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# "It is possible to reinvent yourself!" An analysis of the learning lives and lived experience of adult literacy students in a Further Education context

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**UNIVERSITY OF  
PLYMOUTH**

***"It is possible to reinvent yourself?"* An analysis of the learning lives and  
lived experience of adult literacy students in a Further Education context**

by

**CHRISTOPHER GRUNDY**

A thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth  
in partial fulfilment for the degree of

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## **Author's Declaration**

At no time during the registration for the degree of Professional Doctorate in Education of has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Doctoral College Quality Sub-Committee. Work submitted for this research degree at the University of Plymouth has not formed part of any other degree either at the University of Plymouth or at another establishment.

This research degree was completely funded by my parents. The thesis was completed over seven-year period, beginning in September 2010, and was submitted in partial fulfilment of the Plymouth University Professional Doctorate in Education programme requirements. The thesis represents the culmination of a substantial amount of reading, thinking and academic written work, some of which was completed and submitted as assessed assignment papers as required for the modular part of the doctorate programme. These papers included the following titles:

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## **Abstract**

### ***"It is possible to reinvent yourself?" An analysis of the learning lives and lived experience of adult literacy students in a Further Education context***

This research presents an analysis of the life stories of four adult literacy learners studying on a Skills for Life course in a Further Education context in the south west of England, three of whom are returning to education for the first time in their adult lives. Drawing on data generated by semi-structured biographical interviews, a sociocultural lens is used to gain detailed insights into participants' life histories and their understandings of the nuanced ways the adult literacy course may be helping them in their lives in the education context and beyond.

Findings from the analysis of the participants' life stories clearly show that their personal narratives are shaped by a heterogeneous bricolage of broader discourses available to them in different social contexts. Although the themes of employability and skills, synonymous with neoliberal political discourses of adult education are dominant themes in the participants' life stories, a rich variety of other narrative themes such motherhood, mental health, dyslexia, marginalisation, social alienation, criminality and substance abuse are also integral to the narratives and the significance of their learning experiences. It is argued that the outcomes of adult literacy learning are by no means reducible to skills acquisition and increases in employability, and that literacy learning experiences can engender a nuanced range of significant, albeit less tangible,

transitions in people's lives that practitioners and policy makers should take in to consideration in devising literacy strategies that meet the needs of people accessing course provision.

The representations of the narratives within the analysis show the ways the participants' course learning experiences, coupled with their exposure to 'alternative' social and education discourses are gradually engendering changes in their literacy practices, their learner identities and world views. Unlike other similar sociocultural research about the outcomes of formal adult literacy education, which so often uses a narrow focus on learners' experiences of the course context using statistical data, the biographical-interpretative approach used in this research situates their learning experiences in broader context of the participants' life stories. In doing this, the research better illustrates the significance of their learning literacy experiences and the ways literacy learning is helping the participants in their lives within the field of education as well as in other social contexts.

The findings strongly indicate that the participants' literacy learning experiences are having a significant destabilising effect on the ways they conceptualise their learning histories, their learning identities and imagined futures. By aligning with the lifelong learning discourses, the participants' emerging identities as lifelong adult learners are manifesting in them critically evaluating and resisting the ways they have previously been disadvantaged in education contexts and imagining new possibilities in education. The research shows that such

meaning making processes are a vitally important aspect of the learning process that is integral disadvantaged adult learners realising their imagined futures in the education and therefore is an implication which should be acknowledged by policy makers and practitioners in the field.

**Key words: adult literacy, life story, narrative, discourse, practice, identity**

# Contents

	<b>Page</b>
<b>Chapter 1 - Introduction</b>	<b>18</b>
1.1 Situating the research	19
1.2 The international context of adult literacy	25
1.3 The purpose of the research	35
1.4 The importance of the research	39
1.5 The research approach	40
<b>Chapter 2 - Literature Review</b>	<b>45</b>
2.1 Introduction	46
2.2 Discourses of adult literacy in education	
policy in England	48
2.3 The Moser Report	53
2.4 Competing discourses that shaped the	
Skills for Life Strategy	56

2.5	Existing research about the outcomes of adult literacy courses	63
2.6	Paradigms of literacy and the problem of transfer	71
2.6.1	Functional Skills and the problem of transfer	73
2.7	New Literacy Studies: literacy as social practice	90
2.7.1	The marginalising effect of the functional model of literacy	78
2.7.2	A critique of New Literacy Studies research	81
2.7.3	Life history and narrative approaches to researching literacy learning	82
2.8	Using biographical narratives to researching learning experiences	91
2.9	Why use a narrative research approach?	94
2.10	Summary	96
<b>Chapter 3 - Methodology</b>		<b>119</b>
3.1	Introduction	100
3.2	Adopting a sociocultural approach to research	102
3.2.1	A social constructionist framework	107

3.2.2	Discourses	109
3.2.3	Discourses and personal narratives	114
3.2.4	Identity, meaning and subject positioning	118
3.3	Challenging the status of biographical research	123
3.3.1	Defending the validity of biographical research	126
3.3.2	Biographical interviews and validity	130
3.4	Methods	135
3.4.1	Recruitment strategy	135
3.4.2	Rationale for recruitment strategy	136
3.4.3	Participant selection	139
3.4.4	Rationale for the interviews	142
3.4.5	Semi-structured interview design	143
3.4.6	The interviews in practice: an illustration	145
3.4.6.1	Interview 1 illustrated	146
3.4.6.2	Interview 2 Illustrated	150
3.4.6.3	Interview 3 Illustrated	153
3.5	The fluidity of life stories	156
3.6	Analysing life stories	158
3.6.1	Stage 1 - Transcribing and coding the data	158

3.6.2	Stage 2 - Writing the participants' life stories	163
3.6.3	Stage 3 - Conducting a discourse analysis	164
3.7	Chapter summary	171
<b>Chapter 4 - Analysis</b>		<b>208</b>
4.1	Introduction	174
4.2	Chronological thematic analysis	177
4.2.1	Adulthood and reasons for joining an adult literacy course	196
4.2.2	The adult literacy context and literacy practices	216
4.3	Discussion	232
4.3.1	Narrative themes of struggle and disadvantage	235
4.3.2	Narrative themes of alienation, criminality and recovery	245
4.3.3	Narrative themes of lifelong learning	252
4.4	Summary	264
<b>Chapter 5 - Conclusion</b>		<b>271</b>
5.1	Introduction	271

5.2	Limitations	271
5.3	Addressing the research questions	280
5.3.1	Key question 1	280
5.3.2	Key research question 2	285
5.4	Summary	290
5.5	Implications and recommendations for further research	295

<b>References</b>		<b>301</b>
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## **Appendices**

A1	About the participants	339
A2	Ethics protocols: research information and consent documentation	345
A3	Participant recruitment PowerPoint presentation	353
A4	Interview questions	354
A5	An illustration of Stage 1: Coding the data (Interview 1 with Jacob)	357
A6	An illustration of Stage 2: Constructing Jacob's	



life story	379
A7 Jacob's life story (in full)	396
A8 An illustration of Stage 3: Constructing a discourse analysis	412
A9 Discourse analysis of Jacob's life story (in full)	415

‘Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.’

**Søren Kierkegaard**

## Introduction

In this chapter the key aims and rationale of this research about the outcomes of formal adult literacy learning experiences in a Further Education context are introduced. The chapter begins by setting the scene and situating the focus of this research in the context of key issues with the functional model of literacy that have been written about in other research. To situate this research about the outcomes of adult literacy education in England within the international context, the policies of New Zealand, Australia and Sweden are discussed. Here, some of the similarities and differences in the policy and pedagogic traditions are highlighted, along with the ways supranational European policy strategies have influenced upon them. To help readers fully understand the rationale for this research, the chapter provides a potted version of my own life story about my returning to formal education and the experiences of teaching in the field of adult education which led to me undertaking this research. My life story is significant as it provides some clear insights into the conceptual origins of the research (Gadamar, 2004, in Scott and Usher, 201: 29). I outline my reasons for embarking on the research, the problem it aims to explore, and the reasons for adopting a social practices methodological approach in making a contribution to knowledge about the the outcomes adult literacy learning. The following two key questions frame the focus of the research:

- Do the participants' learning experiences on the formal adult literacy course change their literacy and language practices in ways that help them in their lives beyond the education context?

- Does formal adult literacy learning affect changes in the participants' learner identities, and if so, what is the significance of such changes in identity?

### **1.1 Situating the research**

During the late 20th century, the purpose and value of adult literacy education in England, as well as in other countries across the world has been constructed in a variety of ways within different education policies and practices. Since the launch of the Skills for Life Strategy (DfEE, 2001), adult literacy education in England as with many other post-industrial countries across the world have become closely allied with neoliberal paradigms of education that constructs literacy as measurable skills that are necessary for progressing in formal education, increasing employability and meeting the literacy demands of everyday life. The rationale underpinning many neoliberal adult education strategies, such as the Skills for Life Strategy in England, are primarily concerned with increasing human capital, increasing the social mobility of marginalised groups, and therein improving the economic competitiveness of nations within ever-changing global market economies (Tomlinson, 2005; Papen, 2005). New Labour's Skills for Life Strategy provision has since been rebranded as Functional Skills Adult Literacy and Numeracy provision, however, the model of adult literacy remains closely aligned with the original structure of the Skills for Life Adult Literacy Core Curriculum (DfES, 2001) in terms of skills measures, levels and approaches to teaching.

Commentators suggest that the prevalence of neoliberal paradigms in the field of adult education has led to the gradual commodification of education (Tett, Hamilton, Hillier, 2006: 7; Mayo, 1999), which in the adult literacy context is having an insidious effect on the scope courses have to meet students' specific literacy needs (Tett et al. 2010; Ade-Ojo, 2011). In particular, it is argued that the target-driven culture of adult literacy education that prioritizes qualification outcomes is manifesting in test-focused teaching practices that are ineffective for developing students' literacy and language in ways that help them overcome the difficulties they face with literacy in their everyday lives beyond the course context (Bathmaker, 2007; Crowther, J., Maclachlan, K., Tett, L., 2010).

Despite the reported success of The Skills for Life Strategy (2001) in terms of qualification outcomes (DfEE, 2006; BIS: 2010), critics adopting a sociocultural lens maintain that the functional skills model of literacy used in the Adult Literacy Core Curriculum (DfEE, 2001) diminishes the scope adult literacy courses have to be responsive to students' needs (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Hamilton & Merrifield, 1999). The functional definition of literacy is based on a cognitivist model of learning that constructs literacy practices as commodified skills that are considered to exist independently of the social contexts in which they are used (Street, 2003). This functional model of literacy skills exemplified in the adult literacy curriculum serves as a basis for measuring students' literacy competencies, identifying skills deficits and ascribing learning levels.

Within the existing literature about the outcomes of formal adult literacy education, a significant body of sociocultural research contests that the functional model of literacy is problematic. One of the principal arguments is that literacy and language use are socially situated practices (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Papen, 2007) that emerge in specific ways in relation to particular working practices and forms of knowledge prevalent within those contexts (Street, 2003; Holland and Lave, 2010). On this basis, they argue that literacy practices cannot be theorized as existing independently and are not universal; rather literacies are multiple as they become patterned in unique ways within particular social contexts. It follows that the functional model of literacy used in the formal adult literacy education context is only one form of literacy amongst a multiplicity of others. Measures of literacy competency and associated judgements about students' functionality in using literacy within formal adult education courses are therefore only relative to the functional model of literacy used in the adult literacy curriculum, and are not necessarily a valid indicator of students' proficiency in using literacies in other social contexts.

As Street (2003) argues, the models of literacy that are used in education are based on a cognitivist model of learning that disguises the ideological assumptions upon which it is based. In treating literacy as objectified and measurable skills, the functional model of literacy fails to acknowledge the social, cultural and economic conditions that may explain the reasons for this apparent literacy deficit. Furthermore, given the functional model only valorizes a very narrow conception of literacy, those people accessing adult literacy course provision are privileged or marginalized according to the extent to which

their literacy and language practices are commensurate with those valorized in the course context. Similarly, other research highlights that the functional skills definition of literacy manifests in teaching practices that are not culturally responsive to students' specific literacy learning needs, which do not always coincide with the literacy practices valorized within the adult literacy context (Ade-Ojo, 2011; Tett, L., Hamilton, M., Hillier, Y., 2006; Bathmaker, 2007; Crowther, J., Maclachlan, K., Tett, L. (2010).

On these grounds, it is argued that the functional model constitutes a 'deficit model' (Ade-Ojo, 2011) that constructs people as having skills gaps, which may not necessarily present a difficulty for students in their lives within other social contexts. The positioning of students as having skills deficits and the ascription of literacy levels can in effect create barriers to education opportunities and potentially prevent people from accessing other further or higher education courses that invariably require Level 1 or Level 2 literacy qualifications as an entry requirement. Thus, the functional model of literacy valorized in the adult literacy education curriculum potentially sustains structural inequalities of opportunity, as people are prevented from undertaking career paths due to their identified literacy deficit.

As detailed in the Literature Review chapter, one of the central issues with the functional model of literacy is the underlying assumption that the literacy practices, being universal, transfer in potentially beneficial ways between different social contexts (Perkins and Solomon, 1992; Tett, 2010). The notion of

transferable knowledge is tacitly accepted in education policy and amongst many educationalists as the 'common sense' view of learning whereby many appear to tacitly agree that learning is essentially a process of knowledge acquisition (Perkins and Solomon, 1992; Sfard, 1998). Language associated with the concept of learning such as: development, attainment, construction, internalisation, accumulation, apprehending, appropriation etc, are common to the nomenclature in the adult education field (DfEE, 2001), and are all suggestive of the acquisition metaphor (AM). Learning as acquisition implies that units of knowledge are transmitted by teachers and accumulated by learners like commodities, which can then be transferred and utilised in different contexts.

The notion of knowledge acquisition and transferable knowledge, however is contested by sociocultural theorists (Street, 2003; Holland and Lave, 2009; Sfard, 1998; Tett, Hamilton, Hillier 2006) who posit a participatory metaphor (PM) of learning. Participatory models of learning reject the essentialist premise of knowledge acquisition on the basis that their reliance on notions of cognitive development are not tenable (Sfard and Prusak, 1998). Participatory models, on the other hand, conceptualise learning as a socially situated activity, whereby the practices of persons become shaped through their participation in communities of practice within given socio-cultural contexts (Tett, Hamilton and Hillier, 2006; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Sfard and Prusak, 1998; Holland and Lave, 2009). As 'newcomers' begin to participate in community activities and use cultural objects, their identities and social practices - their ways of being and knowing become patterned according to the norms of that community (Wenger,



1998). As participants' practices become more closely aligned with the cultural practices in given contexts, they gradually become identified as 'experts' and are advantaged as their social capital within the community increases.

In summary, the notions of skills acquisition and transferable knowledge are fundamental assumptions of the functional skills model of adult literacy which are widely contested by sociocultural theorists. Adult literacy education policy documents (Skills for Life Strategy, DfEE, 2001; Moser Report, 2000) and the majority of literacy practitioners I have worked with tacitly endorse the acquisition model of learning and the principal idea that literacy learning transfers in ways that improve employability and helps students overcome various literacy difficulties they experience in other social contexts. This widespread tacit consent to the functional model of literacy is largely due to the shaping influence of dominant neoliberal education policies that are primarily concerned with the development of human capital. From a social practices perspective, however, functional models of adult literacy that construct literacy as transferable skills is a simplistic view of literacy learning that does not acknowledge complexities of literacy learning and the different ways people may benefit from their learning experiences. Indeed, there is very little evidence within the existing academic research (Metcalf & Meadows, 2007; Metcalf, Meadows, Rolfe & Dhudwar, 2009; McIntosh, 2004) and government policy research (BIS, 2009) to corroborate the commonly held assumptions about the benefits of adult literacy learning experiences beyond the attainment of qualifications.

In light of the above issues, building on other research that adopts social practices approaches to analysing the outcomes of formal adult literacy learning (Barton, 2009; Allat & Tett, 2018; Tett, 2016; Tett & Maclachlan, 2007; Forster, Petrie & Crowther, 2018, Bynner, 2017), this research uses a narrative research approach combined with a discourse analysis as way of providing a holistic, interpretative account of the outcomes of formal adult literacy learning. In using a narrative research the aim is to foreground the participants' voice in order to provide highly detailed insights into the participants' lives and lived experiences of adult literacy learning. In doing so, the analysis firstly illustrates the nuanced range of outcomes the participants associate with their literacy learning experiences that are not accounted for in the existing research with a similar focus. Secondly, the analysis of narratives provides a way of interrogating the theoretical relationship between the personal and the social (Carless & Douglas, 2017). Despite the focus on personal experience, narrative analyses provide insights into the ways dominant discourses in given social contexts have a shaping influence on the stories told (McLeod, 1997). The reasons for adopting a narrative research approach and combining it with a discourse analysis are expounded fully in the Methodology chapter.

## **1.2 The international context of adult literacy education**

So far, in this chapter the discussion has outlined some of the theoretical problems associated the functional model of adult literacy in England which has served to illustrate why the key questions that frame the focus of this research are pertinent to the debate about the outcomes of adult literacy learning. In this section, some of the similarities and differences in the policy approaches of

three other European countries are discussed in order to situate the research within the international context . Due to the constraints of word count, I have restricted the discussion to two English-speaking countries, New Zealand and Australia, and one non-English speaking country, Sweden. These countries were selected for the discussion as, similar to England, they each have a long history of adult education policy with some clear parallels regarding the ways the pedagogic practices have been shaped by European education policy directives concerned with the development of human capital. Despite this commonality, they also illustrate some interesting contrasts with each other in terms of their pedagogic approaches to teaching adult literacy. Sweden in particular, although not English-speaking, is included in the discussion as it advocates a more humanistic pedagogic model of adult education compared to that of England, and is therefore useful for drawing some interesting contrasts in the ways adult literacy learning is constructed in terms of policy intentions and pedagogic practice.

Since the late 20th century, England as well as many other countries across the world such as America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Finland, to name but a few, have implemented national adult literacy and numeracy education strategies (NALA:, 2011; Hamilton & Hillier, 2006).

To give some examples, New Zealand has a long history of adult education, including policies such as the employment-focused Language and Numeracy Action Plan (Tertiary Education Commission, 2008) and more recently the Tertiary Education Strategy (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment & Ministry of Education, 2014). Australia also has a long history of adult

education, which has become increasingly vocationally orientated since the 1974 Kagan report, which advocated a more holistic model of adult literacy. Later adult education strategies, such as the Australian Language and Literacy Policy (1991) and the Workplace English Language and Literacy Programme (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2006) show a trajectory towards an emphasis on the development of human capital (NALA, 2011: 16).

The language and arguments featured policy documents are used to justify policy intentions (Ball, 1990). In the case of adult literacy education policies, a common narrative justifying the need for national adult literacy strategies reflects neoliberal concerns about addressing skills deficits and developing human capital as a way of sustaining economic competitiveness of nations and improving the economic and social lives of marginalised social groups (NALA, 2011: 10). Such claims are corroborated by large-scale government funded research that, in the main, use statistical data to make correlations between income, employability and formal qualifications. In England, Tony Blair's foreward in the policy document entitled 'Skills for Life - the National Strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills: delivering the vision 2001 - 2004' (DfES, 2004) typifies this policy narrative, stating:

'The legacy of skills needs and poor quality provision left millions of adults in England, and their families, disadvantaged. Adults with poor literacy and numeracy skills earn an average of £80,000 less over their working lives, are more likely to have health problems, and, in a world where there is so much emphasis on information and communication to feel isolated from wider society.' (DfES, 2004: 5)

Sweden provides some interesting contrasts with other countries in terms of the policy language it uses to explain the rationale of its adult education system which places a greater emphasis on notions of social justice, citizenship alongside concerns with developing human capital. The following quotation from a Swedish Ministry of Education and Research fact sheet about its municipal adult education system called Komvux illustrates the policy narrative that juxtaposes these intended outcomes.

‘Komvux at basic level is intended to provide adults with the knowledge, skills and competence they need to take part in society and working life. It is also intended to prepare adults for further study. Adults who lack the knowledge, skills and competence usually acquired in compulsory school, assuming that other conditions are met, have the legal right to education at basic level.’ (Ministry of Education and Research, 2013: 1)

In the European context, the European Union has implemented a supranational policy strategy for adult education which is partly responsible for the homogenization of neoliberal type education policies of Member States. For example, concerns about an economic crisis were highlighted in the Lisbon Strategy (European Commission, 2009), which was launched to ‘make the European Union the most economically competitive and dynamic knowledge based economy in the world’ (NALA, 9: 2011) in response to a changing global market economy characterized by a fundamental transition from industrial economies to knowledge based economies. The tenets of the Lisbon Strategy typify the European Union’s stance on lifelong learning and the links between

education, skills and employability. For example, the 2008 progress report on the Education and Training 2010 Work Programme entitled, 'New skills for new jobs - action now' (European Commission: 2010) stated, 'Education and training are crucial to economic and social change. The flexibility and security needed to achieve more and better jobs depend on ensuring that all citizens acquire key competences and update their skills throughout their lives' (European Commission, 2008: 3).

The Education and Training 2010 Work Programme led way to the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training, known as the 'ET2020', which set out the European Union's policy intentions for the Lisbon treaty. The strategy emphasised that the 'efficient investment in human capital through education and training systems is an essential component of Europe's strategy to deliver the high levels of sustainable, knowledge-based growth and jobs that lie at the heart of the Lisbon strategy' (European Commission, 2009: 1). This entailed Member States agreeing to the benchmark that an average of at least 15% of adults participated in lifelong learning initiatives by 2020 (NALA, 2011:10).

Today, the lifelong learning discourse and its fundamental emphasis on developing the human capital of nations is common to the underpinning rationale of many education policies in Europe and other English speaking countries outside Europe. Despite the many nuances in adult education policy, adult literacy and numeracy education is regarded as being integral to developing the social and human capital of nations necessary for addressing people's skills deficits and developing economic growth (NALA, 2011: 9). To

illustrate the ways international adult education policies compare with England's and resonate with dominant neoliberal concerns about human capital, the policy approaches of New Zealand, Australia and Sweden are briefly outlined below.

Similar to England, New Zealand has a long history of adult literacy policy development which has been influenced by the government's participation in the 1996 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and subsequent surveys run by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (see: Furness and Hunter, 2017: 1). In 2001 the New Zealand Adult Literacy Strategy was launched which represented the first comprehensive government funded adult education policy (Walker, 2010). Similar to England's Skills for Life Strategy (2001), the New Zealand strategy aimed to increase participation in adult education on a national scale by raising awareness of the benefits of improved literacy, language and numeracy and improving the quality of provision through a sustained professional development programme (Benseman and Sutton, 2008: 5). This policy was instrumental in establishing adult literacy as an integral part of the education system and future policy agenda that later saw a series of policy developments, the trajectory of which became increasingly concerned with employability and skills. This policy trajectory included the New Zealand Skills Strategy (2008) and the Literacy, Language and Numeracy Action Plan 2008-2012 (Tertiary Education Commission, 2008), and more recently the Tertiary Education Strategy 2014-2019 (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment & Ministry of Education, 2014). The objectives of the Action Plan aimed to raise employees' and employers' awareness of the benefits literacy, language and literacy learning, and secondly promote the number, quality and relevance of training

opportunities for those regions and industries with high numbers of workers with poor basic skills (NALA, 2012: 35)

The IALS and OECD surveys indicated that over a million adults in New Zealand lacked the literacy skills necessary to participate in a knowledge-based economy (Walker, Udy, Pole, May, Camberlain, Sturrock, 1997). The findings of these surveys subsequently prompted sustained government commitment to raising literacy levels through the implementation of adult literacy provision (Tertiary Education Commission, 2008, 2015) in order to develop the human capital of the New Zealand in a changing global economy. The Tertiary Education Strategy 2014 - 2019 (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment & Ministry of Education, 2014) is a key policy that currently influences the field of adult literacy education in New Zealand today. This policy strongly reflects the tenets of a neoliberal discourse and is consistent with the European Union international literacy policy and England's Skills for Life Strategy (DfEE, 2001) that emphasise the link between literacy skills and the development of human capital. The foreward of the Tertiary Education Strategy exemplifies the neoliberal discourse in stating:

'Tertiary helps improve people's lives, and the lives of those around them. It is a passport to success for individuals in our society, and supports wider economic growth and prosperity. Skilled people are essential to the success of business and other organisations.' (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment & Ministry of Education, 2014: 2)



Turning to Australia, the history of Australia's adult literacy policy development demonstrates that Australian conceptions of literacy have been more sophisticated than the basic skills-based conceptions favored by policy makers in England. Falk and Millar (2001) suggest that Australian policy development has been tensioned between three traditional conceptions: the basic skills approach similar to that England that views literacy as cognitive skills that transfer between contexts; the growth and heritage approach that views literacy acquisition in more humanist terms as emerging in nuanced ways within specific social contexts; and the critical cultural approach that views literacy as a social practice. Tensions between these three strands were exemplified in Australia's 1974 Kagan report which emphasised the importance adult literacy and numeracy education has for delivering on more humanist objectives of social equity and social justice as well as increasing employability (McKenna and Fitzpatrick, 2004).

According to McKenna and Fitzpatrick (2004), the Kagan report's attempt to blend vocationally-orientated conceptions of literacy with more holistic ideals of adult literacy education epitomises the perennial tension in Australian education policy between human capital approaches concerned with economic competitiveness and humanist approaches concerned with citizenship, social justice and transformation.

Despite these tensions, since the 1996 election of a conservative national government, the policy trajectory, similar to the policy trajectory of England and Sweden, has gradually shifted away from developing social capital towards implementing programmes that have a more acute emphasis on vocational

education and training. For example, Balatti et al (2006) highlight how literacy and numeracy policy since 1996 gradually became embedded in vocational National Training packages which are exclusively designed to increase employability with little or acknowledgement of other learning outcomes pertaining to social capital. Commentators such as Searle (2004) and Wickert (2007) argue that the integration of adult literacy with vocational education training means that the status of adult literacy policy and provision in the political agenda is significantly weakened.

Turning to Sweden, Sweden also has a long history of adult education, the traditions of which date back to the study circles of the 19th century that placed a strong emphasis on citizenship and social justice. The Swedish study circles remain the main source of provision for adult civic education which focus on helping adults to understand and address various social issues facing society (NALA, 2011: 42). In 1968, the Municipal Adult Education (MAE) system, Komvux, was set up in order to provide education opportunities for adults marginalised by the hierarchical school system. MAE was significant in establishing adult education as being integral to the traditions and coherence of Sweden's lifelong learning system.

Despite this strong tradition of critical pedagogy and citizenship, the Swedish education system has undergone several policy shifts that indicate a gradual trajectory towards more neoliberal education principles. In response to a national economic and employment crisis in the 1990s, adult education policy placed a greater emphasis on skills and employability consistent with adult education policies in other countries at the time that also reflected neoliberal

discourses concerned with developing human capital (Veeman, 2004). For example, in 1997 Sweden's most comprehensive adult education programme, the Adult Education Initiative (AEI), was launched that aimed to half Sweden's unemployment by the year 2000 (Rubenson, 2006).

According to Rubenson, in contrast to typical vocational-orientated adult literacy education initiatives found in other countries, AEI adopted a much broader approach that aimed to create a 'knowledge lift' (Ministry of Education and Science, 1999) that not only increased employability skills but, in accord with Sweden's education traditions of citizenship, increase the general educational levels of all unemployed adults in the national population (NALA, 2001: 43 - 44). Recent research (Sandberg et. al, 2016) however, suggests that the neoliberal shift in the Swedish education system has manifested in education discourses of individualisation whereby the marketisation of education has resulted in teaching practices that focus almost exclusively on the labour market function of education to the detriment of others (Fejes, 2010).

In summary, the marketisation of education is a global phenomenon (Ball, 2007; Ball & Yodell, 2008; Burch, 2009) that has arisen from neoliberal concerns about economic competitiveness appears to be a dominant trend in many postindustrial countries across the globe (Ball, 2007). Such concerns about the development of human capital in the adult literacy context have manifested in similar pedagogic approaches that primarily construct literacy in narrow terms as measurable commodity or employability skills. As illustrated in the discussion about the international context of adult literacy, the acute emphasis on employability in the discourse of adult literacy education means that course

provision is less likely to acknowledge the many other benefits of literacy learning, and therein neglecting the personal motivations and needs of those adults participating in literacy learning which are not necessarily employment-orientated.

### **1.3 The purpose of the research**

The purpose of this research is provide representations of the participants' lived experience of adult literacy learning in order to better illustrate the multiple and nuanced ways they think they benefit from their learning experiences. My interest in undertaking this research stems from concerns I, as an adult literacy practitioner, had about the ways my humanist pedagogic intentions actually translated in terms of helping the people I taught overcome the specific literacy problems in their lives. In this section, an overview of my background and pedagogic intentions is expounded as way of providing an insight into the purpose of this research.

School is not for everyone. For many, school is just something that happens to you as a child; it seems a natural part of growing up and you just have to do the best you can without getting into too much trouble, before going out into the 'big wide world'. On reflection, this depicts my own view of school at the time, or at least is the way I construct my biographical narrative surrounding my experiences of school.

I went to a comprehensive secondary school in the south west of England, where I ambled through achieving several CSE qualifications. I left school at 16 and undertook a carpentry & joinery apprenticeship with a local Further Education college, which I completed at 19. In the early 1990s, influenced by friends, I began reconceptualising my future and in 1994 I tentatively returned to education by enrolling on an Access course. The Access course was a profound transitional episode in my life, for my academic aspiration to go to university to read sociology and politics was slowly being realised, I was gradually positioning myself as an aspiring academic and prospective university undergraduate.

Following the Access course, I went to university to study sociology and politics and became what can be described as a perennial student who had an ardent passion for study. I was someone who reveled in philosophical reverie and writing, and got a real buzz from the profound sense of existential enlightenment I considered my studies bestowed. My experiences of university study over the years culminated in the attainment of a Master's degree in philosophy from Nottingham University in 2001, the status of which affirmed my identity as an academic.

On reflection, my own experiences of further education and the value I attach to them have had a shaping influence on my fundamental pedagogic intentions. In training to become a teacher, the humanist doctrine of Carl Rogers (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994) and notions of self-actualization (Maslow, 1987), pragmatism

(Dewey, 1916) and emancipatory education (Freire, 1972) resonated with my own pedagogic ideals and intentions. Throughout my career, regardless of the teaching context, my practice has continued to be grounded in these strands of educational theory. One of the maxims that underpins my outlook on teaching is that education is a wonderful thing which can facilitate empowering transitions in a person's life; I have therefore aimed to instill in my students the sense of wonder and enlightenment that I gained from my own learning experiences.

In becoming an adult literacy lecturer in 2004, I discovered that my humanist-emancipatory approach to teaching resonated with the progressive teaching practices of my peers in the adult literacy teaching context. Many of the literacy practitioners I have worked with over the last ten years endorse, or at least tacitly consent to the progressive tenets of adult education. It is a commonly held assumption that literacy learning experiences can be transformative (Mezirow, 1990) and that adult literacy courses represent transitional spaces (Winicott, 1958) that help students to improve their education opportunities and life chances. It is clear to me that progressive discourses that pervade my experience of the adult literacy field has a shaping influence on mine and other practitioners' professional practices, our teaching values and the way we conceptualise the benefits of our students' learning experiences.

Since the launch of the Skills for Life Strategy (2001), funding for adult literacy course provision in the FE sector has gradually become more closely tied to qualification outcomes. This has manifested in curriculums becoming

increasingly test-focused, which in turn has constrained practitioners' professional discretion to utilise teaching practices and approaches they consider to be most useful to their students' lives and learning needs. Most of the practitioners I have worked with concede this shift in emphasis has had an insidious and detrimental effect on the quality of courses. A common issue cited is that there is less scope to be pragmatic and devise learner-centred practices that are necessary for helping students to transgress their perceived literacy difficulties and developing their confidence within the formal education context.

In discerning a tension between the qualification-driven emphasis of policy and my humanist pedagogic intentions, I began to take a more critical stance towards the value of adult literacy education for helping people in their lives. I became decidedly more sceptical about notions of transformative learning and wondered how and in what way my students benefited from their learning experiences. This critical trajectory led me to conclude that beyond my own limited observations there is very little compelling evidence to corroborate my pedagogic assumptions that students' literacy and language practices change significantly, or that their course learning experiences bring about beneficial changes in their lives.

Despite my growing scepticism, however, I did not dismiss entirely the value-judgements I had formulated about the benefits of literacy learning, which were formed in my experience of teaching literacy to hundreds of adults over many years. In this respect, I witnessed what I considered to be strong indications of

my students becoming more confident in their literacy and learning practices, and have listened to countless testimonials from students who reiterate very similar narratives about how they think they have benefited enormously from their learning experiences in terms of their literacy practices and their confidence as adult learners. As a practitioner concerned about the effectiveness of my teaching practice and the ways students benefit from their learning experiences, my 'everyday' reflections and insights presented me with decidedly ambiguous and unconvincing insights into the value of students' literacy learning experiences. It is this critical line of thinking, combined with my interests in social theory, that led to me undertaking the Doctorate in Education. I thought that a doctoral course of study would provide me with the academic discipline I need to help me gain some deeper insights into the outcomes of literacy learning.

#### **1.4 The importance of the research**

The research sets out to explore and understand the ways students make sense of their learning lives and course learning experiences using a social constructionist lens. A significant amount of the existing research about the outcomes of adult literacy learning shares the assumptions of the neoliberal functional model of literacy and focuses exclusively on the participants' learning experiences in the course context. In contrast, this research adopts a more holistic, interpretative analytical approach that is critical of the functional model of literacy and broadens the focus of the analysis to encompass the participants' stories about their lives beyond the course context. The methodology pioneered for this research combines a biographical research



method with a discourse analysis in order to provide a detailed representation of the lived experience of becoming an adult learner. By foregrounding the participants' voice and situating the adult literacy course in the broader context of their life history, the research is able to illustrate the significance their course learning experiences have for the participants in ways other research does not. In particular, whereas other research appears to base its analysis using the assumptions of neoliberal discourses and the functional model of literacy, this research takes a more grounded approach and analyses the range of discourses that influence the participants' narrativised understandings of their learning experiences. In doing this, the analysis aims to illustrate some of the complexities and contingencies of learning, and moreover show the nuanced variety of ways the participants construct their understandings about the value of literacy learning which is not reducible to the attainment of skills and qualifications. The findings of the analysis also illustrate the role storying plays in the learning process and the fundamental importance it has for participants in terms of making sense of their learning experiences in the process of them becoming an adult learner. This aspect of the findings has implications for practitioners who endorse more humanist and holistic pedagogic approaches which are discussed in the conclusion chapter.

### **1.5 The research approach**

Drawing on data generated by biographical interviews, I use a social constructionist lens (see Burr, 2010; Gergen, 1999) to analyse the life stories (Cohen *et al.*, 2011) of four adult literacy students studying in a Further Education context. The research aims to provide a detailed representation of

the participants' lived experience of returning to education and being an adult literacy student by analysing their life stories and the ways their personal narratives are constructed in relation to various societal discourses.

By combining a narrative approach to research (Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Clandinin & Connolly, 1990) with a discourse analysis (Graham, 2011), the research aims to bring a fresh contribution to the existing body of research concerning the outcomes adult literacy learning experiences can have on the lives of students. By analysing the participants' life stories and the narratives within them, I illustrate the ways the participants' world views, their learner identities, and notions about the value of education are influenced by the variety of discourses available to them over the course of their lives. In so doing, the research provides a detailed representation of the participants' lived experience of literacy learning and becoming a lifelong adult learner. The analysis shows that the participants' understandings about the outcomes of their learning experiences are constructed using a bricolage of discourses, and are by no means reducible to neoliberal education discourses and concerns about skills, qualifications and employability.

Other government and academic research (Hamilton & Merrifield, 1999; Bathmaker, 2007; DfES, 2002; DfES, 2003; BIS, 2013) tends to be narrowly focused on the course context with an emphasis on teaching practice, level progression and skills acquisition. In the main, the research tends to be based on large-scale statistical analysis of qualification outcomes and engagement;

there is very little interpretative research data about the ways students' learning experiences are affecting their everyday lives and literacy practices in other contexts. While course-focused analysis is useful for gaining insights into participants' course learning experiences, learning processes and the effectiveness of pedagogic practice, they are only able to present findings about the ways participants' literacy and learning practices are gradually aligning with those valorised within the course context in advantageous ways. To extrapolate from this and make claims that students' course learning experiences help them overcome their literacy difficulties in other social contexts is problematic from a socio-cultural perspective. From a sociocultural perspective, the central issue is that notion cognitivist notion of skills acquisition and transfer is problematic as there is very little evidence to suggest that skills transfer in the ways suggested by policy makers (Bereiter, 1995).

