school has little apparent relevance to the lives of the students and is of little interest and they are struggling to access it, it is not surprising that they fail to be engaged in a subject, as is confirmed by the comments of Marie and Jane. It seems more likely that a student's learning will progress if they are enjoying what they are doing and have the necessary skills to access the curriculum fully. Debbie spoke of how she had enjoyed the easy-going approach of her primary school, but when she had to take part in the more formal lessons at secondary school, she said she felt she had 'switched off' in class, as she could not keep up in the lessons with the other students. Once she fell behind in English it affected most other subjects and she could not catch up:

… primary school was good. In primary school it's more of a game. It's not so much paper and words, you make games from it. But in secondary school the

first couple of years were OK, but when we got put to into our bands A B and C, I was in C. And in those classes, there is still higher achievers and lower and I think the school concentrated on the higher achievers to get the grades. If I had struggled, I would ask, if I still didn't get it then, it was like 'oh, you'll pick it up'. So then I got stuck and the following week I was still trying to pick it up from the previous week … I think that was when I switched off. Debbie

4.2.4 How practical and creative subjects can build confidence

In contrast to the negative feelings expressed about learning English at school, I was surprised to discover the extent to which taking part in practical and creative subjects generated such enthusiasm among the participants and how even the tone and body language used when they were speaking changed from matter of fact to more animated and livelier. Many participants spoke extremely positively of their feelings about taking part in the more practical subjects they had studied, such as art, drama and sport. These more practical subjects gave participants a chance to excel at something and, to a certain extent, counteracted their less pleasant experiences with academic subjects where they often felt inferior. Debbie discussed her thoughts on this further by describing how she enjoyed taking part in certain more hands-on subjects.

Art and textiles were more relaxed and a bit more free. If I could have had more hands on… the physical way of doing things, I could have got on so much better [in other subjects]*. There was never really any option and I think that was why I took textiles and things like that. It wouldn't really get me*

anywhere outside of school. I enjoyed it [textiles] *and I learnt. I got a good grade in science too and that is much more practical.* Debbie

Interestingly Debbie used the words ‘more free’, which appears to indicate her need to be more practically and actively involved in what she was doing rather than be limited both physically and creatively. Debbie’s views about practical subjects were echoed by Thalia, who had not enjoyed academic lessons, but had a love of sport:

Sport was why I went to school and I was very good at sport, kind of. I did everything - netball and rounders, hockey, karate. I would have studied something to do with physical education [at 16], *but hindsight is a great thing.* Thalia

Some participants had passed GCSEs in these subjects, but not in English. When asked if they had passed any GCSEs at school participants talked about how they had been successful in more practical subjects:

I think I got Cs in science and art and textiles, but not much academically. Debbie

Yes lCT, art, design and technology. Anna

Yeah, art, drama, ICT and science, I think. Marie

Yes some, like drama, but I didn't get English. Leon

It is interesting that some of the participants had achieved GCSE passes in these more practical, creative subjects rather than in English. When asked why this was, the participants talked particularly about the enjoyment they found in the more non-academic subjects. In addition, Debbie highlighted that the physical way of doing things suited her best and, she believed, would have helped her progress when learning English if there had been a way for her to study academic subjects in a more practical way. Thalia's liking for sport was the one thing at school she looked forward to in an otherwise dispiriting day. When talking about sport her demeanor changed from looking uncomfortable, as she talked about her experiences of learning English, to smiling when she remembered the sports lessons. This ties in with the comments of Anna, Marie and Leon who had all happy, satisfying memories of taking part in non-academic subjects such as art and drama, where they could express themselves freely without the constraints of more formal lessons. These subjects were seen as positive and rewarding by the participants, whereas English was often seen as rather boring and irrelevant.

Research confirms that taking part in subjects considered to be non-academic, such as sport, art, music, dance and drama can have significant beneficial effects. These included promoting social interaction and they also had a positive emotional impact, such as reducing stress and increasing self-confidence and self-esteem (Zarrett et al., 2009). With regard to sport specifically, Zarrett et al. (2009) talked of how involvement in sport was

strongly linked to developing competence and character. Gadbois et al. (2019) found that being involved in sport had more positive results than not being involved. Fraser-Thomas and Côté, (2009) found that involvement in sport for young people was linked to a growth in positive development skills, such as meaningful relationships with adults and peers, use of own initiative, meeting challenges and a feeling of a sense of community. Golding et al (2016) researching into whether dance classes at school accelerated learning, discovered that movement helped cognitive development and that developing physically had a link to the development of the brain. This study found that enjoying the lessons plus the multi-sensory nature of dance played a part in the children having positive learning outcomes and recommends that dance and movement should be part of an integrated curriculum.

Golding et al (2016) also suggest that there are potential benefits for dance to improve attainment levels in all areas and that this has particular relevance since arts provision has been reduced in the core curriculum. The connection between music, dance et cetera and an improvement in attainment was endorsed by Posner and Pantoine (2009) who argued that finding an art form which appeals to a child, whether music, dance or other arts, has potential for improving their cognition generally because of the time and concentration they spend on it. This is echoed by Malvilidi et al. (2018) and Donnelly and Lambourne (2011) who argued that participating in regular physical activity can have considerable cognitive and intellectual benefits for young people and is considered to be valuable for their physical and mental health. These studies reinforce the comments by Debbie, Thalia, Anna, Marie and Leon

above regarding how enjoyable and positive more practical subjects made them feel.

Yet, physical activity and intellectual activity in schools are usually seen as unrelated activities, although, Malvilidi et al. (2018) suggest, it would be possible to integrate physical activities into academic settings and so improve educational practice. These studies all reinforce the participants' comments about the enjoyment they found in sport and creative activities. The participants who stated that they get more enjoyment from certain less academic and more practical subjects may prefer a more 'hands on' way of learning. Such students may benefit from approaches which allow for less formal ways of learning, such as a programme set up by Honeyford and Boyd (2015) to consider the effects of combining formal education with more informal ways of learning. They found that creative and visual play had significant implications for teenagers' literacy practices. The students in the programme were encouraged to develop their literacy practices through the use of multiple media, such as advertisements, realia, texts, film, art, music and drama. The researchers discovered that opening up the classroom to multiple literacies plus the active involvement of the students, allowed literacy to be supported and valued. They argued that, by contrast, what tends to happen in schools is that there is little time or space for such activity. This is because the focus of the curriculum is on acquiring skills such as the decoding and comprehension of selected texts with a particular vocabulary and structure. They argued that rather than using simplified texts, literacy needs to happen in other areas, such as creative spaces which would allow students to

enjoy the environment they are in and to experiment and learn by using a variety of materials and texts (Honeyford and Boyd, 2015). This may have been a better way to learn for students such as Marie who felt a lack of engagement in the more academic subjects and for Debbie who liked the physical involvement of practical subjects.

4.2.5 Conclusion

The majority of the participants had very negative feelings about their experiences of learning English at school. Throughout their lives many have carried with them damaging memories which still have the power over them to have a negative effect on their sense of self-worth and on their confidence in their ability. Their difficulties with English often led to them struggling with other academic subjects because they could not access them easily. For many of the participants the only bright points in their schooldays were the active, practical subjects, such as art, drama and sport, and as Thalia said, sport was the reason she came to school. Many of the participants would have had a better overall experience of education if they could have had more creative opportunities available to them when learning English. This suggests that they could have achieved more in the more academic subjects if they had had a greater sense of enjoyment and fulfilment in what they were doing. In that way their memory of learning English could have been of satisfaction and pleasure instead of frustration and humiliation.

4.3 How do the participants explain the difficulties they faced with GCSE English?

The participants stated that they believed a range of different problems, both at school and home, caused them to have difficulties with GCSE English and so there has to be a greater awareness of these problems which need to be addressed. These problems included lack of help and support at school, lack of parental support at home and the double effect of both little support at school and at home. This is because without sufficient help and support at school a child may struggle to the extent where they fall behind the other children and then do not catch up, while lack of support at home means what is being taught at school is not reinforced or valued. However, the greatest impact is on those who undergo the double effect of both little support at school and at home. This lack of support at school, coupled with inadequate support at home, often left the participants in a situation where they were trying hopelessly to succeed without much prospect of having anyone to help them. This can have a detrimental effect on learning English which may lead to difficulties attaining the GCSE. These three themes are further discussed and analysed below.

4.3.1 Lack of support at school

A major source of difficulties for the participants lay in the lack of support they felt they received at school, especially once they were teenagers. Many of the participants had appreciated the more relaxed atmosphere at primary school, which they felt was easy-going and enjoyable, whereas at secondary school the focus was on working hard and passing exams. The participants did not feel they received the support they needed at secondary school which led to them feeling let down and, as a consequence, more likely to switch off and

become disaffected. This indicates that teaching practices and attitudes need to be more sensitive to students who are finding the work particularly demanding and discover ways both to help them academically and to encourage and motivate them.

Some of the participants had very strong views on the lack of support at school, for example, when asked if she was helped at school Jane replied vehemently '*Never'.*

Claire also spoke of how she felt she was just left on her own to get on at school, as best she could:

I wasn't prodded, I wasn't helped. Claire

Anna said she wished she had received more help at school and found it particularly difficult in her final year to keep up:

The work got a lot harder and I always found it difficult, on reading, and difficult to focus. I'm more of a practical kind, and sometimes I find it difficult to take things in. And I have to re-read it over and over again. Anna

She added that she felt she had needed more support in the classroom:
I think more support in the classroom, LSAs for the amount of children. You could have one LSA helping two children, but if the others in the class are struggling, they don't get the support. Anna

These comments by Claire, Jane and Anna endorse research which argues that not giving a child adequate support at school can lead to their failing to keep up with other children and being unable to catch up (Francis and Wong, 2013); (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007). Other research shows how demotivating it is for children to feel they are lacking in the skills they need to thrive like other children (Archer, Halsall, and Hollingworth, 2007; Francis and Mills, 2012; Osler, 2006). The way children are viewed can affect the way they behave at school and if they are seen negatively, it can lead to them switching off and disengaging with education.