If literacy practitioners, policy makers and education managers are sincere about adult literacy courses helping students overcome difficulties in their lives, given the problem of transfer, some challenging questions about the outcomes of students' learning experiences need to be asked to inform curriculum design. The following types of questions challenge educationalists to critique the functional model of literacy in terms of its effectiveness for meeting the literacy and learning needs of those who access the provision:

- Given the theoretical issues associated with cognitive notions of learning that assume skills transference, in what ways do the forms of literacy and

language taught in the adult literacy education context relate to other literacy practices within other social contexts?

- Is it the case that the participants' literacy and language practices change in ways that help them in their life beyond the education context?
- What do students say about the outcomes of their learning experiences?
- Are there any tensions between the instrumental functional skills model of literacy and the learning needs and motivations of students?
- What are the implications of these tensions for policy makers and practitioners who are committed to more humanist notions of adult education?

By broadening the focus of analysis so that it takes into account the participants' narrativised understandings about their lives beyond the course context, as well as their narratives about their personal backgrounds and previous formal learning experiences, the analysis situates the life episode of undertaking an adult literacy course in the broader context of their lives. The life history approach places an acute emphasis on the voice of the participants so that the research is able to provide a detailed representation of the lived experience of the participants' learning experiences. The research is therefore better able to illustrate the significance of the participants' course learning experiences in terms of any changes that may have occurred along with the participants understandings of the ways the course may have helped them. For example, changes in their reading and writing practices, changes in their confidence in formal education settings, changes in their education and career aspirations.

The analysis of rich biographical data is useful for illustrating the highly nuanced ways people construct their understandings of the outcomes of the adult literacy learning experiences. Often these do not neatly coincide with current education policy rhetoric that constructs the outcomes of literacy learning in narrow terms, highlighting increases in employability and vocational skills as the main outcomes. The problem with constructing literacy learning outcomes in such narrow terms is that it tidies away the messiness of learning experience, and obscures the heterogenous multiplicity of outcomes that people accessing adult literacy education may experience. As illustrated in the stories told by the participants in this research, the value of using a narrative approach is that it provides detailed insights into the messiness of learning experience. Such insights provide a basis from which to challenge the efficacy of the policy rhetoric that constructs literacy as an employability skill, and in turn provides a basis to begin discussing more progressive adult education paradigms that could be more responsive to the lives and literacies of those people accessing the adult literacy education.

## Chapter 2 - Literature Review

### 2.1 - Introduction

In this chapter, existing literature about the outcomes of adult literacy courses in England is reviewed in order to show the ways this research makes a contribution to knowledge about the lived experience of literacy learning. The chapter begins with a short analysis of key adult literacy education policy in the last 30 years to illustrate the ways various discourses have shaped the policy rationale and practices that are prevalent today in the field. Other relevant research that focuses on the outcomes of adult literacy education courses is reviewed in order to show how the sociocultural approach used in this research resonates with and builds on existing research to make a contribution to knowledge.

I illustrate some of the gaps in the existing research and make the argument argue that these stem from common theoretical and methodological issues associated with the functional model of literacy. The issues associated with acquisitional models of learning (Sfard & Prusak, 2005) and the idea that knowledge 'transfers' (Perkins, 1992) are discussed. Other research that uses sociocultural approaches to theorising adult literacy learning are also critically reviewed. I argue that a common issue with this body of research is that it confines the analysis to the course context and fails to adequately explore in any detail the learners' views about the nuanced ways their learning

experiences could be helping them beyond the course context. For these reasons, the existing research does not provide detailed insights into some of the less tangible outcomes of people's learning experiences, which although significant, are not encompassed in the narrow confines of their research focus. Finally, I review research pertinent to the analytical lens used in this research which recognises the role discourses (Hamilton & Pitt, 2011; Tett, 2016; Anderson & Holloway, 2018) and the role of storying (De Groot, 2018; Roberts, 1991; Goodson and Sikes, 2001; Polkinghorne, 1988; Goodson, Biesta, Tedder, 2010; Carless & Douglas, 2017) play in the learning process and as a focus for understanding the ways learning experiences in the course context impact on the lives of people beyond the course context.

## **2.1 Discourse**

As detailed in the methodology chapter, this research adopts an anti-realist epistemological stance to theorising the social world that maintains knowledge about reality is constructed in relation to different language practices and attendant socio-cultural and historical traditions (Burr, 2003). Knowledge claims therefore do not have the status of being objective facts or revealing essential properties about persons and social worlds, but stand as conceptual representations of the social world that are rooted in discourses. On this basis, an analysis of the discourses operating within given social fields can provide useful insights into the way sociocultural structures have a shaping influence on the patterns of thought and the practices of participants.

The term discourse in this research is used in two senses: firstly, it refers to ‘a systematic, coherent set of images, metaphors and so on that construct an object in a particular way’ (Burr, 2003). In the broadest sense, discourse includes dialogue, texts, circulating narratives and sets of beliefs that provide a basis for meaning making and purposive action (Warriner and Anderson, 2017; Lester, Lochmiller and Gabriel, 2017). Secondly, discourse refers to ‘the actual spoken interchanges between people’ (Burr, 2003), the analysis of which which is useful for identifying the ways the narratives in verbal exchanges are shaped by various discourses participants have been exposed to. Such an analysis is also useful for revealing the ways discourses exercise power over participants by creating and at the same time limiting possibilities for social action.

A discourse analysis of education policy is then useful for gaining insights into the power dynamics in policy (Wodak and Meyer, 2009) in terms of the ideological ways policies construct the problems they seek to address (Ball, 2003i; Bacchi, 2000). As Taylor puts it, ‘Discourse theory can be used to explore particular policies in their historical context; tracing how policy “problems” are constructed and defined and how particular issues get to be on the policy agenda’ (Taylor, 1997: 28).

In the context of adult literacy education in England, various dominant policy discourses over the last 30 years have shaped the goals and pedagogic models used in the field of literacy education today (Hamilton & Pitt, 2011). In turn, discourses shape the ways adults accessing adult education conceptualise what literacy is, and the way they become positioned as adult literacy learners. In researching the participants’ understandings of the outcomes of their learning



experiences on the adult literacy course, it is therefore necessary to provide a historical overview of adult literacy policy and identify some of the dominant discourses that may be shaping the participants' narrativised experiences articulated in this research.

## **2.2 Discourses of adult literacy in education policy in England**

The ways the 'problem' of literacy has been represented in adult education policy has evolved since the 1970s, and a broader constellation of discourses of disadvantage have influenced such changes. For example, discourses of mental health, disability, homelessness, poverty and social exclusion amongst others are common features of adult literacy policy that present adult literacy learners as a stigmatized group (Hamilton and Pitt, 2011). In making the link between literacy deficits and disadvantage, government policy in effect reinforces negative stereotypes associated with academic attainment through which their alienation or otherness is further made manifest (Chouliaraki, 2010; Hall, 1997; Lister, 2004; Luke, 2003).

Historically, the origins of adult education in England can be traced back the self-improvement movement of the early twentieth century when the Workers' Education Association (WEA) was established in 1903 (Rose, 2010). The WEA is a community-based, voluntary movement that is committed to establishing education opportunities for working class people with limited or poor education experience. The WEA's mission statement is imbued with a social justice discourse that highlights the impact poor education has on the lives of marginalised groups. It speaks of a vision of 'A better world, equal, democratic

and just; through adult education the WEA challenges and inspires individuals, communities and society.'

The social justice and progressive discourses represented in the WEA's mission statement were later represented in the principles of the Right to Read programme launched in 1974. The Right to Read programme was grounded in the liberal tradition of community and adult education that was born out of the economic growth, industrialisation and social reforms that characterised the 19th century epoch (Crowther, 1999; Shaw, 2003). The liberal model was rooted primarily in the philanthropic education for the poor provided by Christian Socialist bodies (Shaw, 2003) and the 19th century radical working class movements which aimed to raise workers' awareness of their shared situation and the ways it can be changed collectively. Thinkers such as John Henry Newman, Thomas Huxley and F.D Maurice, conceptualised education as a means of empowering working class groups by generating knowledge collegiately rather than receiving cannons of bourgeoisie knowledge and values transmitted by the status quo (Johnson, 1988: 79). Robert Owen, who was one of the founders of utopian socialism and the cooperative movement in the 19th century, also shared liberal notions of education, seeing it as a fundamental right and a way of developing a more equitable society. In his words, ' . . . any general character, from the worst to best, from the most ignorant to most enlightened may be given to any community by application of [good education]' (Silver, 1965: 61). Although discourses of personal development may have been dominant, manufacturers who advocated the Temperance Movement of the 1850s and 1860, however, viewed education as a way of increasing the skills base and productivity of the workforce along with inculcating the

bourgeoise values and tacit compliance with the work ethic (see: Pollard, 1963: 269).

The core principles of the liberal tradition, which include concerns about social justice, the inalienable right to access education opportunities, and a focus on helping people achieve personal goals underpinned the Right to Read campaign and the Adult Basic Education (ABE) government funded initiatives in the 1970s. Other education discourses influenced the conceptualisation of these initiatives, including the government's growing concerns about the nation's skills deficit and economic competitiveness, as well as more radical Freirian notions of critical literacy which conceptualised education as a way of empowering disadvantaged groups and engendering social change (Tett, 2010). As Hamilton argues, one education discourse prevalent at the time of Right to Read and ABE framed education as a means of providing education opportunities to local communities with a view to addressing 'issues of power and representation by emphasising the need for social and political change to address language-based inequalities' (Hamilton, 1996 in Papen, 1999: 17).

Since then, adult education became more of a priority for successive governments which became increasingly concerned about the 'flight of capital' and therefore sought to protect the economic prosperity of the nation by increasing human capital (Mayo, 2005). The problem of illiteracy was identified as having detrimental impact on the nation's economy, which ignited debate about the vocational role of adult education in re-skilling the workforce and increasing the nation's human capital. As a result of the International Adult

Literacy Survey (IALS) conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation (OECD, 1994) policy makers recognised basic skills qualifications for adults as a priority for improving social mobility and combating growing social exclusion (Hamilton & Merrifield, 1999; Filed, 2000). The research highlighted the nation's literacy 'deficit' as being a significant problem, in that England was shown to have a greater percentage of adults with low levels of literacy and numeracy compared to 13 of the 20 European countries included in the survey (Bathmaker, 2007).

Thus, discourses of vocationalism in adult education policy began to emerge more prominently amongst others, which emphasised the links between basic skills and employability. In 1992, the Further and Higher Education Act came into force which prioritised funding for vocational type courses, including adult literacy and numeracy provision. The Further and Higher Education Act in effect made a distinction between vocational and non-vocational education, whereby non-vocational provision was regarded as less important and awarded less funding than provision that was regarded as being more directly linked to skills and employability. The emphasis on qualifications and employability in the act represented a significant policy shift in literacy education from a liberal discourse primarily concerned with self-improvement, to a discourse of vocationalism concerned with skills and employability (Papen, 2005). Although the act enhanced the status and funding security of adult education for the foreseeable future, critics argue that discourses of vocationalism contradicted the founding principles of Adult Basic Education, which was traditionally concerned with liberal principles of personal and community development,

citizenship and employability (Tuckett, 1991; McConnell, 1996). Critics also argued that the acute focus on the production of qualification outcomes, in effect, diminished the scope practitioners have to devise more holistic, student-centred learning programmes (Hamilton and Merrifield, 1999).

The notion of lifelong which is common place today in adult education discourses, first appeared in the 1994 White Paper entitled, 'Growth, Competitiveness, Employment: the Challenges and Ways Forward into the 21st Century' (CEC: 1994). The paper outlined the importance of lifelong learning for addressing various social issues and developing economic prosperity and growth:

'Our countries' education and training systems are faced with major difficulties . . . [that] are rooted in social ills [such as] the breakdown of the family and the demotivation bred by unemployment. Preparation for life in tomorrow's world cannot be satisfied once-and-for-all acquisition of knowledge and know how. All measures must therefore necessarily be based on the concept of developing, generalising and systematising lifelong learning and continuous training (CEC 1994: 16, 146).

The above extract illustrates how the dominance of neoliberal discourses of vocationalism merged with the discourse of lifelong learning. These discourses would later become synonymous appearing in many EU education papers such as: 'Teaching and Learning toward the Learning Society' (CEC, 1995); Learning

for Active Citizenship' (CEC, 1998); 'Memorandum of Lifelong Learning (CEC, 2000). In turn, it is this dominant neoliberal policy discourse of vocationalism and lifelong learning that would later manifest in The Moser Report (DFEE, 1999) and the pedagogic discourse of the Skills for Life Strategy (DfEE, 2001) which have since continued to shape the common sense view about adult literacy education today.

### **2.3 The Moser Report**

In 1998, the New Labour government commissioned Sir Claus Moser to conduct a comprehensive review of the Adult Basic Education sector in England and make recommendations of how best to 'tackle the vast basic skills problem in this country' (DfEE: 1999). Moser's report, entitled 'A Fresh Start – improving literacy and numeracy (DfEE: 1999), established that approximately seven million adults as being 'functionally illiterate' – that is, not having 'the ability to read, write and speak in English and to use mathematics at a level necessary to function at work and in society in general' (DfEE: 1999) and called for a substantial, long-term national strategy that aimed to halve the number of functionally illiterate people by 2010. The report recommended implementing a national system of literacy and numeracy course provision, structured around a standardised literacy core curriculum and national qualifications in order to address the problem of the skills deficit that 'cramps the lives of millions of people' (Moser, 1999: 1.1). Moser argued that this would serve to professionalise the adult education sector and provide a more comprehensive standardised system of accreditation for helping educationally marginalised

groups of people to improve their skills and opportunities for gaining employment .

Moser based his claims about extent of the nation’s literacy deficit on statistical research conducted by IALS (Moser, 1999: 3.1) which suggested there was a strong correlation between distribution of people’s annual earnings with different levels of literacy and numeracy qualifications. The findings presented in ‘Table 1.1’ below were used to corroborate the Moser’s premise that poor levels of ‘literacy and numeracy have a profound effect on earnings’ (Moser, 1999: 3.5).

Annual earnings	Low level literacy	High level literacy	Low level numeracy	High level numeracy
Up to £4000	20	11	26	6
£4000 - £9000	29	12	29	10
£9000 - £13000	27	16	22	17
£13000 - £19,200	17	20	15	21
Over 19,200	7	40	7	46
Total	100	100	100	100

**(Table 1.1)**

Although this evidence ostensibly shows they there is a corresponding pattern between low level literacy qualifications and low annual earnings, this does not necessarily mean that the person’s literacy is poor and problematic, or that their literacy practices are the main reason why their low income. Moser's suggestion that there is a causal link between low literacy qualifications and a person’s income is not sufficiently substantiated.

From a sociocultural perspective, the statistical model of research Moser is using glosses over the complexity of contingent reasons why people find themselves in low paid employment. Given that qualifications are based on formal assessments of specific form of literacy valorised within the education context, from a sociocultural perspective that views literacy as socially situated, such measures are not relevant to, or reflective of, a person's literacy proficiency in other social contexts. Many people struggle with school learning and the associated reading and writing activities required of them in the classroom, however, it does not follow that they necessarily struggle with the everyday literacy demands they countenance in other social situations. Viewed as social practices, the form of literacy valorised in education contexts are unique constructions of literacy which may not resonate with other forms of literacy in other social contexts. Thus, Moser's findings regarding the nation's problem of illiteracy is theoretically problematic when the functional definition of literacy used for measuring literacy is considered. Firstly, the functional definition of literacy is a narrow oversimplification of what literacy practice is and therefore the measures of illiteracy claimed can be contested as being fundamentally flawed from a sociocultural perspective which views literacy as social practices rather skills. Secondly, Moser's suggestion that illiteracy is directly related to social and economic issues can also be contested. The use of the term 'functionally illiterate' is loaded and makes the assumption that a person's literacy skills, as measured against the narrow functional skills definition, means they struggle to function in their lives within other social contexts. Such an assumption is not sufficiently substantiated by the statistical



data in Moser's research. In light of Ball's (1990) view that policies are used to construct problems in certain ways and define solutions, we can see how the tenuous causal link between skills levels and earnings put forward by Moser is being used to justify the need for the implementation of a national Skills for Life strategy (Mayo, 1999).

## **2.4 Competing discourses that shaped the Skills for Life Strategy**

In 2001, the Skills for Life Strategy (SFL) was launched by New Labour which implemented the recommendations of the Moser Report (DfEE, 2000). The strategy is recognised as being one of the most comprehensive adult literacy Education policies to have been launched in England since the 1970s (Bathmaker, 2007) in terms of establishing 'a national learning infrastructure' (DfES, 2002). The strategy included significant and long-term government funding, a new National Literacy curriculum and a comprehensive framework of teaching qualifications and Continuing Professional Development training, all of which was designed to professionalise the adult literacy sector (Mayo, 1999).

The policy intentions along with the ideological justifications of the Skills for Life Strategy (DfEE, 2001) were influenced by a range of competing discourses prevalent in the adult education field at the time. The language contained within the Skills for Life Strategy clearly shows how the political rationale was shaped by some of these discourses including: compensatory discourses; a student-centred participatory learning pedagogic discourse; discourses of exclusion and

duty; and a neoliberal discourse of vocationalism. These are discussed and illustrated below.

Firstly, the policy uses a compensatory discourse that blames both the individual for their failure to achieve in education, and also teachers and institutions for sustained underachievement and declining standards (McQuillan, 1999). Both the Moser report and the Skills for Life strategy blame sustained underinvestment in education as the root cause of poor educational attainment which has manifested in a systemic skills crisis that the SFL strategy aims to address. In the introductory pages of the SFL strategy, the minister for education at the time, David Blunkett, outlined the fundamental aims of the policy, and justifications for it, using a neoliberal discourse that is consistent with that of the Moser report:

‘A shocking 7 million adults in England cannot read and write at the level we would expect of an 11-year old. Even more have problems with numbers. The cost to the country as a whole could be as high as £10 billion a year. The cost to people’s personal lives is incalculable. [. . .] Despite the strong roots, stretching back to the mutual learning of the nineteenth century, standards of literacy and numeracy provision have been too poor for too long. That is why, in 1998, we asked Sir Claus Moser to write his ground-breaking report, A Fresh Start, on literacy and numeracy in England. [. . .] [We] will be spending £1.5 billion over the next three years on enabling those adults with poor literacy and numeracy

abilities to acquire the skills they need.’ (David Blunkett, Skills for life, Executive Summary, DfEE 2001: 2)

As the narrative encapsulated in the quotation suggests, the country’s literacy and numeracy deficits are portrayed as being a perennial problem that has stemmed from consistently poor standards of education provision. By constructing the country’s literacy and numeracy problems as being associated with a legacy of poor standards in school education, the strategy used Moser’s research to legitimate the need for a comprehensive nationwide literacy and numeracy strategy that aims to help educationally marginalised people to develop ‘the skills they need’ (DfEE 2001: 2) to enhance their lives and improve their employability.

Secondly, the strategy champions a student-centred participatory learning pedagogic discourse that draws on the work of Paul Freire (1972). The strategy recommended the use of Individual Learning Plans in order to help ensure that the delivery of the curriculum remained responsive to the needs of adults accessing the provision. This pedagogic rationale resonates with social approaches to disability to rights, social justice and improving access and attainment of identified marginalised groups in society (Barnes, Mercer, and Shakespeare (1999).

Thirdly, the strategy articulates a discourse of social exclusion and duty as a central justification for the strategy which was imported from EU policy

directives and became a central tenet of New Labour's social policy (Beech and Lee, 2008; MacLeavy, 2008). As illustrated in the Moser quotation above, the SFL policy conceptualises literacy and numeracy deficits as being a significant problem that the government has a duty to address through a nationwide adult education strategy. To this end, the policy identifies and targets specific disadvantaged social groups that it constructs as constituting a new underclass (Welshman, 2006). An initial target was set for improving the literacy and numeracy skills of 750,00 'priority groups' of adults by July 2004, followed by a later target of 1.5 million adults by 2007. These priority groups included: unemployed people, those in receipt of benefits, prisoners, public-sector employees, low-skilled employees, homeless people, refugees and asylum seekers, and second-language speakers (DfEE, 2001; DfES, 2003).

By identifying these priority marginalised groups, the policy is constructing people within them being 'new kinds of willing subjects' (Ball, 2009: 537) who have a duty to regulate their own behaviours and address their identified skills deficits. The discourse of exclusion running through the SFL Strategy document also subtly suggests that individuals who have skills deficits are 'agents of their own misery' (Hamilton and Pitt, 2011) as they depend on others or circumvent their skills difficulties rather than taking responsibility of addressing them:

'Of course, people with these poor literacy and numeracy skills get by, usually by relying on others for help or by avoiding situations where they

need to read, write or calculate. But, because they lack literacy and numeracy skills, they and their families may well exclude themselves from advantages that others may well take for granted.’ (DfEE, 2001: paragraph 2)

There is clearly a suggestion of blame in the discourse of exclusion that positions individuals with skills deficits as lacking the agency required to change their situation. This suggestion serves as another means of justifying the government’s duty to address the issue through the implementation of a skills strategy. The quotation below neatly encapsulates the juxtaposition of the two discourses of exclusion and learner agency; the quotation articulates the policy intentions for addressing this issue which are illustrative of both the compensatory discourse and the student-centred pedagogic discourse mentioned above:

‘The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education and the National Association of Councils for Voluntary Service are working together to develop awareness of literacy and numeracy skills within the local and community sector, involving learners in the design and delivery of programmes in order to increase their commitment and motivation. We will support and look to extend this work and enable an estimated 50,000 of these adults at risk of exclusion to improve their literacy and numeracy by 2004’ (DfEE, 2001: paragraph 69).

The fourth and most prominent discourse featured in the strategy is New Labour's neoliberal discourse of vocationalism concerned with the governments duty to address the need to develop human capital and economic competitiveness in order to meet the needs of a changing global economy:

'And up to half of the 7 million people are in jobs. Many are in low-skilled or short term employment. We must increase the people's earnings potential, and the country's wealth and productivity, by giving them the literacy and numeracy skills they need to participate in a global, knowledge-based economy' (DfEE, 2001: paragraph 17).

The SFL policy discourse also constructs various other social issues such as unemployment, poverty, deprivation, crime, health as being related to low literacy and numeracy skills. This emphasis on the importance of developing literacy and numeracy skills to help address the nation's ills was consistent with the language used in other adult literacy policy documents that highlighted the relationship between skills, earnings and economic productivity:

'Poor basic skills costs the country as much as £10 billion per year in revenue, lower productivity and the increased burden on the state.' (John Healy, Minister for Adult Skills, in Update 2, DFES, Winter 2002, p8).

‘Critically, the survey found a significant earnings return to those with higher skills levels. For example, adults with Level 2 or above in numeracy were found to earn (on average) roughly twice the average annual income of those with skills at Entry 1 or below.’ (Skills for Life, Annual Review 2013 - 14, DFES, 2004, pg.4)

In summary, despite the evidenced-based research used by government to justify the need for a national literacy strategy, and subsequently how effective it is in practice, Fairclough (2003: 94 - 95) argues that such statements are based on a ‘logic of appearances’ - that is ideologically reasoned arguments which lack a substantial ‘logic of explanation’. As in the case of the SFL strategy, Fairclough argues that policy documents often use rhetorical arguments and shocking descriptions of given social issues, but do not provide any elaborate explanation of how or why the issue has come about. In doing so, governments can present what may well be innocuous social and political issues as being more significant than they really are, and therein contrive a more convincing case for implement education interventions that purport to remedy the issue. For example, the two quotations above emphasise a link between adults’ skills levels and earnings, however this is inherently superficial as it does not provide any robust explanation of the reasons for this disparity in earnings, nor does it expound the range of more complex social and systemic inequalities in education and employment that may have given rise to the stark differences in adults’ literacy skills and earnings. As Ball (1990) argues, policy makers construct political problems using particular ideological frameworks in order to justify the proposed ideologically informed solutions. In the context of adult

education, policy makers define why illiteracy is an issue that needs to be addressed, what constitutes literacy, and therein justify the purpose of adult literacy courses and pedagogic models used.

## **2.5 Existing research about the outcomes of adult literacy courses**

In this section, I critically discuss the existing research about the outcomes of adult literacy courses. The strengths and weaknesses of the approaches are discussed in order to show how the sociocultural lens used in this research, which combines a discourse analysis with narrative research, avoids some of the limitations cited and therein makes a contribution to knowledge.

The Skills for Life Strategy (DfEE, 2001) is commonly recognised as being one of the most comprehensive adult literacy Education policies to have been launched in England (Bathmaker, 2007) in terms of establishing 'a national learning infrastucture' (DfES, 2002). The strategy included significant and long-term government funding, a new National Literacy curriculum and a comprehensive framework of teaching qualifications and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) training, all of which was designed to professionalise the adult literacy sector (Mayo, 1999).

Shortly after its launch, evaluative research conducted by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES 2002a) reported that between April and October, 2002, approximately 91,000 adults had improved their basic skills. Statistical



data in a government research paper entitled 'Delivering Skills for Life' (DfES 2002) that 300,000 adults had improved their literacy and numeracy skills, and a year later, 470,000. Since then other government research conducted by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES, 2004) and the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS, 2009; 2010; BIS 2013) has consistently suggested that adult literacy courses have been generally successful in terms of broadening participation in education opportunities, re-engaging marginalised groups adults with formal education, and helping them to attain formal literacy qualifications that potentially improves their employability.

Despite these reported successes which are corroborated by statistical evidence, the picture regarding the benefits of adult literacy courses in terms of increasing literacy competency and employability is less clear. Metcalf and Meadows (BIS 2007; BIS 2009) conducted extensive longitudinal research on a sample of 2012 participants. The research used a combination of qualitative and quantitative research data to evaluate the impact of participation in college-based Skills for Life literacy and numeracy courses on a range of economic, personal and social outcomes on economic outcomes for both the individual and the economy. The quotation from their research below identifies key findings of their study which suggested that Skills for Life courses:

- 'increased life-long learning and self-perceived literacy and numeracy competence;
- led to a gain in qualifications;
- had a positive impact on self-esteem;

- May improve health, and, based on qualitative evidence, may improve ability to conduct a wide range of everyday activities and increase independence, and;
- did not have a significant impact on either employment or earnings'

(Meadows and Metcalf, 2009)

What is of particular interest here is that their research concluded that there is very little compelling evidence to show that participants' literacy learning experiences and the attainment of qualifications leads to them improving their employability. They suggested that their statistical evidence regarding changes in the participants' employment status showed 'that after one year, there was no impact on employment and earnings, but that, in terms of employability indicators, small, but significant improvements were indicators were identified in terms of self-esteem, health and employment commitment' (Meadows and Metcalf, 2007: 54).

In their final 2009 report, Meadows and Metcalf concluded that despite being 'unable to identify any quantifiable economic benefits', their qualitative data suggested that 'courses may provide foundations for further skills development' (Meadows and Metcalfe, BIS 2009: ix) citing notable outcomes such as self-esteem, qualifications which could improve employability. They suggested that these softer outcomes mean that Skills for Life courses do provide an effective route back into education for adults, which has increased participation:

'The most impact relates to greater participation in education and training. Adults with poor basic skills have often not had good experiences at school and it is known that those with poor school experiences are difficult to attract back in to learning as adults. Participation on Skills for Life courses has increased commitment towards education and training and increased participation in new courses.' (Meadows and Metcalf, 2005, 45).

Meadows and Metcalf's research appears to be a comprehensive study of the outcomes of literacy courses. By combining the use of quantitative and qualitative methods this arguably corroborates the believability of their findings. The quantitative data can accurately ascertain the tangible outcomes of courses such as the attainment of qualifications, course progression and changes in employment; while the qualitative data can be used to explore in some detail the softer, less tangible outcomes of courses such as changes in attitudes towards learning, perceptions of literacy competency, and increases in confidence about abilities to meet literacy-related tasks in everyday life. One of the methodological issues with Metcalf and Meadow's research relates to their method for generating data regarding the participants' perceptions about the benefits of the course. The questionnaire used a combination of open questions and 'tick box' structured responses that are inadequate for exploring fully the meaning behind the selections made. For example, respondents were asked if they felt that their literacy and numeracy had shown 'definite improvement / some improvement / no improvement'. What 'improvement'

means for the participants and the basis for them making their selection is left unsubstantiated in this type of questioning. This perhaps undermines how compelling the research findings are, however, structured responses do enable researchers to conduct statistical analysis of responses and identify patterns and trends in large-scale longitudinal research like this. This methodological issue also relates to other government research that evaluated adult literacy courses.

Later government research (BIS, 2013) regarding the impact of adult literacy courses mirrored the key findings of Meadows and Metcalf's (2005) research. Firstly, it was concluded that there was scant evidence to suggest that participants' learning experiences manifests in tangible increases in terms of employment once they have left the course:

'Based on the evidence in this study, whilst labour market outcomes, in terms of getting a job (for unemployed learners) and getting a better job (for those learners already in work), are common motivations across the learner group, the extent to which learners achieve these within a few months of their basic skills courses is relatively limited. The qualitative part of the study . . . also concluded that it was early for evidence on job-related outcomes, but noted that there were favourable indications amongst learners in terms of improved ambition and progress to subsequent training' (BIS, 2013: 15).

Secondly they suggested that their findings showed participants did gain social and psychological benefits from the course learning experiences:

‘A major finding from the evaluation, on which there is relatively little in the existing evidence base, was the accrued benefits to health and well-being amongst learners. Life satisfaction, mental well-being, locus of control and self-esteem all showed a significant increase amongst learners. The greatest increase was in mental well-being and self-esteem. This presents evidence of health and well-being benefits associated with basic skills courses.’ (BIS, 2013: ix)

In summary, the existing large-scale, qualitative literature about the outcomes of adult literacy courses in the main uses statistical data to determine the outcomes of adult literacy courses based on narrow signifiers such as skills acquisition, level progression, the attainment of qualifications and changes in employability and income (see: DFEE, 1999; BIS, 2009). One of the key issues with this is that it is working from an acquisition model of learning (Sfard, 1998) and rests on the key assumption that the attainment of skills and qualifications are indicators of beneficial changes in the students’ lives and literacy practices beyond the course context (Bathmaker, 2007). This assumption is contested from an anti-realist, sociocultural perspective (Burr, 2003) which view learning as a process of participation in situated social practices (Sfard, 1998; Holland and Lave, 2009; Lave and Wenger 1991). As detailed more fully in section 2.6, it is argued that given that learning is socially situated, such practices do not transfer unproblematically between different contexts in the way assumed so

commonly assumed by policy makers who adopt acquisition models of learning (Perkins and Salomon, 1992; Street, 1995). The reliance and emphasis upon large-scale statistical data that has a narrow focus on measures of progression in the course context therefore lacks the data necessary to show convincingly if, and in what ways, the participants' literacy learning experiences are affecting their lives and literacy practices beyond the education context.

This point was conceded by Metcalf and Meadows (BIS, 2009) who concluded that although learners thought 'the courses have made a real difference to their lives' (BIS, 2009: 84) the statistical data showed Skills for Life courses 'did not have a significant impact on either employment or earnings' (BIS, 2009: 84). Interestingly, in terms of evaluating the impact literacy courses had on learners' literacy proficiency, Metcalf and Meadows articulated the difficulty in evidencing changes in literacy competency using qualitative approaches to research. In their conclusion about literacy courses they explained:

'... there is evidence that taking literacy and numeracy courses can have an impact on literacy and numeracy competence, but individual studies have rarely been able to demonstrate this because the effects are difficult to detect at typical sample sizes.' (BIS, 2009 3).

Arguably, this methodological difficulty of measuring literacy competency the researchers encountered is very telling, and perhaps exemplifies the central issue with the functional model of literacy that attempts to objectify literacy

practices as measurable and transferable skills. The emphasis placed on statistical data about the link between qualifications and employability arguably lacks the qualitative detail that is necessary to show the more nuanced, less tangible outcomes of literacy learning that may occur alongside the attainment of skills and qualifications. Very little, if any, attention is given to the students' voice and the ways they understand their course learning experiences to be helping them.

Such narrow-focused analyses are extremely limited for two reasons. Firstly, it does not provide detailed insights into the ways course learning experiences are useful for helping participants to address the literacy-related difficulties they experience in their everyday lives beyond the education context. Secondly, the research is based on a highly simplified functional definition of literacy which assumes that literacy and language are universal skills that exist independently of persons and can therefore transfer between contexts in beneficial ways. Peoples' lives, their literacy practices and the ways they benefit from their literacy learning experiences are too complex to be identified through the qualitative approaches to research favoured by policy makers which has dominated the field. Thus, a rich and detailed analysis of students' lived experience of literacy learning is required in order to better understand this complexity and the many factors and contingencies which contribute to it. One way to obtain this level of detail is to theorise literacy as social practice and analyse the life stories of adult learners which provide trustworthy insights into the lived experience of literacy learning.

## **2.6 Paradigms of literacy and the problem of transfer**

By analysing the history of adult literacy education in England, it is possible to identify the ways various policy discourses have constructed adult literacy education and legitimated its remit by privileging certain ideological interests. As Ball (1990: 22) argues, policies are not grounded in truths but are constructed 'statements about practice - the way things could or should be - which are derived from statements about the world.'

As the evolution of policy and practice within the history of adult literacy education field clearly demonstrates, literacy is a contested concept. How literacy is defined, the purpose and value of literacy education, along with how it should be taught is a perennial debate amongst policy makers, pedagogues and practitioners in the field. Since adult literacy education first emerged in England during the 1970s, the structure, scale and the pedagogic discourses underpinning the provision have changed dramatically, not just in the United Kingdom, but internationally (Hamilton and Hillier, 2006; Tett et al., 2012).

We can make sense of this shift by using Thompson's (1980) theoretical distinction between liberating and domesticating paradigms of learning. It is suggested in much of the literature about the history of adult literacy education (Tomlinson, 2005; Bathmaker, 2007; Tett, Hamilton, Hillier, 2006) that there has been a paradigmatic shift in adult literacy education whereby 'emancipatory' paradigms of adult literacy (Thompson, 1980) that have an emphasis on individual needs, personal development and emancipation (Barros, 2012), have been gradually displaced with a 'domesticating' paradigms of literacy learning (Thompson, 1980) which places an emphasis on skills, the attainment of



qualifications and employability in order to develop the human capital of the nation (Ade-ojo & Duckworth, 2015).

In the context of adult literacy, this domesticating notion of education has manifested in a functional definition of literacy which is neatly encapsulated in the following definition by Gray (1956):

‘A person is literate if he (sic) has acquired the essential knowledge and skills which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his group and community, and whose attainments in reading, writing and arithmetic make it possible for him to continue to use these skills towards his own and the community’s development.’

Baynham (1995) argues that neoliberal education discourses that closely link literacy skills with employability have become ‘a powerful construct in defining literacy in terms of its social purposes, the demands made on individuals within a given society, to function within that society, to participate and achieve their own goals’ (Baynham, 1995: 8). Neoliberal discourses which privilege a functional definition of literacy have become dominant in the field of adult literacy education. Terms such as lifelong learning, standards, skills, economic competitiveness and employability being integral to the language used in policy discourse (Ade-ojo and Duckworth, 2015). The functional definition of literacy learning and the assumed benefits of literacy learning commonly made by policy makers is contested by theorists who adopt a sociocultural stance to theorising literacy learning and pedagogic practice.

### **2.6.1 Functional skills and the problem of transfer**

The functional skills model of adult literacy learning rests on the key notion of skills transfer or the transfer of learning. According to Perkins (1992: 3), 'Transfer of learning occurs when learning in one context or with one set of materials impact son performance in another context or with other related materials'. Transferable learning is a commonplace assumption in education and learning theory today, however, it is highly problematic as there is very little evidence to corroborate that learning transfers in beneficial ways (Thorndike, 1923; Pea and Kirkland, 1987; Salomon and Perkins, 1987). The notion of transfer is based on an acquisiton model of learning (AM) exemplified in the works of educationalists such as Vygotsky (1962) which theorises learning as the act of gaining knowledge and concept development. In the AM model, knowledge or concepts are considered as being objectified units of knowledge which can be transmitted by teachers and accumulated by learners to build richer, more comprehensive cognitive structures (Sfard, 1998: 5). The AM implies that once acquired, similar to acquiring material goods or commodities, knowledge transfers and can be applied for different uses within other social contexts.

Sociocultural theorists favor the use of a participatory metaphor of learning (PM) (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Tett, Hamilton & Hillier, 2006; Holland & Lave, 2009) where the language of acquisition, attainment and concept development for describing learning is substituted with language such as community, participation, belonging and practice (Sfard, 1998: 7). In PM, learning is not considered as an act of processing, but as the ongoing process of persons

participating in socially situated activities through which persons change their patterns of practice as they become a member of a particular community (Sfard, 1998: 6). The key ontological distinction between the two metaphors is that PM does not objectify knowledge as a self-sustaining entity and views learning as changes in a person's practice (their language, action, sense of being) that emerge through their experiences within given social situations. One of the strengths of PM is that by focusing on the shaping influence of localised cultural practices, it can account for why it is that people, without any explicit teaching can become proficient in what they do in a variety of contexts that are organised using very specific forms of knowledge. Conversely, the AM cannot account for this informal dynamic of learning.

At face value, from a sociocultural perspective, the implications of the PM model are that the learning that takes place in the course context will only transfer, or be of use, if the forms of knowledge or resources across different contexts are universally the same - the chances of which are remote. The reason being literacy can be understood as practices that can be inferred from events and actions of persons that are mediated by the uses of language and written texts (Tett, Hamilton and Hillier, 2006). Literacy practices are not reducible to observable acts of communication and language use, but are inextricably related to a person's attitudes, world views and their relationship to the discourses and forms of knowledge that have a shaping influence on their literacy practices within given situations. Literacies then are multiple and specific to given social situations, therefore they do not transfer between contexts in the way that is implied by AM.

The idea that learning in one context is not at all beneficial in others however, seems counter-intuitive. Perkins (1992) makes the theoretical distinction between two types of transfer and two mechanisms by which transfer occurs, which are useful for understanding the ways socially situated learning can be shown to be useful in other contexts. Firstly, 'near transfer' refers to the transfer of learning between very similar contexts and performances; the nearer the similarity the greater the probability of transfer. Second 'far transfer' refers to the transfer of learning between remote or seemingly alien contexts and performances; the greater the contrast in contexts means there is less of a probability of transfer, if any at all (Perkins, 1992: 2). Perkins also maintains that transfer can occur via two theoretical mechanisms that can be related to the types of transfer. Firstly, 'reflexive or 'low road transfer' involves the triggering of well-practiced routines by stimulus conditions similar to those in the learning context' (Perkins, 1992: 2). Secondly, 'mindful or 'high road transfer' involves deliberate effortful abstraction and a search for connections' (Perkins, 1992: 2).

To relate Perkins' model of transfer to the formal adult literacy course context, learning invariably takes place in a classroom situation with fellow students, is facilitated by a professional teacher who uses educational texts, resources and strategies to engender specific types of literacy learning experiences that are designed to meet prescribed assessment criteria. The education context, and the attendant literacies and performances therein are extremely remote to the literacies and performances of many other contexts and therefore would entail 'far transfer' and 'high road transfer' if literacy learning is to help the students' literacy and language proficiency. For example, the literacy practices involved

in working as a plumber are very different to those involved in being a nail technician. Plumbers and nail technicians both use language to communicate in their everyday activity, however, the literacy practices they both use are very different as they are patterned by very different social institutions and forms of knowledge which are specific to those social fields. More specifically, each context uses very different 'workplace literacies' (Tett, Hamilton, Hillier, 2006: 25) in that it has its own specific gambit of esoteric terminology, writing styles, along with highly nuanced writing tasks and requirements to perform specialised verbal interactions. The proficiency in using these literacies is learned through their experiences of participating in their everyday working practices and using the forms of knowledge embedded within the activities required of them in their respective roles. Thus, in light of the problem of transfer associated with AM, the underlying assumptions in policy rhetoric and government research about the benefits literacy learning has for people in terms of helping them in their working and social lives can be contested.

## **2.7 New Literacy Studies: literacy as social practice**

Literacy is a contested concept amongst practitioners, policy makers and theorists in the field of education (Papen, 2005). What literacy is, the purpose and value of literacy education, along with how it should be taught depends greatly on the particular theoretical stance from which literacy is being conceptualised (Street, 1993; Tett et al, 2012). New Literacies Studies (NLS) researchers, adopt a sociocultural stance (Ade-Ojo, 2011; Bathmaker, 2007; Mayo, 2005; Street, 1985; Tett, Hamilton and Hillier, 2006) to theorising literacy learning. They are critical of the functional model of literacy that has become

the dominant way of thinking about literacy since the launch of the Skills for Life strategy in 2001. Their critique is based on a rejection of cognitivist views of learning (Vygotsky, 1962; 1978) that theorise learning as the acquisition of skills which can transfer usefully between contexts. It is argued that the conceptualising literacy in terms of objectified, measurable competencies is a simplification of what literacy is and cannot account for the complexity of what it means to be literate in a given context (Tett & Hamilton, 2006: 2).

NLS theorists posit a social practices model of literacy (Street, 1993; Barton, 1994; Gee, 1996; Barton & Hamilton, 1998) that is based on a participatory metaphor of learning (Sfard, 1998) outlined earlier in this chapter. The social practices model maintains that 'being literate' entails being able to participate in socially situated activities, communication and working practices in ways that enable them to advance their own interests and agendas. To give an example, what it means to be literate as a carpenter requires a understanding not only of specific terminology and esoteric language of the trade, but also a nuanced appreciation of the working practices, forms of knowledge and social conventions embodied within the social context. In other words, 'being literate' entails knowing how to be a carpenter and perform the expected social role.

On this basis, NLS commentators such as Tett and Hamilton (2006), Crowther, J., Hamilton, M. and Tett, L. (2001), Street (1985), Gee (1996), Brandt and Clinton (2002), Ade-Ojo & Duckworth (2015), Barton, D. and Hamilton, M. (1998) theorise literacy as socially situated practices that are multiple as they

continually emerge in nuanced ways through the everyday activities of participants in given contexts. The ways people engage with texts, and use language to converse and participate in various everyday activities within given social settings varies considerably between different social contexts. Social contexts embody specific forms of knowledge and working practices (Holland and Lave, 2009) which influence the nuances of meanings and purposes associated with given literacy activities and are integral to the participants' language use and what it means to be literate in those contexts.

In contrast to the social practices theory of literacy, the functional model of literacy used in formal education contexts treats literacy as objectified and measurable skills that exist independently of people and contexts of use. Curriculums attempt to objectifying literacy using a criteria of skills competencies which in effect strips literacy of the meaning making processes involved in language and literacy use. From a social practices viewpoint, this functional model is problematic as the attainment of qualifications are not necessarily valid indicators that participants' literacy practices have improved in ways that benefit them in terms of them increasing their employment status or helping them in meeting their literacy needs in their daily lives beyond the course context (see: Ade-Ojo, 2011; Ade-ojo and Duckworth, 2015; Mayo, 2005; Tett, Hamilton and Hillier, 2006).

### **2.7.1 The marginalising effect of the functional model of literacy**

Social practice theory is premised on the idea that literacies are socially situated practices (Street, 2003; Tett, Hamilton and Hillier, 2006) that are embedded in institutionalised forms of knowledge and patterns of behaviour within given contexts. In theorising literacy as socially situated practices, firstly it provides a convincing explanation of why it is that other research (BIS 2009) about the outcomes of literacy courses has found that literacy learning within the course context has not manifested in changes in a person's employment status or income. Arguably, this lack of evidence in the existing research is testament that the functional skills model of literacy which assumes skills can be acquired and transfer in beneficial ways is inherently flawed. From a social practices view, the literacy practices used within the education context are not universal, do not transfer between contexts and on this basis the usefulness of the functional model of literacy for helping marginalised groups of people can be contested.

By theorising literacy as socially situated practices, this approach explains why it is that people from different sociocultural groups are advantaged and others disadvantaged by the literacy practices valorised in the formal education context (Gee, 1991; Besnier & Street, 1994). The forms of literacy taught in adult literacy education contexts are shaped by dominant neoliberal education discourses and institutionalised forms of knowledge featured in curriculums and policy documents (see: Ball, 1990; Lo Bianco and Wickert, 2001; Moore, 2002) that emphasise vocationalism. Education policy and its enactment by education institutions, together, have the authority to formalise what constitutes legitimate literacy practices and the way they are commodified as measurable skills (see:



Street, 1995; Crowther, Hamilton and Tett, 2001). In this respect, the neoliberal ideology in adult education, with its emphasis on human capital and employability skills privileges particular literacy practices and conventions that are recognised as being useful within work contexts, whereas other forms of local and vernacular literacies are not valorised within the adult education context (Jones, Turner and Street, 1999; Lea and Strierer, 2000). The consequences of this are twofold. Firstly, it means that those people whose literacy practices, including vernacular use of language and literacy do not coincide with the forms of literacy valorised in the literacy curriculum are at a distinct disadvantage as they will be measured as having poor literacy skills; secondly, it means that those people who join courses for reasons that are not employment related are also disadvantaged as their literacy learning needs are not pertinent to the remit of the course and its emphasis on vocationalism.

In light of this argument, Bathmaker (2007), Tett, L., Hamilton, M., and Crowther, J. (2012) question the value of adult literacy courses for helping participants transgress the specific literacy-related difficulties they experience in their everyday lives which are not employment-related. It is argued that the shift in emphasis from social capital to human capital, and the commodification of literacy as 'employment skills' means that many individuals who wish to develop their literacy practices for personal development purposes or for reasons such as citizenship that are unrelated to employment no longer have the opportunity to do so. Other commentators argue that the neoliberal ideology and its instrumentalist model of education has led to a 'value for money approach to education' (Ade-ojo and Duckworth, 2015: 43), the standardisation of curriculum

and closer monitoring of teaching practice - all of which do not necessarily serve the learning needs and interests of the people accessing adult literacy courses.

### **2.7.2 A critique of New Literacy Studies research**

The social practices conception of literacy put forward by NLS writers is however criticised as exaggerating the autonomy of literacies that emerge within local contexts. Brandt and Clinton (2002) argue that the literacies that manifest in given contexts are not 'invented' by participants and practitioners within contexts, nor are they independently chosen or sustained by them. To think of literacy practices in such a way suggests that cultural contexts emerge in isolation and that the literacy practices that emerge within them have little or no relation to the literacy practices and conventions in other cultural contexts, which is disputable. As Brandt and Clinton (2002: 1) argue, 'Literacy in use, more often than not serves multiple interests, incorporating individual agents and their locales into larger enterprises that play out from the immediate scene'. Brandt and Clinton highlight the 'material dimension of literacy' (2002) and the influence 'consolidating technologies' have on localised literacy practices that possibly originate from outside organisations. On this basis, they characterise literacies as being 'transcontextualised', and viewed as such suggest they have the potential to 'travel, integrate and endure' (2002) between contexts.

While I acknowledge the NLS view that literacies are socially situated, I agree with Brandt and Clinton (2002) that local literacies are particular manifestations of more generalised literacy conventions and practices that can have a degree

of commonality between different social contexts. In this sense, while the localised forms of literacy within social contexts settings are highly nuanced, it is plausible to suggest that the forms of literacy and literacy practices in one context can in some way have parity with those in others. As discussed in the Introduction chapter, Salomon and Perkins (1989) propose a 'low route to transfer', arguing that literacy is so ubiquitous that we relearn it in many different contexts, and thus develop a flexibility in our practices not found in other areas of formal learning.

### **2.7.3 Life history and narrative approaches to researching literacy learning**

Other social practices research (Barton, 2009; Forster et al. 2018; Tett, 2016) adopts life history and narrative approaches to researching the outcomes of literacy learning, the findings of which show that participants' identify a range of less tangible learning outcomes associated with their literacy learning experiences. Barton (2009) used a social practices approach to examine the relationship between adult learners' lives and their engagement with literacy, numeracy and language learning. Barton defined literacy, numeracy and language as social practices in that they are 'activities that people carry out and which relate to and are shaped by all the other activities they engage in throughout their lives, rather than just as skills or cognitive attributes that people have or do not have' (Barton, 2009: 52). Barton maintained that this definition influenced their approach to the research aimed to 'understand people's participation, engagement and progression in diverse settings' (Barton, 2009: 52) by listening to what they have to say about their literacy and language

practices within different sociocultural contexts and the meanings they attach to those practices in the broader context of their lives (Barton, 2009: 52).

Barton's research drew together large-scale research of 282 people (134 students, as well as other teachers, managers and support workers). A qualitative model was used that employed a mixed methods of data generation the included observations, group work, photographs, video and several interviews over a six-month period in order to generate data that can be triangulated (Barton, 2009: 52). In its philosophy, the research aimed to work collaboratively with the participants so as to 'represent people's voices fairly and in consultation with them' (Barton, 2009: 53). Barton considers this to be particularly important in 'working with groups that include people in positions of social inequality who have experienced marginalisation throughout their lives' as it is 'the learners' perspective on these issues that particularly adds to earlier findings in this area (Barton, 2009: 53).

The findings of Barton's research suggest some commonalities in the participants lives and understandings about their difficulties with formal learning. The majority of the participants they spoke to had 'very negative previous experiences of education, and negative experiences with authority' (Barton, 2009: 54). These negative education experiences stemmed from other social issues associated with things such as ill-health, histories of violence and trauma, being bullied at school, family breakdown and drug dependence. For some of the participants, this resulted in them 'seeing themselves as having

been positioned outside a world of normality' (Barton, 2009: 55). The findings showed that the participants had a variety of reasons for joining the provision ranging from safety and survival reasons, negotiating transitional periods in their lives, and more specific learning goals associated with progression in their education or career aspirations (Barton, 2009: 54). Barton's findings showed that the informal, learner-centred approaches to teaching that were responsive to individual's lives and learning needs were important in terms of helping the participants to progress onto further basic skills classes, and in terms of personal development such as 'learners' self-esteem, motivation, team working, time keeping and individual problem solving' (Barton, 2009: 56).

Forster et al. (2018) adopted a life history approach to explore the learning outcomes of 14 adults participating in either employability skills training or community adult education in a de-industrialised region of the North East England. They conducted a thematic analysis of data collected through semi-structured interviews that focused on: the effects of de-industrialisation on the participants lives, and how their experiences of adult education have 'shaped their position, disposition, and identity' (Forster et al., 2018: 7).

Forster et al. found that common narrative themes in the data which strongly suggested that various social, personal and community benefits outweighed positive outcomes associated with increases in employability. In accord with some of the findings of Barton (2009), Forster et al. identified a range of 'softer' outcomes including improved self-confidence, new education aspirations and

the emergence of more beneficial adult learner identities, which were considered by the research participants as being more significant to them than changes to their income and employability.

Their findings also indicated that the community-based provision was more successful in strengthening the participants' subjectivities and 'sense of self and capacity to act' than the employability skills programmes which weakened subjectivity (Forster et al., 2018:13). Forster et al. maintain that their data suggested that the employability training contributed to increases in the participants' anxieties about their situation and 'reinforced feelings of failure' (Forster et al, 2018: 11) as well as some improvements in self-confidence and self-esteem. In contrast, the narrative themes about learning experiences in informal, community-based contexts were significantly more positive, with a variety of personal benefits mentioned, including narratives of improved confidence, improved mental health, narratives of redemption, social re-integration, and a sense of restored control over their lives (Forster et al, 2018: 11).

Forster et al. argue pedagogic models that place an emphasis on developing human capital and learner's employability fail to acknowledge socio-economic inequalities of communities and are therefore less responsive to the specific needs of communities and the people that live in them (Forster et al, 2018: 6). Using Freirean language, they argue that traditional 'banking' models of adult education are not effective for developing the critical consciousness that enable persons to identify and challenge their marginalised subject positions and the

various structural inequalities in their lives that may have contributed to their marginalisation (Forster et al, 2018: 6). On this basis, Forster et al. (2018), advocate the use of a Freirean critical pedagogic approach based on dialogic learning that helps engender a process of 'conscientization', through which marginalised groups of people can better understand and resist their disadvantaged subject position, and the possibilities for changing it:

'Freire's dialogical methods critical education engages learners in the social conditions that are oppressing them, and provides a space to question oppressive structures. Through dialogue, learners begin to critically reflect on their situation and develop a political consciousness that challenges them to take action' (Forster et al. 2018: 7).

Forster et al. conclude that critical pedagogies that respect learners as citizens and respond to their specific social and emotional needs can help to foster a sense of belonging and therein in community cohesion. This provides a basis for orchestrating a collective voice and resisting deteriorating communities and social inequalities:

'A Freirean critical pedagogy enables learners to become critical thinkers and this enables knowledge to be actively constructed between learners and tutors. In doing so, the private problems of individuals can become collective issues for social action and political engagement' (Forster et al., 2018).

Other research by Tett (2016) adopted a life history approach combined with a Foucauldian lens to examine the impact adult literacy learning experiences have on participants' identities. The research analysed the participants' previous experiences of formal learning and the ways 'negative discourses' associated with literacy difficulties shape perceptions of literacy capabilities (Tett, 2016: 427).

The research drew on data generated by session observations and semi-structured interviews with 7 teachers and 34 adult learners studying on literacy projects. Tett maintained that qualitative approach adopted is premised on the idea that 'human beings are interpreters of meaning' (Tett, 2018: 432) and, following Wedin (2008) that autobiographical interviews offer an effective way of examining the 'perspectives and life conditions of the target groups [and] take local, everyday practices into consideration' (Wedin, 2008, 762). The participants were asked to talk about their lives, key events, their current situations and imagined futures in order to construct an autobiographical account of their lives. In presenting the research, Tett highlights that autobiographical accounts are constructions rather than objective historical accounts (Gluck and Patai, 1991), and that the story is shaped by a range of contingent sociocultural factors, particularly those involved with the interview context (Tett, 2018: 432).

The findings in Tett's research showed that at the early stages of their learning programs many of the participants positioned themselves as 'failures' as



learners based on their previous negative experiences in formal learning contexts (Tett, 2016: 439). Tett argues, that as a result of positive learning experiences on their programme participants showed signs of critically reflecting on their learning histories and challenged the 'negative education discourses' that shaped their identities and expectations as failed learners:

'Positive experiences in their programmes had caused them to re-evaluate their previous understandings and enabled the construction of new identities as people that are able to learn' (Tett, 2016: 439)

Consistent with the findings of Forster et al. (2018), Tett argues that the humanist teaching intentions and practices of practitioners was a significant factor in the development of participants' critical faculties. Tett suggests that encouraging learners to question and resist their positioning in negative discourses of disadvantage and failure manifests in a group discourse of progression and aspiration that enables 'the collective and the common to enter individual activities (Sfard and Prusak, 2005: 15). In Tett's words, through their course experiences:

'They were able to make use of a different discourse framework through which to interrogate their experiences, and this has enabled them to engage in the authoring of new selves and new social relations, and thus new figured worlds' (Tett, 2016: 439 - 440)

The process of critical exploration described by Tett clearly has resonance with Freire's notion of 'conscientization' through which the participants in Tett's

research appear to be establishing new, more positive subject positions in education discourses. In particular, Tett suggests the participants show signs of resisting positioning in discourses associated with failure, such as depression, bullying, substance abuse with other discourses of aspiration, new employment and education potential (Tett, 2016: 433 - 435).

Both Tett (2016) and Forster et al (2018), suggest that the process of critical reflection and re-narrativisation is integral to helping educationally marginalised groups of people relinquish their inhibitions about their capacity to learn and take advantage of opportunities in education. Arguably, the formation of emerging adult learner identities and learning goals is constitutive of new forms of agency, in that the language of failure is displaced with the language of possibility and therein new opportunities for action. On this basis, creating learning communities through an emphasis on critical pedagogies (Friere, 1990, 1991) and narrative learning approaches (Biesta et al. ) are considered by some theorists as being most effective in changing the education opportunities and motivations of marginalised adults (Cieslek, 2006; Tett and Maclachlan, 2007). Within such models, learning communities that acknowledge the voice of participants, and provide spaces to share experiences and collectively create emancipatory, progressive discourses are most effective for engendering persistence in adult learners (Tett, 2016). Theorising learning contexts as communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991), learning occurs through the 'inherently socially negotiated character of meaning . . . in, with, and arising from the socially and culturally structured world' (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 51).

Research by John Bynner, entitled 'Whatever happened to lifelong learning? And does it matter?', uses a life course approach to research, which identifies similar wider literacy learning outcomes as those identified by Barton (2009), Tett (2016) and Forster et al. (2018). Bynner's paper draws on longitudinal research in a 15 year programme using data from the 1958 and 1970 British Birth Cohort Studies. Bynner selected these studies as 'they lend themselves particularly well to understanding the role and progress of lifelong learning in individual progress of lifelong learning in individual lives, each collecting data on experience in the interesting domains of life - family, community, education, employment, health and so on - as the developing individual passes through them on the route adulthood' (Bynner, 2017: 62).

In addition to the findings of Barton, Forster and Tett discussed above, Bynner's findings showed other wider outcomes, including: improvements in participants' psychological and physical well-being, reductions in drinking and smoking habits, increases in exercise, greater resilience against depression, and increases in political interests and participation in elections (Bynner, 2017: 76 - 77).

In his critique of the dominance of neoliberal model policy trajectory of education that privileges the 'economic' over the 'wider' social and well-being learning goals, Bynner suggests that lifelong learning is integral to the welfare of individuals and communities in a changing world, stating, 'What is indisputable is that, as society transforms digitally at an accelerating rate, a wide range of capabilities is critical to adult functioning, individually, in the family, the community and the workplace.' (Bynner, 2017: 82). Bynner argues that lifelong learning plays a fundamental role in developing these 'capabilities',

and as shown by NIACE surveys (Tuckett and Aldridge, 2010). He maintains that an absence of sufficient literacy and numeracy provision that is responsive to the needs of persons and communities could compound social and economic inequalities and contribute to the growing 'learning divide' (Sargent et al, 1997).

Bynner advocates a return to more traditional models of adult, community and family learning, whereby embedded pedagogic approaches to teaching adult education are most effective for motivating and engaging participants in literacy and numeracy learning. Referencing research by Mallows and Lister (2016) and Reder (1994), Bynner suggests that motivating disadvantaged adult learners is best achieved through 'repeated and sustained practice integrated into everyday activity in the workplace, at home and in the community' (Bynner, 2017: 84). Bynner suggests that 'lifelong' and 'life-wide' learning are fundamental to 'bridging irreversibly the learning divide' and addressing current political concerns about human capital and the need to address skills inequalities of marginalised groups (Bynner, 2017: 84).

## **2.8 Using biographical narratives to research learning experiences**

In the field of adult literacy education there has been an increase in the use of biographical and life history research (Carless and Douglas, 2017; Tett, 2016; Forster et al., 2018; Baacke and Schulz, 1985; Alheit and Hoering, 1989; Alehit et al., 1995; Erben, 1998; Bron and West, 2000; Dominice, 2000; Goodson, 2001). Biographical research is grounded in the work of Jerome Bruner (1986; 1990) who made the distinction between two 'modes of thought': paradigmatic cognition and narrative cognition. Below, a thumbnail overview of Bruner's

narrative theory and its significance to the analysis of literacy learning in this research is provided.

Bruner's notion of 'paradigmatic cognition' describes the process of objectifying knowledge through the ascription of categories and classifications of concepts and identifying relationships between those concepts in order to understand and explain human action and the complexities of learning experience. It is clear that the acquisition model of learning (discussed above) that considers learning as the development of skills is based on the Bruner's notion of paradigmatic cognition. In contrast, 'narrative cognition' theorises human action as being shaped by a person's interpretations of experiences within given social contexts. Learning is an experiential, interpretive meaning making process which involves relating socially situated experiences to both, previous learning experiences and to their goal-directed purposes and imagined futures (Goodson, Biesta et al, 2010).

This meaning making process can find expression in the everyday practice of persons telling life stories about their experience. It is through this practice of storying that persons construct highly personalised narratives about their lives and imbue it with meaning and significance. As Polkinghorne (1995: 5) explains:

'Narrative descriptions exhibit human activity as purposeful engagement in the world. Narrative is the type of discourse composition that draws together diverse events, happenings and actions of human lives into thematically unified goal-directed purposes.'

Polkinghorne, following Bruner (1990), maintains the distinctive role of narratives is that they provide a 'plot' for persons to order and make sense of their lives by assembling the random and contingent nature of life experience into a coherent narrative theme. Plots function as 'a type of conceptual scheme by which a contextual meaning of individual events can be given (Polkinghorne, 1995: 7). Similarly, Bruner highlights the significance of the linear sequence of personal narratives and explains that 'a narrative is composed of a unique sequence of events, mental states, happenings involving human beings as characters or actors' (Bruner, 1990: 43).

It follows that the social roles associated with particular narratives people appropriate have a patterning influence on the actions of persons. For social roles, like those of characters in a play, are defined by certain character traits, qualities that restrict the scope for certain possibilities of social action and behaviours, while at the same time privilege and justify the scope for others that are regarded as being commensurate with the role. As Bruner explains, in articulating narratives, the person 'not only recounts but [also] justifies' (Bruner, 1990: 121) courses of action in accordance with the narrative role being appropriated.

So, although personal narratives are unique representations of a person's 'private experience', the origins of these narratives are grounded in a person's relationship to cultures and the discourses available within them (Burr, 2003: 66). For social constructionists, the narrative roles or 'discursive positions' defined in the available discourses not only provide a conceptual framework of

meanings, but also disciplines persons to think and behave in certain ways.

Hall (2001: 72) succinctly summarises this Foucauldian view of the relationship between discourse and practice:

‘Discourse, Foucault argues, constructs the topic. It defines and produce the objects of our knowledge. It governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and are used to regulate the conduct of others.’

A study of personal narratives can therefore provides social researchers working from a sociocultural perspective with an insight into people’s biographies, and the ways their social practices are related to and shaped by social structures and institutions.

## **2.9 Why use a narrative research approach?**

The recent popularity of biographical learning in education theory can be explained as part of a rising critique of and resistance to the shortcomings of the acquisition model of learning prevalent today in education research. As Bron et al. (2005) write, it can be seen ‘as a reaction against those traditional forms of research, which marginalised the perspectives of subjects themselves or reduced social process, including learning, to overly abstract entities or largely socially determined processes in which individuals had little space for creativity’ (Bron et al., 2005: 12). Bron et al. maintain that such research ‘gave little or no credence to the idea that participants might shape, however coincidentally, the social and educational worlds they inhabited and might have

important stories to tell in building a better, more nuanced understanding of learning and educational processes' (Bron et al., 2005: 14).

In contrast to positivistic approaches to research that tend to marginalise the voice of subjects, biographical approaches to research place an emphasis on the meanings and significance subjects relate to their learning experiences. Whereas most policy research in the field of adult literacy tends to be narrowly focused on economic outcomes of lifelong learning (Biesta, 2006), the biographical approach broadens the focus of the analysis to encompass a range of outcomes that are identified as being significant to the subject. In so doing, biographical approaches to research can provide a deep insight into the lived experience of learning which other approaches often omit as it is regarded as unimportant to the analysis of literacy learning. As Tedder & Biesta (2007) argue the biographical approach is based on a broader conception of learning, 'which does not restrict the meaning of learning to institutional definitions, but which includes the cognitive and reflexive dimensions of learning as much as the emotional, embodied, pre-reflexive and non-cognitive aspects of everyday learning processes and practices' (Tedder & Biesta, 2007: 1).

Viewed through a social cultural lens, people's life histories and the life stories they use to make sense of their life histories play an important role in two respects. Firstly, the practice of telling life stories is regarded as playing an important meaning making role for people in making sense of their lives and the world around them (Flyvbjerg, 2006). People tell stories as part of their everyday life and in recounting their experiences imbue them with interpretations about the significance of their life experiences. Although the



practice of storying is a highly personal and individualised meaning making activity, it is one that is shaped by discourses available to persons within the various social contexts they interact within (Bathmaker, 2010: 3).

This leads to the second point that the study of life stories therefore can be used as a basis for analysing the relationship between agency and structure. Life stories provide deep insights into the nuanced meanings people associate with different episodes in their lives; they provide a method for getting closer to the lives and experience of ordinary, marginalised and silenced lives (Riessman, 2008). In doing so, they show the ways a person's practices, thoughts, actions and world views are shaped by their relation to broader social structures and institutions. Biographical research then goes beyond the narrative constructions and makes convincing representations of the life as lived (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

Such research then has the scope to generate highly detailed analyses that help to illustrate the social construction of everyday social practices and the cultural influences that shape them (Chase, 2005) in ways that post-positivistic research cannot. In the context of studying the outcomes of adult literacy courses, the analysis of life stories can show the way learners' exposure to education discourses such as Skills for Life and lifelong learning education shapes their learner identities, their learning practices and the ways they think about both their past and future in the field of education.

## **2.10 Summary**

In summary, over the course of the last sixty years or so, adult literacy education in England has been shaped by a variety of pedagogic discourses and teaching traditions that influence teaching practices today. Since the 1980s, however, adult literacy education has been subject to a policy trajectory that has been increasingly orientated with neoliberal concerns about developing human capital which culminated in the Skills for Life Strategy (DfEE, 2001). The Skills for Life Strategy typifies the neoliberal education policy agenda that sought to address the nation's literacy and numeracy skills deficit in order to improve the economic competitiveness of the country and improve the lives of marginalised social groups.

One common theme in much of the research about adult literacy education is that the dominance of the functional skills model of literacy, with its narrow emphasis on employability skills and the development of human capital greatly negates the scope for course provision to engender learning experiences that meet the specific needs of those accessing the provision (Ade-Ojo, 2011; Bathmaker 2010; Crowther et al., 2010; Tett, 2016).

That said, another common theme in the research reviewed in this chapter about the learning outcomes of adult literacy education suggests that despite the acute policy intentions regarding human capital, this does not always translate in practice. Research shows that practitioners' resist the neoliberal pedagogic discourses (Allat and Tett, 2018) in favour of their own pedagogic intentions that often align more closely with traditional liberal / humanist traditions concerned with personal development, social justice and democratic citizenship.

Research also shows that although it is not an explicit policy intention of adult literacy learning, dialogic learning processes that engage learners in processes of critical reflection on their previous formal learning experiences are implicit in adult literacy learning (Forster et al, 2018; Tett, 2016, De Groot, 2018). A common argument is that are conducive to them establishing a more advantageous subject position as an adult learner.

Findings from life history approaches (Tett, 2016; Forster et al., 2018) suggest that exposure to adult education discourses and discourses of lifelong learning within the adult learning contexts manifests in learners constructing alternative counter-narratives to the personal narratives of deficit, marginalisation and disadvantage they have used to understand their learning lives previously. Narratives of associated with improved self-confidence, new education aspirations are common themes in their research. From a Foucauldian perspective, such changes in participants' discursive practices can be theorised as an emerging subject positions (Foucault, 1990, 1991) or identity narratives as adult learners. The construction of adult learner subject positions is perhaps indicative of new forms agency in terms of participants' challenging social inequalities, surmounting personal inhibitions about their opportunities in education and re-evaluating the impossible as possible.

This study acknowledges the merit of Bruner's notion of 'narrative cognition' and therefore aims to foreground the participants' narrative constructions as a way of providing a representation of their lives that is trustworthy and that we can have confidence in. In accordance with Bruner's model, the analysis takes into

account the participants' previous experiences of education, and explores in detail their understandings of the ways the course is helping them meet their everyday literacy needs and learning aspirations. In doing so, the research situates the participants' course learning experiences in the broader context of their lives and therein is able to effectively illustrate the significance of their learning experiences and the various ways they consider them to be benefiting them.

In the next chapter, I detail the narrative research methodology and argue that by framing this research in the analysis of the participants's life stories, it provides a detailed window into their lived experiences and the discourses that shape their understandings. Such an analysis, arguably, escapes some of the issues identified in the existing research for two reasons. Firstly, it is not narrowly framed in the pedagogic assumptions of the neoliberal functional model of literacy; and secondly, by foregrounding the participants' voice the analysis is better able to show the nuanced ways the participants understand their course learning experiences which are not necessarily shaped by the assumptions of neoliberal vocational discourses.

## 3 - Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

This research uses a sociocultural epistemological lens (Burr, 2003) which rejects the tenets of realist epistemology. Whereas realist theories maintain that reality has essential qualities that can be discovered through empirical research, social constructionist theory maintains that knowledge claims and the meanings persons attach to reality are constructed in relation to the concepts used in particular disciplines to make sense of social reality (Gergen, 1999: 14). The methodological approach used recognises that doing research is itself a socially situated activity that is influenced by the research intentions and the theoretical framework used to generate and interpret the data. It follows that this research does not aim to make universal truth claims about adult literacy learning experiences, rather it aims to provide a trustworthy representation of the participants' learning experiences - representations that have verisimilitude and resonate with the participants' understandings of their literacy learning experiences.

In order for the research to stand as a believable and trustworthy representation of the participants' lives, it is necessary to make clear 'the chain of evidence' (Yin, 2009:4) upon which the findings of the research is based. This entails making clear what the research intentions are (Wellington et al., 2005; Etherington, 2007), and providing a highly detailed account of the methods used for generating, analysing and presenting the data. As Kvale (1995) argues, the validity or quality of social constructionist research is an expression

of the craft of research. For Sennett (2009), the hallmarks of craft include a dedication to good work for its own sake, and working with others collaboratively and transparently. This research clearly bears these hallmarks for several key reasons. The research aims to understand the lived experience of adult literacy learners studying in a FE setting by foregrounding their voice and analysing the significance of their course learning experiences in the broader context of their life stories. The methodology used for generating and interpreting the data has been clearly laid out for the reader so they can appreciate how the findings were constructed. By fortifying the analysis with an abundance of quotations from the interview data, the verisimilitude of the analysis, along with its value in relation to key research questions can be judged accordingly.

The chapter begins by explaining the sociocultural framework adopted and details the rationale of the entire process of creating the research, including: recruiting of the participants, generating and interpreting the data, and formulating the analysis. The key research questions that frame the focus of the research are as follows:

- Do the participants' learning experiences on the formal adult literacy course change their literacy and language practices in ways that help them in their lives beyond the education context?
- Does formal adult literacy learning affect changes in the participants' learner identities, and if so, what is the significance of such changes in identity?

### **3.2 Adopting a sociocultural approach to research**

As outlined in Chapter 1, my own experiences of returning to education at the age of twenty and studying social theory as an undergraduate had a powerful effect on my world view generally, and changed my learner identity in terms of the value I attached to academic learning and my imagined future in formal education. It is this transitional effect of my learning experiences that inspired this research that is primarily interested in understanding the ways adult literacy learning experiences can impact on the learning lives of participants. The changes in my own learning identity that I experienced in returning to education also had a bearing on my decision to adopt the non-essentialist / anti-realist premise that learner identities are socially situated and temporal rather than being expressions of innately determined dispositions or essential qualities.

The theoretical approach used rejects the tenets of the essentialist epistemology (see: Fuchs, 2009) that maintains objective truths about the social world exist outside of consciousness of people and can be discovered. I endorse a sociocultural lens that maintains knowledge, rather than being discovered, is constructed in relation to the specific theoretical frameworks and language practices of given disciplines used to generate and analyse data (Gergen, 1999:13). From this position, the forms of knowledge and working practices that emerge within social contexts are theorised as being co-constructed by participants in a continual meaning making process (Burr, 2003; Lave and Wenger, 1991). The meanings participants ascribe to their life experiences are patterned by the institutions, language practices and discourses within given social contexts (Polkinghorne, 1988). Social practices

of participants are then constitutive of one another. As Wenger writes, 'It is a mistaken dichotomy to wonder whether the unit of analysis of identity should be the community or the person. The focus must be on the process of their mutual constitution' (Wenger, 1998: 146). Accepting this, I therefore recognise that as a researcher I am interpreting the social world using a theoretical framework consisting of an assemblage of specific concepts which inform the construction of the knowledge produced. The findings are presented as a co-constructed representation of social worlds and personal lives, not as a revelation of universal truths.

This research aims to examine in detail the participants' understandings of the ways their adult literacy learning experiences affect their lives in education as well as in other life contexts. Other social research about adult literacy learning (BIS, 2010; BIS, 2013; Ade-Ojo, 2011; Crowther, 2010; Tett, Hamilton & Hillier, 2006; Tett, Hamilton & Crowther, 2012) often has an acute focus on literacy and pedagogic practices in the course context and includes little, if any, analysis of the participants' life histories or lives beyond the course context. Other research discussed in Chapter 2 that has a more similar focus and approach to mine for analysing the outcomes of adult learning experience, such as Barton, 2009; Forster et al. 2018; Tett, 2016 also restricts the focus of the analysis to the course context, analysing progression, employability and increases in confidence in course settings. Arguably, such narrowly focused analyses fail to analyse adequately the significance and / or benefits of the participants' learning experiences in relation to their everyday lives. By taking a more holistic, biographical approach and situating the analysis of the participants'



course learning experiences in the broader context of their lives, this research is better able to show the nuanced ways literacy learning experiences affect their lives in other contexts in ways other course-focused research does not. Biographical analysis is also able to illustrate the complex and less tangible ways learning affects people's lives, and therein enhances the verisimilitude of the representations made of the participants' lives and learning experiences (Goodson and Sikes, 2001).