4.3.2 Lack of support at home

Another significant problem for many of the participants was lack of support at home and they all expressed strong views on this, despite some having pleasant memories of their parents helping them others had disappointing memories of how their parents were either unable or unwilling to help. Stevie, for example, spoke of how her parents were not able to help her with her schoolwork and had little or no interest in her progress at school. Other participants did speak of their parents helping them with learning to read, when they started school, but any help seemed to decrease, and the participants had few memories of parental involvement as they grew older. This decrease in help could be for a variety of reasons such as the parents may not be able to help with schoolwork as the child gets older and the work gets harder, or the parents may assume the school has sole responsibility for the child's education and that it is best not to interfere. Also, as children

become teenagers, they are likely to be growing away from their parents' close influence and stop feeling the need to ask for much help.

It may be that support needs to be a constant throughout a child's education and indeed, as argued in chapter 3, their social and financial situation at birth affects their development throughout their lives, (National Equality Panel, 2010); (Field, 2010). When given vocabulary tests at age five UK children from the poorest families are already behind children from behind better off families Waldfogel and Washbrook, 2010). The qualification levels of parents have the largest impact on a child's GCSE scores followed by the socio-economic position of the family, as students from poorer families received lower grades at GCSE in English than those from more well-off families (EPPSE 3 -16+, 2015). In order to improve the outcomes for all children intervention has to take place before the age of five. Early education has positive effects, such as improvement in both maths and reading at age 7. These effects continue to be significant to the age of sixteen (Goodman and Sianesi, 2005).

The research above is echoed by Stevie's comments as she spoke rather resentfully of her negative memories of her parents' seeming lack of interest in her education:

I wouldn't have said I needed support, but encouragement, actually. Sometimes I just think you've got to get yourself in the right mindset. My parents said 'What you do at school is up to you'. They didn't take any interest or anything. They hadn't a clue what I was up to, but I don't really blame

myself now, I used to. I half blame myself. I had the potential, but nobody could be bothered. I've always had this little gremlin sitting on my shoulder saying - you'll just be an average. And my parents, because they weren't interested, it was definitely more my parents than school. I told my mum once, 'You shouldn't have had children', she's very insular. My dad is quite illiterate. Stevie.

Her early experiences made her determined to bring up her own children differently because she believed that positive parental involvement would have made a difference to her education. When she had children of her own, she kept closely involved in what they did at school, so that she could reinforce it at home:

I can remember [learning to read] at infant school because I wasn't very good at reading, as I didn't see the point in fiction. My parents didn't spend any time with me at all and I noticed that the pre-school [where the participant had worked] if you had parents that were involved in the education you got on much quicker. I did the same with my two, so that when they went to school they had a second dose of it. My parents, no, we were seen and not heard. They worked a lot of hours, and they felt it was important to supply us with stuff. They were born in the '40s and didn't have much, so they thought stuff was more important than attention. They worked Monday through Saturday but had two afternoons off and also worked three nights at a night club. My father asked me about what I was doing when I was at college, sometimes. But not before then, we discussed it a little bit, but other than that, no. I always

discussed everything with my kids from dot. Stevie

Studies have shown that whether or not a family are in a position to help their child affects the child's chance of success which confirms the research, described in chapter 3 carried out by Field (2010); EPPSE 3 -16+ (2015) and COPE (2017) on the importance of parental support and influence on a child's development. The participants who did not receive support at home had to rely wholly on their school to give them what they required to succeed there. The majority of the participants identified themselves as coming from backgrounds where one or both parents were semi-skilled or unskilled and thus likely to be from a lower socio-economic background than middle class children. Social and educational inequality are made by material and social capital. Material capital is the ability to pay for enhanced educational opportunities in addition to or instead of state education, such as private schooling or tuition, educational resources, the financial means to move into the catchment areas of good schools et cetera. Social capital entails both having an understanding of how to support children through the education system and having the confidence to negotiate it. It also means having networks and connections to others who can offer support, such as internships. Whether or not the family can access these capitals can make a vast difference to the child's life chances. There are other reasons for the socio-economic gap, such as gender, ethnicity, disability, et cetera and these may all interact to affect attainment, but they mostly relate to matters of material and social capital and the way these interrelate to the organisation of the education system (Francis and Wong, 2013).

The participants' comments in this section support recent research which shows that an important indicator of exam success are the characteristics of a child's family and that the characteristic which has the strongest influence on GCSE results is the qualification levels of the parents, especially the mother (Waldfogel and Washbrook, 2010).

For some of the participants learning was made even more difficult as they experienced the double effect of having little support at home in addition to not receiving the help they needed at school. This double effect, which meant it was difficult, if not impossible, to resolve problems with their English schoolwork, is considered more fully below.

4.3.3 The double effect

The greatest difficulties for participants occurred when they underwent the double effect of finding schoolwork difficult, but not getting adequate help at school and not having parents who were in a position to help them. Schools need to investigate why an individual student is having difficulties academically, for example, Thalia had been diagnosed with dyslexia at school and believed she did not have enough help with this condition. Her parents did not have the knowledge or skills to help her, and the school offered only limited support. She spoke vividly of the shame and embarrassment she felt being singled out for extra help at secondary school:

I used to find it very difficult [learning to read] *and it took my parents a long time to get me tested for dyslexia. And it came back that I was borderline and*

so I was offered no help. I was just kind of left to it. My parents didn't have the education [to help]*. I was probably a tiny bit behind* [at primary school] *but nothing major. A late developer, it was more when I started senior school that I felt it. I hated it … I was made to feel stupid.* Thalia

On the other hand, Rachel's needs were not picked up at school and she soon realised that she was not learning in the same way as the other children. The school did not appear to have the knowledge or resources to meet her particular needs and she left school at fourteen without qualifications. She felt she was constantly criticised at school and became frustrated:

When I started school I didn't like it from day one, not because I didn't like it, but because I knew it wasn't going into me like everyone else. I found reading very difficult. I just remember that whatever we did, and whatever subject, even if I liked it, it didn't make sense. And I remember things like, in secondary school, when they set homework they'd say allow half an hour and, I mean, it would take me three hours. And I would sit there and do it and I would be so tired. On the school report it would be like 'effort in class 10, effort in homework 10, actual ability to do it none'. And this was the crunch point, I said to my mum 'I'm not putting myself through this anymore. It doesn't matter how hard I try, I'm not getting it …' And I just refused to go to school then, after that, which at the time caused massive amounts of arguments and fights, though now my mum says to me 'You did make the right decision'.

And it was things like careers interviews, they know your ability and are trying

to help you choose the path on what they think, based on what you can get down on paper, you know, and they come up with something stupid like an undertaker. Anything I said I wanted to do, at that time I wanted to be a social worker, and they said you can't do that because you have to write reports. I could write really well, but when it came to reading … I didn't fit the typical dyslexic bracket because I could write. Rachel

Rachel's mother tried to help her at home, but she did not have the knowledge or the resources to support her daughter. By the time Rachel had children of her own she had worked out she needed to intervene at the earliest opportunity to prevent her son, who was showing signs of dyslexia, struggling with education as she had done:

And my mum would try and read with me at home, and my mum is fantastic at English, she would just get so frustrated with me and then she couldn't do it because she was banging her head against a wall. I would make the same mistakes all the time, I couldn't get anywhere. And I have two children, my son is seventeen and very dyslexic. When he was nine, I had him privately statemented [a statement of special educational needs] *and I paid for three hours extra help a week through school. I knew it was the only way and it worked, he got his GCSEs. My son did so well, and the odds were against him, but his school were the opposite to mine, they provided for every need that was in his statement. And didn't just focus on his weaknesses, they focused on his strengths as well: there was none of that when I was at school. There were things I could do, like play the piano. I found I could learn things if*

I did other things at the same time. They taught my son like that, so he learnt his times tables while bouncing a ball. These techniques weren't really known then. But I'm really enjoying it now, I'm learning, but even if I had been able to take in the information then, this time is better. Rachel

Like Rachel, Anna's dyslexia was not discovered at school and she found school work increasingly difficult as she got nearer to sitting her GCSEs. When asked if her parents had helped her at this time, she said that, although they were supportive, they had not been able to help very much as they did not have the knowledge to do so:

… some of the things they really couldn't grasp. *I think towards the end [of school] like towards year 11, I struggled and found things hard. And when I came here* [FE college] *they picked up that I had a bit of dyslexia. They said they may not have caught it while you were at school and so I didn't get the help I needed. The work got a lot harder [in year 11] and I always found it difficult, reading, and difficult to focus. I'm more of a practical kind, and sometimes I find it difficult to take things in and I have to re-read it over and over again, which is what the lady here* [FE college] *picked up on.* Anna

The above participants all spoke of how inadequate support at school coupled with a lack of sufficient help at home meant they faced their GCSEs at a disadvantage. Parental education is more important than both socio-economic status and family income, but socio-economic status is important for exam results as students from lower income families achieved lower GCSE grades

in English and maths than those from higher income families (EPPSE 3 -16+, 2015). Disparities between children in different socio-economic groups often increase as a child grows older. Differences in families' abilities to help their children (such as getting them into good schools) also affect the children's achievements. Children from more economically advantaged families generally gain better skills at reading and problem-solving and are more likely to complete post compulsory education than children from poorer families (COPE, 2017).