As suggested by the key questions above, the research is primarily concerned with analysing the participants' understandings of their course learning experiences in the broader context of their life history. The first research question is concerned with exploring the multiple ways participants ascribe meanings and significance to their course learning experiences in relation to their previous experiences of education, and also in relation to other cultural fields in their lives. By adopting this broad analytical lens, the analysis is able to illustrate the nuanced ways participants believe their learning experiences are helping them in their lives, whereas much other research adopts more of an acute focus on the course context. To this end, the interview data generated, to a degree, was led by the participants and encompasses a variety of life episodes significant to them, some of which are remote from the adult literacy context. This approach to interviewing (see: Urquhart, 2012) meant that the participants had the freedom to draw on experiences and articulate meanings they felt were of significance to them (Morrison 1993:66). The interviews were successful in generating sufficient biographical data necessary for achieving my

aim of constructing an analysis that situates the participants' experiences of the adult literacy course in the broader context of their lives.

The second research question focuses on analysing the data to provide insights into the ways the participants construct their identities as adult learners. By taking into account the participants' narratives about their previous experiences of education, the research shows the ways their course learning experiences, and the discourses they have been exposed to therein, are having a shaping influence on their identities as lifelong adult learners. The question aims to enquire whether, and in what ways, any changes in learner identities are significant in terms of understanding the social dynamics of learning and the implications this has for pedagogic practice in adult education.

To answer the questions, similar to the Critical Narrative Approach (CNA) adopted by Souto-Manning (2014), a thematic analysis of the participants' life stories is conducted, combined with a discourse analysis, which illustrates how the personal narratives are shaped by wider sociocultural influences. This two-pronged methodological approach to analysing the data enables the research to show the ways people's everyday lives, their social practices and the personal narratives they use to understand their lives are influenced by institutional discourses. For narratives articulated in people's everyday lives are ultimately intertextual representations of 'recycled institutional discourses' that have been appropriated to make sense of their life experiences (Souto-Manning, 2014).

As Bakhtin (1981: 293) writes:

' . . .there are no "neutral" words and forms - words and forms can belong to "no one"; language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents . . . [L]anguage is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world . . . As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing . . . [t]he word in language is half someone else's'

The two-pronged analysis enables the research to show how the participants' experiences of learning in the adult literacy context involves them constructing new learner identities and re-narrativising their learning lives through the appropriation of various education discourses that they have been exposed to in the adult education field. The analysis also illustrates the ways that the participants are in a process of weaving these often disparate and contradictory narrative scripts into a coherent narrative that best fits their experiences in an ongoing meaning making process. Indeed, the data suggests that the process of appropriating alternative personal narratives to understand their lives is a destabilising process that causes a degree of anxiety. Theorists such as Burr (2003), Lave & Wenger (1991), Bourdieu (1998, 1980), Foucault (1998), Sfard & Prusak (2008), Holland & Lave (2010), Davies & Harre (1990), and Atkinson (1998) also support the view that approaches to research which illustrate this narrative intertextuality offer a more convincing representation of participants' lives in all the mercurial and multifaceted messiness that is human life.

### 3.2.1 A social constructionist framework

The theoretical frame used in the analysis begins from the premise that a person's practices and the meanings they ascribe to their lives are socially constructed through their experiences in different social contexts over the life course (Bourdieu in Wacquant, 1989: 44; Foucault, 1988; Holland & Lave, 2010). As people live their lives, they interact within a diverse range of socio-cultural fields and begin to adopt the different forms of codified knowledge and working practices (Holland & Lave, 2010) that constitute the 'rules of the game' (Bourdieu, 1992b: 98) within those fields. Their participation and immersion in these socio-cultural fields, has a shaping influence on participants' practice (Bourdieu, 1992: 97), in that their ways of being, knowing and doing, become 'inscribed in the body of the individual' (Bourdieu, 1985) to form a 'habitus'. Bourdieu defines habitus as follows:

'Is a socialised body. A structured body, a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular structure of that world - a field - and which structures the perception of that world as well as the action on that world' (Bourdieu, 1998: 81).

Through their experience in a given field, participants' social practices, or habitus, gradually become patterned in ways that coincide more closely with the specific forms of knowledge and cultural practices embodied in the cultural structure of that field. Over time, a symmetry emerges between the participants' habitus and the sociocultural norms in given contexts, in that the

participants' behaviour becomes patterned in ways that are consistent with the specific norms and expectations of communities. As Bourdieu writes:

'The habitus, as a system of dispositions to a certain practices, is an objective basis for regular modes of behaviour, and thus for the regularity of modes of practices, and if practices can be predicted . . . this is because the effect of the habitus is that the agents who are equipped with it will behave in a certain way in certain circumstances. (Bourdieu, 1990b: 77)

The degree of symmetry between the participants' habitus, the patterning of their practices and the cultural structures of given fields can manifest in the participants becoming more adept in performing various roles and activities in given contexts. In turn, the participants' distinctive habitus advantages them as they have increased their cultural capital in given fields which confers upon them social attributes of distinction and enables them to identify with more prestigious subject positions available within that field (see Moore, 2004; Shilling, 2004; Bourdieu, 1986). Lave and Wenger (1991) theorise this process of subject positioning in education contexts as 'legitimate peripheral participation'. In this model participants gradually reposition themselves along the 'Novice' to 'Expert' scale as their social practices being to coincide more closely with the forms of knowledge and practices institutionalised in the cultural milieu of given contexts.

In adult literacy learning contexts, this process of moving along the 'novice to expert' scale is represented in students' gradual mastery of those literacy practices defined in the curriculum, their progression through the learning levels and the attainment of qualifications. All of these function as explicit signifiers that can validate and reify a participant's subject position in the adult literacy context.

### **3.2.2 Discourses**

In this research discourses are analysed as a way of understanding and explaining the way forms of literacy and language shape patterns of thought and practice of participants within given social contexts (Burr, 2003: 63; Souto-Manning, 2014). The term discourse, however, has many different definitions and applications, therefore it is necessary to clarify that the term is being how the term is being used in this research. Below, I provide a detailed account of how the concept of discourse is used in this research. I begin by outlining a broad conceptual definition, and go on to explain the specific model of discourses used in this research, which makes a distinction between discourses and personal narratives .

Discourses are theorised as sociocultural texts (Chruszczewski, 2009: 1) that represent attempts to rationalise the messiness of social realities by fitting them into coherent conceptual frameworks for understanding those realities (Bourdieu, 1998; Foucault, 1998). Discourses in this sense, are represented in forms of:

‘speech or writing seen from the point of view of the beliefs, values and categories which it embodies; these beliefs etc. constitute a way of looking at the world, an organization or representation of experience – ‘ideology’ in the neutral non-pejorative sense. Different modes of discourse encode different representations of experience; and the source of these representations is the communicative context within which the discourse is embedded.’ (Hawthorn 1992: 48, cited in Mills [1997] 2004: 5)

Discourses are represented in written texts, stories, metaphors, art, and are expressed in patterns of dialogue and social action, cultural artefacts and conventions, cultural trends, sociopolitical ideologies and educational pedagogies within different fields. Discourses make implicit claims to truth about the reality they represent and influence how participants construct meanings and make sense of their everyday experiences (see: Hall, 2001:32; Burr, 2003: 65). Available discourses therefore have a patterning influence on participants' habitus (Bourdieu, 1998) - i.e. their social practices; therefore social practices can be considered as expressions of discourses - they are the ‘practices which form the objects of which they speak’ (Foucault, 1972: 49).

Foucault defines discourse as:

‘ . . . a group of statements in so far as they belong to the same discursive formation [Discourse] is made up of a limited number of statements for which a group of conditions of existence can be defined.

Discourse in this sense is not an ideal, timeless form [. . .] it is, from beginning to end, historical - a fragment of history [. . .] posing its own limits, its divisions, its transformations, the specific modes of its temporality. (Foucault 1972: 117)

Foucault suggests that discourses are constituted in everyday practices and shape the way a something can be meaningfully talked about in given social situations. Discourses refer to 'a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events. It refers to a particular picture that is painted of an event, person or class of persons, a particular way of presenting it in a certain light' (Burr, 2001: 64).

Discourses then are not universal, rather they are socially situated and continually (re)emerging in multiple forms as they are appropriated and re-appropriated by participants in their everyday interactions with others in given sociocultural contexts. This symbiotic relationship between discourses and participants' practices, is usefully theorised by Holland and Lave (2009) in their 'history in person' paradigm. Using this paradigm, in any given social context discourses find expression in 'codified knowledge'. For example, in the adult literacy context, this would include cultural artefacts such as course curriculums, teaching and assessment materials, pedagogic disciplines, policy statements etc.



These manifestations of discourses have a shaping influence on participants' working practices: their patterns of thought and action, language, ideas and the meanings they attribute to their activities and the world around them. Without a relation to discourse, participants' experiences and their social practices are essentially meaningless; as Derrida puts it, there is 'nothing beyond the text' (Derrida, 1976: 158). Bourdieu & Passeron (1977) also recognise the shaping influence of discourses on the meanings participants ascribe to their lives:

' . . . the field of culture is arbitrary, in that its positions, and the objects that mark them . . . have no intrinsic justifications or qualities. They are in themselves 'empty'. They have meaning only relationally.' And therefore, 'All pedagogic action is, objectively, symbolic violence insofar as it is the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977: 5 in Moore, pg. 447).

Discourses then influence on what is thinkable, and what is unthinkable, they are constituted in people's' knowledge and the meanings they ascribe to their experience of the world around them. Ultimately, discourses regulate and govern which discursive practices, social actions and ideas are legitimated, and which are not in given contexts (Hall, 2001: 32). As Foucault writes:

'Truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power. . . . Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it

induces regular effects of power. Each society has its régime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourses which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.' (Interview, Truth and Power, 1979: 131)

In this respect, discourses function as 'regimes of truth' (Foucault, 1979) in Rainbow, 1991); they constitute the 'rules of the game' (Bourdieu, 1992), which in effect situate people in a hegemonic knowledge - power relation, whereby the justifications for social, economic and political inequalities that manifest are premised on arbitrary truths. As Bourdieu writes: 'All pedagogic action is, objectively, symbolic violence insofar as it is the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977: 5).

Given that discourses are represented in social structures as well as in the language, social practices and the world views of participants (Bourdieu, 1980: 54), 'Social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside social agents. When habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a 'fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 127).

As a result of this congruence between participants' world views and the status quo, participants are more likely to tacitly consent to their social position. For the patterns of social inequality and oppression that emerge in given contexts are normalised and 'appear' legitimated in relation to the various discourses that have shaped the participants' own world views. The participants then, are not only complicit in their own oppression, but their very own social practices also tacitly help to sustain prevailing discourses and patterns of inequality that manifest in given contexts. Being normalised, the mechanisms of power are less likely to be scrutinised, challenged or resisted by those who are subjugated and positioned disadvantageously. As Foucault (1976: 86) writes, 'Power is only tolerable on condition that it masks a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to ability to hide its own mechanisms.'

### **3.2.3 Discourses and personal narratives**

The notion of discourse in this research is used in the Foucauldian tradition (Foucault, 1971) as a basis to theorise the social construction of the participants' identities and the meanings they ascribe to their literacy learning experiences and lives more generally. The research focuses on exploring the relationship between discourses and the shaping influence they have on the personal narratives participants construct in making sense of their everyday lives.

Discourses emerge in given sociocultural contexts and become institutionalised in texts and cultural artefacts such as policy documents, curriculums and teaching resources. Discourses are theorised as cultural scripts (Polkinghorne,

1991) that are appropriated by participants' in nuanced way as personal narratives in order to make sense of their lives and construct a sense of identity within given social contexts (Burr, 2003). Personal narratives and attendant identities are theorised as being intertextual and temporal. They are intertextual as different personal narratives are voiced in relation to a person's participation in multiple social contexts (Rogers, 2004: 294) and the public discourses available within those contexts. As Burr argues, 'Our identity is constructed out of the discourses culturally available to us, and which we draw upon in our communications with other people. A person's identity is achieved by a subtle weaving of many different threads (Burr, 2003: 106). Personal narratives are also continually revised, re-articulated and re-appropriated over the life course in light of new life experiences and participation in new contexts. Thus, the process of constructing personal narratives is an ongoing meaning making process, which as Lave (1996) suggests, can be considered as a form of participatory learning:

'There are ways of becoming a participant, ways of participating, and ways in which participant and practices change. In any event, the learning of specific ways of participating differs in particular situated practices. The term 'learning mechanisms' diminishes in importance, in fact it may fall out all together, as 'mechanisms' disappear into practice. Mainly, people are becoming kinds of persons' (Lave, 1996: 157).

Linking this to Foucauldian theory, the narrative themes that emerge in the participants' life stories can be theorised as appropriations of various discourses. These narrative themes are also representative of the the

participants' positioning in discourses - what Foucault refers to as 'subject positions' (Foucault, 1980), which vary according to historical, cultural, or social context. As Baxter (2002) argues,

'The self is not fixed in a set of socialised, transferable roles, but is constantly positioned and repositioned through discourse. Individuals both negotiate and are shaped by their subject positions within a range of different and often contradictory discourses.' (Baxter, 2002: 829)

The multiplicity of discourses available to participants invariably means that they often do not neatly align with one another, but often conflict in terms of the ways they construct the social world as it is and how it should be. Given this, the process of positioning in multiple discourses can involve a degree of struggle for participants when discourses come in to tension with one another (Burr, 2003: 110). This struggle of positioning in different discourses and reconciling the tensions between them in the process constructing personal identities as adult learners is clearly represented in the participants' narratives in this research. One of the reasons being that 'individuals are constrained by available discourses because discursive positions pre-exist the individual whose sense of "self" (subjectivity) and range of experience are circumscribed by available discourses (Willig, 1996: 114). For example, the participants who have for years positioned themselves as being marginalised or academically disadvantaged as a result of their school learning experience is inherently disempowering. For although they are showing signs of positioning themselves as lifelong learners, their long-held subject position of being marginalised remains dominant: it appears more credible and instils doubt about the efficacy

of their emerging position as a lifelong learner they're attempting to establish and valorise.

Thus, despite the shaping influence of discourses on participants' identities within everyday interactions, participants have a degree agency to position themselves in different discourses, resist them, and appropriate them in nuanced ways to 'fit' with their social situation (Davies and Harre, 1990, 1999; Van Langenhove and Harre, 1994). Davies and Harre, employing Foucault's idea that power and resistance are always operating together, suggest that the concept of positioning recognises the power of discourses to constrain a person's practices but simultaneously provide possibilities for them adapting them (Burr, 2003: 113).

In summary, an analysis of the relationship between discourses in the adult literacy learning context and the narrative themes articulated by the participants is useful for forming insights into the ways they are negotiating the adult education field and constructing identities as adult learners (Souto-Manning, 2014). The methodological approach used in the analysis of the data views the interview transcripts as texts (Foucault, 1980, 2007; Fejes, 2011; Fejes and Nicoll, 2008). An analysis of the narrative themes within the interview data provides a basis to illustrate the ways the meanings the participants ascribe to their lives and learning experiences have been shaped by their positioning in multiple and contrasting discourses such as lifelong learning and Skills for Life discourses. An analysis of this subject positioning in multiple discourse provides a basis to explore the subtle and nuanced ways the participants ascribe significance to their literacy learning experiences in terms of beneficial

changes in their literacies, their habitus (Bourdieu, 1981) as an adult learner, and their lives more generally beyond the course context.

### **3.2.4 Identity, meaning and subject positioning**

The concept of identity in the theoretical lens used does not refer to an essential quality, or 'true self', as this notion of identity, although intuitively plausible, represents ontological illusion (Gergen, 1999: 122). A person's sense of self is considered as emerging through the discursive practice of storying everyday experience. The stories told are constructed using in relation to the various interpretative and communal traditions in which people become embedded Gergen: 1999: 126). As Usher et. al, (1997: 103) write, personal identity is:

' . . . that of a decentred self, subjectivity without a centre of origin, caught in meanings, positioned in language and narratives of culture. The self cannot know itself independently of the significations in which it is enmeshed. There is no self-present subjectivity, hence no transcendental meaning of the self. Meanings are always 'in play', and the self, caught up in this play, is an ever changing self, caught up in the narratives and meanings through which it leads its life.'

Within the social constructionist paradigm, life experiences in themselves have no intrinsic meaning, rather meanings are theorised as being *co-constructed* by participants in relation to their experiences and interactions with others in given

social contexts (Bruner, 1990:124). It is through this meaning making process that participants 'story' their lives and imbue them with particular meanings and coherence (Denzin, 2000; Sarbin, 1986 in Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). The narratives articulated represent an ongoing process of identifying through which people gain a unified sense of self, or identity that is perceived to endure over time and space (Roberts, 1999; Goodson & Sikes, 2001; 2010; Polkinghorne, 1998; 1995). Thus, life stories do not report truths about a person's life history (Goodson and Sikes, 1991), and endorse the view that story telling is a socially situated activity through which persons narrate their lives for coherence and meaning (Roberts, 1999).

In analysing the data, it is clear that the participants are actively and tentatively constructing nuanced stories and meanings about their lives in relation to a variety of competing discourses. Expressions of identity are then expressions of the broader societal discourses they identify with. As Davies and Harre (1990: 263) suggest, a person's identity can thus be characterised as multiple and emerging:

'An individual emerges through the processes of social interaction, not as a relatively fixed end product but as one who is constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate. Accordingly, who one is, is always an open question with a shifting answer depending upon the positions made available within one's



own and others' discursive practice and within those practices.' (Davies and Harre, 1990: 263)

The practice of storying represents a process of meaning making (Wenger, 1998), in that the telling of life stories involves participants appropriating various narrative themes associated with discourses available to them (see: Georgakopoulou, 1986). In appropriating various narrative themes, personal experiences are given meaning and significance. As Polkinghorne writes, in this sense discourses function as 'cultural scripts' (Polkinghorne, 1998) that provide participants with a broad narrative for positioning themselves in the social world, making sense of their lives and constructing a sense of identity (Bamberg, 2004; Davies & Harre, 1990). Goodson and Sikes share a similar point of view that '... life stories often use 'schematic resources', or 'prior scripts', which not only shape personal narratives, but also play a part in shaping the lives of the people who adopt them' (Goodson & Sikes, 2005: 75).

Over the life course then, a person's sense of self can be characterised as an ongoing 'narrative project' (Goodson and Sikes, 2010). Persons are in a continual process of constructing and reconstructing multiple storylines to make sense of their lives in relation to the experiences they encounter. Identity can be theorised as a composite of multiple and emerging 'identity threads' (Burr, 2003) that, theoretically speaking, intertwine and cohere to form a unified sense of self. As Burr writes:

'A person's identity is achieved by a subtle interweaving of many different identity threads . . . All of these, and many more are woven together to produce the fabric of a person's identity. Each of these components is constructed through discourses that are present in our culture . . . We are the end product, the combination of particular versions of these things that are available to us. (Burr, 2003: 106 - 107)

Burr's view has merit, in that the construction of identity is not determined exclusively by a person's relation to one particular discourse, as people have a degree of agency to accept, resist, move between and negotiate their position relating to a variety of discourses (Davies and Harre, 1990; Harre and Langenhove, 1991, 1999) over the course of their lives. Moreover, persons construct the different personal narratives in order to make sense of their lives in nuanced ways to suit their particular circumstances and experiences (Bamberg, 2004; Day Sclater, 2003). Indeed, when persons interact with unfamiliar social fields and the discourses embodied therein, they are able to objectify themselves in 'new' ways by taking up the subject positions available to them. Such new subject positions, for some participants, represents opportunities to appropriate alternative cultural scripts and construct alternative meanings regarding their life histories and their imagined futures, bringing with it potentially advantageous opportunities. As Raey (2004 :436) argues:

' . . . when a habitus encounters a field with which it is not familiar, the resulting disjuncture can generate change and transformation. The

refractory and destabilising implications the the notion of field has for the concept of habitus can produce nuanced understandings of power relations and political agency' (Raey, 2004: 436)

I maintain that the process of appropriating new meanings in relation to different discourses persons identify with represents the ongoing construction of a habitus, which also brings about the prospect of new forms of agency within given fields. For example, when adults return to formal education, in positioning themselves in discourses (such as the Lifelong Learning discourse) and objectifying themselves in different ways (such as a being a Lifelong Adult Learner), their new subject position enables them to reconstruct new identity narratives. Such identity narratives can manifest advantageously. As the data in this research shows, the participants are beginning (re)scripting themselves as having greater confidence to access different opportunities in education and realise newfound goals that they may have previously conceived as being inaccessible to them.

In summary, the analysis examines social and education discourses associated with the field of adult literacy learning and focuses on the key themes that emerged in the biographical narratives articulated by the participants. These narrative themes are theorised as personal expressions of the public dominant social and education discourses available to participants. The data in this research suggests that discourses of marginalisation, alienation, self-improvement, criminality, mental health, rehabilitation, and xenophobia and

immigration, to name but a few, are significant influence on the participants' narratives articulated within the interview context.

### **3.3 Challenging the status of biographical research**

Biography is the narrative of a life lived by one person and written by another (Petrie, 1981: 5), and biographical research methodologies have become increasingly popular in the field of social research since the 1970s in what is being termed the 'cultural or linguistic turn' (Reissman, 1993; Chamberlain et al., 2000; Roberts, 2002). This is due to the increasing scrutiny of more traditional realist methods for researching social life that are based on realist epistemological and ontological notions that social realities exist independent of persons and can be objectively conceptualised through research. In contrast, biographical approaches to research adopt anti-realist interpretative epistemological and ontological assumptions (Smith, 1989; Sparkes, 1992) that maintain social realities are multiple, socially situated and mind-dependent (Smith & Sparkes, 2007).

A central ontological supposition of biographical approaches is that humans are story telling animals that live storied lives in storied landscapes (Connelly & Clandinnin, 1999; Sarbin, 1986; Somers, 1994; Smith & Sparkes, 2006) which are shaped by cultural life (Polkinghorne, 1998). Narrative is the 'primary scheme by which human existence is rendered meaningful' (Bruner, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988: 11) and therefore a narrative analysis provides a useful way of exploring the relationship between the everyday understandings of life experience and the patterning influence of cultural norms and discourses in

given contexts (Ochs & Capps, 2001; Bakhtin, 1981: 293). As Smith and Sparkes (2009) write:

‘We live in, through, and out of narratives. They serve as an essential source of psycho-social-cultural learning and shape who we are might become. Thus narratives are a portal through which a person enters the world; play a formative role in the development of a person; help guide action.’

On this basis the analysis of people’s narrative constructions are of prime concern in social science (Andrew, Sclater, Rustin, Squire, Treacher, 2000) as they provide a way of generating the highly detailed data necessary to write credible representations of participants’ lives, and the unique ways people construct meanings in relation to their lived experiences in different social settings (see: Hatch and Wisniewski, 1995: 128 -129; Riessman, 1993; Dezin and Lincoln, 1994; Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995; Polkinghorne, 2007: 7). Although the emphasis of biographical research is on the subjective meanings people create, biographical data can also be used to examine the ways meanings are shaped by various sociocultural structures and discourses (Wengraf, 2001; Souto-Manning, 2012).

Any methodological approach to researching social life, no matter how robust, is subject to critique from those commentators who disagree with the ontological and epistemological ideas upon which it is premised. The biographical approach to researching social life is certainly no exception, as the emphasis

placed on subjectivity is commonly regarded as 'unscientific' as it lacks the degree of objectivity necessary to make trustworthy knowledge claims.

According to Stanley the focus on specific personal experiences is 'raising central epistemological and thus political issues for all forms of social inquiry and praxis' (Stanley, 1994: 89).

A central concern relates to issues of adequacy due to the highly subjective nature of the data generated in interview dialogue between researchers and the researched (see: Tedder in Coe, R. et al., 2017; Flyvbjerg, 2006; Shavelson & Towne, 2002). In this regard, Bourdieu warns of the 'biographical illusion' created by co-constructed meanings that both parties tacitly endorse the authenticity of, stating 'the subject and the object of biography (the interviewer and interviewee) have in a sense the same interest in accepting the postulate of the meaning of narrated existence (and, implicitly of all existence)' (Bourdieu, 2004 [1986]: 28).

Bourdieu's point highlights concerns over the subjective nature of the data generated which is influenced by the the dynamics of the research relationship which by definition is 'first and foremost a social relationship marked by its own dynamics and roles, and dependent on the context, as well as the social features and backgrounds of everyone involved' (Caetano & Nico, 2018: 8).

The narrative data is thus a joint construction' (Clausen, 1998: 197) that involves all the contingencies and inconsistencies associated with the practice of telling of life stories in any other life context. Any life story articulated is subject to flaws in memory, factual inaccuracies and are influenced by the particular power relationships present in social situation being articulated which

have a bearing on which life experiences are selected, which experiences are not, and how those experiences are interpreted. Life stories then are contingent on given social situations and can change depending on the time it is being told, who it is being told to, and the reason why the story is being told.

These issues about subjectivity and temporality are central to the realist critique of biographical research. The realist critique maintains that biographical data can only generate interpretative representations of reality based on the value-judgements of participants and researchers, rather than presenting findings based on more objective, empirically rigorous data (Becker 1970).

Interpretative approaches therefore lack the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge as the claims to knowledge cannot be epistemologically justified in the same way as more 'scientific' research methods (Roberts, 2002). The fundamental weakness being that individual, specific and idiosyncratic about one person's life cannot say anything about the social life in more general terms (Caetano & Nico, 2018).

### **3.3.1 Defending the validity of biographical research**

The validity of of biographical research can be defended on ontological and epistemological grounds. From a social constructionist perspective (Burr, 2010, Gergen, 1999) all canons of knowledge, including scientific knowledge, are not objective, veridical truths that are 'revealed' through research, rather they are truth claims constructed in relation to the specific theoretical framework being used (Gergen, 1999: 13). The process of conducting research and making truth claims involves a human being using a particular theoretical framework to make a series of inter-related judgements throughout the entire research process.

The entire process of knowledge production is relative to the theoretical lens being used and the judgements of the human being using it; the 'gap' between realities and the representations of them are mediated by the researcher (Campbell & Stanley, 1963) and the narrative conventions of the particular theoretical discourse used to justify those representations (Richardson, 1995: 199). Social constructionists (Burr, 2010; Gergen, 1999) dismiss the empiricist notion that truth claims are objectively true, arguing that so called 'truths' are constructed using vocabularies of professional disciplines and only represent 'forms of description and explanation particular to these traditions of practice' (Gergen, 1999).

The Oxford English Dictionary (2012) reports that the term 'valid' is derived from the Latin term 'validus' meaning strong, powerful, and effective, and can be used to mean: 'Of arguments, proofs, assertions etc.: well founded and fully applicable to the particular matter or circumstances sound and to the point, against which no objection can fairly be brought' (Simpson, 2003). In terms of what constitutes valid data for justifying truth claims, the realist and social constructionist paradigms share the same principle of validity in that they both accept the fundamental idea that in order to be valid, knowledge claims must be based on transparent and rigorous research protocols that show the truth claims made are consistent with the theoretical framework being used.

The debate concerning issues of validity arises because realist and constructionist doctrines use contrasting epistemological paradigms for justifying knowledge claims. The realist paradigm is premised on the notion that the external world is 'knowable' and that research can discover 'objective



knowledge of reality, an empirical, material basis for individual experience and the stories reflect a lived reality' (Roberts, 2002: 7). In contrast, social constructionist paradigms do not set out to 'discover' universal truths about social reality, but present trustworthy representations of social worlds and people's lives based on the participants' uniquely created meanings and understandings of social the social worlds they find themselves in (Bruner, 1986).

The biographical methodology used in this research aims to interpret and present a coherent representation of the participants' lived experiences of becoming an adult literacy learner. By focusing on the narrative themes that emerged within participants' interview data about their lives, the analysis provides a highly detailed, localised account of the complexities, contradictions and ambiguities intrinsic to social life that are often 'silenced' (Reissman, 2008: 9) by grand narratives that often purport to make universal claims to knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 237). The context-dependent knowledge generated by localised research can 'retain more of the 'noise' of real life than other broader types of research which are more prone to making unsubstantiated generalisations (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2001: 4). The value of using an interpretative research paradigm is that it challenges the believability of some of the universal assumptions made by dominant discourses. By foregrounding narrative understandings and the meanings people ascribe to social realities, interpretative lenses generate representations of lived experiences that potentially resonate more closely with the nuances of people's lives than quantitative methods that do not place such an emphasis on subjectivity.

In response to the critique that biographical research has little use for explaining anything beyond personal experience, it is argued that this is not the case when the social construction of life stories is considered. Life stories are not articulated in isolation but are shaped by persons' life experiences and language practices within social contexts through which the self and the world they experience are known and made knowable (Foucault, 1990, 1991). The methodology in this research that combines a thematic narrative of life stories with an analysis of discourses that shape those stories provides a credible way of constructing new insights about the social world (Souto-Manning, 2014). For example, the findings detailed in Chapter 4 show that the participants' understandings about their problems with literacy and potential to achieve in the field of formal education are shaped by a bricolage of discourses they have been exposed to over the life course, including school education discourses, dyslexia discourses, discourses of disadvantage and marginalisation, adult literacy education discourses and discourses of lifelong learning. Despite the nuances in their stories, the commonalities in the language used is suggestive of the patterning influence of social structures and institutions. As Wood and Kroger (2000) write:

'It is exactly the connection between discourses and social contexts, processes and situations that makes discourse analysis a valuable and powerful tool for studying social phenomena (Woods & Kroger, 2000)

In summary, regarding the issue of validity, in contrast to realist epistemological traditions that intend to prove truths about the social world, constructionist

approaches to research aims to provide robust theoretical representations of social worlds which are themselves constructions. In this sense, what constitutes valid 'knowledge' within biographical research can be conceptualised in ways that do not coincide with standard notions of 'reliability', 'validity' and 'generalisability' used in realist approaches. Hatch and Wisniewski (1995) therefore suggest that alternative language is necessary for theorising the validity of narrative research which includes terms such as: adequacy, aesthetically finality, credibility, explanatory power, coherence, plausibility, trustworthiness, verisimilitude etc. (Bruner, 1986; Riessman, 1993; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995). One of the fundamental challenges regarding the quality of narrative research is that the representations made are coherent, have verisimilitude, and are shown to be based on compelling data sets generated through a robust methodology. In order to demonstrate the quality and coherence of narrative research, the researcher's intentions, the methods used for generating the data, and the process used in formulating the analysis must all be made transparent to the reader. For these elements are integral to the construction of the research and influence the fairness and trustworthiness of the representations of the participants' lives (Bruner, 1986)

### **3.3.2 Biographical interviews and validity**

The decision to use a qualitative biographical approach to interviewing stems from the ontological notion that persons are 'interpreters of meaning' (Tett, 2016) and that their understandings are unique manifestations of multiple socialisation experiences that occur in different contexts over the life course. In contrast to quantitative approaches that tidy away the messiness of human subjectivity, the qualitative approach of using semi-structured interviews

arguably are the best method for giving voice to this experience and hearing first hand the unique meanings persons construct in relation to their experiences (Caetano & Nico, 2018).

Thus, the biographical methodology used in this research does not shy away from the charge of subjectivity, but highlights it as a fundamental quality of the research that promotes the otherwise silenced voices of the persons under examination. The methodology recognises that the data generated by biographical interviews is co-constructed and influenced by a host of factors specific to the interview context. In particular, it acknowledges that the research intentions, the focus of the inquiry, and the questions asked combine to invoke a particular telling of the participants' life stories (Kvale 1996:126). The story told is potentially a brand new version of events that may only have a degree of congruence with the events themselves or indeed with other versions of the story the participants may have told previously to others in different contexts. This variation in the construction of life stories is not necessarily an epistemological problem from an interpretative perspective, rather it highlights the point that life stories are not the same as life experiences (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Life stories are expressions of a person's search for meaning: they are temporal and continually modified over the life course to suit different purposes within different social situations: the interview context being one of them.

The central point here is that the subjective meanings of lived experience are what is being represented in the research. Subjectivity is 'an object in itself or as a means of accessing the topic analysis' (Caetano & Nico, 2018: 13).

Although biographical approaches foreground this subjectivity, the validity of the data is safeguarded by the various academic protocols involved in generating the data and findings within the interview context and across the entire process of presenting the findings (Atkinson, 2012; Berger, 2015; Brannen, 1993; Caetano, 2015a; Doucet & Mauthner, 2002; Gubrium et al., 2012; Hoffman, 2007). In summary, biographical research aims to present an objective analysis of subjective experiences, and it does this by using theoretical frameworks, methodological devices and analytical procedures that serve to distance the researcher from the researched. In order to defend the validity of biographical research, researchers need to be transparent in how the data was generated and show that they have addressed the following questions:

- Does the researcher convincingly show that the interview narrative has genuine coherence with the participants' other life stories?
- What has the researcher done to verify and illustrate this coherence?
- Has the researcher made the process of data collection and analysis sufficiently transparent?
- Has the research been conducted in a way that minimises researcher influence over the story told in the endeavour to represent the participants' voice in an open, honest and trustworthy fashion?
- What claims are being made and are they legitimate?

In response to these questions, I recognise the distinction between 'life experience' and 'life story' (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). The life story articulated within the interview situation is only one nuanced version of events and experiences that, firstly, may not be a 'true' representation of what happened.

Secondly, the story may vary from or contradict other versions of the life stories participants articulate in other social situations (see: Denzin, 1970: 245).

Although this may be the case, the different versions of life story do not need to be consistent with one another, nor do they have to be completely coherent in order to be valid. For the practice of constructing life stories is an ongoing, everyday life activity that is dynamic and relative to the specific time and context in which they are being articulated, along with the purposes for which they are being voiced. The story that emerges in the interview situation is one amongst many other versions of a life story that is no less trustworthy than those articulated by persons in other contexts.

What is perhaps more important in conducting biographical research is that researchers show that they have thoroughly explored and presented the multiplicity of narratives articulated in the interviews in a convincing fashion (Atkinson, 1998). As detailed in this chapter, the methodology aims to 'remain close to the experiences of the researched and the contexts in which their experiences emerge' (Bryman, 1988). It is for this reason that I opted to use a pragmatic, semi-structured questioning strategy that foregrounded the participants' voice. In doing this, I could explore in detail the narrative threads as they emerged in the interviews without imposing 'the formulation of theories and concepts in advance of the fieldwork' (Bryman, 1988). The semi-structured approach gave me the flexibility to explore and corroborate the narrative themes identified, elicit further details as required, and ultimately check the 'internal coherence' (Atkinson, 1998) of the life story, along with my understanding of it. According to Atkinson:

'Internal consistency is a primary quality check that can be used by both the interviewer and the storyteller to square or clarify early comments with recent insights, if they appear to be different.' (Atkinson, 1998: 60).

A 'participant validation' (Woods, 1996; Lincoln and Guba, 1985) technique was used in the final interview to help ensure that my understandings and representations of the participants' stories corresponded with the story the participants intended to tell. Finally, to show the trustworthiness of the research, the entire research process is made clear by detailing my researcher intentions, the method of data collection and the process for analysing and representing the findings.

In response to the question of what knowledge claims can be made legitimately within biographical approaches to social research, I highlight two points about the way in which I think the analysis should be read. Firstly, the analysis should not be read as providing any kind of objective, universal insights into social realities and the plight of the 'adult literacy learner' as experienced by others. Neither should it be read as 'faithful' depictions of events and experiences (see Kelly, 2007). The analysis should be read as narrative representations of lived experience that are co-constructed by interviewers and interviewee (See Stanley, 1993). The analysis stands as an intimate and localised discourse construction that recognises and makes transparent the various social and theoretical influences embodied within the process of data construction and analysis. By focusing on the participants' voice the analysis provides a detailed and robust representation of the participants' lived experience of being an adult literacy learner. Such intimate detail allows the reader to 'gain a feeling of

knowing the life of the participant warranted by the credibility and authority of the text.' (Atkinson, 1990: 133) In so doing, the representations of the participants' lives illustrate the ways the participants' narratives coincide with and deviate from the commonly held assumptions and generalisations represented in dominant discourses surrounding adult literacy education.

Secondly, in writing the analysis I ensured that the participants' voice remained central to the formation of the narrative representation, and did not purposefully omit any inconsistencies or contradictions that emerged. The analysis therefore illustrates the messiness of life stories, and portrays something of the struggle the participants appeared to have in constructing a coherent personal narrative about their lives by drawing on a bricolage of disparate discourses available to them. The analysis focuses on the intertextuality of the participants' narrative constructions and explores the ways their ongoing positioning in different discourses is influencing the way they make sense of their lives.

### **3.4 Methods**

In this section, I detail the methods used to generate the research data. I begin by giving a full account of the strategy I used to recruit and select the participants used for this research. I go on to detail the structure and rationale of the biographical interviews used to generate the data, and explain how this is consistent with my epistemological position.

#### **3.4.1 Recruitment strategy**



To raise awareness of the research and recruit participants for the interviews, a recruitment strategy was devised that followed the process outlined below:

- A Powerpoint presentation (Appendix: A3) and discussion about the research was held with four adult literacy groups in a Further Education college setting.
- An information sheet (Appendix: A2) was issued to all students who attended the presentations which detailed the aims of the research and what their participation in the research would involve them doing.
- A one-to-one discussion about the research was arranged with all those students who expressed an interest in being involved in order to give them the opportunity to discuss their involvement in greater detail.
- Suitable participants were then selected and contacted to arrange the time and date of the first interview.
- The Ethics Protocol (Appendix: A2) was explained and signed at the beginning of first interview.

### **3.4.2. Rationale for recruitment strategy**

In recruiting participants for this project, I recognise that the power relationship between teachers and students was an ethical factor that needed to be carefully considered in order to reduce, as far as possible, my influence on the students' decisions about getting involved (See section 3.4.3). In recruiting and working with participants for the project, from the outset, I endeavoured to build a strong

working rapport with prospective participants, and instill in them a sense of trust in me and being involved in the research. I considered this as being essential for allowing students to make the decisions as freely as possible without any sense of pressure, obligation or negative implications for not being involved. I considered establishing a good rapport as being vitally important for alleviating any inhibitions participants may have regarding the prospect of talking candidly about their lives in what is probably an unusual interview situation.

I decided that the most effective way of being transparent and building trust at the initial stage of the recruitment process was for me to meet with four cohorts of adult literacy students at the start of their lectures to give a short PowerPoint presentation (Appendix: A3) followed by an informal discussion about the research project and the opportunity of being involved. I thought a good approach for introducing the project to the students was to talk to the students about my own life story, focusing on my education background and how I have ended up being a research student with Plymouth University. This proved to be successful in placing the research in context, and students gained an appreciation about of my views about the value of education, and could also appreciate my personal and professional interests in researching the learning lives of adult literacy students studying in a Further Education context.

The presentation and discussion were also designed to make it clear to the students what they would have to do should they wish to get involved in the project. I used plain English to explain the terms of their involvement, stating

that the students were under no obligation to get involved, and that if they did decide to participate in the project that they were free to withdraw at any juncture and would suffer any negative repercussions whatsoever. At the end of the discussion, I issued the students with an Information Sheet (Appendix: A2), which explained in clear terms the finer details of the project, and also made students aware that project had been approved by the Plymouth University ethics committee. Students were given the opportunity to discuss the project with their peers and to speak with me informally on a 1:1 basis in order to address any questions they had about becoming involved with the research.

Following the presentations, I used an opportunity sampling method (the strengths and limitations of which are discussed below in section 3.4.3) to select five students (four males, and one female) who expressed an interest in being involved in the research to their lecturers. I then made contact with each of the prospective participants to discuss their involvement further and make arrangements for the first round of interviews. Four of these students agreed to attend the first interview; one decided that he wanted more time to think about the opportunity further before committing.

While the first round of interviews were taking place, another female student expressed an interest, so I arranged to interview her in addition to the other four participants, just in case any of the other participants should decide to withdraw from the project. This proved to be a fortuitous decision, as one of the male participants who attended his first interview decided to relocate and would

therefore not be able to attend the other interviews. The other student who was deliberating about being involved decided not to proceed, which meant I had two male and two female students signed up for the project.

### **3.4.3 Participant selection**

To select suitable participants for the interviews, I used an opportunity sampling method to identify participants for the research (Cohen et al., 2011). I chose opportunity sampling in order to minimise my influence on the participants selected and therein the data generated. As this is small-scale qualitative analysis based on qualitative research into the life histories of the participants, it was not necessary to use a stratified selection criteria in order to obtain a sample that is representative of different age groups, genders, learning levels, class backgrounds etc. Opportunity sampling offered the fairest way of selecting participants for the sample, for without a selection criteria in place, every interested student had an equal chance of being selected.

In theoretical terms, as the sample is to a degree random and un-bias, the sample can be viewed as being representative of the wider student population as luck is the only variable that compromises its representativeness (Sharma, 2017: 750). In turn, this degree of representativeness means that it is reasonable to make some tentative generalisations about the lived experience of being an adult literacy learner. This is a very cautious assertion, for although luck is the only variable that determines who is selected, the sample used is also potentially influenced by more complex factors, namely: not all students in

the groups were present and therefore did not have the opportunity to participate; some students may have wanted to participate but not had the confidence to do so; researcher bias is a difficult factor to mitigate with opportunity sampling as researchers are more likely to select candidates that offer the prospect of generating richer data in terms of insight and understanding. (Marshall, 1996: 523). That said, this was not the case in this research as all five candidates who stepped forward were interviewed.

I therefore did not use clearly defined selection criteria as such, however, ideally I was looking to recruit two males and two females, and preferably students who were working at a range of different levels across the sample in order to vary the data and make it more representative. This, however, was not a prescriptive criterion. The only guidelines I used for selecting participants were three-fold. Firstly, each participant selected needed to be reasonably confident to speak about their lives in a detailed way so as to generate sufficient data for conducting the analysis. I established this by engaging those interested in becoming involved in the research in an informal conversation after the recruitment presentations. The second guideline was that each prospective participant was willing and available to attend the three interviews over the course of the academic year. The third caveat I followed was that none of the participants selected could be a student I had taught. The reason being, I recognise that the student - teacher relationship I have with my own students is more likely to influence how they answer my questions and therein corrupt the data generated, compared with those students I have not taught. Given that I have a vested interest in my own students' learning experiences and the

opinions they voice, this may also skew the way I interpret the data and construct my representations of it in the analysis.

For any of the students, being invited to talk in a detailed way about their lives in an interview situation with a college lecturer will be an unfamiliar social situation, which will probably be a little intimidating for them. This, coupled with the status and authority of me being a college lecturer who has control over the interview situation, means that the students are positioned in a subordinate power relation between themselves and the interviewer (Maton, 2003; Wellington et al., 2005; Etherington, 2007). It is highly likely that the students will be influenced by this power relation in terms of the ways students choose to talk about their lives and articulate their views about their course learning experiences.

For those students I know and have worked with, the power relation is different to those students I do not know, and therefore has different implications to those students I have not worked with. The contingent nature of conducting interviews means that it is difficult to surmise exactly how my knowing the students will influence the interview, however, it is likely the students I know would be inclined to appease me by voicing views they think would meet with my approval. They may become more reticent about voicing criticisms about their experiences of the course or recounting previous learning experiences, life episodes they think would not meet with my approval. In modifying their responses in this way, it would, in effect generate corrupted data and therefore

undermine the validity of the findings. Conversely, my rapport with the students and the trust they have already invested in me could serve to put the participants more at ease and enhance how candid and forthcoming they are in articulating their views within the interview situation, therein generating richer and potentially more useful data. In light of these methodological implications, I recruited participants who were not my students in order to reduce the risks of data corruption associated with interviewing students I know.

#### **3.4.4 Rationale for the interviews**

I decided that the most appropriate way of generating the data needed to conduct a discourse analysis of participants' lives was to conduct three, one hour, one-to-one, semi-structured biographical interviews with each participant. I considered three interviews at different times were necessary in order to provide sufficient time for the participants to articulate and develop their stories as fully as possible. The interval between the three interviews also meant that I had time to critically evaluate on the effectiveness of the interview technique and the quality of the data being generated required for the analysis. Given I have no previous experience in conducting biographical interviews, I was particularly concerned about getting the right balance between eliciting details of the participants' significant life events and the exploration of the meanings they attached to those events. In practice, the semi-structured interview technique proved effective for maintaining a structure and focus, but allowed sufficient scope to question pragmatically as a way of 'magnifying' avenues of particular significance as they emerge in dialogue (Morrison 1993: 66). In turn, semi-structured interviews gave the participants the discretionary space to

articulate their life stories in any way they choose, drawing on those experiences they feel are relevant to the story they wish to tell. In this way, the participants' voice is foregrounded and the researcher's influence is reduced compared to more structured approaches to interviewing.

Consistent with the view that persons are 'interpreters of meaning' (Tett, 2016) and live storied lives in storied worlds (Clandinnin & Connolly, 2000) the interview forum was considered as a meditative space for me and the participants to have a uniquely reflective conversation within the frame of the semi-structured interview, through which we were able co-construct extended narrative accounts about their life histories (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006). It is these narrativised understandings that emerged in the interview conversations that I used to conduct my discourse analysis. As a social researcher, I agree with Polkinghorne (1995) that, 'Narrative is the type of discourse composition that draws together diverse events, happenings, and actions of human lives into thematically unified goal directed purposes' (Polkinghorne 1995: 5). By analysing the narrative themes in the interviews data, it enabled me to theorise the ways these personal narratives relate to, and have been shaped by, various discourses the participants have been exposed to in the different social contexts in which they have interacted over the life course (; Goodson et al., 2010; Hinchman & Hinchman, 2001; Polkinghorne, 1988; Ricoeur, 1991; Souto-Manning, 2014).

#### **3.4.5 Semi-structured interview design**



Similar to the approach used by Tett (2016) in her research about adults participation in adult literacy programmes, the research data was generated by three semi-structured biographical interviews with each participant that aimed to provide an opportunity for them to articulate their life stories in depth and with a degree of freedom to draw on experiences they considered to be relevant. The structure of the three interviews aimed to elicit a chronological telling of life stories that began with the participants' early years, moved gradually into adulthood, and finally into thoughts about their imagined futures.

Each of the three interviews were comprised of a series of scripted open questions (see appendix: A4) and non-scripted questions that were designed to elicit a chronological telling of the participants' broader life stories while maintaining a central focus on generating data relevant to the key research questions about their literacy practices and previous experiences of formal education. To this end, the questioning technique followed a binary method recommended by Holloway and Jefferson (2000). This entailed lines of enquiry were led by 'narrative questions' that aimed to elicit a general narrative concerning episodes and events followed by a series of 'explanatory questions' that were tailored to elicit more detailed explanations of the meanings and significance the participants attached to those experiences. The scope to ask unscripted questions also enabled me to explore pragmatically avenues of interest pertinent to the research in more detail.

Central to the rationale of the questioning technique was the aim of minimising the degree of researcher influence in terms of asking leading questions and directing the content of responses given. When questioning participants, my strategy was to only intervene where I found it necessary to ask for clarification of ambiguous statements, or when further elaboration on points significant to the research is required. Given that three of the four participants I interviewed described themselves as being dyslexic and were not used to being in an interview situation, impromptu questioning was often required to support the participants in making their points and to facilitate the interview process (Kvale, 1996: 158). In such instances, a pragmatic questioning technique that combined scripted and unscripted questions, along with 'verbal prompting' were used to ensure my understandings of the responses given accurately represented the participants' intended meanings (Silverman, 1993). In practice, it was necessary to ask many impromptu 'follow-up' questions that would 'pick up' on certain facets of the participants' responses. These follow-up questions proved invaluable for clarifying certain aspects or intended meanings in the participants' responses that were initially ambiguous. I found that the follow-up questions I needed to ask flowed naturally in the exchange of meanings that took place in conversation. In the following section, I provide some excerpts from the interview data to help illustrate how the questioning technique worked in practice.

#### **3.4.6 The interviews in practice: an illustration**

Prior to the first interview, each participant was issued with the task of drawing a timeline of their life history that identified the key episodes or significant events

in their life history. The aim of this task was to give participants time to engage in the process of reflecting on and constructing representations of their life histories so that when they attended the first interview they would have already done some background thinking in relation to the questions I would be asking. It was my intention that the timeline exercise would help the participants feel more prepared and at ease in the interview situation, and therefore ultimately enhance the richness of the data generated in the interviews.

#### **3.4.6.1 Interview 1 Illustrated**

The first interview was comprised of 12 questions and had a biographical focus, exploring the participants' understandings of their formative years, their family backgrounds, and previous learning experiences in formal education settings. The scripted questions used for Interview 1 were as follows

1. Tell me a little about your life.
2. Thinking about school, what was it like for you?
3. Were you supported or encouraged with your school work by your friends or family?
4. Did you leave school with any qualifications? What were they?
5. What did you do when you left school?
6. Did you join any college courses or do any training after school?
7. If so, how did you get on?
8. Why did you decide to join an English course?
9. In what ways do you think your English needs to improve?
10. What are your thoughts about the course so far? How are you finding it?

11. At this stage, do you think the course is benefiting you in any way?
12. What do your friends, family and partner think about you joining the course? Are they supportive?

I was particularly interested in finding out about the participants' school learning experiences and the personal narratives they constructed around these. In designing the first interview, I was mindful that the participants would probably be very nervous about being interviewed, and therefore considered it necessary to help them relax into the process of articulating their stories in order to optimise the effectiveness of the interviews in generating the required data. To this end, following the suggestion of Harding (2006: 3) I began with the simple, broad question, 'In any way you want, tell me about your life'. As you can see from the excerpt below from the first interview with Jacob, this was effective in eliciting a broad overview his life story:

*Interviewer:*

*'In any way you want, John, tell me about your life.'*

*Jacob:*

*'I was born in north London, Camden Town to a Nigerian father and a Welsh mother, and from the evidence from the pictures it was a really - I was quite a happy and well looked after child. And I have four siblings: three sisters and one brother, and I grew up, I think as a typical Londoner - didn't do much at school, took off, thought I'd be a bit of an entrepreneur, got involved in all sorts of bits and pieces, got involved in dealing drugs and ended up with a severe dependency for the best part of 25 years, and done all the bits and pieces, gone to jail and everything that is associated with that sort of lifestyle, and then pitched up, as it were, here in sunny Plymouth aged 46 and into a treatment centre - I got funded to go into a treatment centre, went in and suddenly the*

*light switched on and I thought 'Oh dear me, this is what's really being going on - not the delusion I'd been telling myself.' And at that point, I knew I was really, really ill. From the detox unit, I went to a secondary unit and spent six months there, then sort of consolidated what I learnt in the primary treatment centre and learnt a bit more, got out and started getting back to school and realised that I had no education, had a dyslexic assessment at Martin's Gate, here in Plymouth, found out that I was dyslexic, and thought something needs to be sorted out, I need to carve something out from the mess, so to speak; and I went on this journey of sort of adult literature classes and doing vocational courses and ended up getting a job as a support worker, which led to me a Diploma in Counselling. On the way to that, I met one of Plymouth's finest women - I'm sure. Julie took off in early recovery to Spain to run her father's cocktail bar, bought some property out there, but fortunately we got out before it all collapsed, came back and turned up with no job or anything. We had baby, a wonderful daughter, Romany, who is six now, got a job as a support worker and trained to become a counsellor, which brings me up to today.'*

Using the narrative / explanatory technique (Holloway and Jefferson, 2000), I then used a series of questions to further explore avenues of interest specific to the Jacob's experiences of formal education. I endeavored to take a chronological approach to this and so began by focusing on his experiences of primary school and the difficulties he experienced with learning:

*Interviewer:*

*'I want to go back to childhood, really, and thinking about your first experiences in primary school, could you tell me a little more of your experience of school and of learning in school?'*

*Jacob:*

*'I think my earliest memories of my first school, which was Buck Street School, must have been about four, and I can remember screaming in my mum's arms, saying I don't want to go there - I hated it, I think, primarily, my whole*

*experience of school was coloured by an accident I had when I was three years old. At three years old, I climbed over the garden gate and went into the road, got knocked over and had my leg broken in four places, so I was in hospital for six months and in convalescence for five months, so I think that had some play in how I developed; and I think I was a pretty needy child. I was like clinging to mum and that sort of thing because mums didn't stay in hospital then. So when I got to school, I think that's why I didn't fit well into school, I didn't feel that it was good in school. I went from that school to another school, St. Mary's, in Summer's Town, and I can remember there, I think there was bloody nuns or something, which used to beat across the knuckles with rulers, but I can, as I'm sitting here now talking, I can remember a teacher - not sure - I was probably five or six, and I was really, really fond of this teacher, so I enjoyed being in the class and learning and playing about and all the rest of it; I can still remember her, so she must have had quite a powerful impact on me.'*

*Int:*

*'So, she had an influence on how you thought about school and learning?'*

*Jacob:*

*'From the smoky memories of it, I think because I liked her I was happy in that class; I would engage and do things. I think it was more about a sense of 'Oh, I like this person so I will go and make being in there a lot easier.'*

*Int:*

*'So before that then in Buck Street, at what age did you . . .'*

*Jacob:*

*'I can only remember sort of saying to my mum that I don't want to go there, I don't think I was there for very long, I can't remember how long I was there. But I can remember, I can remember enjoying the times when stories were read to kids and et kids had some quiet time - I remember that. But a more sort of significant experience in school was when I was - it's jumping a bit - but it was when I was 13, thereabouts, and I had tis English teacher named Miss Gean, who I was terribly fond of as well; and I can remember having some sort of an*

*epiphany at that moment in time. This woman sort of sat me down and something mad happened - I don't know what it was, but she got me interested in English and I started to apply myself. And at that point, I could not say the alphabet at thirteen, but with her help, somehow, I went out and I had this wonderful day where I was looking at words and I could read them for the first time, and I thought, 'Oh my God!' It was quite emotional actually remembering. [laughs] I thought, 'Shit! I can read, I can read, I can read!' And my best understanding of it was that, sort of, stuff must have been building up or I must have been depending on seeing words, and it must have got to some sort of critical mass before sort of the light switched on and remember it happened in a day! I can remember the date, but it was a day when for the first time I could bloody read. All the way through that when I wasn't able to read, I didn't know - it's jumping a bit - I didn't know until I came to Martin's Gate, aged 46, I was not sort of consciously aware that there was two sounds to a letter.'*

*Int:*

*'So, between St. Mary's School and thirteen, you weren't able to read at all.'*

*Jacob:*

*'No. Not at all. I mean, I imagine I must have been able to read easy words, those sort of things.'*

#### **3.4.6.2 Interview 2 Illustrated**

The second interview was designed to continue exploring the participants' life histories and personal narratives more broadly, but with more of an acute focus on exploring the present. In particular, I aimed to explore the participants' reasons for joining an adult literacy course, along with their views about the course and the ways (if any) they think it has been beneficial to them. I aimed to draw out some detail on the participants' understandings of any transitions

they thought were manifesting as a result of their adult literacy course learning experiences. The questions that comprised interview 2 were as follows:

13. How is the course going? How does it compare with other courses you have done?
14. At this stage, do you think the course is useful to you in any way?
15. And what about your English? Have your English skills changed in any way since joining the course?
16. Have you changed the way you think about yourself / as a learner in any way since joining the course?
17. Has anyone that knows you well made any comments about how you or your use of English have changed since joining the course?
18. If you could go back in time, what advice would you offer to yourself about school and education in general?
19. Have your thoughts or ambitions about the future changed in any way since joining the course?
20. In your honest opinion, what aspect of the course (if any) has been most valuable or useful to you so far?

The questions in this interview were designed to explore the participants understandings about the ways in which the course learning experiences were impacting on their everyday lives beyond the course context. Questions 14 to 17, in particular focused on this line of inquiry. Question 17 aimed to establish if the any 'significant others' had noticed any changes in the participants' practices or confidence as adult learners. This data could then be used to illuminate the ways others are positioning them as learners and in work contexts and if this positioning has changed or not. The following excerpt from Interview 2 with Jacob shows his responses to question 17 which illustrates Jacob's positioning as being more confident in terms of his capacity to surmount his personal struggles with literacy related issues in the workplace:



*Int:*

*Thanks Jacob, that's really interesting - really interesting. So leading on from that, has anyone that knows you well made any comments about how you have changed and how your use of English has changed? So you've talked about yourself more generally there, but what have other people said about your use of English and how you've changed in general?*

*Jacob:*

*I think sort of the most intimate sort of feedback I've had, I've had feedback from my external supervisor, who I meet with once a month and she, a lady with considerable more experience, thinks I'm inspirational, thinks that it would be absolutely wonderful if I believed that I had a brain, because it's clearly evident to other people that I have, it's just it would be great if I believed that I have! She thinks there has been a vast improvement in my ability to manage difficult situations, to manage my work load and em, to keep sort of things developing. My line manager, who was really, I think she had some expectation I'd be a bit of a superman, was sort really sort painfully disappointed in my performance has since given me lots of feedback and is impressed with my personal development, she's impressed with the dedication I do put in to my work; she's always telling me that I can express verbally really well. My work colleagues, similarly think I do really good work and can really express myself and line manager said to me that I'm one of the few practitioners that actually when we have group therapy sessions, and we have a group process after with the counselors, and she says I'm one of the few people that actually brings the whole group process in to our process and explore that - which is a really good developing talent. My partner - I know she will probably disagree - is impressed with my fortitude and my ability to overcome all my struggles and all the rest of it, and em, my family think I'm extraordinary because they knew what I was like in the past and what I've become now and are immensely proud of me. So I get a lot of clues. I get good feedback from Chris, even though he's like me to do a bit more homework. So generally, people have a really a positive attitude about me, people think I'm quite a capable person.*

### 3.4.6.3 Interview 3 Illustrated

The third interview consisted of two parts: the first part aimed to continue exploring the participants' narrative constructions regarding the course and its effect on their literacy practices and learning lives. The questions that comprised the first part of Interview 3 were as follows:

21. How has the course gone?
22. Do you think the course has been useful to you in any way (e.g for education, work, or for every day life?)
23. And what about your English? Has your use of English changed in any way since we last met? Have these changes (if any) been useful to you in any way? If so, how?
24. Have you changed the way you think about yourself as a learner in any way since joining the course?
25. Have you made any new plans for the future since we last met? Have these plans been influenced by the course?
26. Has anyone that knows you well commented about the ways you or your English use have changed since joining the course?
27. Are you considering joining any other courses when your English course finishes?
28. In your honest opinion, what part of the course (if any) has been most valuable or useful to you and your life outside of the course?
29. Would you recommend the course to a friend? Why?

The second part was used to carry out participant validation (Woods, 1996: 46; Lincoln and Guba, 1985) in order to ensure that my analytical representations resonated with their outlook. To do this, I gave a detailed overview of my analysis to the participants, and offered them the opportunity to make comments and any amendments they felt were necessary. Below, I have

illustrated this in Interview 3 with Jacob which shows how this was useful in getting right some of the details:

*Int:*

*So, we're going to move into the second part of this conversation now, and I'm just going to feed back a bit about my interpretation of your story. I don't think in me telling you of my interpretation you're going to learn anything new because from what you've said you're already really self-aware of your own story and I can sort of tell you have spent a lot of time reflecting and making sense of your life history. And part of that has been to do with your recovery plan, hasn't it? And like I say, as I am feeding back to you some of my interpretations, feel free to stop me, correct me, modify me or add anything in, ok?*

*Jacob:*

*Yeah.*

*Int:*

*So right at the beginning when we first met, I just asked you to give me an overview of your life: and you did! [laughter] And it's amazing really because you did it in about a minute and I had to unpack that. So you started off by saying you were a well looked after child, you grew up as a typical Londoner, didn't do much at school and that you had entrepreneurial aspirations from a fairly early age. You got involved with dealing drugs and with jail and with all the other things that come with it, and you said that you became drug-dependent for about 25 years and ended up in a treatment centre in Plymouth at the age of 46. And you said that at that time, being 46, you had what seems to be a significant episode or moment of clarity if you like, in that you recognized or realized that you were ill and in your words, 'needed to carve something out of this mess'. Is that fair so far?*

*Jacob:*

*Yeah.*

*Int:*

*And since that moment, you have set about doing all sorts of different things, including joining an adult literacy course, taking up various voluntary work, doing some vocational course - I think you mentioned an electricians course.*

*Jacob:*

*No - that's what I wanted to do, I tried to do that as a kid but . . . when are we talking about are we talking about since I got into Martin's Gate or into recovery?*

*Int:*

*Just generally.*

*Jacob:*

*No, I didn't do an electrician's course. I done all the sort of personal development stuff.*

*Int:*

*A diploma in counseling, you have a new relationship, married?*

*Jacob:*

*No, just my partner.*

*Int:*

*You have a daughter and you are in a career as a counselor, developing your skills within that role as a means of providing for your family and securing a sound future. That in a very concise nutshell seems to be your story and if we were to put it into chapters, you've got you formative years in school, leaving school and entering adult life: an adult life which eventually took you down a route of crime; and the third chapter seems to be a chapter you're a family man, a working man and it does seem to be a new chapter to me.*

*So looking at your learning identity in school, it seems to me that you were someone that values learning and you had quite strong educational aspirations - that's very clear to me - and as a result of that you really did try, and you've*

*said so yourself, your father was a big influence on this: he had high expectations of you and your brother, he wanted you to excel in education, take advantage of the school learning with a view to becoming a barrister or a doctor or whatever - doesn't every father want that for their kid? And you set about, as a school boy endeavoring to fulfill that, and you're still endeavoring to do that now, I think.*

*Jacob:*

*Yes, I am.*

### **3.5 The fluidity of life stories**

I recognise that life stories are continually emerging over the life course and that participants often articulate multiple and contradictory versions of their life stories. The ways participants articulate their life stories and imbue them with meanings is influenced by a contingency of sociocultural factors such as: the time of life at which it is being told, who it is being told to, the social context in which it is being told and the various power relations that are involved (Bruner, 1990:124). Life stories are continually being modified and adapted by participants to 'suit' particular audiences within different social situations in an ongoing meaning making process over the life course. I therefore acknowledge that the life story being told in the biographical interviews represents only one version amongst many other versions: they are not necessarily factual accounts, but are 'lives interpreted and made textual', and represent 'a selective commentary on lived experience' (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Therefore, in accord with the anti-realist epistemological approach (Burr, 2007), I do not consider the interview as a means for 'discovering' objective truths, but consider it to be a socially situated activity where stories, meanings and understandings

are co-constructed in the ebb and flow of dialogue between the researcher and participant (Ellis and Berger, 2003).

In using biographical interviews to generate data, I recognise that the interview situation is unique, in that it is unusual for persons to articulate detailed biographical accounts of their lives and critically analyse the meanings various life events hold for them. Therefore, the interview situation may elicit a uniquely crafted version and bring about new understandings for the participants about their lives (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). This meaning making process was apparent to me when interviewing, as it appeared that certain elements of the participants' life stories were well rehearsed, while other elements were seemingly 'under construction' and were perhaps being voiced for the first time. The interview situation therefore is not simply a forum where participants faithfully report their life experiences and truths about their lives, rather, it is a creative forum whereby interviewer and interviewee actively co-construct meanings and explore understandings in a rigorous disciplined way.

In light of the co-constructed nature of the life stories and meanings articulated, in order to ensure the my representation of the narratives within the stories 'rang true' with the participants', it was necessary to verbally recount an overview of the story 'as I saw it' with each of the participants in the third set of interviews (Appendix 10). This method of participant validation was important as it provided an opportunity for the participants' to agree and / or amend subtle details in the stories, which in turn helped preserve the verisimilitude of the data

before the process of analysing began. It was also ethically important, for out of respect for the participants it was only right that their life stories were portrayed as accurately as possible in the final research.

### **3.6 Analysing life stories**

I acknowledge that the entire research process, from the initial concept, to designing and conducting interviews, constructing the life stories and conducting a discourse analysis, each represent layers of interpretation that influence my representation of the participants' lives in the final analysis. In order to illustrate the robustness of the research, the three-stage interpretive process involved in constructing the analysis is detailed below. These stages were:

Stage 1 - Transcribing and coding the data

Stage 2 - Writing the participants' life stories

Stage 3 - Writing the discourse analysis.

#### **3.6.1 Stage 1 - Transcribing and coding the data**

The first task was transcribing the audio recordings. Rather than have this done for me by a third party, I decided to transcribe the recordings myself in order to get closer to the data (Castleberry and Nolen, 2018). Transcribing the data oneself helps the researcher become more intimately familiar (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with the detail of the data and also acquire 'a sense of the entirety of the data and allows a greater understanding of the phrasing or meaning of the term

when viewed in the context of the whole' (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018: 808). The process of reading and re-reading involved in transcribing the along with the process of analysing the data.

The process of transcription proved to be extremely time-consuming, as it entailed continually rewinding and actively re-listening to every word being said in order to ensure the transcription, and any notes I was making, remained accurate. Despite the laborious task of transcribing the audio recordings, I found the process extremely useful for identifying significant aspects of the data that I considered to be most relevant to the research questions. I annotated the transcripts during the process of transcribing as way of highlighting and recording initial ideas or links that were relevant to the research.

As this process of annotation got underway, I decided to devise a crude 'analytical tool kit' (listed below) which was useful for interpreting the narratives in the stories being told in a consistent way, and helped with the initial process of constructing the narrative representations for each participant. It was also useful for formulating my initial analysis of the raw data at this stage of the writing process. In analysing the raw data, I focused on the following:

1. Any significant life events and episodes that appeared to be significant to the participants' telling of their life story, and to the focus of my research



2. Signs of meaning making in relation to the life events articulated
3. Reoccurring themes embodied in the narratives indicative of subject positioning
4. Signifiers of different identity constructions
5. Indicators of any tensions experienced in the ongoing process of (re)positioning in different discourses
6. Any commonalities and differences between the participants' life stories which may be illustrative of the dominance of discourses such as the lifelong learning discourse or adult literacy education discourse.

The tool kit was used to draft some very crude narrative outlines for the participants' life stories, as well as to conduct some preliminary analysis. In order to write the narrative outlines and ensure the process of interpretation remained as accurate as possible, I often re-listened to the audio recordings, and re-read the interview transcripts several times, adding further comments and notes to the transcripts and the narrative outlines. I found this stage of the writing process to be considerably messy in terms of formulating a linear narrative construction of the participants' life stories, however, the toolkit gave the analysis clearer structural coherence. In writing the narrative outlines, it became apparent that each participant had a unique story to tell with stark contrasts in their biographical narratives. At the time, this contrast in the participants' narratives concerned me in terms of establishing commonalities in the narratives across the four sets of interview data.

I then began the process of conducting a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the data that aimed to identify, analyse and establish any patterns in the data pertinent to the focus of the research questions. Coding in qualitative research is defined as ‘the process by which raw data are gradually converted into useable data through the identification of themes, concepts or ideas that have some connection with each other’ (Austin, 2014:436).

To code the data systematically and consistently across the four data sets a coding map was used to categorise the data into four analytical categories: Significant life events; meaning; identity; practice. The ‘significant events’ column was used to identify any life events, experiences or episodes that participants mentioned in the interviews that I considered to be pertinent to the focus of the research. For example, experiences of dyslexia, or being bullied. The theoretical categories of meaning, identity, practice and community were used to code and collate interview data ready to begin formulating the theoretical analysis of the life events identified in the ‘significant life events’ category. This process was useful for identifying common themes in the coded data and was used to formulate both the interpretation of his life story and formulate the theoretical analysis in relation to the key questions. As Braun and Clarke write, a theme ‘captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 77).

As illustrated in Jacob’s coding map below (Table 2), the identified themes in the respective coded categories were highly relevant to the research questions. The coding map served as a template for sifting the data and separating excerpts of data that I considered to be relevant to the analysis as I read and re-read the transcripts. In using the coding map to guide the process of interpretation, when relevant data was identified, I used the track-changes application to colour highlighted the excerpts and attach ‘a note to self’ regarding the analytical significance (See Appendix 5).

Table 2: Coding for interview transcripts

Significant life events	Identity	Meaning	Practice	Community
	Londoner			
School and family	Disadvantaged school learner	Domestic issues, broken leg	Struggle	School
School and dyslexia	Dyslexic	Disadvantaged; alienation	Struggle with reading; being able to read for the first time	
Career	Entrepreneur		Realising there are alternatives	
Crime	Heroin dealer, smuggler, robber	Drugs / justification for criminal activity	Proficient, successful	
Drugs and crime	Criminal / deviant	Validation, kudos, success, shame	Proficient	Criminal associates
Addiction	Addict	Realising addiction issue		
Fatherhood	Father	Responsibility		
Education and returning to learning	Reinvention	Education aspirations; sense of possibility and reinvention	Newfound confidence	Acceptance in non-criminal social circumstances
Rehabilitation	Recovering addict	Madonna moment		

Significant life events	Identity	Meaning	Practice	Community
Adult education	Adult learner	Outcomes of learning experience	Changes in confidence	tentative feelings of acceptance and belonging

### 3.6.2 Stage 2 - writing the participants' life stories

With the annotated interview transcripts and narrative outlines completed, I was finally in a position to begin drafting the life stories. To help structure the writing of the four contrasting narrative outlines written in Stage 1, the generic headings listed below were used. These headings were pertinent to both, the participants' stories and to the focus of my research.

- Family background
- Previous experiences of formal education
- Understanding of participants' literacy-related practices and the difficulties they encountered with literacy in school
- Reasons for joining an adult literacy course
- Understandings of course learning experiences and the ways (if any) participants think their learning experiences are helping them to achieve certain goals and realise their imagined futures.

Notes and quotes from the annotated transcripts were identified and collated under the relevant headings. Once a sufficient bank of quotes had been compiled, the narrative outlines were written based on the selected quotes to form the four chronological life-stories. In taking this approach, the

representations and analysis were securely rooted in and remained faithful as possible to the narrative constructions I considered to be running through the participants' life stories. The process of drafting the life stories proved to be highly effective for identifying the prominent narrative themes in the data, and enabled me to begin linking these themes to the theoretical concepts I would later use when conducting the discourse analysis. An illustration of Stage 2 in practice is provided in the appendix (see Appendix: A6).

By distinguishing the writing of the life stories from the process of writing analysis, the rigor of the analysis was preserved, as it precluded the theoretical interpretations becoming confused with the meanings articulated by the participants.

### **3.6.3 Stage 3 - Conducting a discourse analysis**

The approach to adopted for conducting a discourse analysis is based on a similar theoretical approach used by Souto-Manning (2014). The analysis of the narrative themes includes an analysis of the discourses within them in order to illustrate the ways the participants' understandings of their lives are shaped by their experiences and exposure to discourses within different sociocultural contexts. Commensurate with other approaches to narrative research (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 2003; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997; Wood and Kroger, 2000), this research recognises firstly, that personal narratives are unique appropriations of discourses persons have been exposed to; and secondly that it is through discourses that power relations are exercised

and maintained in society. As Foucault writes, 'We are inscribed in the discourses of our lives' (Foucault, 1972). Secondly, that such discourses function as an architecture of meaning that shape life worlds (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999) and everyday social interactions, including what is said and how it is said within a particular structure (Archer, 2000). Thus, as Souto-Manning writes, the analysis of personal narratives and relations to discourses, 'allows us to assert the power of institutional discourses through the analysis of conversational narratives and to verify the presence of recycled institutional discourses intertextually woven into their fabric (Kristeva, 1986)' (Souto-Manning, 2014).

To write the discourse analysis, I re-read the life stories I had written in Stage 2, and used the coding maps to continue the process of conducting a discourse analysis of the narrative themes identified in the data. I formulated the analysis 'organically' by remaining close to the raw data in the process of interpretation, without any kind of intended narrative structure in mind. To do this, I began by re-reading closely the life stories I had written, remaining acutely focused on the participants' voices and tracing the dominant narrative themes in the life stories being told. The language and ideas expressed in the articulation of the narratives was then analysed to establish the ways they have been shaped by a variety of discourses.

This first attempt at conducting a discourse analysis and writing up the four case-studies was only marginally successful. It got the analysis off the ground, orientated my thinking and gave me a clearer idea what the shape of the final

analysis may look like. However, the first draft contained a few issues that challenged the integrity of the analysis. Firstly, my writing style lacked clarity in terms of separating out where the participants' narratives ended and where my analysis began. Secondly, the analysis was not substantial enough throughout, and did not lead to any definite conclusions in relation to the key questions. I therefore decided that before continuing writing the analysis, it would be prudent to revise my method of interpreting the data so that it followed Willig's (2001) paradigm for conducting a discourse analysis, and also remained consistent with social constructionist theory (Burr, 2004).