Studies emphasise the importance of early intervention in a child's development even before they start school if they are to have an equal chance of success (Feinstein, 2003; Field, 2010). This must then be continued throughout primary school so that they do not lose ground against other more privileged children. Francis and Wong (2013) argue that a child's socio-economic background is by far the main predictor of achievement. They give the example of a working-class child starting school already behind middle class children, the child may struggle to keep up and soon sees themselves as not as good as the others, which may affect their whole future life. To be able to benefit from the school curriculum, children's literacy and numeracy skills need to be adequate, however, about one fifth of children fail to reach level 2 (equivalent to GCSE grade C/grade 4) in literacy and numeracy (Clifton and Cook, 2012). Poor literacy skills affect the capacity to succeed in all subjects and there needs to be a concerted effort in primary schools to ensure children have a basic proficiency in literacy before they start secondary school (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007). In order to improve their chances, it is

necessary to be involved in children's development before the age of 5 as this seems to have long-lasting and positive effects. Early education leads to improvements in cognitive tests, including both maths and reading at age 7; these effects reduce in size but remain significant throughout the schooling years, up to age 16 (Goodman and Sianesi, 2005); (Lee and Burkman, in Engle and Black, 2008).

Thus, early years' education appears to be vital in helping to escape a cycle of poverty which can follow the child throughout their life. This is echoed in a recently published UK government policy on childcare and early education which states: 'Providing children with good-quality education and care in their earliest years can help them succeed at school and later in life. This contributes to creating a society where opportunities are equal regardless of background.' (Department for Education, 2015, p.1). This confirms Field's report on poverty and life chances (Field, 2010) which found overwhelming evidence that children's life chances are determined by their development in the first five years of life. The report concluded that family background, parental education, good parenting and opportunities for learning and development in the early years have greater significance for children achieving their potential in life than financial advantages.

Thalia, Rachel and Anna, who all have dyslexia, illustrate how a school failing to recognise or investigate why a child is struggling and then failing to deal effectively with any difficulties they may have, can lead to long term problems which may have been avoided if they had been picked up earlier. When this is

coupled with a lack of parental support the child experiences the double effect of neither school nor home offering the support they need. This is such a waste of opportunity as the negative effects can last a lifetime.

4.3.4 Conclusion

The difficulties the participants described when dealing with GCSE English were of three types. The first, lack of support at school, often left the participant frustrated and disheartened, unable to keep up with the other students. The second, lack of support at home, meant that what was studied at school was not reinforced or extended in the home, as their parents were either unable (through lack of education) or unwilling to help. The final theme, lack of support at both home and school, shows how the participants who had experienced the double effect of both no support at school and at home, struggled with passing GCSE English. Of the three themes, participants saw lack of support at school as the principal reason they struggled, but if they had sufficient support at home, which reinforced and encouraged what they were learning at school, the effect of lack of sufficient support at school could be ameliorated. Those participants who experienced the double effect of lack of support both at home and at school were left on their own trying to cope with studying GCSE English without the help they needed. Therefore, there needs to be a greater awareness of the importance of support systems at home and at school for effective learning to take place. Students cannot be expected to be left to try to study alone without a support system.

5 Findings and Discussion: Part II

5.1 Introduction

This chapter continues the discussion of the findings and looks at the effects on the participants of not having sufficient literacy. It then considers the motivations behind those who have returned to study as adults. Finally, the participants discuss how the education system could be improved.

5.2 In what ways do the participants' experiences of learning English shape later life experiences?

The extent and to which the participants' experiences of learning English continued to affect their lives after they left school was remarkable and they described four main ways in which their experiences of learning English had affected them long term. The first of these themes concerned their lifelong lack of confidence in their own ability and feelings of being inadequate intellectually, which the majority of the participants felt held them back. The second theme was that some of the participants were determined to get on with their lives and do well despite their lack of confidence. The third theme was not recognising, whilst they were still at school, the importance of qualifications for later life. The fourth theme which arose, for some of the participants, was the realisation of how the type of language they speak and the accent they use can affect how they are perceived by others.

5.2.1 How their experiences have affected their confidence

The extent to which the participants' confidence was still being affected by

their earlier experiences came as a surprise. They spoke of how they had been left with a general feeling of a lack of confidence in their own ability, which applied to both their school experience and carried on affecting them in their adult life. The negative memories of studying English GCSE and many other subjects at school had continued to trouble them as they went through life. All the participants felt disappointed with school, as they had not achieved the qualifications they would have liked to achieve and they did not feel school had set them up to lead the sort of fulfilled lives they could have led.

They described having continuing feelings of the anxiety they had felt at school and a constant worry of being judged and found wanting, even now. Their school experiences had repercussions throughout their lives, for example, when asked if her difficulties with English had affected her in other ways in her life, Thalia replied:

It's affected my confidence. Even now, the fact is, I don't have my English - I find it embarrassing to say I can't go to college because I don't have my English because, you know, GCSEs are such a big focus now… on having GCSEs and, you know, don't get me wrong, because I like reading, and writing is an everyday thing. But if it still makes you feel a little bit… yeah… I feel terrible, I feel people are going to judge me, it does knock my confidence… and in jobs and things as well. You don't have a 'C'… before it didn't matter what grade. Thalia

Thalia explained how her lack of English GCSE had affected her in many

areas of life: if she went to the pub with friends and talk turned to school and qualifications, she always felt uncomfortable and hoped the conversation would change direction so that she did not have to admit her lack of qualifications. She felt that when applying for jobs the emphasis was on the grades someone had achieved, not the actual person they were, so she always believed herself to be at a disadvantage. Now, as she was working as a teaching assistant, I asked her if she would like to go further and train as a teacher, she looked horrified and said she did not believe it was something she could aim for. In effect, she felt limited by her early school experiences which, instead of enabling her to flourish, had shut her down and led to her feeling excluded from careers she might have had.

Thalia's comments are representative of many of the participants who do not have the confidence to grasp the opportunities life has to offer them as adults. This confirms research that confidence has a large part to play in determining whether adults are able to take up any opportunities that are available to them (Norman and Hyland, 2003). They found that barriers to learning fall into three groups *situational* which concerns having time to attend courses and sufficient income to pay for them; *institutional* where the system does not adequately consider the teaching and learning needs of adult learners; and *dispositional* which relates to adults' negative perceptions of previous learning experiences and their expectations and goals, (McGivney, pp. 17–22 in Norman and Hyland, 2003). A vital aspect of the dispositional barriers is the extent of the adult learners' confidence and whether it aids or impedes learning. So many of the participants spoke of lack of confidence and how it had hindered them

in their adult life. The idea of confidence may sometimes be used inaccurately and vaguely when, in fact, it can be central to the learners' chances of success when returning to education. (Norman and Hyland, 2003).

It has been suggested that social interaction may be seen as an important factor in increasing confidence and several of the participants mentioned how much they enjoyed coming to the adult English classes, where they felt that both teachers and staff were supportive. Working and interacting together as a group can improve confidence and levels of achievement and so learning as part of social practice should be encouraged (Lave and Wenger, cited in Hutchins, 1993).

However, some of the participants were determined to do well despite their early experiences. They wanted to put those experiences behind them and get on with their lives.

5.2.2 Determination to succeed in spite of the impact on confidence

All the participants said that school had made them have negative feelings about their own ability. For example, Rachel believed she had been written off by the school and needed to get away from that environment in order to succeed. She described how not having learnt to read at school made her feel:

It knocked my confidence, but luckily, I'm such a person that I thought I'm not putting myself through it and I still stand by that to this day [leaving school at

fourteen]*, it was the right decision. It didn't stop my life, I mean, by the time I was twenty I was earning more than everyone I knew. So it didn't… all the things they had tried to make me feel, not intentionally I think, but given they were working on what was written down on a piece of paper, they thought I was going to fail, that I wouldn't succeed in anything. That was how I was made to feel.* Rachel

Similarly to Rachel, Marie, working as a health care assistant, was determined to make the best of things and when asked if not having passed English GCSE has affected how she felt about herself, replied:

Yeah, kind of, but I think there's not much point thinking about it, and just make the best of things. That's just my way of thinking though I can imagine, my god, it's worse for others, it has impacted my life really, because if I'd have got it… I couldn't just, you know, it would have made my life easier as a whole, if I had got it at school, of course. Marie

Julie, now a lecturer in a further education college described her discomfort in having to write on the board as she is never confident that she has spelt words correctly:

It makes me feel so small if I haven't spelt something right, it knocks you back. It only takes a little thing like a student commenting on my spelling and I'm right back again, or a particular colleague saying something about my spelling. It didn't matter how great my lessons were, she'd pick me up about my

spelling. I never caught up and that's what this did to me, I never caught up. Throughout my secondary education I just assumed I wasn't very bright. Julie

These participants appeared to have personalities and strength of character which allowed them to put to one side what had happened to them, without forgetting their experiences. They were able, to a certain extent, to put their past experiences behind them and were determined to progress in their careers and look to the future. The participants' comments are reinforced by a study by Archer and Yates (2016) on career confidence, indicating that those who took part in a career coaching course had a higher degree of positivity after coaching to change cognitive processes and that this led to an increase in confidence. It is possible that Rachel, Marie and Julie have characters that allow them to have sufficient self-belief and confidence largely to overcome their early experiences and while not forgetting their past are able to make the best of their current circumstances.

Conversely, some of the participants said how they had just not realised, how important it was to gain qualifications when they were at school. They were now left having to try to make up lost ground and spend time studying for examinations they could have taken at school.

5.2.3 Failure to recognise the importance of qualifications when a teenager

One of the elements that had the greatest impact on the participants' lives was their lack of qualifications and several of them felt they had really not understood the consequences of not getting adequate qualifications while still

at school. Several of the participants spoke of how education at secondary school seemed to have been largely about gaining qualifications, but they had not realised the importance of those qualifications and now regretted not putting in the effort to do well at the time. When asked if she felt pressurised at school, when she was a teenager, because of the coming exams, Marie, who has now returned to education as an adult, said she had not appreciated the importance of GCSEs when she was at school:

I just don't think I was really that bothered. How I didn't realise how important it was, like, for the future. I don't think I ever really tried. I can't remember revising like I'm revising now for things [English GCSE]. Marie

Leon felt that schools give too much irrelevant information to students and then, when it is time to choose which subjects to study with a view to a career, young people do not have the knowledge to make an informed decision. They do not see the point of why they are learning certain things. In addition to Leon's experience, Anna, when asked when she started having problems at school and why she thought she fell behind the rest of the class, said:

It had been in the secondary school, I think it was lack of attention, I just lost focus for a couple of years. Anna

Joe, who is now taking a part-time distance learning degree while working full-time, echoed the comments of Marie and Anna in feeling that he lost focus:

I think that in some places, teachers who can, should give you more attention but, some places can't because they have too many children. I think all the extra activities by the schools are important, but that is voluntary and I'm glad I went to the ones which gave the extra help. A lot of it [what happens to a child] *is circumstantial. A lot is going on in your life and you're not focusing on school because of these other things. And a lot is down to you and how focused you are as an individual. If I am honest, I don't think I was motivated enough when I was younger and then now it's the opposite. I've got to a point where I want to make those changes so, it's easy for me to make time in the evening to study… and I don't mind doing it.* Joe

Thalia, Rachel, Marie, Anna, Joe, and Leon's comments confirm the findings of a study by Rabušicová and Oplatková (2010) which looked at a hypothetical model of an adult with inadequate literacy skills in order to discover what life was like for such a person. In their study the information was collected through a biographical interview with a respondent whose characteristics corresponded to those of a hypothetical person who was likely to show signs of low functional literacy. Characteristics, such as gender, age, parental education achievements and job history of this hypothetical person have been derived from the results of research into adult functional literacy. The analysis of the qualitative data focused on three areas of the respondent's life, which were her family life, her time at school, and her lifestyle. The study identified how the person used coping strategies in her daily life. It found that lack of adequate literacy means it is impossible to gain the qualifications necessary for a wide range of career opportunities and Rabušicová and Oplatková

(2010) found that insufficient literacy skills were often the result of the low socio-economic status of the family, which consisted largely of unskilled parents with limited education and financial insecurity, which is similar to the families of most of the participants. The lack of skills could also result from having a combination of unemployed family members, an absent parent, lack of interest in culture or education, parents with low expectations of their child's ability and an indifference to their child's individual development. All these issues were found to influence whether, and to what extent, a person used their literacy skills.

Adults with inadequate literacy skills may not necessarily value the skills gained at school as important for their everyday lives, whereas schools should make an effort to motivate pupils, especially those from socio-economically disadvantaged families, to use their literacy skills in order to meet their individual needs, which the participants did not feel had happened for them. If an adult lacks adequate literacy skills it can lead to a negative self-image and thus, they avoid putting themselves in situations which they think may set themselves up for failure. The study argued that the adult's lack of goals and expectations is connected to a lack of self-confidence. This passive attitude to life then allows decisions to be made because of external circumstances and it is this which dictates the direction life takes, rather than the individual making informed, independent choices. Such a position then has the potential to be reproduced through subsequent generations and so continue the cycle of inadequate literacy skills, Rabušicová and Oplatková (2010). This powerlessness is echoed in the comments of the participants, who felt

diminished by their experience at school. These experiences counted against their attempts to learn and then they felt left behind, they could not keep up and felt out of place.

A further way the participants' experiences of learning English shaped their later life experiences was the awareness for some students that the way they spoke set them apart from others and led to them feeling judged as somehow less than others.

5.2.4 The significance of language use

Two of the participants told me how they had become aware that the language they used every day was influencing how certain people perceived them. They used the informal language they had been brought up to speak and not the formal language used in school and felt this counted against them in many situations. Similarly to the other participants, Joe also struggled academically all through school, but his negative experiences at school were compounded by his awareness that he spoke differently from the other students and teachers and was treated differently by them. This confirms research which found that how a child uses language affects both how they are able to take part in the taught curriculum at school and how well they feel they fit into the school environment. (Bernstein, 1960). A child's early experiences influence the extent to which they identify with the school system and their behaviour and actions may also influence how teachers view the child and their abilities (Hamel, in Francis and Wong, 2013). Participants with regional accents commented on the difficulties they faced because of feeling that they were

judged and positioned within society by the way they spoke. For example, Joe was born into a working-class environment and has never forgotten changing schools at thirteen and the unpleasant teasing he received for speaking in a way which was not deemed appropriate by his new peer group who used received pronunciation. This led to him feeling uncomfortable and out of place and he is still wary of peoples' reactions to the way he speaks.

As an adult, Dale, brought up in the west of England with a distinctive regional accent and dialect, took action and decided he would change the way he spoke completely. On moving to London for work, he put a great deal of effort into affecting the well-modulated accent and appropriate language of an educated southerner. He described how sometimes he is aware that a word has not sounded quite right as he said it and he makes a mental note that it was not quite right. However, he has been successful in giving the impression of being an educated, middle-class person from the south. He feels that to have kept his former accent would have marked him out as less intelligent and less well educated. In contrast, he said that when he goes back home and sees his 'mates,' he reverts back to his childhood accent and way of speaking in order to fit in with, and be part of, his old crowd. Both Dale and Joe became aware that the way they spoke affected how others saw them and they both determined to modify how they spoke in order to avoid being judged and found wanting. This confirms the findings of Bernstein (2010), in chapter 3, section 3.9, who argued that particular groups in society may use language differently and this can affect how they are seen by others. The comments made by Dale and Joe exemplify this as they felt judged negatively by the way

in which they spoke.

Bernstein maintained that there are two types of language used in society which are a *formal* language and a simpler *public* language. He argued that the use of a *public* language by certain groups in society, such as unskilled and semi-skilled workers, criminal sub-cultures, rural groups and teenagers, may result in their finding it difficult to fully gain admittance to certain areas of society and that this may begin as soon as they start school. These differences in the types of speech spoken are most evident where there is the largest disparity in socio-economic status. Within English society great emphasis is placed on what people do for a living and how much money they have, and this is closely tied to language. The effects that language have in society are significant because using language that is deemed not to be ideal, that is not using received pronunciation, may limit the progress someone can make in their choice of occupation and so affect their socio-economic status.

The type of language and speech patterns a child learns is determined, from the moment they begin to speak, by a combination of their environment, surroundings, and family. The linguistic style used influences both what is being learnt and future learning and behaviour. Language is part of the social structure and a child's social structure is part of their experience of life. To try to make a child use a *formal* language when they have been born into a culture which uses a more simple *public* language may lead to them being isolated from their usual relationships, (Bernstein, 2010).

When *public* language and responses are in accordance with the experiences of the group of speakers and listeners the vocabulary used may be limited, but this is because the user is reacting to their own experience of that social group. The speaker may use only *public* language or may use both *public* language and *formal* language. The language used reinforces patterns of thought and acting which are used by the speaker's social group and it also reinforces group identity. Using a particular form of language allows for certain ideas and concepts to be expressed and a *public* language is the nature of the language or the way it is used, rather than the actual vocabulary used (Bernstein, 2006, 2010). A *public* language used by a group does not have to use a common vocabulary, but does have a common linguistic style, such as a particular dialect. 'A dialect is a form of a language that is spoken in a particular area', (Collins, 2019a).

The problem for the users of *public* language, as both Joe and Dale found, is that when society uses *formal* language they are put at a disadvantage if they are perceived to be using the wrong language or dialect. In the case of literacy acquisition, the conventional way of teaching in schools uses *formal* language. The short, simple sentences used in *public* language are not adequate for expressing complex ideas, while using incorrect grammar and vocabulary can make the intended meaning uncertain. In a *public* language meaning may be implied and this can result in the child not being able to describe adequately what they want to say to a teacher, whereas a *formal* language allows for subjective meanings to be explained clearly. Joe and Dale both realised at an early age that it was in their interest to change how they spoke at school in

order to fit in. The comments made by Joe and Dale exemplify the way people may be influenced by the class system to judge others by their accent.

The language used by a particular group is one of the main ways it reinforces the opinions and behaviour of that group and this can have the effect of favouring certain ideas more than others. An individual needs to be able to use *public* language but also use *formal* language when necessary. Trying to impose a *formal* language on a child can take them away them from their usual social groups because the change in the language used affects those relationships and how the child sees themselves (Bernstein, 2010). Unfortunately, with regard to literacy acquisition, a *public* language is not consistent with the mainstream way of teaching which uses *formal* language. Using a *public* language may not be adequate to express complicated ideas and concepts and the type of language used may not be able to communicate the meaning they want to express (Bernstein, 2010). Differences in language will affect the extent to which a child is able to access the curriculum (Bernstein, 1960) and their early experiences are likely to influence the extent to which they identify with school. Language use may influence how teachers view the child and their ability (Hamel, in Francis and Wong (2013).

As Joe and Dale discovered the distinct pronunciation and dialect of a particular group may be considered undesirable by certain parts of society since the accent spoken by those holding positions of power in society, for example politicians, the judiciary, doctors et cetera, is frequently what is known as ‘received pronunciation’ which is ‘a way of pronouncing British

English that is often considered to be the standard accent' (Collins, 2019b). Tikly and Barrett (2011) highlight the importance of education in enabling an individual to have a sufficient level of income to provide for an adequate standard of living. Such education also has an inherent value in itself and allows the individual to feel a sense of self-worth. In order for children to have access to a good education any barriers to success need to be identified and removed.