Willig's (2001) paradigm for conducting a discourse analysis was used for two reasons. Firstly, the paradigm closely relates to the approach used in Stage 1 for analysing the data; secondly, Willig's paradigm is commensurate with my methodological intention of taking a pragmatic approach to analysing data, in that it foregrounds the participants' voice in constructing holistic representations of the participants' life stories. Willig's (2001) guidelines for conducting a discourse analysis proved useful in guiding my analytical practice, and helped me write a more substantial, theoretically coherent theorisation of the participants' life stories. The particular guidelines I used were as follows:

1. Identifying discourse constructions: finding the different ways the object of analysis is referred to in the text.

2. Locating discourses: deciding the way the object is being represented / portrayed / conceptualised within different discursive constructions.
3. Action orientation: what achievements and effects for the participants manifest as a result of these constructions.
4. Positionings: Identifying the subject positions that are made available to participants within these discourses.
5. Practice: identifying the emerging possibilities for action associated with the participants' alignment with subject positions.
6. Subjectivity: the ways the subject positions influence participants' experiences, thoughts and feelings

Willig's (2001) guidelines helped me to better understand how to conduct a discourse analysis and provided a sound pragmatic template for writing the analysis (See Appendix: A9 for an illustration of how I applied Willig's guidelines in writing the analysis).

In conducting the narrative / discourse analysis, several key discourses emerged as being most relevant to the participants' understandings about their learning lives. These included: functional skills adult literacy adult education discourses, lifelong learning discourses, dyslexia discourses, mental health discourses, and discourses of disadvantage and struggle. Below, I have provided two short extracts from the interview data from Jacob's and James's



interview data and briefly illustrated the way a discourse analysis of their narratives about their difficulties with reading, writing and formal learning could be conducted.

**Jacob, Int 3: 5**

*' . . . and there was this really posh, well-healed group of chaps walking round and, em, someone asked me a question, the manager of the hotel asked me a question or something and I said something about something being yellow, and he wasn't being unkind, and he said it's not pronounced like that - spell it. And I was rooted to the spot with this huge feeling of shame: I couldn't spell 'yellow' and couldn't pronounce it. So, that's how I saw myself as this person that couldn't. So over time, and going back - that's going to stay with me for years and years; so entering into these places to do this kind of thing is huge, so I saw myself as somebody who was less than other people, that had this immense difficulty and that there was something wrong with me. And I found out that I had dyslexia, and that separated a lot from what I thought the damage I had done to myself through dependency - it kind of filtered that out, I thought yes, alright there is a rhyme and reason for it, perhaps I'm not so damaged because of that - there's an understanding for it and that was at the age 46.'*

Jacob's narrative in the above extract is illustrative of the way he is appropriating the concept of dyslexia and positioning himself in a dyslexia discourse to make sense of the difficulties he has encountered with reading and

writing throughout his life. Jacob's narrative clearly suggests that his positioning as a dyslexic learner is helping him to re-evaluate and rationalise some of the difficulties he has encountered with learning and distinguish them from other problems he has had with substance dependency. As Jacob expressed it, 'it kind of filtered that out, I thought yes, there is rhyme and reason to it, perhaps I'm not so damaged because of that - there's an understanding for it' (Int 1: 2).

**James Int 1:2**

*James:*

*Right, I left school at 14 unable to read and I joined a box factory and obviously I did not need to read making boxes and I taught myself to read when I was about 16, but I didn't learn to read when I was at school. I'm afraid I played up I think every day at school because I couldn't read and so the easiest way to avoid being made a fool of picking a book up and supposed to read in front of the class, I kicked up, threw chairs around; I was very disruptive.*

*Int:*

*Ok, so was this at primary school as well?*

*James:*

*Just at secondary.*

*Int:*

*Ok.*

*James:*

*Yeah, so educationally wise, I had a failed education really; I learnt very little from school apart from ways to avoid being made a fool of, and I was bullied a lot at school, so I was glad to see the back of school really, so at 14 I was pleased to say goodbye. So since leaving school, I have always had a thirst for knowledge, so I have done my own ways of trying to teach myself ways to read. So I have only found out about ten years ago I suffered with dyslexia, and that's been quite a thing realizing that you have managed to have a career without knowing it - you've managed to find ways of managing your difficulties with reading and covering up your inability to take on reading - anything that's written down, and sometimes verbally, I don't take in information verbally very well, so I need to reiterate in my own head and sometimes write down what somebody has said to me because I can turn round exactly the opposite way round; so I know that is something that I do, and that's something only in the last ten years I know I can rationalise now - and like, I need to write that down and get somebody to spell out exactly what did you ask again, and then write it down so I can see it, so then I can rationalise what has been asked of me or what the exercise is, or what's expected of a particular task.'*

The extract below from James's interview illustrates the ways his narrative understanding is shaped by the appropriation of two discourses. The narrative in the first part of the extract illustrates his use of discourses of disadvantage and struggle in the school context which resulted in his disruptive behaviour. The second part of the narrative shows that James is appropriating a dyslexia

discourse and now positions himself in this discourse as dyslexic student which, like Jacob is helping him to rationalise and overcome his difficulties with literacy.

### **3.6 Chapter Summary**

- Do the participants' learning experiences on the formal adult literacy course change their literacy and language practices in ways that help them in their lives beyond the education context?
- Does formal adult literacy learning affect changes in the participants' learner identities, and if so, what is the significance of such changes in identity?

As framed by the key research questions above, the overarching intention of this research is to provide a highly detailed, qualitative analysis of the outcomes of adult literacy learning by focusing on the lived experience of the participants and the ways they make sense of their course learning experiences. In this chapter, I explained in detail the research methodology and the reasons why a biographical approach makes an important contribution to understanding the nuanced outcomes of adult literacy learning that are not accounted for in the majority of other research in the field.

I began by explaining the social constructionist lens used and my justifications for using it as a way of bringing a contribution to knowledge. I argued that other research in the field (BIS, 2010; BIS, 2013; Tett, 2008; Tett, 2012) shares or tacitly consents to the pedagogic assumptions of the neoliberal discourse, and

for this reason are benign in their analysis of the outcomes of literacy learning. In expounding the biographical methodology used, I argued that a social constructionist / interpretative analysis of the participants' narrative constructions provides deep insights into the nuanced outcomes of literacy learning which are not recognised by other research. I argued that an interpretative approach to the analysis of the participants' life stories means that the research can show the complex ways competing discourses influence the construction of the participants' understandings of their literacy learning experiences.

The chapter detailed the biographical interview method used to generate the data, and showed why the focus on the participants' life stories is consistent with the social constructionist lens. I made the case that a semi-structured approach to interviewing is best suited for foregrounding the participants' voice (Morrison, 1993: 66 - 67), reducing researcher bias (Cohen, 437), and generating rich data sets that faithfully illustrate the verisimilitude of the participants' world views (Bruner, 1986).

One of the main theoretical premises that influenced the methodology used is the notion that literacies are socially situated practices that relate to, and are influenced by the particular forms of knowledge and working practices that manifest within specific social contexts (Street, 1985, 1996; Gee, 1991). In light of this, I argued that a biographical approach is best suited for conducting a broad analysis of the ways the participants' course learning experiences affect

their lives in other contexts. I showed how the biographical lens enabled me to conduct a trustworthy discourse analysis of the complex and messy ways the participants construct understandings about their course learning experiences by drawing on a variety of competing discourses available to them within and beyond the field of education. By analysing the bricolage of discourses that influence the participants' understandings of their literacy learning experiences, I argued that the research offers a more convincing window into the lived experience of literacy learning that resonates with the participants' own word views.

In the next chapter, I present the analysis of the four participants' life stories as an extended analysis. The analysis focuses on the participants' life stories and the ways these stories align with, and deviate from, a heterogeneous range of dominant discourses. To foreground the participants' voice and corroborate the trustworthiness of the analysis, a selection of quotations from the interviews are featured throughout the analysis.

## **4 - Analysis**

### **4.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I conduct a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) combined with a discourse analysis (Sotour-Manning (2014) of the biographical data generated by the participants' interviews in order to answer the following key research questions:

#### **Key research questions**

- Do the participants' learning experiences on the formal adult literacy course change their literacy and language practices in ways that help them in their lives beyond the education context?
- Does formal adult literacy learning affect changes in the participants' learner identities, and if so, what is the significance of such changes in identity?

To answer these questions, the analysis focuses on the participants' life stories and explores the ways a variety of discourses, not just the neoliberal discourse, have shaped the participants' narrative constructions about their experiences of formal education. By foregrounding the participants' voice, the analysis provides a robust representation of the lived experiences of James, Sarah, Jacob and Alice, who studied adult literacy in a FE setting. The aim is to provide a window into the participants' worlds (Goodson, 2001) to better

understand the outcomes of literacy learning which do not always neatly coincide with dominant neoliberal conceptions of learning outcomes prevalent in the adult literacy field.

The analysis is divided into two sections. The first section (Section 4.2) serves to provide a chronological representation of the participants' life stories that centre around their experiences of formal education. The representation has been divided into a three-part biographical structure as follows:

### **Participant background and formal learning experiences**

#### **Adulthood and reasons for joining an adult literacy course**

#### **The adult literacy context.**

Within each of these biographical sections, relevant excerpts from each of the participants' interview data has been provided in order to illustrate the key narrative themes in their life stories. This section of the analysis is heavily weighted with quotations from the data so that firstly, the participants' voices are foregrounded and secondly that readers can appreciate more fully the narratives being articulated. It is important to emphasise that the representation of the participants' life stories and their significance are my own analytical constructions: they stand as a unique representation of the adult literacy context, which can be used to better understand the ways literacy students



conceptualise their learning lives and the outcomes of their learning experiences.

Within each biographical section the narrative themes that emerged in the participants' life stories are examined to show how they are functioning as scripts (Polkinghorne, 1988) the participants construct to make sense of the various events and episodes they chose to speak about. By analysing the participants' previous life and learning experiences, I aim to situate the experiences of returning to education in the broader context of their life history and therein better illustrate the significance their learning experiences. In particular, the analysis shows the ways the participants are in a process of subject positioning (Freire, 1990, 1991) as a 'lifelong adult learner' and from their emerging vantage point are beginning to reconceptualise their world views and future learning opportunities. Commensurate with other research (Bynner, 2017; Tett, L., Hamilton, M., and Crowther, J. (2012) ;(Tett, 2016), the narratives suggest beneficial transitions are occurring, such as: the transgression of perceived personal barriers associated with a lack of confidence in formal education settings; the sense of having improved their literacy and learning practices; the conceptualisation of 'alternative' imagined futures and education opportunities that the participants previously considered to be unobtainable.

In the second section (Section 4.3), an analysis of the commonalities and differences in the narrative themes and discourses across the four sets of interview data is provided. In discussing the findings, I highlight some of the

parallels and differences the analysis has with other research about the outcomes of adult literacy learning experiences. The analysis concludes by returning to the key questions of this research, and focuses on whether or not, and in what ways the participants' learning experiences, and exposure to discourses in the adult literacy context, have affected the way they understand their learning histories and their imagined futures. I consider how these new and emerging understandings are being constructed in relation to the participants' exposure to different education discourses available in the course context, namely the dyslexia, Lifelong Learning, and Adult Education discourses of self-improvement. I discuss whether their course learning experiences, and their emerging learner identities constitute a new form of agency or not, particularly in terms of helping the participants to access new and potentially advantageous opportunities, not just in education, but in other areas of their lives.

## **4.2 Chronological thematic analysis**

### **Participant background and formal learning experience**

#### **Alice**

Alice is a 26 year old from Poland, who came to live in England with her boyfriend in 1998 to seek new opportunities to advance her teaching career as a German language teacher. Prior to emigrating to England, Alice graduated with a Master's degree in German Language, and has trained and worked as a language teacher in various school settings in Poland. Alice speaks German,

Polish, Spanish and Italian fluently, however she arrived in England with a very limited understanding of English language.

The narrative in Alice's story suggests that she has always been passionate about education and indicates that she sees herself as having a disposition for learning languages in academic contexts. Alice spoke proudly of her previous academic achievements, and it is my interpretation that her identity as an academic and an aspiring teacher are both very important to her. It is clear to me that she is mindful of the considerable time and effort she has invested in her education and now has an unswerving determination to make use of her academic achievements as a means of pursuing her long-term goals of becoming a German language teacher. Since moving to England, however, Alice's career plans have been set back due to her academic qualifications not being recognised in England. This has meant that Alice has had to resort to taking various low-paid manual jobs working in kitchens and in cleaning jobs, which has been hugely frustrating for her.

Speaking about her previous experiences of education, Alice described herself as someone who has always had a passion for learning and has enjoyed various academic success in her studies in school, college and university settings. The narrative in Alice's story strongly suggests that she regards herself as an able learner who is proficient in synthesising a range of academic practices, especially languages, with a degree of confidence. Speaking about

her school life, Alice claimed she was 'a very good student' who kept good notes. She recalled:

'I always enjoy learning some new things, especially languages. In primary school we did not have any foreign languages, so have only Polish language and I really liked writing and reading and spending lots of hours sitting alone and reading something. (Int 1: 6)

This extract shows that Alice stories herself as having a disposition for academic learning, and has had keen interest in languages childhood. This appears to be a narrative that continued to characterise her outlook on her education throughout her formative years and into adulthood. In the interview, Alice spoke passionately about how she continues to gain an enormous sense of satisfaction from her learning experiences, and stated that: 'I want to learn during my whole life.' (Int 1:7)

After leaving high school, in 2004, Alice went to an art college where she met a German language lecturer, Dr. Raluca Tudor, who she thinks had a significant influence on her passion for studying German language and inspired her to consider a career in teaching the subject. In Alice's words:

'That was my journey with German language. She was amazing because when she teach me, she gives me the whole picture of the German

language, not only the grammar rules and the vocabulary, but also the culture, the history everything in once, so she has a passion and I decided - I start thinking about becoming a German teacher because of her, so that was very, very eh . . . strong point in my timeline.’ (Int 1:1)

In 2004, Alice passed her exams in art college, and in August of the same year, went on to join Teacher Training College to study for a Bachelor of Arts degree in German Language. Alice describes this as, ‘ . . . one of the most best part of my life: I meet there lots of new friends and also excellent teachers; we have a lot of training courses and trips which gives me the opportunity to learn German language, German people, their culture.’ (Int 1:1)

In June 2007, Alice graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in German language and went on to undertake a full-time Master’s degree programme in German language at Warsaw University in the following September. Although Alice’s mum was supportive of her decision to do a Master’s degree and train as a teacher, her father had a different views about the value of education and the teaching profession. This resulted in quarrels between Alice and her father, who expressed concerns about Alice’s career choice and the costs of doing a Master’s degree. In Alice’s words:

‘I think only my mum she was supporting me all the time, for my father education could not exist, so I don’t understand him and he was also, he don’t agree with me when I choose being a teacher because he told me

that you wouldn't be, you wouldn't eh - everything is about the money and the career, he was thinking that working as a teacher I make a cross on my life because in Poland you don't earn a lot of money with this job, and for me it is something more than just money.' (Int 1: 7)

In contrast with Alice, the other three participants, James, Sarah and Jacob, each articulated very different narratives about their learning experiences at school. All three participants recounted the significant difficulties they countenanced with learning in school, particularly with reading and writing. They each explained how their endeavors to achieve work set in the school classroom were continually frustrated, as they invariably struggled with many of the learning tasks and activities involving reading and writing. They described how their struggle with school learning often led to them abandoning the learning tasks, which eventually manifested in a distinct sense of inadequacy regarding their literacy practices and potential as a learner in comparison with their peers.

Below, using a selection of extracts from the interviews, I analyse the narratives of James, Sarah and Jacob relating to their experiences of school and illustrate the ways they each position themselves similarly as being disadvantaged learners within the school education context.

### **James**

James is a 60 year old man who has not been in formal education since leaving school at the age of 14. Following a mental breakdown, James said he decided to join an adult literacy course as part of his recovery in order to help him with his self-confidence as well as to address issues that he associated with his reading and writing practices.

James talked in decidedly negative terms about his learning experiences at school, and attributed undiagnosed dyslexia as being the root cause of the various other issues he faced at school. Looking back, James described school as being a 'waste of time' and a 'pointless exercise (Int 3:14). James recounted that despite trying his hardest to attempt the work set, how he continually struggled to complete many of the tasks set due to difficulties with reading.

James said:

'I wanted to understand it, but I couldn't understand the basics, I couldn't put words together, they were always moving, always the letters would be moving around, so I couldn't . . .' (Int 1.6)

James explained that his continual struggle with the work set in class was, in part, due to the lack of support he received from his teachers with his reading and writing in the classroom. He said that he got the impression his teachers did not actively acknowledge or address the underlying reasons for his difficulties, and eventually gave up trying to teach him, setting him meaningless tasks such as copying from textbooks. Elaborating on his difficulties with

literacy in school, James explained that he thinks that his school teachers were not sufficiently trained in recognising and supporting students like him with dyslexia. In James's words:

' . . obviously education has moved on and I'm very aware that the teachers I had when I was at school - they were all ex-Air Force, Army - they were all straight from the services, into teaching and possibly . . . and didn't have, eh, that ability to pick up dyslexia or realise that somebody who can't read and he's kicking off because you're asking him to read, he's going to do anything he can so he doesn't make a fool of himself in front of the class. Yeah, so I understand that there is a different timescale . . . ' (Int 1: 18)

The underpinning narrative in James's story suggests that his continued struggle with reading and writing tasks in the school setting eventually undermined his confidence and motivation to learn, which manifested in him identifying himself as the 'classroom joker'. As James explained, his sense of embarrassment and shame about his perceived lack of ability to learn, resorted in him being purposefully disruptive in class as a strategy for deflecting the criticism of his peers and to avoid the sense of shame and humiliation that comes with continually not being able to complete the learning tasks set. In James's words:



'I'm afraid I played up I think every day at school because I couldn't read and so the easiest way to avoid being made a fool of picking a book up and supposed to read in front of the class, I kicked up, threw chairs around; I was very disruptive.' (Int.1:1)

As illustrated above, the narrative in James's account about his school learning experiences depicts a story of struggle and disadvantage in the classroom setting, which James thinks manifested in his pattern of disruptive behaviour and him assuming the role of 'the classroom joker' that served to mask his sense of failure and inability to learn. As James said, 'All I knew was to fool around, to cover up what I couldn't do in class; I was the joker in the class' (Int. 1:2).

Looking back on the pattern of disruptive behaviour that characterised his school life, James suggested that he thinks the teachers could have been more perspicacious in supporting him by making more of an effort to to understand the reasons for his disruptive behaviour and exploring further the difficulties he was experiencing with learning resulting from his reading difficulties. As James says, 'Nobody picked it up! Nobody said, 'Why isn't this lad . . . eh . . . has he ever read to us? No he hasn't, has he! [laughs]' (Int1.4)

In summary, James' narrative about school learning suggests that his subject position in the school setting as being that of a disadvantaged learner, who was failed by his teachers and the teaching practices they used, which he thinks

were ill-equipped to meet his learning needs. A dominant theme in James' narrative suggests that he retrospectively constructs himself as being the 'classroom joker' which is perhaps indicative of James's sense of alienation within the school context and the frustration he felt about his learning capabilities. The narrative theme of disadvantage and alienation clearly shapes most of his dialogue about school, and indeed was explicit in James's evaluative summary about his school life:

'Yeah, so educationally wise, I had a failed education really; I learnt very little from school apart from ways to avoid being made a fool of, and I was bullied a lot at school, so I was glad to see the back of school really: so at 14, I was pleased to say goodbye.' (Int 1:2)

## **Sarah**

Sarah is a 26 year old single parent who joined the adult literacy course with a view to achieving the Level 2 qualification in English she needed to progress on to an Access course. Sarah's long-term plan is to undertake a degree in counselling so she can fulfil her ambition of working with young people as a personal support worker. The narrative of being a single parent is central to Sarah's life story and her reasons for returning to education. She explained how becoming a mother changed her outlook on life, and in particular made her realise the importance of education in terms of realising her career plans and providing financial security for her daughter. In Sarah's words, 'Everything is for her.'

Regarding school, Sarah's understanding of her learning experiences are similar to James's, in that the narrative in her life story suggests that she identifies herself as being a disadvantaged learner in the school setting. Over the three interviews, Sarah talked about the many difficulties she faced with literacy and learning at school, and how she is convinced her experiences of education could have been more beneficial had she received more pastoral support at home and in the school setting. A reoccurring theme in Sarah's narrative concerned the ways she thinks domestic issues in the family home, coupled with a lack of support regarding her school education had a detrimental impact on her school education. In Sarah's words:

' . . . maybe it could have been completely different at school. The home life impacted on like all the family, like definitely, you can just see it really. I think maybe if I had a lot more help with my schooling I might have been a bit more brainier academically.' (Int 1:4)

Elaborating on this, Sarah added:

' . . . I think that whatever is going on at home is going to influence you in a big way to go onto like your education. It does make a big impact and if you haven't got the help there, then it's even worse.' (Int 1:6)

In the interviews, Sarah described the ways she was marginalised in the school setting, and articulated a narrative that portrayed her as being a helpless victim of social circumstances. For Sarah, the absence of support and encouragement with her school work at home was mirrored in the school setting, for it seemed to her that the teachers were more inclined to offer support to either the more able children, or conversely those children who were most disruptive or had more profound learning difficulties. As Sarah explained:

‘I was in bottom sets, so I would have maybe people with learning difficulties or disabilities that would seem that they would need that help more than me, but sometimes they wouldn’t. I would, but sometimes they would get the help more and other students would go on. It was like, if you are being disruptive, there is obviously a reason, but they like just kicked you out of the class . . . With some of the children, the way they were and with some of the teachers especially with the kids who do really well like they get noticed more than the kids that don’t in school.’ (Int 1:8)

Talking about her disruptive behaviour in class, she explained that she thinks her school teachers did not actively explore or seem to care about her family circumstances and the possible reasons for her behaviour; in Sarah’s words:

‘ . . . [I] was thrown out of the classroom instead of being given the time and attention I needed’ (Int 2:2). Sarah strongly implied that the school’s failure to intervene and provide more effective support for her and her family was

instrumental in compounding some of the difficulties with learning that she continues to face today with academic study. Elaborating on this, Sarah said:

‘Just because of like all the shit - they like brushed it away. Like, you would have meetings with them and then it would be like ‘Well nothing else is happening.’ And there was so much stuff where the school could have helped and a lot could have happened within my home, then it might be a lot more different for like adulthood now.’ (Int 2: 18)

Reflecting on her academic performance in school, Sarah described herself as someone who found learning academic subjects like maths and English ‘hard’ and uninteresting, and much preferred the more practical subjects like drama (see Int 1: 4). Sarah said:

‘English was hard. It’s just the same with writing. When I write like a story or something, if you had been my English teacher you would see that it didn’t really make sense. I have just never really been, I don’t know. It’s hard. I struggled with all subjects in school.’ (Int 1:11) She added ‘I just got by I suppose, just being me. My education was crap.’ (Int 1:8)

Sarah implied that she now recognises in herself indicators of mental health issues and dyslexia that she thinks impacted on her school education. In this sense, Sarah draws on medical discourses of dyslexia and mental health to

make sense of the behavioural and learning difficulties she faced at school, positioning herself as someone who had undiagnosed dyslexia and mild mental health issues. In constructing her subject position as someone who has dyslexia and mental health issues, Sarah indicated in the interviews that she is actively seeking formal confirmation of both these conditions from the college and her doctor. The subject positions of being someone with dyslexia and mental health appear to be helping her to validate her retrospective understanding of the difficulties she faced with school learning; in turn, this is helping her to access the additional learning support she thinks she needs to help her realise her education and career goals:

‘ . . . my doctor for years has been saying that it’s depression, so I’ve got my meeting with the mental health team on the 1st August for an assessment, so I won’t know more until then, but basically . . . I don’t know. But that’s the only thing I can think of that makes me disruptive and not as capable to learn as other students my age. Because I thought coming back at this age, when I was 25, was ideal, I thought I’d be alright, but no.’ (Int 2: 3)

The narrative themes in Sarah’s story suggest that she retrospectively attributes her disadvantaged position in school as being the result of three contingent factors, namely: a traumatic and unstable family background; a lack of support with her studies in the home and in the school setting; and, more recently, undiagnosed dyslexia. Sarah’s story also strongly indicates that she sees

herself as a victim of circumstance, in that she suggests her family, her school teachers along with Social Services all failed to acknowledge and address her social and education needs while at school.

### **Jacob**

Jacob is a 56 year old student of Nigerian heritage who returned to education for the first time in his life by joining an adult literacy course in 2004. Jacob's story is strikingly similar to James's and Sarah's experiences of school learning, in that Jacob described in detail the many difficulties and continual sense of frustration he encountered with school learning - something he thinks is the result of undiagnosed dyslexia. On this, Jacob recounted how he strived to live up to his father's high academic expectations and excel in his school work, and how his efforts were continually thwarted due to his dyslexia and associated difficulties with reading and writing.

Jacob outlined his story of how, having left school without any qualifications, he fell into a life of serious crime and substance abuse, which culminated in him becoming an addict and going to prison regularly over most of his adult life. Jacob explained that his decision to join the adult literacy course was one of necessity, in that he says he reached a 'crisis point' in his life when he recognised that he needed to confront and overcome various literacy-related difficulties he had faced all his life which were now causing more serious problems for Jacob in his working life as a counsellor.

The narrative in Jacob's story about his school life depicts his father as having a significant influence on the value he attaches to education as the means of achieving a successful career. Jacob recalled how his father had high expectations of all his children regarding their education and implied how, at the initial stages of his school life, he ardently attempted to fulfil his expectations. The data clearly shows that this narrative theme regarding the importance of academic success has influenced the way Jacob thinks about and evaluates his education history. As Jacob said:

'It's there all my life; I think it's my dad. He was a loving and caring man, but he was like, he was very authoritarian and to him, if you weren't a doctor or a lawyer, you weren't anything. And I think that's the message I picked up, that to be anything I need to obtain this university degree.' (Int 1:22)

Despite his efforts to fulfil his father's expectations, a reoccurring theme in Jacob's interview data about his school life concerned the difficulties he experienced with learning at school. In particular he made several references to his frustration and anxieties about not being able to read which he considers to have been the fundamental and enduring barrier for him regarding his capacity to excel in his education. Jacob described how, as a result of his ongoing struggle to achieve in school he eventually saw himself as being 'different' somehow to the other children in terms of his learning ability. Describing his early experiences of school as a 'nightmare' (Int 1.4), he recalled



that he found himself in the 'dunces' class' (Int 1.4) working with teachers who he suggested did not really know how best to support him in overcoming his apparent difficulties with learning. In Jacob's words: 'I don't think nobody knew what the bloody hell was wrong with me - what my problems were' (Int 1:7).

It is clear from Jacob's narrative about school here that he positions himself as being a disadvantaged learner, or 'dunce', who was failed by his school teachers. Across the three interviews, Jacob's narrative about his difficulties with formal learning and literacy embodies a bricolage of narrative themes, including themes of: a dyslexia, alienation and disenfranchisement, along with themes associated with family breakdown and personal injury. The narratives in his life story suggest that in retrospect, Jacob realises that his difficulties with learning at school were influenced by a range of factors including undiagnosed dyslexia, a traumatic childhood accident, and issues associated his home-life and parents' relationship. Speaking about his accident and its effect on his school learning, Jacob said:

'I think, primarily, my whole experience of school was coloured by an accident I had when I was three years old. At three years old, I climbed over the garden gate and went into the road, got knocked over and had my leg broken in four places, so I was in hospital for six months and in convalescence for five months, so I think that had some play in how I developed; and I think I was a pretty needy child. I was like clinging to mum and that sort of thing because mum didn't stay in hospital then. So

when I got to school, I think that's why I didn't fit well into school, I didn't feel that it was good in school.' (Int 1: 2)

Jacob suggested that the difficulties he experienced with learning at school were compounded by circumstances in his home-life. Jacob suggested that his parents' relationship was often deeply problematic due to his mother's mental health issues which manifested in an 'extraordinarily difficult' period in his life (Int 1: 4). In Jacob's words:

'It was, I think it was quite difficult. I think I was in sort of the dunce's classes and acted out and all the rest of it; so I think I could only do little bits of reading and writing. And I think what was more difficult was my mum, I don't know what was wrong with her - I think she had some sort of mental health issue. I think she got diagnosed, I'm not quite sure, but the relationship between her and my father was really difficult, and she felt that she desperately needed to get away. So from an early age she abandoned us with my dad. And she would come back and my dad would be running around, apparently, going nuts looking for us if we had been dumped in a hospital or dumped in a foster care place that sort of thing. So, I think the whole of that period was extraordinarily difficult. And, em, I think like the social services were involved in our lives and they was trying to help, but I get the sense that I really couldn't apply myself at school and I was in remedial classes and playing truant and that sort of thing.' (Int 1: 5)

The narratives of James, Jacob and Sarah about their school life depict an ongoing struggle with school learning, and indicate that they each constructed themselves as being disadvantaged learners in the school setting. The narratives show that they each attribute their struggle with learning at school as arising from a heterogeneous range of contingent factors inside and outside the school context, such as family related issues, mental health issues, poor teaching, and dyslexia; however, all three participants were explicit that their difficulties with the reading and writing elements of school learning constituted a fundamental barrier to their confidence in learning other subjects within the school setting.

All three participants are constructing subject position dyslexic learners and use the notion of dyslexia as a way of rationalising their literacy and learning difficulties, citing 'undiagnosed dyslexia' as being the principal reason why they struggled with their school work. All three participants strongly suggested that their dyslexia constituted an unmet need in school, and implied that their teachers lacked the professional expertise required to recognise the condition and better support them in developing their reading and writing practices.

By identifying themselves as dyslexic learners, it appears that James, Sarah and Jacob are using the narrative of 'undiagnosed dyslexia' to construct understandings about their school learning difficulties. This is a post hoc reading of their life history, having been exposed to a dyslexia discourse during

adulthood. From their vantage point of being dyslexic, the participants appear to be using a dyslexia discourse and its legitimacy as a body of 'expert knowledge' to form new understandings about their difficulties with literacy and learning in school. Dyslexia discourses then are shaping the ways the participants are constructing themselves as being victims of an inadequate model of learning in school that they think was ill-equipped in helping students like them who have learning difficulties associated with dyslexic.

The participants' stories about their school learning experiences illustrate how being continually and consistently positioned by teachers in the school setting was instrumental in reinforcing their sense of helplessness and in effect reified the veracity of their identity as a disadvantaged learner. The interview data suggests that for most of their lives James, Sarah and Jacob have tacitly accepted as true the way they were positioned within the school setting. This is understandable, as being children they would tacitly accept the professional authority of teachers, and invariably would not think to critically appraise the ways in which they became positioned as learners. For example, when asked if he felt marginalised by the teachers, James stated that at the time he did not consider himself as being marginalised or discriminated against in any way by the teachers; rather he viewed his disadvantageous subject position as being an 'unable learner' and his role of 'playing the fool' as simply being the way things were and did not question it. In James's words:

‘I didn’t see myself as a marginalised learner, I didn’t visualise myself. I might have been perceived as a marginalised learner, but I didn’t see myself, so I just thought that’s what education was, so that was it. So I just assumed I just couldn’t read and that was it, so I didn’t see myself as anything different really.’ (Int 3: 24)

In summary, the participants’ narratives about their school learning experiences indicate the ways they became positioned within the working practices and forms of knowledge embodied within school settings, and moreover the ways this positioning has shaped their school learning identities and ways they came to conceptualise the value of learning throughout most their adult lives. In the next section, I analyse the participants’ narratives about their adult lives, and show ways their narrative understandings of their school learning experiences have had a profound and enduring influence on the way they conceptualise their literacy practices and their academic abilities.

#### **4.2.1 Adulthood and reasons for joining an adult literacy course**

Talking about their reasons for joining an adult literacy course, each of the participants identified a range of nuanced factors that culminated in them deciding to join an adult literacy course. A dominant theme common to each of the participants’ narratives suggests that, firstly, they each considered themselves to have a ‘literacy deficit’ of some description that prevented them from realising their personal goals and career ambitions; secondly that joining a adult literacy course represented a turning point in their lives (Tett, 2016: 434)

and was the best means of addressing various issues their lives. As McGinvey (2001) suggests, often crises or transitions in life are motivators for adults returning to learning. These motivations for joining the course resonate with the findings of government research conducted in 2013 by the Department of Business Innovation and Skills, which stated:

‘Given the background of learners, there were strong employment-related motivations amongst learners. The majority of unemployed learners intended or expected to use the course to help them get into employment, and most of those in employment were motivated by getting a better job or promotion. However, motivations were not simply career or employment-related. The evidence indicated that self-improvement and self-fulfilment were amongst the most common motivations and objectives for learners.’ (BIS, 2013, ix)

Below, an analysis of the participants’ narratives regarding their reasons for joining an adult literacy course is presented. The common themes in their narratives are analysed to show the ways these themes and the meanings embodied in them relate to, and have been influenced by, various social and educational discourses they have been exposed to in their lives.

## **Alice**

Alice emigrated to England with her boyfriend in 2013 with a view to pursuing her teaching career as a German language teacher, and explained how she was disappointed to find that her academic qualifications were not recognised in England and that, in essence, had to 're-qualify' by attaining equivalent England recognised qualifications. This entailed that she had to undertake basic level courses in English and Maths in order to meet the entry requirements required to access GCSE English and a teacher training course. Alice described her frustration about this situation saying:

'I don't give a shit about this, it just, I am very angry because we all live in one Europe, and my qualifications should be recognised as well in England, because when an English teacher come to Poland he don't need to do anything, he can choose between hundreds of jobs, so I don't understand.' (Int 3:10)

Alice explained that she decided to join a Functional Skills English course at a local Further Education college to develop her knowledge and use of English language and to gain the qualifications she needed to help her realise her career ambitions. Alice added that she viewed the course as a way of improving her verbal communication skills in English in order to become more confident in conversing with others in her every day social interactions while living in England. Alice stated that she recognises English as being the global language, and thinks that being more adept in using English will help her

achieve her career goals, as well as to overcome the social anxiety she experiences when communicating in English. In Alice's words:

'And of course I want to know a new foreign language and because English is the most important language on the whole world. So that was the main goal for me. And I wanted also be not so stupid. In conversation with my boyfriend's friends, because they came to us very often, and I'm just sitting next to my boyfriend and I couldn't speak because I can't understand them and they look at me, thinking, maybe, she is very strange. [laughs] So they don't understand and my boyfriend don't tell them that I don't speak because I don't understand. So that was horrible.' (Int 1: 11)

Alice elaborated on her anxieties associated with not being able to speak fluent English, and alluded to the racism she has countenanced in public spaces since coming to England. Alice explained:

'My aspiration was to start learning English language, and I need to learn this language from the beginning because when I came here I really don't understand people; I was very ashamed about this because you can't live proper because a simple situation on your life, you are out of that. So you can't go for shopping, you can't read newspaper, you just, you just don't exist really, and when you try to say something everyone just look at you



and think ‘Oh no, she is from Poland, so she probably want some benefits’ and stuff like that. I really think like that.’ (Int 2: 5)

Alice spoke animatedly about her surprise and disappointment in discovering that many people she has met have expressed xenophobic prejudices about Polish people, stereotyping them as being lazy, economic migrants. She explained how she feels compelled to challenge and resist xenophobic discourses about Polish people by ‘showing’ others such views are misrepresentations and have no basis in truth. Comparing her position on this issue with other Polish people she has met living in England, she suggested that she was disheartened to learn that many Polish people acquiesce to the racism they experience, and are either indifferent to being stereotyped, or worse, disguise their Polish origin for fear of reproach. It was clear that Alice vehemently rejects this as an unjust discourse about Polish immigrants, and as her testament below illustrates, is resolute in actively doing her bit to enlighten people that such xenophobic discourses about Polish immigrants has no efficacy.

‘Yeah, I really would like to show English people, I would like to change the stereotype, you know, of Polish people, that they just came to English because of money, that they work hard, that they live in bad . . . they live like rats, which is horrible and they don’t have any hobbies or ambitions, which is not true. And they don’t even tell other people they are from Poland because they are ashamed, I don’t know why; I don’t understand, I

want to show others that there is different, that people in Poland can be smart, they can be a little bit successful, that they learn, they can learn.' (Int 3: 18)

The narrative in Alice's story about her learning life suggests that for most of her life she has been successful in her education and conceptualises herself as being a confident learner who has strong academic capabilities and potential to achieve her aspirations of becoming a German language teacher. It is apparent that the issue of Alice's qualifications not being recognised in England, her not being conversant in English, coupled with her experiences of racism have had a significant destabilising impact on her identity as an aspiring professional. Her status as a Polish immigrant has exposed her to a xenophobic discourse associated with immigration in England which is influencing the way she is constructing meanings about her life in England and her identity as an adult learner. In particular, her position in the English education system as 'unqualified' adult, coupled with her frustration about having to take a series of unskilled job roles are experiences are very much in tension with her identity as a university graduate. That said, Alice's sense of identity as a graduate with career prospects appears resilient, as she vehemently rejects the validity of the English education system which does not recognise her qualifications.