5.2.5 Conclusion

For the participants, their experience of learning English has shaped their later life experiences in several ways: for some, it has affected their confidence negatively throughout their lives and resulted in them having underlying feelings of anxiety and a worry of being seen to be lacking intellectually in some way. However, other participants, although they were aware that they had not done well at school academically, were determined to succeed in spite of an ongoing lack of confidence. in addition, some of the participants had failed to realise the importance of gaining qualifications when they were at school and were now determined to make up for lost time and obtain the qualifications they needed. One group of participants had realised, as they grew older, that the type of language or accent they use may affect how others see them if they mix with certain groups in society.

5.3 What is the motivation of the participants, who have returned to education, to study GCSE English?

What stood out here was the level of commitment and purpose the

participants showed. Whatever the reason for returning to education they expressed absolute determination to succeed this time. Now they intended to make up for what they had missed out on. The overwhelming motivation for participants returning to education to study English now (at this stage in their lives) was to gain qualifications for a particular career. Two main themes emerged here, the first was that the majority of participants said they *needed* it to progress in their chosen career. For those participants it was the motivation to get a professional qualification that caused them to enrol on the English course. They had specific careers they were aiming for but, they could not access the necessary training courses without GCSE English. The second theme was to prove to themselves that they were capable of getting the qualifications they did not get at school, in spite of their early negative experiences of education at school. Interestingly some of the participants had been left with, what could almost be described as, a compulsion to keep on getting qualifications. They expressed an urge to succeed academically which had never left them. These themes are explored in more detail below.

5.3.1 Studying GCSE English to get a particular qualification

Four of the participants were working in healthcare but could not proceed any further in their careers because of their lack of GCSE English. In effect, not gaining that one qualification at school was locking them out of their choice of occupation and all that goes with it: a satisfying and meaningful career, better pay, a defined progression structure and status. For example, Debbie, who is hoping to train as a nurse, explained that her choice of career when she left school was very limited:

I probably would have gone on to nursing if I had had better grades. Um, I think when I left school, hairdressing and things like that were the only things I could get into with my grades… Nursing was never thought of when I left school. I just wouldn't have been able to get in. I didn't get GCSE English at school… and I want to do nursing… I am working as a Health Care assistant at the community hospital down the road. At work they have been talking about me doing an apprenticeship… I would do exams and they would send me out on placements, wherever they were wanted. I think it's about four years. Hopefully, if I get my grades. Debbie

The possibility of doing the nursing apprenticeship was the incentive she needed to retake her exams. This was also the situation with Anna, who had wanted to be a nurse since she was at school but could not, because she did not have English and maths GCSE:

I currently do home care which I have done for five years. I want to get into nursing so I need my GCSEs, English and maths, before I can go any further. I really enjoy home care and I always wanted to do nursing. Anna

The majority of the participants shared the same overwhelming sense of motivation and they now had a powerful reason to succeed. They either had not had that when they were still at school or were not able to fulfil it, as they did not have the requisite qualifications to be accepted onto the relevant training courses for the careers they have now chosen. This links to the

findings in research question 3, that some students do not realise how passing GCSEs while still at school, means so many more opportunities are available to them. It would seem to be beneficial if there were a greater emphasis in schools on ensuring students understand the necessity of passing certain exams if they have a career in mind. There also needs to be an emphasis on the importance of passing English and maths GCSE as they are so often essential among the entry requirements to a large variety of careers.
It is unfortunate that so many of the participants lacked motivation at school and so finding ways to motivate students at school is vital if they are to succeed.

Research confirms that motivation plays a large part in succeeding academically and in a study concerned with motivation to read, it was found that different factors lead to a student learning to read and different factors keep them reading. A student may persevere with a text they find boring or difficult if they perceive it to have a useful purpose for them, (Jang et al., 2015). Although the factors may be related there are significant differences between them and if the teacher knows what the differences are, they can overcome any assumptions that a student is or is not motivated. Thus, the teacher can plan lessons which accommodate the student's particular reasons for being motivated to read. A student's views on reading develop over time and those views determine whether they read or avoid reading. Choosing to read is affected by other issues such as their level of interest in a specific subject. Therefore, a teacher, who knows a students' interests, may help offset a negative view of reading by offering relevant texts. A student's

interests and their attitude to reading may differ depending on the value they place on the importance of what they are reading so, although they may view reading negatively, they may still value the importance of certain texts. This suggests that discovering what the student wants may be key to unlocking disaffection (McGlinn, 2003; Honeyford et al., 2015).

Leon, similarly, spoke with enthusiasm of his work as a carer and was keen to qualify as a nurse too but also needed to pass English:

I'm here to get a C in English. I'm a full-time carer. It's in the community, so I do home care. I want to go to university to study nursing. I want to do mental health nursing. I have worked in special needs and with special needs children and I worked in a nursing home, but the one thing I haven't done is mental health nursing. Leon

Marie, who had left school with few qualifications, had just successfully completed an access to higher education course and was hoping to go to university if she could now pass English and maths:

[I have] *just done an access course, I did science. I've got a conditional offer to do paramedic science, but I need English and maths. I'm just about to start a weekend job as a Health Care Assistant. I need to have my English to go to university.* Marie

Debbie, Anna, Leon and Marie were all motivated to return to education in order to pass GCSE English (and/or maths) which they had not passed at school. They want to pursue a career in the medical profession and their determination means that they have been able to transcend the experience of not obtaining the qualifications they needed at school and change their employment situation. It can be very difficult for adult students to return to education for many reasons because of the barriers to learning that arise when people leave school, such as work and family commitments, cost and lack of confidence (Department for Education, 2018); (Norman and Hyland, 2003). I am arguing that those who had difficulty acquiring adequate literacy skills will often tolerate the inequality as something they have to accept, even though they are aware their skills are behind those of their peers, whereas the participants who have returned to education all have sufficiently strong motivation to overcome the barriers to learning to enrol on adult education courses to pursue the qualifications they missed out on at school. They may have low self-esteem and low expectations of being able to change their situation, but they are trying to change their situation. Their life experiences indicate that they should not challenge the status quo because that is how things are, and the reasons for this lack of opposition link to Bourdieu's (1986) concept of habitus. Habitus is central in regulating the practices making up societal relationships and so the way in which people live their lives reflects those relationships and the surroundings people live in. They are influenced by their experiences of life and are inclined to choose what they have encountered previously and thus their cultural and social preferences are affected by what is available to them. For the group of participants taking the

GCSE English class, the desire to gain a particular qualification was the spur that drove them back into education. They have not settled with the lower status occupations which they have already but are aiming for prestigious, worthwhile careers they have chosen. In 4.4.3 above, participants speak of how they had not appreciated the importance of gaining qualifications at school.

I asked Toby, who successfully passed an English GCSE resit when he was 20 years old, why he thought he succeeded then, after he left school. He answered:

I wanted it badly. In school I never had a clear goal. When you have such a clear goal you're more driven. I would have been more motivated if I had felt the subjects were relevant. Toby

Toby realised when he started work that he did have a skillset, there were things he was good at, whereas he had always felt he was not good at academic subjects when he was at school. His answer exemplifies the difference between the participants' attitudes when at school and how they felt after they left.

In a meritocracy the argument is that social mobility is based on merit and that people can move up or down within society because of what they have achieved (Francis and Wong, 2013). Therefore, in a meritocracy, society benefits since people work in positions which are appropriate for their skills,

that is, those considered to be less able do the lower level jobs while those considered to be more able do the higher skilled jobs. In fact, social inequality has increased while social mobility has been reduced because those from low socio-economic groups are so disadvantaged compared to the privileges enjoyed by those from higher socio-economic groups (Francis and Wong, 2013). Thus, even though, as stated in *Skills for Life* (2001), the education system is intended to prepare young people with the knowledge and abilities they need to be productive members of society and the workforce, this has not happened. If a student leaves school without English GCSE many career opportunities are closed to them. Debbie, Anna, Leon and Marie have all now decided to aim for careers they really would like to have, but the opportunities should have been available when they left school. They should have been able to leave school with adequate qualifications at GCSE so that they could enrol in suitable courses.

Not gaining suitable qualifications at school had also affected, Thalia and Stevie, who both work in education and need English GCSE to progress in their chosen fields:

I work as an LSA and I need a qualification. I'd like to continue doing that to at least Higher Level Teaching Assistant. I decided that I want a career in a certain area, I want to work in the classroom and want to be with children. I'm learning myself now, but back then [at school] it was a bit difficult. Thalia

But I can't do a PGCE, they said you can't as you don't have GCSE. So, I need both the English and maths. Stevie

They both have specific careers in mind, while Mia has found that the type of work open to her is so limited by not having any GCSEs. All the participants in this section need GCSE English to progress in their career path or, in Mia's case for starting a career:

I felt like I was restricting myself in terms of career if I didn't have any GCSEs, just maths and English. So, I thought now would be a good time, so I can do it while I'm still 21. I have no qualifications whatsoever. Mia

However, some of the participants had a different reason for coming back to education: they wanted to gain qualifications for their own personal satisfaction rather than for improving their qualifications.

5.3.2 Studying GCSE English and/or other subjects to prove to themselves that they can achieve academically

Several of the participants had returned to education to prove to themselves that they were capable of achieving qualifications they had not been able to achieve before. They did not intend to start new careers or use the qualifications to improve their present work situations, they just wanted the personal satisfaction of knowing they could succeed at something that had eluded them in the past. This had made them determined to prove themselves despite their negative experiences of school.

When Rachel was asked what her motivation was to return to education, she replied that she did not need to get English GCSE but, as she had always felt anxious and miserable going to school , she was taking the course for her own satisfaction:

… it was like, I'm going to prove to myself that I can do it. It was more of a 'I'm not scared'. I'm a barber and I had my own business. I didn't need to change careers for financial gain. Even coming to college [currently] was different … when I walked to school, anxiety began as soon as I started out. Coming to college I was so excited. It's a different atmosphere, the approach to teaching is very different now, in every aspect, it's just different. Whereas now, even though I don't get it right all the time, it doesn't bother me. But it did take a really long time to get to that point. Seeing different clients from all walks of life, I realise now that lots of other people have similar problems. Rachel

Rachel's motivation was similar to that of Julie, in wanting to achieve for the sake of it. However, Julie's went much further as she felt compelled, repeatedly, to take new qualifications, almost as if she was making up for her past. For example, Julie, a college lecturer in her 50s, described how struggling with English had led to her spending time, throughout her life, taking various qualifications to prove that she could pass exams. She felt a continuing motivation to gain paper evidence that demonstrated her academic ability. Her poor spelling still hung over her, despite having left school many years ago, and it continued to affect her at work. She felt she had been

classified as lacking in intelligence by, what she considered to be, her sub-standard use of English. She said how she never feels comfortable having to write on the board when teaching, as she is never sure she has spelt them correctly:

By the time I got to secondary school I'd been boxed as a person of a particular level of intelligence. They don't know who you are. I still wonder if that's what motivates me. I did three 'A' levels, but I really struggled. I did biology but I had to give it up because of all the spellings. And again, I couldn't do a degree, so I had to do two years at King Alfred's [a local college] *to get a diploma and then I went to London to make it up to a degree. Then I got a place to study at Bristol University and I needed that, I needed that to prove that I could do it.* Julie

Like Julie, Toby, who works full-time, had enrolled in a distance learning degree.

I felt I had a chip, I wanted to go to uni to prove I could do it. I now got 80% on the essays. I never got any encouragement [at school], *just one careers advice chat and I didn't take the careers advice seriously. There was no mentoring, no one to look up to, I never found that 'thing'.* Toby

Similarly, Jane, a bright, articulate, semi-retired woman, enrolled on a distance learning degree in her 60s in her favourite subject, science, a subject she had barely been able to study at school. She had many different jobs over the

years but had not let a lack of qualifications stand in her way. Although for Jane, there would always be the thought of how different her life might have been, if she could have had greater opportunities as a child. She might have been able to have a much more satisfying and well-paid career if only she had had more chances at school.

5.3.3 Conclusion

Asking the participants about their motivation to return to education revealed the extent to which their negative experiences of learning at school had affected them all in some way, either by them regretting their lack of qualifications and trying to make up for it now or, in the case of Rachel, Julie and Jane, wanting to get qualifications to prove to themselves that they could pass.

5.4 What are the participants' views on how the education system could be improved to avoid others having their experiences?

I was interested to discover the participants' views about any failings they saw in the education system and how they might be improved, in order to prevent others having similar experiences to theirs. The participants had all had less than ideal educational experiences themselves and I wanted them to have an opportunity to suggest improvements or alternative ways that schools could act to avoid others going through what they had experienced.

The participants mentioned repeatedly their concerns about the burden of the pressure put on children at school, who feel a relentless anxiety to achieve. All

the participants talked about seeing school as somewhere they felt there were continuous demands on them to achieve. They believed this was unnecessarily harsh and that the pressure must be, so that children could have a more positive learning experience. The participants made various suggestions for improvements to the current system based on their own experiences and, for those who had children, on their children's experiences too. When asked if they had any suggestions on the ways in which the education system could be improved the participants were quick to reply, suggesting various, different ideas which are shown below.

5.4.1 Reduce the pressure to achieve

When invited to express their opinions about the way schools' function, all the participants said they thought schools put far too much pressure on young people. The word 'pressure' was mentioned frequently and was linked to school's emphasis on passing examinations. All the participants said they believed that so much of school seemed to be solely about passing examinations. For example, Marie was concerned with young people feeling a sense of failure at 16, if, like herself, they did not do well in GCSEs:

There's way too much pressure on kids at 16, because it's drilled into them that GCSEs are the most important exams you're ever going to do and these define your career path for the future, and then they wonder why these poor kids have anxiety levels through the roof. Because you're drilling into them that if they fail this, they've failed life. Marie

These views were echoed by Thalia, who was dissatisfied with her education to the point of hating school. She also was concerned with the extent of the pressure to achieve by the education system, which was now affecting her child. In addition, she was concerned that her son did not always understand his schoolwork but was being pushed to learn just enough to pass a test:

I was not satisfied with my education the whole way through. I did end up hating school which made it really hard to engage and want to learn… yeah. I think my biggest issue in the education system, at the moment, is pressure that's put on our children. I feel it myself with coming back to do English, it's a lot and they have to do and they're young still, but it's a great big thing. If they don't get them, they're not worthy or something. I think the pressure, and really bad knock-on effect on our children, yes, it's great to have it but, if they're not mentally well that's no good and I think the pressure… makes them feel like if they don't get this, something's wrong with them… I think that's a big problem. My son in year six bringing home SATs work all the time and there are certain things he has to do to get the marks, personally I don't feel that he's comprehended the whole of it at all. He says, 'I just read one line - that's all I have to answer'. Yes, I think there's too much pressure on them… and being made to feel not worthy if they don't get it, they're not good enough and that's not fair. Thalia

Anna also said how she felt schools' expectations were too high when she was at school and those expectations were still as high now. Children feel a constant pressure to achieve, which can take any enjoyment from the

experience:

I think the schools expect a lot from them [children]*.* Anna

Additionally, Tom felt that schools were often too critical of students because the school felt the pressure of how it would be rated academically, as it wanted results to look impressive.

The comments by Marie, Thalia, Anna and Tom are consistent with research (Pascoe et al., 2019) which found that ongoing stress is a considerable worry for school students. This negatively affects their capacity to learn, their academic performance, employment prospects and physical and mental health. The authors recommended that it is important to find ways to increase students' ability to deal with stress-management. This is echoed by Roome and Soan (2019) whose research emphasised the importance of staff providing support, particularly for students who are susceptible to exam stress. They also recommend that staff should have training to raise their awareness of risk factors which can affect students' ability to cope. It would also be advantageous for staff to have training into how their behaviour can contribute to stress or alleviate it. Additionally, students who need more support in relation to their well-being could be identified and relevant support offered.

As Jackson (2006) points out, contemporary society emphasises individualism and this has led to a culture of competition in education whereby schools have

to publish their results in national league tables which show how successful (or otherwise) they are. Thus, there is much pressure on students to succeed academically at school and, as Reay (2001) states, this can lead to them fearing they will be seen as a failure if they do not succeed academically.

5.4.2 Make school more democratic

Certain of the participants argued that they would have preferred a more collaborative way of learning rather than being told what to do all the time. They resented being told what to do and knowing that they had no choice, they had to go to school. Marie spoke of how she much prefers coming to college, which is her own choice.

I felt I was very limited by not having GCSEs. That's why I came here (FE college)*, and I'll feel so pleased with myself when I get them. I much prefer it as an adult though, the environment is completely different, you come to college, you go to your class, but you don't have to be there, you're choosing to be there. And that, in itself, makes it easier because you know it's what you have decided and not what the government is telling you, you have to do. Being around other like-minded adults as well, looking at other people and thinking 'you're a lot older than me', makes me feel better. It shows it's never too late to get these qualifications. Everybody is here for their own reasons and I respect a lot of the people in my classes, a couple of them are there because their kids are currently doing GCSEs and they want to be able to help them and I think that's one of the greatest reasons to do it. I really have admiration for those people.* Marie

Like Marie, Stevie was also enjoying her college experience and appreciated having clear, written guidance on what was expected from her, which was preferable to her memories of confusing classes. She wants to know what she should be learning and whether or not she has achieved her goals:

I think in English there should always be learning objectives on the board and a plenary session at the end, to say what have you learnt, have you learnt anything? Stevie

Stevie recommended that all school-teachers should behave more like the college teachers and treat everyone as equals, rather than ordering others about:

I think not embarrassing people in lessons, allowing slow processors time to think. Be down to earth with the children, rather than being a teacher at the front. Stevie

She wants to see a more equal partnership between teacher and student, rather than the student always being on the receiving end. The comments of Marie and Stevie are in line with the findings of Roome and Soan (2019) who suggest there are many strategies which could be used in the classroom to improve students' abilities in reducing exam stress. They argue that students, as well as staff, should be aware of their goals and be given strategies to cope with exam stress. They also advocate changes in teaching practice, for

example giving students opportunities to be involved in more investigative learning tasks, to develop thinking and problem-solving strategies, recognise the importance of their own contributions, and to make sure that staff are seen to be supportive and not pressurising. This follows on from the work of Paolo Freire in the 1970s whose 'critical pedagogy' is a teaching approach designed to help students question and challenge both the way they are taught and the beliefs and systems in society. He criticises the practice of the teacher acting as a banker who deposits facts into the students' minds which the students passively accept without making any contribution to the dialogue. Freire's (1970) approach encourages students to think critically about their position within the education system and society as a whole, rather than the teacher narrating and the student passively listening.