## **James**

Considering school as 'a waste of time' (Int 3: 14), James suggested that he left school at the age of 14 with no qualifications and a decidedly negative view of school learning. In James's words:

'Yeah, so educationally wise, I had a failed education really; I learnt very little from school apart from ways to avoid being made a fool of, and I was bullied a lot at school, so I was glad to see the back of school really, so at 14 I was pleased to say goodbye.' (Int 1:1)

James soon entered the world of work and took a manual job working in a box factory on a production line. James's initial experiences of work were not without trauma, as he continued to be a victim of bullying from some of his work colleagues. James remembers that,

' . . . the abuse from school just carried on: I had the tyres let down on my cycle and / or they'd take the valves out, so I'd finish work and have to walk my bike home - things like that. So I was glad to get out of the factory just to . . . em . . . it was like as if I hadn't finished at school, the abuse just carried on.' (Int 1:10)

Finding his role in the box factory 'deadening', he followed his father's advice following advice from his father, James decided to leave to undertake an apprenticeship with a friend of his father who owned an television and radio

business. In this role, James's work involved assembling television sets and recounted that he found the technical aspects of the role more challenging; in particular he struggled in understanding some of the more esoteric and complex terminology involved in the job:

'I was dismantling things for the engineers, so I wasn't doing anything technical yet, but basically learning on the job, learning . . . I had to learn what parts go into a television and put them in order, so I had to work out the impedance of different resistors, so I had to work out from resistors that were from one ohm up to four hundred megs, so I had to work out the colour codes for each resistor and had to put them in order. So that was a new thing for me to have to work out orders of, and actually writing, so I had to actually learn how to write - just sentences: this is for these resistors. So I started to need, needing to use English and numeracy really for the first time. So it was hard, but good, good.' (Int 1.11)

Recognising this need, James recalls how he made a concerted effort to improve his proficiency with the literacy-related aspects of the job by studying electronics textbooks and manuals in his own time and as part of his college course, which he suggests he found challenging:

'I had difficulties in college, in that once you do an apprenticeship they want you to attend college, and em, I had to start reading more in textbooks and em, so I was really struggling; I would go home with lots of

different books to read and to try and teach myself consecutive sentences which I had great difficulty with.' (Int 1:12)

James remembered that at the time he harboured deep-seated aspirations of being able to read more elaborate texts. James's dialogue suggests to me that he felt shame in the workplace regarding his lack of confidence in reading when explained how he made efforts to mask his difficulties with reading by pretending to read broadsheet newspapers on the factory floor:

'I was really embarrassed before I was diagnosed with having dyslexia; I didn't want people to know. Well as a lad, I remember buying one of the big papers, what are they . . . one of the big broadsheets and I never read it, but I bought it to show I was reading a newspaper. But how sad is that, to show I could read a newspaper, I bought this . . . it was The Guardian. As a 16 year old I bought The Guardian, walking around as an apprentice for an electronics company with The Guardian, as if to say, 'You know I can read' and hold the paper with The Guardian name out. And you think, how sad is that. How very sad.' (Int 3: 4)

The narrative underpinning James's life story about his early adult life suggests that the difficulties he experienced with reading and writing in school continued to create various barriers for him. Despite these continuing difficulties with literacy, however, he had a long career working as a social worker, working in children's homes until his early retirement.

James said that he joined an adult literacy course at a Further Education college in 2010 after suffering the trauma of a mental breakdown following the collapse of his marriage. Speaking about this period in his life, James articulated a mental health narrative to explain his reasons for joining the course. He suggested that undertaking the adult literacy course was an integral part of his personal recovery, in that it would help him to build his self-confidence in social situations, as well as helping him to develop his confidence with reading and writing. James said that he recognised that he needed to address the difficulties he was experiencing with reading and writing, which he suggested were creating considerable barriers for him in his everyday life to such an extent that he was unable 'to write down ten consecutive words in a birthday card' (Int 2: 3).

## **Sarah**

In talking about her adult life, Sarah suggested the responsibility of being a single-parent has radically changed her outlook on life and the way she thinks about her future, saying:

'It wasn't really until Chelsea was born that I realised I needed to do something. If I didn't have Chelsea at that age, I don't know what would have happened.' (Int 1:15).

When Chelsea started attending primary school and bringing back homework, Sarah said she was keen to support Chelsea with it and learn together, but found that she struggled to understand some of the technical concepts involved and realised that she needed to address this and develop further her knowledge of English. In Sarah's words:

'When Chelsea started primary school, foundation, she was given homework like phonics and I was like, "What does this mean?" I was just like, I can't go on like this. I want to go to uni so I need to go and do it, and then it was understanding her homework and I thought I need to do it with her. I did not want to be saying, "No. You just do it yourself". But we do our homework together and it's alright even though sometimes it's like. "Oh no! I've done that bit wrong!" At least we are doing it together and I can help her.' (Int 1: 22)

Sarah frequently explained how the responsibility of being a single-parent has led her to seriously re-evaluating the importance of school education, in particular English and Maths, for everyday life and in terms of securing a good career in adult life. In Alice's words:

'To get a decent job really you have got to have the qualifications and just everyday life really. With maths and English, not other subjects, I just think it's important to be up to date and you don't realise how important it is in school until you leave school.' (Int 2:5)

Elaborating on her views about the importance of education, Sarah explained why her views about education and the potential opportunities it affords have changed:

‘Because of my past really, my childhood, and I’ve always wanted to do it, but because I’ve been called ‘thick’ - blah, blah, I didn’t ever think I could do it, and then obviously when Chelsea was starting school and she was coming home with all this, I thought now was my time to do maths and English. Because I didn’t know it was like as easy as do my maths and English, get on an Access course and get into uni. I thought you had to be like a grade-A student to go to university, so when I got to the age of 25, I’d grown up a lot more than what I was in my younger years of 20 I suppose. So it was the ideal time to go back to learning . . .’ (Int 2: 16)

Hearing Sarah talk about her changing conception of education, it appeared that Sarah has reached a turning point in her life where she considered an adult literacy course as the best way of addressing her literacy difficulties with literacy, and provided the best route for taking her first tentative step back into the field of education in order to pursue her intended career as a support worker for vulnerable children. Sarah expressed her sense of serendipity in discovering that going to university was now a real prospect for her, saying:



'I wouldn't have ever thought I'd get into uni or had the chance of doing that, fulfilling that. I've always wanted to do a social work degree, but was never like . . . and with things like that it was always like 'You've got to be like this and you gotta be like that,' so you don't think you're going to be able to do it, and then you grow up a bit and realise that there are ways of doing it.' (Int 3: 9)

Despite her aspirations of going to university, and despite recognising the value of education in terms of it being a prerequisite for obtaining the qualifications she needs to enter her intended profession as a social worker, Sarah suggested that she was decidedly ambivalent about having to do a degree. As the extract below illustrates, Sarah appeared to be ambivalent about the prospect of undertaking a degree and was mildly disdainful in the tone of her conversation about this:

'Well, because that's [university] the only way you can get to be what I want to do. So that is the only option; I rather not go to uni to be honest with you, but to get to where I want to be I've got to, so I've got to do it, or else I won't be able to do it. I've tried like through volunteering and they won't even take me as a volunteer, unless you get a placement at uni. And I will go to uni, you know, and I will complete it and get a degree at the end so I can go in and help, because I can't really do much now with nothing. And I don't want to do and NVQ and whatever . . . I want a degree.' (Int 3:9)

Elaborating on her reservations about doing a degree, Sarah expressed some inhibitions about her academic capabilities; she also seemed unconvinced about the intrinsic value of academic study, as she questions how relevant and useful a degree would be to her in terms of helping her to become more proficient in the practical work involved in being a social worker. In Sarah's words:

'It's stupid sometimes. Sometimes you should be able to work towards a degree within a role and then they can see then. I know that people say you need 'blah, blah', but I don't think it means everything - not really. I know that to a lot of people it does, but I think if you are good at something and can show that you have a passion for it and drive, then you should be given the chance no matter how well you are on paper.' (Int 3: 11)

Hearing Sarah talk about her adult life, she suggested that the responsibility of becoming a single-parent mother gave Sarah a clear sense of purpose and vocation in life to provide for her daughter. As a single-parent mother, Sarah strongly intimated that she views it as her role to provide financial security for Chelsea, independently of the biological father. She talked passionately about her unswerving conviction to realise her career plans to become a social worker and acknowledged that this would entail returning to education and working towards a degree. Sarah's acknowledgement that working towards and achieving a degree is a real possibility for her represents a significant shift in the

way she is now beginning to construct her understandings about the value of education since leaving school; moreover, the gradual process of re-evaluating her future learning opportunities in this way is indicative that she is identifying with a lifelong learning discourse and gradually conceptualising herself as lifelong adult learner. This process of identifying is, however, seemingly a tentative one for Sarah, as she seemed markedly ambivalent about the value of undertaking study and her capabilities to achieve in higher level courses. This is illustrated by the concerns she expressed about the challenges studying for a degree represents for her, and also her critical stance about the value of a degree in terms of its relevance and practical use for her intended career. Nevertheless, it was her career aspirations that led to her undertaking the adult literacy course.

### **Jacob**

Jacob left school at the age of 14 with no qualifications, and remembers having his aspirations to continue with his education and establish a career being continually frustrated. In Jacob's words:

'I desperately wanted to do something, and I can remember seeing like, I think it was to be, train to be, in night school to be an electrician or something. And I was desperate, I went in, I really had to steal myself to go into the night school; and they started asking me about mathematics and I just failed abysmally. I thought, oh God, I can't do that, and I come out and I was gutted.' (Int 1. 9)

At this juncture in his life, Jacob remembered his dad advising him that he should look for a manual job:

‘ . . . my dad realised that I was in trouble and he said to me, ‘Look, you need to get a job.’ And I remember thinking myself, ‘No! I need to go to college!’ He said, ‘Look, you’ve not applied yourself, you need to get a job with your hands.’ So I went back to the careers advisor, and ended up getting a job as a trainee maintenance engineer in a big hotel in King’s Cross.’

Jacob recalled enjoying working life, however, his anxieties concerning his literacy-related difficulties were further compounded by various indicators he discerned in and around the work place. In the following quote, Jacob recounts an exchange with a manager of the hotel where he was working, which affirmed to him his identity as someone who had a difficulty with literacy learning :

‘And one day, in one of my early jobs as a trainee maintenance engineer which is a glorious title for a general handyman, there was this big entourage of senior managers, there was this huge hotel, a 700 room hotel - and there was this really posh, well-heeled group of chaps walking round and then someone asked me a question: the manager of the hotel asked me a question or something and I said something about something

being yellow, and he wasn't being unkind, and he said, "It's not pronounced like that - spell it!" And I was rooted to the spot with this huge feeling of shame: I couldn't spell 'yellow' and couldn't pronounce it. So, that's how I saw myself - as this person that couldn't. So over time, and going back - that's going to stay with me for years and years; so entering into these places to do this kind of thing is huge, so I saw myself as somebody who was less than other people, that had this immense difficulty and that there was something wrong with me.' (Int 3: 4 - 5)

Jacob recounted how, as a teenager, he continually struggled to hold down various full-time jobs, but was more successful in running small business ventures running a market stall, stocking bubble gum machines and running his own debt collecting agency. Jacob explained that it was around this time that he became more involved with various criminal activities buying and selling drugs when he made the 'conscious decision' to relinquish all his businesses in order to concentrate his efforts on selling crack cocaine, which he realised was considerably more lucrative. In Jacob's words:

'What happened, right, it's crazy 'cos I had made a conscious decision, right, irrational as it seems, but I remember making it, I started to sell cocaine and I was getting lots of money out of it at about 19 or 20; and what was happening was that I was finding I didn't have enough time to devote to my more entrepreneurial stuff because the time I was devoting to that side was taken away time from earning money from the coke, and

the coke was giving me a decent amount of money. So, it made business sense to give up the entrepreneurial stuff and focus only on the coke, which ultimately led to my demise, really. But at the time, for a 19 year old, and I was like looking at my dad thinking like, you're a bit of a mug - you're still, know what I mean, riding your bike, still going to work and all that, and I'm nicking this money. It was like, you had it wrong, mate - I got it right, sort of thing.' (Int 1: 11)

This extract suggests that Jacob had reached a turning point in his life, whereby his increasing involvement in criminal cultures was influencing his subject position as a criminal. It illustrates the way Jacob was beginning to understand the world from a different vantage point, in that he no longer aspired to fulfil his father's work ethic, and is seemingly contemptuous of it. It seems to me that Jacob was turning his back on the 'straight world' and relinquishing his enduring struggle to fulfil his father's expectations and succeed in the world of work and education.

In his interviews, Jacob described in detail how he excelled in his criminal activities and was beginning to reap substantial financial rewards that he considered to be unobtainable in his previous job roles in the hotel industry. Jacob explained that his criminal activities provided him with the means of achieving his aspirations of wealth and status which he says helped him to allay some of his anxieties about his aspirations to feel successful. In Jacob's words:

'So, there was a lot of kudos to it, a lot of money, lovely feelings, it addressed all my anxieties and my fears - it was meeting my needs of aspirations for using my brain, so I was caught into it for a long time.' (Int 1.15)

Over the three interviews, Jacob spoke candidly and in great detail about his precarious lifestyle characterised by a turbulent mix of criminal activity, long-term substance abuse and intermittent periods of being in prison. This lifestyle culminated in Jacob seeking professional help in a drug treatment centre at the age of 45 where he had an epiphany: In Jacob's words:

'Suddenly the light switched on and I thought, 'Oh dear me, this is what's really being going on - not the delusion I'd been telling myself!' And at that point, I knew I was really, really ill.' (Int 1:1)

As part of his recovery, Jacob took the advice of his support workers and decided to return to education by way of an adult literacy course. Jacob recalls thinking:

'Something needs to be sorted out: I need to carve something out from the mess, so to speak; and I went on this journey of sort of adult literature classes and doing vocational courses and ended up getting a job as a

support worker, which led to me studying for a Diploma in Counselling.’ (Int 1: 1)

In the excerpt below, Jacob explains in some detail why undertaking a literacy course represented a huge personal step for him in terms of his rehabilitation and reintegration back into society beyond the confines of the treatment centre. Jacob suggests that doing the course was important for him in transcending his criminal identity, overcoming his fear of stigmatisation, and learning to trust others would not judge but accept him, regardless of his criminal past. He describes the episode of undertaking a literacy course as a ‘stepping stone’ which served to enable him to begin establishing his identity as an adult learner and ‘test the water’:

‘These people understood what I was fighting against and what I was trying to save myself from; they understood, but then, to take that outside of that environment was like a huge no, no’: the stigmatisation the barriers are just huge, and particularly being one of society’s worst taboos: is like a drug dealer and a heroin drug dealer, destroying other people’s lives - the taboos like that are pretty massive, jails and all the stuff. So I think a fundamental point was, if you will, finding my way from the treatment centre to a stepping stone outside of the that environment which was the learning environment, and then in some way because they understood, that bit of it gave me the confidence to sort of take that side - sorry, I’ve lost my train of thought. But to take it outside the treatment centre was just



a daunting prospect, but because I was guided and pushed and had to do something, I said I need to address this issue, find myself in a learning supportive environment, that was an extension from the treatment centre into another sort of 'acceptance'. So it was like almost you could test the waters there and think ok, if other people can do it then maybe - and so it is like a domino effect.' (Int 3. 9-10)

#### **4.2.2 The adult literacy context and literacy practices**

##### **Alice**

Summarising her learning experiences on the course, Alice claimed that the opportunity to study English further '... has give me the opportunity to become more confident when talking and listening to other native speakers. During this course he [the tutor] taught me how to write formal and informal letters in English, how to write newspaper articles; we also had some lessons about complaint, and this course changed my English use in many ways.' (Int 1:12)

Alice explained how she quickly progressed up through the learning levels achieving a Level 1 and Level 2 Functional Skills English qualifications within one academic year.

Alice said that she recognises that she still has difficulties with her grammar, and in particular using the right tenses, but nonetheless thinks her English use has improved markedly. She explained how her boyfriend and friends have also noticed this improvement in her verbal communication, and have

commented on the ways she is becoming more articulate in conversation when using English:

‘Yes, my boyfriend’s best friend, Alex, he always try and teach me some words at the beginning of our relationship; he helps me a lot because he knows German language as well. That was easier for me to have some conversation from someone who knows German, so we can communicate even if I don’t understand something in English and he explain me everything in German. And I know because my boyfriend told me several times that Alex see the difference in my language You know in this conversation I have at the beginning - Alex just see the difference at the beginning of my visit here and now.’ (Int 3: 7)

Alice implied that she is becoming more self-confident in speaking with others and also thinks she has become more adept at reading English texts. In Alice’s words:

‘That I don’t ask about everything; my boyfriend, if I want to tell him something, that I don’t scared about asking people questions, about starting some simple conversation, that I read more, maybe not intelligent, but difficult books and newspapers, and at the beginning I don’t even try. Now I only watch movies with subtitles, not with dubbing; and even without subtitles sometimes and I can see now the difference. But I still know that I need to learn a lot.’ (Int 3: 7)

Comparing her English usage with other Eastern European people she has met in her workplace, Alice said that she has noticed that she is considerably more fluent in her verbal use of English. Alice recounted that her manager at the cinema where she works confirmed this view when she went to interview for the job, saying:

'I started two days ago a new work in Vue cinema, so I was speaking with the manager at the beginning because I have an interview and I think he was amazing about - because I tell him I came here a few months ago and I just do nothing so I just tell him that I really want this job, but I know that my English isn't good enough, so probably some problems with my job position, but he told me no, your English is good enough to do this job and I am very impressed because in another cinema, his supervisor is a Polish girl and she's lived here twelve years in England, she don't speak as well as I.' (Int 2: 18)

In joining the course, apart from developing her English practices, Alice said she was also interested in gaining an insight into the teaching methods used with a view to perhaps adopting them in her own teaching practice as a German teacher. Alice stated:

'That was a very important experience for me; I learn something new about teaching people and I probably will use this in my life when I come back to Poland and start teaching again. And I can also say that, if I say that correctly, encouragement? Engagement? Yeah, the engagement and partnership in each lesson was one of the features I really admire, and after every test and presentation he give us feedback - that's very important for students if they really want to learn something.' (Int 1: 13)

Alice spoke highly of the course in terms of the potential it has to improve students' understanding and use of English. Elaborating on this Alice explained passionately how she thinks the course is instrumental in helping students to achieve personal goals and suggests that their learning experiences on the course could also inspire students to continue their education and enrol onto higher level courses in the future. In Alice's words:

'Because you learn on this course very important things for example how to write some formal letter, informal letter, use language proper, how to recognise if some text is for example descriptive, informative; so the difference between adjectives, adverbs, so how too use language proper. You have the possibility to learn some other people from other countries sometimes, you have the possibility as well to change your life maybe too . . . what else . . . I really recommend this course for everyone who want to improve their language and want to understand how to use language in different situations, and what else? This course, I think, helps many

students and maybe they are more focused on achieving their goals which means in many situations means access to higher education - maybe after this course they decide to go to university, maybe they do this GCSE in English and maths and decided to study something.' (Int 3:12)

## **James**

In thinking about how the course has been useful for him, James said that, 'I'm completely different . . . and my English is massively improved now.' (Int 2: 3)

James substantiated this view by explaining how his understanding of vocabulary and reading proficiency have improved greatly, and that he now reads novels and a broadsheet newspaper in its entirety every day. James also considered that his writing practice has improved in ways that benefit him: he talked about how he has successfully drafted fairly complex letters to his solicitor, and has been writing a daily diary for his daughters which he emails to them as a means of staying in touch, practicing his writing and exploring new vocabulary. For James, these developments seem to be significant personal achievements which he implies are attributable to his learning experiences on the adult literacy courses. He said:

'I can't express the joy from being able to read a newspaper, a book. For me, it's just 'wow!' Em, I'm not sure I said, I had a break down last year when I first joined the English class, and I had difficulty putting ten words together; so I think I might have mentioned that. But, I've actually managed to come back, and I couldn't read a newspaper, but now I can

read cover to cover of a newspaper, I can pick up a book and I can start to read it, I can put notes down about the book and leave a little message for myself. I get so much joy from reading, and yes, new words, I love it.' (Int 1:19)

James suggested that his sense of progress in relation to his literacy practices on the course has been validated to him through attainment of qualifications and progression from Entry Level 3 to Level 2. In addition, he mentioned that his daughters have commented on how his proficiency in writing and use of vocabulary have dramatically improved in his email correspondence with them. In James's words the writing in his diaries 'changed radically' and 'they've [James's daughters] have seen a massive improvement.' (Int 3: 18)

James suggested that his confidence in writing extends to more formal styles of writing required for correspondence in dealing with his legal affairs independently, which is something he implied he is very proud of:

'... the course was fantastic, it's made me more confident and I've had to write some quite serious letters to solicitors and ombudsmen to, em I can't think ... I've had to write some very specific letters with varied subjects in the letter which I had to make sure I was very clear how I progressed through it, and I've done that. I feel very confident that when I've read through I think I've done that well.' (Int 3: 20)

James detailed how his use of English today is markedly improved compared to what it was like four years ago, and describes how his learning experiences on the adult literacy course have developed his self-confidence in his abilities and potential to learn. James said the course has helped him realise that:

‘You can progress as a person just [by] doing this English course; it will help you with your confidence. I’ve gained a massive amount of confidence with not just English; I feel better in myself that I’ve done that.’ (Int 3: 21)

### **Sarah**

Like James, Sarah also made several references to the ways the course is benefitting her use of English. Based on feedback from her tutors, and by making comparisons with other students in group, Sarah suggested that she thinks she is making definite progress in terms of her confidence with formal learning, and in terms of her use of oral and written English:

‘Before it just used to be like short sentences that were just like simple, but whereas now there is more expression through coming back to do English now. Really it’s helped me with that. Like now I believe I could go a lot further with my English and reading.’ (Int 1:21)

Elaborating on how her writing has developed, Sarah added:

‘If I was to write my own reference for a job, normally I would have got someone else to write it, but I write it all out myself now and use my own words. I just get somebody to check through it first to make sure it’s ok. So definitely, my writing as improved - big time!’ (Int 2:10)

Sarah suggested that the course has helped her to improve her English in many other respects, saying:

‘I have got a little bit better with like speaking on the phone, like with pronouncing my words properly or writing; even in my exam writing is more expressive - not like simple sentences. That’s the only thing I thought I could ever do, but obviously coming into this it’s made me realise I can write a lot better and I can do it; I just need time.’ (Int 2:7)

Sarah recounted that as well as receiving positive feedback from her tutor, significant others such as friends and family also commented on the ways her writing practices have improved markedly:

‘. . . because they always see my spelling and have seen the way I’ve wrote. As I was saying about my friend, Jade, before, she read through something I had writ and she was like, ‘Bloody hell! I didn’t know you could write like that.’ I was like, ‘Nor did I!’ But it’s just sitting down and thinking about it.’ (Int 2: 14 - 15)



In talking about how she has benefitted from the course, Sarah described how she enjoyed working with other students on the course and meeting people from a diversity of cultural backgrounds:

'I just think like, I've never been like in a classroom with anybody else other than people like from England and it's a different way of learning isn't it? You are learning their culture and they are learning yours and I think it is quite interesting. Whereas before, I wouldn't have even cared or whatever, but now I am like finding that I want to learn more about other cultures and understanding for them whereas when you are younger I don't think you really get it. You just don't really care do you?' (Int 1:26)

Sarah added that she thinks that her experiences of meeting people from different cultures may prove to be useful to her in her counselling role, saying:

'Interacting with foreign students: that's like helped me with my voluntary work as well because it is diversity I suppose. Yes, it has definitely helped me to understand their way of learning, that they need help to learn as well.' (Int 1:25)

Reflecting on the teaching approaches used on the course, Sarah contrasted her learning experiences on the adult literacy course with her experiences of learning in school, saying:

‘You’re a lot more respected . . . you don’t feel like you’re going to school. It just feels like it’s your choice to do this, so you can pick and choose if you want to go, you can pick and choose whether you want to learn or not, so basically it’s down to you. And, yeah, I’m glad I come back. And I did. I’m glad I completed it.’ (Int 2: 22)

In particular, Sarah said she thinks the course has ultimately been useful to her in terms of ‘enabling me to go out and be able further my career and get on to my Access course. Because without my English and maths I wouldn’t have been able to do it. But the things that stands out mostly is the English, and how far I’ve come with that.’ (Int 2: 25)

In talking about the ways in which she thinks her English has improved since joining the course, Sarah spoke about her reading and writing practices in everyday life situations:

‘Yeah, well obviously within writing, helping my daughter with her homework and just like in general when I’ve got to write a letter or fill out something. Like I would use words . . . I definitely write differently to what

I used to write, and I've found different words to say as well for different situations, and it sounds a little bit more better - if you get what I mean.' (Int 3: 3)

Elaborating on this point, Sarah said:

'The application forms; I have never really filled one out until now like, until I started doing my voluntary work. Before it just used to be like short sentences that were just like simple, but whereas now there is more expression through coming back to do English now. Really it's helped me with that. Like now I believe I could go a lot further with my English and reading.' (Int 3: 4)

Sarah also spoke about the ways her reading practices are suggested that she is beginning to be more confident in reading novels:

'I have never ever read a book until I read Fifty Shades of Grey. I know that may sound like . . . I read all three of them and it was really like easy. My friend explained it to me before I read it so as I could get the hang of the story because some of the words were like, "I can't get that". That helped me then because I read three books and that was an achievement because I had never read before. It will help me to read on more and I would like to find a book I will be in to.' (1:21)

It appears that Sarah's sense of progress regarding her literacy practices and potential to progress in education have been validated through her interactions with significant others who have commented on her achievements and the changes in her language use they have noticed. On this, Sarah said:

'Yeah, friends with spelling, obviously, because they always see my spelling and have seen the way I've wrote. As I was saying about my friend, Jade, before, she read through something I had writ and she was like, 'Bloody hell! I didn't know you could write like that.' I was like, 'Nor did I!' (Int 2: 14)

Sarah also stated that her friends and family have commented about how proud they are of what she has achieved, knowing the difficulties she has countenanced in the past. In Sarah's words:

'Like everyone just says they're proud of me because obviously they know what I'm like and how hard it was for me to learn or whatever; I suppose I can't really explain because you don't know me like, what I'm like outside. So yeah, everyone is just really proud of me to be honest, about how far I've come.' (Int 2:15)

## **Jacob**

Evaluating the tangible benefits of his learning experiences on the adult literacy course, Jacob spoke about how his competence in structuring writing has improved, and explained that he is now less likely to become anxious at the prospect of writing reports in his job as a counsellor. For Jacob, this was something he said he needed to address in order to keep his job secure, as his report writing skills were identified as being below the required expectations in recent performance reviews with his manager. Previously, Jacob intimated he had managed to circumvent this issue with his writing by getting his work colleagues and secretaries he knew to proofread and correct his prose. Talking about this, Jacob said:

‘And in my report writing at work, I’m beginning again, it’s increased my awareness and I’m becoming more familiar with the breakdown of sentences, that a sentence must have a subject, a subject must have a verb, and phrases; and there was a lovely term I came across the other day, a ‘particular verb’ and that sort of thing, and that’s really sort of, and I think ok, something tangible is happening at some sort of increased awareness of the structure of a sentence is coming to me; and again I think I would describe it more as an awareness rather than a practical ability. And this is really, along with other things has increased my capacity, which in turn has increased my sense of my suppose self-esteem and all that sort of stuff. Like now I’m carrying four clients and they all need discharge reports pretty soon; I nearly completed one, I’ve got one ongoing and sort of, three months ago, this would have caused me huge anxiety. It’s like there’s this pile of work and I’m like how am I

going to address it? And I think, with this increased ability and this increased sense of competency has led me to be able to think more clearly rather than get taken over by the anxiety and the worry of it.' (Int 2: 3)

Jacob's sense of progress with his education and its positive influence on his proficiency in his role at work have been validated to him by a range of other people in different contexts. In his professional role as a counsellor, Jacob said:

'[My manager] is impressed with my personal development, she's impressed with the dedication I do put in to my work; she's always telling me that I can express verbally really well. My work colleagues, similarly think I do really good work and can really express myself . . . ' (Int 2: 11-12)

Jacob mentioned that his partner and family have also supported him and recognised his achievements and the personal progress he has made. Jacob said:

'People are astonished, they think, 'What? You can't read, you can't write!', sort of thing. I think for my partner there's two bits of it: she thinks, 'God, he's sort of addressing this', and there's a bit of it of it with her where she's still sort uncomfortable with it, and worried about the stigmatisation of it -

that's a bit uncomfortable for her, but she's incredibly supportive. And my family and friends just think the fact that I've still - after everything that's happened - still got the sort of will to address these issues and carry on, they think it is nothing short of a bloody miracle. [laughs]' (Int 1.28)

Elaborating further on his partner's view on his progress, Jacob explained:

'My partner - I know she will probably disagree - is impressed with my fortitude and my ability to overcome all my struggles and all the rest of it, and em, my family think I'm extraordinary because they knew what I was like in the past and what I've become now and are immensely proud of me. So I get a lot of clues. I get good feedback from Chris, even though he's like me to do a bit more homework. So generally, people have a really a positive attitude about me; people think I'm quite a capable person.' (Int 2: 11-12)

Jacob suggested that he realises that his literacy practices still need to improve further in order to achieve his long-term career goals of becoming a 'service manager' (Int 2: 13 - 14), and now has the confidence derived from his successes so far to continue with his studies. Despite the many setbacks Jacob has experienced in his life with literacy and learning, Jacob stated that he now harbors aspirations of attaining a degree qualification:

‘ . . . my main aim is to get to a place where can do my job without the stress and worry of not being able to write a bloody report. So that frees me up then to develop my career and perhaps one day get that bloody degree. (Int 1: 26)

In summary, the narratives about the benefits of their course learning experiences are multiple and nuanced, however, they all indicate that the participants literacy practices have improved in useful ways. In accord with the work of Bynner (2017), the narratives strongly suggest that the participants associate their course learning experiences with a variety of wider beneficial outcomes that extend far beyond academic benefits and the development of their literacy practices. For example, all of the participants suggested that they found the course useful in a variety of ways for overcoming various issues and inhibitions associated with their education that they consider to have been a barrier to them in achieving their respective goals. Despite the nuances of the participants’ evaluations, the participants’ narratives suggest that there are several common themes in the participants’ narratives regarding the ways they think they are benefiting from their course learning experiences.

All the participants shared the view that their learning experiences on the course have been useful to them in terms of developing their knowledge and use of the English language, and in terms of increasing their confidence about being in a formal learning environment. In talking about the ways their literacy skills have changed, all the participants referred to their developing reading and



writing skills and the attainment of Functional Skills English qualifications. In accord with other research (Tett, 2016), the data suggests that progression up the literacy learning levels, along with the attainment of literacy qualifications, are being read by the participants as tangible indicators that their literacy practices, as well as their competency as learners are improving. The data suggests that the participants based their judgements about their changing literacy practices on a range of other signifiers situated in social contexts beyond the field of education, including: comments from significant others, greater proficiency with literacy-related tasks in the work setting, increased confidence in reading a broader variety of texts, and a greater sense of confidence in their writing practices.

### **4.3 Discussion**

#### **Intertextuality, narratives and shaping discourses**

The participants' stories about their lives are comprised of intertextual narrative constructions which have been shaped by a diverse multiplicity of discourses they have appropriated in making sense of their life experiences. Table 3 below identifies the key narrative themes that emerged in each of the participants' interview data about their formal learning experiences as well as other narrative themes the participants considered significant to their formal learning experiences.

Table 3: Key narrative themes in participant life stories

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Narrative themes relating to experiences in formal education settings</b>	<b>Narrative themes relating to other experiences &amp; social settings</b>
Alice	ESOL education Academic privilege Identity as Master's graduate Lifelong Learning and language of possibility	Xenophobia Social alienation
James	Marginalisation in school Disadvantaged school learning Dyslexia discourses Lifelong Learning and the language of possibility	Mental health Poverty, deprivation and financial hardship
Jacob	Marginalisation in school Disadvantaged school learning Dyslexia discourses Mental Health Lifelong Learning and the language of possibility	Criminality Substance abuse, dependency and recovery Criminal rehabilitation Social alienation Mental health Morbidity and ill health Domestic / familial breakdown
Sarah	Marginalisation in school Disadvantaged school learning Dyslexia discourses Mental Health Lifelong Learning and the language of possibility	Single-parenthood Mental health Domestic / familial breakdown

The intertextual construction of the life stories is illustrative of the ways competing discourses function as 'cultural scripts' (Polkinghorne, 1989) which, in an ongoing meaning making process, are appropriated by participants in nuanced ways to make sense of their lives and the world around them (Archer, 2000, 2003; Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999; DeGroot, 2018: 453). The influence of these multiple discourses on the construction of the participants' life stories explains why they are comprised of a variety of narrative themes that are

merged together to form a coherent life story. Commonalities and re-occurring patterns in the dominant narrative themes across the four sets of interview data, such as marginalisation, mental health, alienation, struggle, lifelong learning, and dyslexia is illustrative of the way discourses exert disciplinary power (Foucault, 1980) over people's lives, their practices and the ways in which they make sense of them (Gee, 1996). For example, Jacob, Sarah and James all articulated discourses of social and educational disadvantage, combining this with discourses of alienation to explain their literacy deficits and struggle with learning in formal education settings. Discourses of dyslexia and alienation were also dominant in the data which illustrated the way Jacob, Sarah and James positioned themselves as adult learners and rationalised their difficulties with literacy within and beyond the formal learning context. James and Jacob's narratives also combined dyslexia narratives with narratives of their struggles mental health issues and rehabilitation in authoring their reasons for returning to formal education.

The bricolage of discourses appropriated in the participants' narrative constructions are illustrative of the existential struggle involved in the process of meaning making, identifying a sense of purpose and navigating an increasingly complex social world in which a kaleidoscope of discourses are available within different social contexts over the life course. Despite the nuanced intertextuality of the participants' narratives, there are some clear similarities in the participants' narratives about their education histories and the outcomes of their course learning experiences. These dominant narrative themes are illustrated and analysed in more detail below.

### **4.3.1 Narrative themes of struggle and disadvantage**

It is apparent that a dominant narrative theme of struggle and disadvantage is common in all of the participants' life stories regarding their education. In telling their life stories, each of the participants recounted various episodes of struggle in relation to their education experiences, and drew on a variety of discourses to construct their narrative positions. For example, Alice articulated a narrative of cultural alienation, xenophobia and language barriers resulting from emigrating to the; Sarah articulated medical narratives associated with mental health and depression, along with a narrative of family difficulties; James articulated a medical narratives associated with mental health issues, and also narratives of dyslexia and deprivation; Jacob articulated narratives of criminality, drug dependency, family breakdown, medical narratives of anxiety, and an education narrative of dyslexia.

In contrast to Alice, whose narrative represents a discourse of academic privilege and success in education contexts, Sarah, Jacob and James articulated a narratives of educational disadvantage with reoccurring themes about the ways they were marginalised in classroom settings. These three participants each scripted the difficulties they experienced with literacy and learning using a range of discourses, including: marginalisation in school settings, mental health issues, family trauma, and alienation to understand the struggles they faced in education. James, Jacob and Sarah each constructed themselves as adults who lack confidence with various reading and writing

tasks necessary to meet the demands in their everyday lives. The narratives in James's, Jacob's and Sarah's life stories suggest that their previous experiences of literacy and their negative positioning within the school context continue to have a significant and enduring influence on the way participants think about their literacy and learning capabilities in their adult lives. The literacy-related difficulties James and Jacob and Sarah have experienced in their adult lives have reified their views about their lack of proficiency in reading and writing, along with their identity as a disadvantaged learner.

In talking about their difficulties with literacy and learning, James and Jacob frequently referred to their dyslexia as a way of explaining their literacy-related difficulties, and suggested that undiagnosed dyslexia was one of the underpinning reasons why they experience barriers with reading and writing tasks. In identifying themselves as dyslexic learners, dyslexia discourses provide these participants with a conceptual framework which they are using to rationalise and find solutions for the learning difficulties they have experienced with literacy and learning over their lives. In this sense, dyslexia discourses are functioning as a 'cultural script' (Polkinghorne, 1995), which functions as a way for them to re-conceptualise their learning histories and the possibilities for overcoming the literacy learning difficulties they encounter. In so doing, the data suggests that James and Jacob were also beginning to consider new possibilities and alternative futures in education and in their careers. This emerging world view is indicative of a new learner identity forming, which is manifesting in new forms of agency, in that they are beginning to transgress

perceived barriers to learning which they previously conceived of as being insurmountable.