5.4.3 Give young people the information they need to make career choices at the right time

Dale argued that there was a lack of guidance on how to find an appropriate career, as he felt schools place too much importance on having a career without really helping students to decide what career is best for them as individuals. More emphasis should be placed on explaining why particular exams are vital for many careers. Thus, they may go into jobs which do not really suit them:

The emphasis is on having a career or job, not how to get it. Dale

Leon agreed with this and suggested that 16 was too young to know what you

want to do in life and he also pointed out that he had friends who had completed degrees and yet were now working in completely unrelated areas:

And it's too early to choose at 16 what you want to do. I want to do this and then I want to do this and I know a few people who have come out of university and they say: 'I don't even do what I studied. I don't know why I studied it', as they don't even do what they studied. So, when they give you the option of what to do, I feel you're really quite young. Leon

Julie, a lecturer at a further education college, made the following comment about her experiences of teaching:

The investment isn't in schools for some young people to rise up. And it starts from primary school that labelling stereotype has happened. And by the time you get to secondary school you're not going to try and change the path that you've been set on. I used to teach the low sets in a secondary school and some of the children were really bright. They would come out with real high order thinking, I might tell them how good it was, but they would go, 'no, no' - and nothing would change. But where is the will to change that? I thought it was going to change but it hasn't, has it? An opportunity is there [in adult education] *and I do have a big regret that they are cutting back on adult education because that does give people a chance and an opportunity, doesn't it?* Julie

Julie felt that everything has stayed the same, with people locked in their places within society, often without the will to make changes or the knowledge of how to do so. This is echoed in literature discussed earlier in this chapter, in section 4.3.3, such as in (Rabušicová and Oplatková, 2010; Francis and Wong, 2013; Cassen and Kingdon, 2007; Archer et.al., 2007; Francis and Mills, 2012; Osler, 2006).

5.4.4 Conclusion

All the participants had strong views on how the education system could be improved in order to ensure others did not have their experiences. The strongest suggestion they made was that there should not be such relentless pressure on students to pass examinations, so that this could lead to a more relaxed and pleasant learning environment. Another popular suggestion was to make schools more democratic, with less of a confrontational relationship between teachers and students. Several participants said it was important for students to be given relevant careers information at the right time, in order to be able to fully consider their future options before they left school.

5.5 Chapter conclusion

The different issues raised by the participants all show how long lasting and profound their experiences have been. The negative effects of school have not gone when they reached adulthood and even those participants, such as Julie, Dale and Tom, who now have successful careers they enjoy can be troubled by feelings of inadequacy. The timeframe of when the participants left school, ranges from over forty years ago to one year ago, however, it

emerged from the interviews that the majority of participants had negative feelings in relation to learning English regardless of the period when they received their school education. I had expected the younger participants to have had more positive experiences because teaching methods have changed (and hopefully) improved over the years but, the outcomes for many were similar regardless of age, that is, the damaging effects of having a lower level of literacy than they wanted or needed.

All the participants had been affected by their literacy inequalities, some still had ongoing issues with low self-esteem, others, while very aware of how they felt, were determined not to let their early negative experiences stand in their way. The participants often felt that the difficulties they faced with GCSE English at school were due to lack of support, either from parents, the school or both. Many were working in areas which were not their preferred choice of occupation and were highly motivated to do whatever they needed to change their circumstances for the better. All the participants had strong views on ways in which the education system could be improved to other prevent students having similar negative feelings about their education.

6 Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

In researching this thesis, I set out to uncover what it felt like for a group of adults to go through life having experienced a lack of literacy at school. This conclusion comprises the following: it reconsiders the research questions; lays out the original contribution to knowledge made by the thesis and why it is significant; discusses briefly the limitations of the research; and finally, suggests some areas for further research.

I was surprised to find that the effects of inadequate literacy were profound and were still continuing for each one of the participants. The original contribution this thesis makes is to consider the emotional impact of a lack of literacy from the viewpoint of those affected, rather than looking at how literacy is measured or, the level of literacy someone has reached. This research is concerned with peoples' actual feelings rather than with facts and figures. As I wrote in chapter 1, I was taken aback to discover that, in the 21st century, young people could still leave compulsory education without gaining, at least, an adequate level of literacy for their needs. This final chapter shows fully the original contribution the thesis has made and describes the importance and implications of the findings.

6.2 Review of the research goal and the answers to the research questions

The goal of this research was to investigate the effects, on a small group of individuals, of the literacy inequalities they faced. The intention was to gain a

better understanding of what they experienced in terms of how they felt about their literacy journeys, and also to examine their opinions on the reasons for literacy inequalities. The research questions were based, in part, on thinking about conversations I had with friends who assumed people with poor literacy were either lazy – they must have messed about at school, or that they were unintelligent. These friends had done well in life and never thought that having insufficient literacy could be due to inadequacies in the education system or in the family situation – it must be the individual's fault. The friends seemed determined not to see the individuals concerned as anything other than a problem. Whereas I could not see them like that, to me the participants were people who had missed out and they should not be blamed for that.

Therefore, the research questions focused on finding out how it really feels for someone to have inadequate literacy for what they want or need. Each of the participants had spoken of the disappointment they felt with what they had experienced at school and were keen to talk about what had happened to them. They had all been affected by not having adequate literacy and the negative way they had felt at school, and these experiences continued to affect them throughout their lives. I tailored the research questions to uncover the participants' feelings and opinions about their experiences. When I interviewed the participants, the questions were subtle and gentle so that I could tease out the answers, rather than asking questions too directly or bluntly. I knew that discussing their childhoods might be emotional for some of the participants and I wanted them to be able to describe their experiences comfortably in their own words. I expected the participants to be smart and

articulate, and they were. They just had not had the opportunity to become good at literacy.

This research does not attempt to recreate other studies that reassert the link between poverty and literacy, but rather to find out what having literacy problems feels like. My impression is that most of the work in this area looks at how having inadequate literacy spoils your chances in the future - how it makes you part of a lower socio-economic group and how you will not do as well as others in life. What is important to me is how people are affected as individuals, and that is what makes this research different.

6.3 The original contributions to knowledge made by the thesis

In considering the very real effects of literacy inequalities on a small group of adults this thesis makes four original contributions to knowledge, which are:

1 The emotional effects of having inadequate literacy last a lifetime
2 It is at secondary school that problems became evident to the individuals affected
3 Even getting extra help at school often became a source of humiliation and shame
4 The importance of getting support both at school and at home

6.3.1 The emotional effects of having inadequate literacy last a lifetime

The findings are significant because of their focus on the lived experiences of the participants and what this has uncovered. The results of the research

highlight the considerable effects of literacy inequalities on the participants, not only when they were at school, but also throughout their lives. It argues that the emotional effects on adults of not having adequate literacy may be overlooked, as so much emphasis in the existing literature is placed on facts about the number of individuals with inadequate literacy and how literacy is defined and measured, for example in Barakat (2016), Hamilton and Pitt (2011) and Robinson (2005), or on the effects of a lack of literacy on income and careers, for example in the Sutton Trust and the Social Mobility Commission (2019), but there is a lack of literature on the feelings adults may have because of the continuing effects of inadequate literacy. Sen (2005) argued that everyone has the right to be the best they can be and to flourish, and therefore they should have the right to acquire the literacy they want and need as a child. It is this that is important to people - what they use literacy for and not just what level of literacy they may have.

Several participants spoke of how they felt, what was almost, a compulsion to be academically successful, and wanted to pass exams to prove to themselves (and sometimes to others) that they were smart. Indeed, certain of the participants had returned to education to study GCSE English as adults, even though they did not need the qualification. Thus, the emotional effects of lack of literacy are evident here, no matter how successful they may be in life now, they still carry around the shadow of inadequacy.

6.3.2 It is at secondary school that problems become evident to the individuals affected

When asked about their experiences of learning English at school, the participants had mostly enjoyed learning at primary school, but felt less happy at secondary school. Some participants had quite a miserable time at secondary school and were still affected by their experiences. Those participants felt that once they were behind it was difficult, if not impossible, to catch up. There was always some sort of trigger point when the participants realised they were getting behind. Sometimes this happened towards the end of primary school and other times at some point at secondary school. But whenever it was, this was when their self-esteem started to plummet, and school started to become a burden which they could not lay aside. Children may, from an early age, have a strong sense that they are falling behind other children in literacy, but accept the situation (Bourdieu, 1986). They need to be monitored closely and asked if there are any problems, so that any issues with learning can be picked up and dealt with straightaway.

6.3.3 Even getting extra help at school often became a source of humiliation and shame

Receiving extra help at school, rather than offering a solution, was often simply a source of humiliation and shame for most of the students, as it often led to them being teased by others. Several of the participants spoke of how they disliked being taken out of lessons to go to a separate room for a one-to-one session as it singled them out, and the other students knew why they were leaving the room. Being taken out of different lessons in rotation meant they could fall behind in those subjects which did not help their overall feelings of inadequacy.

Previous research has indicated that there is a strong link between problems accessing literacy and acceptance of other forms of inequality in later life (Flemmen, 2013; Sullivan, 2001). My findings show that the negative impact on individuals begins when they become aware that they have been singled out, thus suggesting that (as in 6.3.2 above), students need to be asked about how they are feeling, and schools need to be aware that sometimes, apparently helpful, interventions are not always perceived as such by those receiving them.

6.3.4 The importance of getting support both at school and at home

Participants who had a good level of support at school but did not have parents who could support them with their education commented that, although the situation was not ideal, having some sort of support was important. The situation was similar for those who had little support at school but did have help at home, because having someone who could help them was beneficial.

However, both groups were in a much better position than those who experienced the double effect of not able to get sufficient support from either school or home. The participants without any support were left to struggle on their own and so there has to be a better understanding of the value of having a support system at home and at school for learning to be successful. There is much research on the reasons behind social and educational inequality (Cassen and Kingdon, 2007; Clifton and Cook; Francis and Wong, 2013; Waldfogel and Washbrook, 2010), but the existing literature stops short before

exploring the emotional effects on those involved.

6.4 The limitations of the research

The research set out to investigate the experiences of literacy inequalities in a group of individuals. It has provided a voice for those who have experienced feeling that they have not achieved a sufficient level of competence in English for their needs. The sample size is quite small, and it may be argued that a small sample size could be seen as a limitation to the research, however, it has been shown that, in qualitative research, the first six in-depth interviews produce the majority of new data, (Guest et al., 2006). By keeping the sample size small enough each participant was able to have a recognisable voice within the study, as suggested by Robinson

(2014).

6.5 Areas for further research

The findings strongly indicate that there are several areas of literacy which would benefit from further research. Particular areas for further research which stood out were: early intervention in the education of children; teaching English in more practical ways; investigating the extent to which adults were taking part in schemes designed to improve their learning; looking into weaknesses in the English education system; making changes in the way education polices are designed and implemented; considering what this would mean for teaching practices in schools and FE colleges and also for Initial Teacher Training and teachers' continuing professional development.

6.5.1 Early intervention in the education of children

The thesis advocates for early intervention in the education of children who are already falling behind their expected level of literacy or, are at risk of doing so (COPE, 2017; Department for Education, 2015; EPPSE 3-16+, 2015; Field, 2010; National Equality Panel, 2010; Waldfogel and Washbrook, 2010). This appears to be the most effective way of raising levels of achievement in literacy. Improving literacy levels will give children the literacy skills they need to enable them to both take part fully and confidently in society and to obtain the qualifications they need for successful, meaningful careers. It will also stand them in good stead for the rest of their lives, so they never have to experience having poor literacy skills.

6.5.2 Teaching English in more practical ways

As shown in chapter 2 there appear to be real benefits in teaching English in more practical ways, whereby students could become more physically involved in what they were studying (Posner and Pantoine, 2009; Donnelly and Lambourne, 2011; Golding et al., 2016; Malvilidi et al., 2018). Such research has indicated that for many students a hands-on approach to learning is beneficial and preferable.

6.5.3 Investigating the importance of targeted literacy intervention for adults

An adult with poor basic skills may find it difficult to change career paths, especially as they get older as, even with intervention to improve those skills, just being taught basic skills in isolation may not be sufficient to change their career direction. Intervention is vital, but it may be difficult to motivate people

who have had negative school experiences and may not want to learn in a classroom environment. A solution could be to address basic skills' weaknesses in contexts which are more relevant to the individual, such as in the working environment and, where possible, incorporate basic skills in a practical setting. This method should make it easier to find and target the adults who would benefit, and it also offers the prospect of combining improved basic skills with both improved work skills and family literacy.

There has been some research into whether policies designed to encourage lifelong learning have been effective in leading to a 'learning society' society' (Gorard et al., 1998). More research could be carried out into the reasons for participation in particular types of learning. Attempts to increase existing schemes, or lessen the effects of barriers to learning, did not necessarily lead to increased participation (Gorard et al., 1998). Education policies need to ensure that adult literacy provision is sufficient and provided effectively for those who may not have benefitted from school education, and so they need to be placed in a position where they can overcome this (Maddox, 2008).

6.5.4 Weaknesses in the English education system

Both the feelings expressed by the participants and their opinions on education, indicate it would be advantageous to address certain weaknesses in the English education system. Many of the participants pointed out weaknesses in the way they were taught, and all felt there was a lack of awareness of their difficulties when they were at school.

One point mentioned repeatedly by the participants was for schools to have a greater understanding and application of differentiated learning, that is treating each student as an individual and not applying a ‘one size fits all’ approach to a whole group. Certain students find it difficult to learn in the same way as others and this can lead to a minority struggling because the teaching methods do not suit the way they learn. Fundamental to this is having differentiated literacy support because, without this, students may not have adequate literacy for their needs and soon start to fall behind. Removing students from classes for extra help with literacy is not necessarily the answer because it sets them apart from their fellow students. As mentioned in 6.5.2 above, teaching literacy in a practical way can make a positive difference to certain students by allowing them to learn in a way which best suits them.

6.5.5 Making changes in the way future education polices are designed and implemented

The participants said how they wished there had been a way for the education system to show greater sensitivity to their needs. Thus, it is vital that education polices be designed in a more collaborative way that consults with a wide range of people, including those who have been through the education system recently and those for whom the system has not been ideal, rather than just concentrating on the opinions of education experts and politicians. It appears crucial that those who have not wholly benefitted from their schooling be given the opportunity to voice their opinions on how the education system can be improved in order to prevent others having their negative experiences. This would then have implications for teaching practices.

6.5.6 The implications for practice of teaching in a more differentiated way

Changing the way students are taught in schools and FE colleges would involve a rethink of, not only, teaching practices, but also of Initial Teacher Training and for teachers' continuing professional development. Teacher education would need to incorporate awareness of the emotional impact on students of any difficulties with learning they may have, and so teachers need to be trained to look for and understand such difficulties. It is not just about students having problems with the mechanics of literacy but also any underlying emotional issues that influence the effectiveness of learning.

6.6 Chapter conclusion

This thesis is significant because it is concerned with the importance of the actual feelings and experiences of a group of adults who have faced literacy inequalities. It has uncovered the extent of the profound and the long-lasting effects on the participants, and this is significant because it highlights the magnitude of the impact on them. This thesis looks at the issues involved from the perspective of those affected and that is its original contribution to knowledge. By concentrating on a group of adults in this way it adds to the literature on literacy, as it takes a wholly novel approach by considering the ongoing, emotional effects on adults. It is hoped the thesis will influence future research and methods of teaching literacy, as it indicates that it would be beneficial to address certain failings in the English education system, so that others do not have the same experiences as the participants in this study.

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Appendix 1

Lancaster University
Bailrigg, Lancaster, LA1 4YW

Information sheet

Project Title: Experiencing literacy inequalities: a qualitative study of the effects of literacy inequalities on adults.
Name of Researcher: Barbara Turner
Email: b.turner4@lancaster.ac.uk

I am studying for doctorate in Education and Social Justice at Lancaster University and I would like to invite you to take part in a research project. Before you decide please take time to read the following information and ask any questions you may have.

This is a study to examine the life experiences of a small group of adults who have left school without reaching the level of literacy they would have liked to have reached.

You have been invited to take part because you attend a class for adults taking GCSE English. Taking part is entirely voluntary. If you do decide to take part I will interview you and record the interview electronically as well as taking notes. All data will be anonymised and you will not be identifiable.

You may withdraw at any time before or during your participation in this study and up to two weeks after taking part in the study, without giving any reason. The research is intended to offer more information on both the participants' thoughts and feelings about acquiring literacy and on the reasons why some people have difficulties with literacy.

Research can deliver benefits to society and to others in a similar position. Although this research may not benefit you directly, it is hoped that it will highlight some of the reasons for literacy inequalities and offer suggestions for how these can be avoided in future.

If you require any further information please contact Dr. N. Ingram at Lancaster University, Bailrigg, Lancaster, LA1 4YW on n.ingram@lancaster.ac.uk

CONSENT FORM

Project Title: **Experiencing literacy inequalities:** a qualitative study of the effects of literacy inequalities on adults.
Name of Researchers: BARBARA TURNER
Email: b.turner4@lancaster.ac.uk

Please tick each box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily ☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time before or during my participation in this study and up to 2 weeks after I took part in the study, without giving any reason. If I withdraw within 2 weeks of taking part in the study my data will be removed. If I am involved in focus groups and then withdraw my data will remain part of the study. ☐

3. If I am participating in the focus group I understand that any information disclosed within the focus group remains confidential to the group, and I will not discuss the focus group with or in front of anyone who was not involved unless I have the relevant person's express permission ☐

4. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications or presentations by the researcher/s, but my personal information will not be included and I will not be identifiable. ☐

5. I understand that my name/my organisation's name will not appear in any reports, articles or presentation without my consent. ☐

6. I understand that any interviews or focus groups will be audio-recorded and transcribed and that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure. ☐

7. I understand that data will be kept according to University guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study. ☐

8. I agree to take part in the above study. ☐

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Date	Signature

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent_____

Date _____ Day/month/year

One copy of this form will be given to the participant and the original kept in the files of the researcher at Lancaster University.

Appendix 3

Interview Questions

These are grouped into 4 sections:

A Their reasons for attending the class/expressing concern about their literacy acquisition. What they did after school.

B Their memories of learning to read and whether they had support at home and at school.

C Their thoughts on how not having sufficient literacy for their needs (including lacking GCSE English, if applicable) has affected them.

D Their opinions on how the education system could be improved.

A

1. Why did you decide to come to this class?
2. Are you working at the moment? *Doing what, where?*
3. Do you live here in the town?
4. Do you live with family?

B

5. Can you remember learning to read? *At home/school?*
6. Where did you go to school? *Geographical location, not specific school*
7. Can you remember the reading scheme that was used?
8. Did your parents or siblings have any problems with learning to read?
9. Did your parents help you with learning to read? *And with homework? Was having the structure of homework important?*

C

10. At what age did you leave school?

11. Did you have any GCSEs or other qualifications when you left?

12. What did you do after you left school?

13. Do you feel satisfied with your education? What did you think of the teachers? Are you satisfied with the way you were taught? *If appropriate ask about dyslexia?*

14. In what ways do you think your career choices might have been different if you had got more/different qualifications from school?

15. Has a lack of literacy affected you in other ways? If so, how?

16. What do you think about the education you received? Did it give you what you wanted and/or needed?

D

17. If you think about a child going to school now, how could the education system be improved?

18. Is there anything you would like to add?

19. Is there anything you would like to ask me?