### **James and dyslexia**

The narrative in James's interview data strongly suggests that being diagnosed with dyslexia has had a profound effect on the way he views himself as a learner, and is a significant contributory factor that has influenced the construction of James's adult learning identity. In talking about the benefits of his learning experiences and his newfound confidence with learning literacy, James described how taking a dyslexia assessment and being introduced to a range of dyslexia coping strategies, in particular, have been particularly useful to him for overcoming his difficulties with reading. James said:

‘ . . . being dyslexic, the realisation that I suddenly know I have a condition that was stopping me reading properly, and now I've built up ways I can read better; now I've got a thirst for it and it's as if I want to read all the stuff I could never read, well never read in the past . . . ’ (Int 3: 2)

James suggested that knowing that he is dyslexic has bolstered his tenacity and strengthened his resilience to the humiliation he previously experienced in connection with being a non-reader. In James's words:

'I used to be embarrassed if I was out and about putting my finger to it; now I don't give a damn if people see me following my fingers along the lines, and I do it. So, I'm more confident and perhaps, em, I was really embarrassed before I was diagnosed with having dyslexia; I didn't want people to know.' (Int 3: 3)

In the extract below, the data shows that James's identity as a dyslexic learner is manifesting in a process of re-evaluating the difficulties he faced with reading and writing, and is constructing new understandings about his learning history using the narrative of being a dyslexic learner:

'[I] only found about ten years ago I've suffered with dyslexia, and that's been quite a thing realising you've managed to have a career without knowing it; you've managed to find ways of managing your own difficulties with reading and covering up your inability to take on reading.' (Int 1: 20)

In practical terms, James's diagnosis of being dyslexic has enabled him to access specialised dyslexia support groups while studying at college. James' frequently suggested these have helped him to develop his literacy practices by devising a range of coping strategies for meeting the everyday literacy-related demands. James claimed that having a visual stress test and being provided with various dyslexia coping strategies and coloured overlays has, in particular, had a profound effect on his ability to read, saying:

'I just can't quantify it - it's just brilliant.' He explains that the use of overlays is 'just amazing . . . I can't speak highly enough that something so elementary and yet fundamentally changing everything I did from there on.' (Int 1: 22)

James elaborated on this point saying:

'I cannot believe the difference from finding out that I could keep words still by using a bit of cellophane! I find that absolutely amazing, and from having a piece of cellophane that is just an ordinary bit of cellophane I can stop any movement on the page; and who thought of it, who developed it? It's just wonderful, and through coming to college and having that stress test done is just amazing and, em, I wouldn't have read so much if I'd still had words jumping around at me.' (Int 1:22)

The revelation of being officially diagnosed as 'dyslexic' is a dominant theme in James's narrative about the adult literacy course. The course clearly represents a significant life event for James, in that it has had, and is continuing to have, a significant effect on how he makes sense of his life history and the various literacy-related difficulties he countenanced with learning at school. James's comments in the interviews suggest that he now realises that the difficulties he faced were perhaps not simply because he didn't have the ability, but were more attributable to undiagnosed dyslexia and a lack of appropriate



specialised dyslexic support that he needed to learn in school. In James's words:

'Well, obviously education has moved on and I'm very aware that the teachers I had when I was at school - they were all ex-Air Force, Army - they were all straight from the services, into teaching and possibly and didn't have, eh, that ability to pick up dyslexia or realise that somebody can't read and he's kicking off because you're asking him to read, he's going to do anything he can so he doesn't make a fool of himself in front of the class. Yeah, so I understand that there is a different timescale; I was a post-war baby and most of the teachers were ex-servicemen.' (Int 1: 18)

The interview extract suggests that James now views his learning difficulties at school from the vantage point of being a 'dyslexic learner'. The course has exposed James to dyslexia pedagogic discourses in which James has positioned himself as a dyslexic learner. By assuming the identity of being a 'dyslexic learner', dyslexia discourses are providing James with a body of language, ideas and conceptual tools to begin rationalising his literacy-related learning difficulties and constructing new understandings about his learning life at school. In this sense, dyslexia pedagogic discourses are functioning as a cultural narrative which James is appropriating to construct his own identity narrative as a dyslexic learner. The interview data suggests that the construction of his identity as a dyslexic learner, although tentative and currently unstable, is gradually displacing his previous identity narrative of being a

marginalised learner. The changes in James's reading and writing practices, along with his emerging identity as an adult learner are manifesting in a new world view regarding his confidence in his academic abilities and the potential to take advantage of future opportunities he previously considered inaccessible.

### **Jacob and dyslexia**

Describing how he considered himself as a learner, Jacob said:

' . . . deep down, I saw myself as someone with real learning difficulties, like almost as a disability level thing, which to some degree I think is a bit true. So I was still caught on a deeper level in this 'there's something wrong with me, this is shameful, you shouldn't be like this a your bloody age'; and I've managed to move from that to a place where I'm much more comfortable and less shameful about it.' (Int 3: 5)

Jacob suggested that discovering that he is dyslexic is useful to him for developing coping strategies for his learning difficulties, and how it has helped him realise that the difficulties he faced with learning all his life were not necessarily the result of any serious learning difficulty or damage caused by his long-term substance abuse. In Jacob's words:

'So, that's how I saw myself as this person that couldn't. So over time, and going back - that's going to stay with me for years and years; so

entering into these places to do this kind of thing is huge, so I saw myself as somebody who was less than other people, that had this immense difficulty and that there was something wrong with me. And I found out that I had dyslexia, and that separated a lot from what I thought the damage I had done to myself through dependency - it kind of filtered that out, I thought yes, alright there is a rhyme and reason for it, perhaps I'm not so damaged because of that - there's an understanding for it . . .' (Int 3: 5)

This excerpt suggests that Jacob's awareness of the concept of dyslexia and positioning himself as being dyslexic provides him with a conceptual framework, or 'cultural script' (Polkinghorne, 1995) for rationalising the difficulties he encounters, and has encountered in his formative years with literacy and learning. In appropriating the dyslexia script, it seems that Jacob is using it to construct an identity as a dyslexic learner. Jacob's words suggest to me that this has involved radically reformulating his original understandings about his literacy and learning difficulties, and the reasons why he fell into a life of crime. Jacob explained this in some detail, saying:

'Fundamentally, I can see sort of crystallised, in that the original tension led to causation. I interpreted that to be that I was bad, I was immoral, I was stupid or whatever, or all those things, you know what I mean; that was the interpretation I put on it, and that carried through my whole life and led to me going underground with this. Because, for whatever reason,

I was a very determined and resourceful person, so where I couldn't meet the need, an identified need, it led everywhere and affected not only myself, but everybody else. Now, with the awareness of dyslexia, and I look back and I can identify and say ok, when I am explaining myself to people now, I'm not immoral, bad, disruptive necessarily, I was someone who had an unmet need. The difference is now, with dyslexia, and I can sort of conceptualise that I have got it, a huge part of that is that I am able to express myself in a new way, the historic part of it. But also, like conceptualise what is going on with me now and link it up, and get my needs met because I can say to my employers, for example, listen, it's not because I'm dumb, I'm lazy, I'm this, I've got this condition and it's this and it's that, and they say ok, and meet my needs.' (Int 3: 24 - 25)

The narrative in this excerpt suggests that Jacob has benefited from his learning experiences, in that he is less inhibited by his anxieties about his literacy difficulties, and feels more comfortable in placing trust in the people around him knowing that they will not judge or stigmatise him for his difficulties with literacy. Elaborating on this, Jacob said:

'So, I've worked through a lot of my inhibitions. And a huge thing as well is I was not consciously aware of human beings that went on, for the most part, un-judgemental. That was also a revelation to me. [Laughs] So I think finding myself in environments where I truly feel people, for the best, are non-judgemental and will be supportive of you and allow you to

flourish is, it's been a great, great help to me to sort of lay off all my inhibitions and go for it, despite how I feel about it. Within adult learning, it's, to my mind, it is that kind of thing: I've come in with all my baggage and I wasn't judged. People were there to support me despite what I was, or despite how I saw myself. (Int 3: 8)

Despite Jacob's sense of progress and his emerging identity as a dyslexic adult learner, he suggested that he felt everything he had achieved was continually at risk of being undermined by what he terms the 'spectre of dyslexia'. During the interviews, Jacob elaborated on this and explained how various incidents, such as a poor work appraisal exacerbated his anxieties regarding his literacy practices, his career and his family's welfare. The quotes below, illustrate these anxieties:

'I had a few appraisals and they were saying to me 'Look, we think we are going to let you go because your performance is not up to expectations, you can't write reports and all the rest of it. So it was like, the last eight months of being in absolute purgatory, because now I'm thinking I've got all this responsibility and I've done all this graft, I've got where I'm going and it's undone me again - it's finally got me!' (Int 1: 25)

'I finally get my own office and all of a sudden the spectre of the dyslexia, or whatever it is, rears its ugly head again. And I think 'Oh no!' And there

is a point where I think just give it up, man; just stop, but that's not an option.' (Int 1:28)

'So it's had a really powerful impact on me, it was like I've been in tears of anguish and apathy and just nearly beaten to the core, because I'm thinking my God, after all this work, this not being able to read and write thing, is finally gonna do me - it's finally gonna screw up my income, my family and everything built. So I got into a really difficult place with it.' (Int 2: 10)

#### **4.3.2 Narrative themes of alienation, criminality and recovery**

One of the central themes in Jacob's life story concerns his illegal exploits as a drug dealer. Jacob recounted explicitly how he thought of himself 'as someone who couldn't' and explained how his sense of frustration and alienation eventually culminated in a significant episode when he consciously decided to concentrate on his criminal activities. As Jacob stated himself, his identity as a pioneering drug dealer enabled him to assuage his anxieties about achieving wealth and sense of status that he failed to achieve through legitimate means.

Jacob's emerging identity as a 'drug dealer' changed his world view dramatically, in that he no longer recognised his father's work ethic and abandoned his endeavours to fulfil his father's expectations regarding academic success. From his new vantage point as a drug dealer, he dismissed his

father's outlook as being 'wrong' and was to an extent contemptuous of it, for at the time, the cultural script of being a drug dealer seems to have helped Jacob to alleviate the sense of despair and alienation he felt as a teenager. Ironically, however, the narrative in Jacob's interview data strongly suggests to me that his criminal past and identity as a criminal is also the cause of Jacob's acute sense of alienation and the difficulties he experienced later in his life as struggled with the process of rehabilitation and recovery.

Jacob's words suggest that he found joining the adult literacy course and working with other adults in this setting profoundly useful to him in understanding and addressing his literacy and learning difficulties. He suggested, however, that becoming an adult learner was very much a tentative process, as he continued to harbour deep-seated fears and inhibitions about validating his subject position as an adult learner. In particular, he expressed concerns that his peers would learn of his criminal past and stigmatise him for it. Jacob spoke animatedly about his fear and anxiety of not being able to escape his criminal identity, and explains how he sees it as a constant threat to his transition back into a 'straight' way of life. Speaking about this, Jacob said:

'I went to Martin's Gate where I met Chris and a lovely lady, and they assessed me, and at that moment I thought well, because I used to live in this fear of stigmatisation, fear of judgement, like I had moments when I would see another drug dealer busted, and that would fill me with fear and

I was like I'm locked in this, I can't escape this now; I am a heroin dealer, I'm a smuggler, I'm a robber . . . ' (Int 1. 18 - 19)

Despite these re-emerging fears, Jacob suggested that other aspects of the course have helped Jacob to actively re-evaluate and think more positively about his capability to transcend his criminal identity and reconstruct a new identity that does not involve criminality. In this respect, Jacob spoke of a significant cathartic episode he characterises as the 'Madonna Moment', where he first had the 'liberating' realisation during a session on his literacy course that it was possible to 'reinvent himself' and put in motion strategies for transcending his personal difficulties. In Jacob's words:

'I had this moment, I call it the 'Madonna moment' when I thought, do you know what, look at this person, she's made herself, she's re-doing herself, she's reinventing herself all the the time. And I thought well maybe, here I am 46 years old, drug dealer etc, and these people are saying to me, look you may have dyslexia, let's start doing the 'ABC' again; I thought maybe, just maybe I can reinvent myself. And that's what sort of went on, I think I got around that sort of . . . I got some sort if inner resilience to say alright, forget that stigmatisation, you can - there is a way you can go back to school and start again without the shame, without the guilt; because that's what held me in really, was that before I was too ashamed to try and learn to read and write again, or to go to these places to get help. And, so then I moved out into supportive housing, I got voluntary work, I was a



receptionist at the Art Centre, which was superb for me because it was like, I couldn't accept myself as I was, but I was getting indications that other people could accept me as I was, and so going into that environment was great.' (Int 1:19)

It is clear from this excerpt that the narrative theme of rehabilitation that Jacob articulated suggests that he subscribed to the notion that it was possible to reinvent himself and construct a new way of thinking about his future. This appears to have filled Jacob with tentative flashes of optimism, which were also regularly eclipsed with the fear of failure, in that he recognised there were opportunities, but also recognised that the route to realising these opportunities was fraught with obstacles he was apprehensive about surmounting - in particular the taboo of his drug dealing identity. Elaborating on what Jacob terms as the 'Madonna moment', Jacob said:

'I had all this fear of stigmatisation and I thought oh my God I'm sort of stuck. And I'm thinking what's the Madonna thing where she seemed to be, I think she was in her forties or something, and she was reinventing herself. And I suddenly became aware, I thought wow, this is the time when people are not inhibited by their same constraints, that you are free to screw up if you want and make mistakes and she . . . it was really liberating to see her reinventing herself from what she had been in her early days to something else, and it was the first time I became consciously aware that you could do that. So I thought, do you know

what, maybe it's ok, maybe you can, I can reinvent myself and that was a really defining moment for me to see that it was possible and the other bit of it really was that people would allow you to do it. So, I've worked through a lot of my inhibitions. And a huge thing as well is I was not consciously aware of human beings that went on, for the most part, unjudgemental. That was also a revelation to me. [Laughs] So I think finding myself in environments where I truly feel people, for the best, are non-judgemental and will be supportive of you and allow you to flourish is, it's been a great, great help to me to sort of lay off all my inhibitions and go for it, despite how I feel about it.' (Int 8 - 9)

Listening to Jacob speak about his departure from a life crime, it seems that this has been considerably traumatic for him in terms of the many personal challenges he has had to face in establishing his identity in the 'straight world' such as overcoming his substance addiction, finding employment and embarking on literacy courses of study. The interview extract below illustrates that by identifying himself as an 'ex-criminal', Jacob has changed his world view and now constructs his previous world view as a criminal as being based on a 'falsehood'. The extract also illustrates the sense of alienation and fear Jacob is experiencing in his struggle to construct his sense of identity and self-worth in the social world he initially ran away from as a young man:

' . . . amongst all the confusion and my existence, I really attached my sense of self to all really crazy things and sort of all the criminality that comes with that.

So in this journey where you realise that it's been a falsehood, you've been lying to yourself, these things are vacuous and tissueous, if there is such a word, that they've got no real sort of value and you realise that you haven't got transferable skills at that point, you're asked by society and those around you to say right recover! You're asked to put down everything you've known, and everything you've sort of sense of self on and to take up this world you're frightened of and fearful of, and that you know nothing about - you've got no sense of your own worth and you feel like it will be against you anyway. So it's a huge undertaking.' (Int 3: 12)

By removing himself from everything he knew and excelled at in the world of crime, and in going through the process of rebuilding his life away from crime, he had in effect returned to the very situation he had been running away from for most of his life. Removed from the world of crime in which he excelled, Jacob no longer had the ascriptions of wealth and status that for years he had depended on to sustain his confidence and sense of self-worth. He was, in a sense, a 'fish out of water' (Bourdieu, 1981), and so had to learn to become a different person - establish a new identity in the 'straight world', which for Jacob meant facing up to his anxieties associated with the 'spectre of dyslexia' and the fear failure in formal learning environments. In Jacob's words:

'I think . . . 'the new me' that has been developing over these last eight years, sort of still prior to getting clean, all the things I built my self-esteem on are external: cars, money all that sort of stuff, being a villain - they was

all sort of valuable things to me, they gave me a sense of who I am despite the morality of it. There was sort of a bit of kudos in it; I felt I was sensible that I had value in that it was a subculture. So when I come into this world now, it was like 'Oh my God!' - I had to really face the fact that I had been completely deluded, I had to face the fact that I couldn't read and write, so I had no sort of value in this sort of world. So, coming to a place where I have got a grip on this now, it's had a massive effect on my self-esteem because I was my worst damning critic, and until I am happy with what I do the external cues don't matter anymore, so when I was coming to a place where I was struggling with the work I started to realise, 'Oh my God!', all my sort of self-worth and sense of my self was reliant on this bloody job. The threat of the job going and all that sort of stuff starts getting a bit dodgy and floating about. So I had to dig tremendously deep, really dig deep and suck it up. I had people round me - my supervisor - external supervision saying perhaps this isn't the place for you; I had my partner saying to me that's sort humiliating to have to go through this process, I wouldn't be able to do it. So she meant well but I'm like thinking shit, this is really dodgy. So, like I get to Chris and that slow process of digging deep sort of built an internal foundation, if I can use that term, that I've overcome this sort of external building of sense of me and this is really an internal sense that I'm slowly developing the ability even at 56. If I didn't have this job, I will soon have the ability, even if I lost the job, I will soon have the ability to go and get a job anywhere else. It might sound a bit grandiose, but also that if for any reason I didn't find a job I wanted or anything, I believe that I would be able to take, once I get a better grasp on the old English, then there will be nothing stopping me; I think could go

out, go back to being an entrepreneur without the criminality and probably make a nice few quid. [laughs]' (Int 2. 9 -10)

We can see here that Jacob recognises he has made a definite departure from his criminal life and is in a process of finding his way in the 'straight world'. The narrative in the data suggests he constructing a new personal identity by aligning with alternative discourses to those associated with criminality. This shift is represented in Jacob's use of language where he talks about 'the new me', and uses the metaphor of 'changing worlds' to describe his departure from his criminal lifestyle. From his new vantage point, he now considers himself to have been deluded in his criminal aspirations, and sees little value in the trappings of wealth he coveted as a criminal. This dismissal is indicative of a change in the narrative Jacob is using to understand his situation.

#### **4.3.3 Narrative themes of lifelong learning**

The most prominent narrative theme across the four sets of interview data is that of becoming a lifelong adult learner. The data strongly indicates that each of the participants narratives about their literacy learning experiences have been strongly influenced by lifelong learning discourses. They each articulated narrative themes associated with process of change and tentative proclamations about their newfound potential to take advantage of education opportunities they had previously considered to be inaccessible. All the participants stated they have aspirations of undertaking other higher level courses, including Access courses, GCSE English and degree courses, and

joined the course with a view to attaining the prerequisite Level 2 English Functional Skills qualification to access these courses. Sarah, Jacob and Alice each suggested that they are undertaking the course primarily for career-related purposes. Sarah spoke about needing the course to access her intended career as a social worker, Jacob spoke about the need to improve his proficiency in drafting client reports, and Alice spoke her need to attain English language qualification to advance her career as a teacher in England. In this respect, the participants' reasons for joining the course directly correspond with the policy objectives of the Skills for Life adult literacy & Numeracy Strategy policy (DfEE, 2001) and the progressive language of lifelong learning discourses that underpin the field of education.

### **Sarah**

The interview data strongly suggests that since joining the course, Sarah has been gradually positioning herself as an Adult Learner which has involved her actively reflecting on her learning history and reconceptualising the value of education in relation to her career objectives. Sarah's reflections about her learning life suggests that her somewhat despondent views about formal education are becoming displaced with a more positive conception about her opportunities in education. In her interviews, Sarah frequently talked about this change in her outlook and acknowledged that working towards a degree was now a real possibility she wished to pursue:

'I wouldn't have ever thought I'd get into uni or had the chance of doing that, fulfilling that. I've always wanted to do a social work degree . . . and with things like that it was always like, 'You've got to be like this and you gotta be like that.', so you don't think you're going to be able to do it, and then you grow up a bit and realise that there are ways of doing it. (Int 3: 9)

This excerpt illustrates the ways Sarah is re-evaluating her future learning opportunities and is indicative that her emerging identity as an 'Adult Learner' is changing what she thinks is now possible in terms of undertaking a degree and working towards becoming a social worker. The process of identifying herself as an adult learner, however is clearly a tentative, as Sarah often expressed concerns in her interviews about what a challenge studying for a degree represents for her in terms of her academic ability, fearing that the difficulties she faced with learning in school would re-emerge:

'It's still just . . . even though I feel I can learn now, whereas in school I couldn't because of concentrating etc, but I still struggle now because of how my concentration is and how easily I am distracted, or how easily distractive I am even.' (Int 3: 5)

Sarah also expressed reservations about the need to obtain a university degree as a prerequisite for entering her chosen profession. She seemed ambivalent and slightly disdainful about the value of academic study as she questioned

how relevant and useful it will be to her in terms of actually doing the practical work involved in counselling young people. In Sarah's words:

'Well, because that's [university] the only way you can get to be what I want to do. So that is the only option; I rather not go to uni to be honest with you, but to get to where I want to be I've got to, so I've got to do it, or else I won't be able to do it. I've tried like through volunteering and they won't even take me as a volunteer, unless you get a placement at uni. And I will go to uni, you know, and I will complete it and get a degree at the end so I can go in and help, because I can't really do much now with nothing. And I don't want to do and NVQ and whatever . . . I want a degree.' (Int 3:9)

'It's stupid sometimes. Sometimes you should be able to work towards a degree within a role and then they can see then. I know that people say you need 'blah, blah', but I don't think it means everything - not really. I know that to a lot of people it does, but I think if you are good at something and can show that you have a passion for it and drive, then you should be given the chance no matter how well you are on paper.' (Int 3: 11)

Despite her inhibitions about her learning abilities, Sarah's identity as a 'lifelong adult learner' is gradually consolidating as Sarah is discerning various indicators in different social contexts that are substantiating this new learner identity.

These indicators include: feedback about her progress from her course tutors,



the attainment of her Functional Skills qualifications and the affirmation of others about the differences they've noticed in her use of vocabulary and writing practices. The data suggests that such indicators are steadily resolving some the inhibitions and anxiety Sarah has about her academic capabilities and her scope to achieve on higher level courses. In this sense, Sarah's identity as a Lifelong Learner is gradually becoming more established, and consequently the previous narrative scripts of being a 'disenfranchised learner' that Sarah used to make sense of her learning life are becoming more irrelevant to her.

This newfound confidence resulting from her sense of success in the adult literacy context, has seemingly bolstered her confidence regarding the prospect of achieving a degree and going on to study at Master's level. Indeed, she seemed resolute that both these goals were achievable saying:

' . . . you need your degree, there's no way about it that you do need it for certain jobs. So that's the path I want. I know people say to me that you can change your mind when you are on the Access course, or at uni, but I won't because it's what I want to do. My mind is made up . . . if you're going to do three years in uni, why can't I do my Master's?' Everything is possible. So the only issue with the Master's is the money, but I don't know what's going to happen when that time comes. So I'm not even worrying about that.' (Int 3: 8)

Jacob's stories about his life of crime and his journey of recovery and rehabilitation illustrate the ways a variety of discourses are influencing the dominant narrative themes he is using to make sense of his life history. These discourses include discourses of criminality and substance abuse, a discourse of recovery and rehabilitation, and various education discourses, such as dyslexia discourses and lifelong learning discourses.

Jacob's words strongly suggest his learning experiences on the adult literacy course have played a significant part in his rehabilitation, in that his interaction with other students on the course led to what he defines as his 'Madonna moment' - this being the realisation that he would not always be stigmatised for his criminal past, and that it is possible for him to reinvent himself and reconstruct an identity that does not involve a narrative of being 'a criminal'. Being diagnosed with dyslexia and identifying himself as a 'dyslexia learner' is providing Jacob with a rationale for constructing new understandings about the difficulties he has faced with learning that do not position him as being 'dumb' or 'lazy'. The data suggests that his identity as a dyslexic learner is also helping him to develop his confidence within the formal learning context regarding his learning capabilities and moreover is manifesting in him beginning to re-conceptualise his future opportunities in education and in his career. As Jacob explains:

'Now, with the awareness of dyslexia, and I look back and I can identify and say ok, when I am explaining myself to people now, I'm not immoral,

bad, disruptive necessarily, I was someone who had an unmet need.

The difference is now, with dyslexia, and I can sort of conceptualise that I have got it, a huge part of that is that I am able to express myself in a new way, the historic part of it. But also, like conceptualise what is going on with me now and link it up, and get my needs met because I can say to my employers, for example, listen, it's not because I'm dumb, I'm lazy, I'm this, I've got this condition and it's this and it's that, and they say ok, and meet my needs.' (Int 3: 25)

Although Jacob's views about his future in education suggest that he is in the process of adopting a cultural script of a Lifelong Learner, a reoccurring theme in Jacob's narrative also suggests that this is very much a tentative process, fraught with tensions and tangible uncertainty. In particular, Jacob spoke of the 'spectre of dyslexia' (Int 1:28) and how he considers this as a continual barrier to his progress, and therein threatens to undermine his emerging subject position as a Lifelong Learner. Such concerns illustrate that, in Jacob's case, the process appropriating this new cultural script creates various tensions with other cultural scripts he has used habitually in the past to make sense of the difficulties he experienced in his learning life. It appears that Jacob is actively mediating this tension in an ongoing meaning making process that involves him identifying further social signifiers to substantiate his emerging identity as a dyslexic adult learner who has potential to achieve in his career and educational aspirations. In the interviews, Jacob spoke explicitly about how comments from significant others at home and in the workplace have helped to validate his sense of achievement and progress:

'My partner - I know she will probably disagree - is impressed with my fortitude and my ability to overcome all my struggles and all the rest of it, and em, my family think I'm extraordinary because they knew what I was like in the past and what I've become now and are immensely proud of me. So I get a lot of clues. I get good feedback from Chris, even though he's like me to do a bit more homework. So generally, people have a really a positive attitude about me; people think I'm quite a capable person.' (Int 2: 11-12)

## **James**

In contrast to his previous experiences of learning at school, it is clear from the way James talks about the adult literacy course and his newfound confidence in his literacy practices that he enjoyed being in classroom and working with his peers, and found his teachers to be supportive, empathetic and skilled in differentiating their delivery to suit his specific learning needs. It is also clear that James found his learning experiences useful in terms of developing his literacy practices. His progression through the learning levels coupled with the attainment of qualifications have served to validate his learning capacity.

Clearly, undertaking the adult literacy course represents a significant episode in James's life story, in that through his course learning experiences he has not only developed new literacy practices, but has begun formulating new understandings about his learning history and is in the process of constructing a new identity as an Adult Learner.

Looking to the future, James explained that he is adamant that he wants to build on his achievements on the adult literacy course by continuing to study and improve his literacy practices. In the extract below, James expressed passion and energy about the prospect of progressing in education, and is highly motivated to take on the challenge this presents for him.

'I don't want to rest on my laurels and think that's good enough I've done that basic English now; I don't want to do that. I don't know.

Improving . . . that's all it is, improving. I feel that if I am improving, I'll be happy. I don't wish to be static and I know I need to be busy and, yeah, so whatever it takes to improve then I'll follow it up.' (Int 2: 11).

James spoke about his plans to enrol on to English GCSE course in the following academic year, and spoke tentatively about the the possibility of undertaking a degree in years to come. In James's words:

'Well, do you know what, I really want to see if I could progress to doing a . . . trying to get to university; I feel like I could progress just that bit more, but I don't have to, but my time's my own so I know that, I feel that I want to push myself harder and I don't need to, but I've just got this thirst, a massive need to keep learning . . . ' (Int 3: 16)

This shows that James's newfound passion for learning and his education aspirations represent a significant shift in his world view, and moreover are indicative that the lifelong learning discourses James has been exposed to on the adult literacy course are having a shaping influence on this view. James's emerging identity as an adult learner is typified by the views he expressed regarding his capacity to learn and take advantage of future learning opportunities when he commented, 'If anyone is open to knowledge, the window's open - the world's your oyster isn't it?' (Int 1:29)

### **Alice**

The narrative underpinning Alice's life story suggests to me that throughout her life she has consistently identified herself as someone who values education and is confident in negotiating and achieving in formal learning contexts. In this respect her identity as a learner has not changed since joining the course, however, since emigrating to England, there are indicators in the data that her confidence in her potential as an aspiring teacher has been gradually undermined due to two factors, namely: issues with not being able to speak fluent English, and learning that her academic qualifications are not recognised in England.

Listening to Alice express her frustration about this situation, it seems that the value and prestige she originally attached to her graduate status, along with her identity as an aspiring professional have been gradually undermined since she arrived in England. This, coupled with Alice having to resort to taking various

low-paid, manual jobs has clearly been a destabilising episode for Alice, in that she is gradually repositioning herself as a disenfranchised second-language speaker, trapped in manual employment with diminishing prospects for realising her professional career as German language teacher.

This change in Alice's situation and her understanding of it is very much in tension with her identity as an aspiring trainee teacher and Master's graduate in Poland. Alice expressed dismay and incredulity about the disparity in the currency of her qualifications that exists between Poland and England, and viewed this as a superficial bureaucratic barrier that unjustly undermines her status as a graduate who is qualified to teach language. Alice's comments in the interview suggest strongly that she does not accept the authenticity of the education system in England, and is therefore somewhat resistant to her subject positioning within it. Despite this, Alice seems to recognise that she had no option but to acquiesce and 'play the game' by resolving to attaining the various qualifications she requires to teach in England including a GCSE English and PGCE qualifications. Indeed, this is what led her to initially enrolling on a Functional Skills English course.

Throughout Alice's interviews, she frequently suggested that the course is helping her to address her specific issues with literacy and language, and views the course as being useful for enabling and aspiring students to access further opportunities in education in order to achieve their personal goals. In Alice's words:

'Because you learn on this course very important things for example how to write some formal letter, informal letter, use language proper, how to recognise if some text is for example descriptive, informative; so the difference between adjectives, adverbs, so how too use language proper. You have the possibility to learn some other people from other countries sometimes, you have the possibility as well to change your life maybe too . . . what else . . . I really recommend this course for everyone who want to improve their language and want to understand how to use language in different situations, and what else? This course, I think, helps many students and maybe they are more focused on achieving their goals which means in many situations means access to higher education - maybe after this course they decide to go to university, maybe they do this GCSE in English and maths and decided to study something.' (Int 3:12)

Like the other participants, Alice's sentiments about her experiences of the course reflect the tenets of lifelong learning discourses in that she thinks Adult English courses have scope to help people to change their literacy practices in ways that help them to improve their life situation and achieve various life goals. In this respect, Alice identified a range of indicators that she thinks validate her own sense of progress and achievement when it comes to her English language use, including her boyfriend, her boyfriend's friend, achieving a Level 2 qualification and being accepted on a GCSE English course - all of which has seemingly given her the requisite qualifications and self-confidence she needs to begin resuming her career in teaching. In this respect, I would argue that



Alice's emerging identity as an adult learner has provided Alice with a script which she is using to reconstruct her identity as someone who can take advantage of further educational opportunities in England.

#### **4.4 Summary**

The thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the participants' life stories shows the diverse range and complexity of understandings they have each constructed about their learning lives and the outcomes of their adult literacy course learning experiences. The analysis of life stories are useful for challenging dominant discourses about the outcomes of adult literacy learning that narrowly focus on the link between adult literacy education and the development of human capital and economic competitiveness. Such approaches construct literacy in terms of skills acquisition, the attainment of qualifications and course progression and restrict the focus of the research to the course context. In doing so, the participants' understandings of the wider outcomes of their adult literacy learning experiences are not accounted for. The interpretative, biological approach used in this research generates some detailed insights into some of the unrepresented aspects of adult literacy learning experiences that are very often silenced or tidied away in other research about the outcomes of adult literacy learning (BIS, 2010; Tett, L, and Maclachlan, K.; 2007 Tett, Hamilton and Crowther, et al, 2012). The research approach encompasses the participant's narratives that take into account social diversity and difference (Bathmaker & Harnett, 2010:169) that are sometimes 'hidden away' by large-scale quantitative research.

Although the participants' life stories are rich and highly nuanced, several commonalities in the narrative themes emerged in the analysis of their reasons for undertaking the adult literacy course and the ways they understand the benefits of their learning experiences. It is clear from the analysis that two dominant narrative themes were common to each of the participants' life stories. Firstly, the narrative of transition in terms of their literacy practices and identities as learners, and secondly the narrative of personal struggle in addressing their literacy related problems and negotiating alternative meanings about their learning lives and imagined futures (Holland et al., 1998).

Commensurate with other research (OECD, 2013; OECD, 2016) all of the participants identified certain social and economic problems in their lives they needed to address, and recognised that returning to formal education by way of an adult literacy course was the best route to start resolving these issues. Such reasons for re-engaging with formal education opportunities is not uncommon, indeed personal crises or transitional periods in life are triggers for educational re-engagement as it is seen as an effective way of negotiating such transitions (McGivney, 2001). This point resonates with the findings in this this research. For example, Alice spoke of her sense of alienation associated with being a second language speaker; Sarah spoke about addressing concerns she had about being a young mum and providing a stable home for her daughter; James spoke of his need to address the barriers he has encountered in school and in everyday life resulting from profound difficulties in reading and writing; and Jacob spoke passionately about the difficulties of proving himself, beating addiction and establishing his career as counsellor. Commensurate with the findings of other research (Barton, 2009), these life stories all depict narratives

of struggle in addressing various problems which they have associated with previous experiences of literacy learning such as issues with authority, violence and trauma, bullying in school (Jonker, 2005). All of the participants articulated narratives that suggested they felt a sense of alienation resulting from their continual positioning outside of normality in formal learning contexts (Barton, 2009: 55). The narratives are suggestive of the ways they as subjects have become positioned in various wider discourses associated with school, immigration, motherhood, criminality, mental health and rehabilitation.

More specifically, the narratives of transition and struggle articulated by Jacob, James and Sarah suggested that they understood their difficulties with learning in school as being the reasons why they continued to believe they had difficulties with learning in adulthood. The narratives of James, Jacob and Sarah suggest that as learners they positioned themselves as 'failures' who were less able to learn than others. Such narratives of failure illustrate the ways they have been negatively positioned in dominant education discourses in the school setting (Jonker, 2005) that treat language and literacy practices as measurable competencies. Subject positioning within the school context is largely based on measures of competency and the ascription of binary labels such as high achiever or low achiever, intelligent or ignorant, capable or incapable, responsible or apathetic (Tett, 2016: 439). As the participants' narratives show, such identities of failure in the school setting have extended into adulthood and resonate in the participants' narratives about their capabilities as learners and along with their potential to achieve their education ambitions (Wojecki, 2007). Thus, such ascriptions of identity and competency become internalised (Barton

et al, 2007) and are regarded by participants as an innate abilities that are seen as being 'impossible to escape' (Youdell, 2003).

Consistent with the research of Tett (2016), the narratives of James, Jacob, Sarah and Alice strongly suggest that their positive learning experiences on the literacy course are helping them to begin contesting their negative subject positions as learners, possibly as a result of their identification with lifelong learning discourses. It is clear that the participants' learning experiences on the course involve a process of critical evaluation or 'problematization' (Freire, 1970) of their life histories through which they are beginning to re-author their understandings of the ways they have been positioned previously in formal education settings. The participants' narratives also suggest that they are each re-authoring their imagined futures. For example, Jacob, Sarah and James each mooted ambitions of undertaking undergraduate courses, Jacob spoke of developing a career as a counsellor, Sarah discussed her plans to become a social worker and Alice of her plans to become a language teacher in England.

The participants' stories of struggle and transition regarding their adult literacy learning experiences give credence to the notion that adult literacy learning contexts are in effect transitional spaces that are constitutive of modern day pedagogies of the oppressed (Freire, 1971). Although adult literacy curriculums are not specifically designed to incorporate critical pedagogies and engender critical thinking, in accord with other research (Tett, 2016), the participant's narratives about their adult literacy learning experiences suggest that, in practice, they are each critically evaluating their subject positions as adult learners and are in a process of re-authoring counter-narratives to the

narratives of failure they have used for most of their lives. In contesting their previous subject positions as ‘failures’ and substituting them with subject positions as ‘lifelong learners’, the discursive practices associated with the identity of being a lifelong learner is changing what they consider to possible in terms of their education opportunities. In this sense, the adult literacy education context functions to provide alternative discursive frameworks through which the participants become repositioned in more positive ways as lifelong adult learners. Similarly, Tett (2016) identified this learning dynamic, stating, ‘Positive experiences in their learning programmes had caused them to re-evaluate their previous understandings and enabled the construction of new identities as people that are able to learn’ (Tett, 2016: 439). Such narratives of transition are perhaps illustrative of Freire’s conception of humans as, ‘open beings who are able to achieve the complex operation of simultaneously transforming the world by their own action and experiencing the world’s reality in their own language’ Freire, 1970: 28).

The language of possibility articulated by the participants, coupled with tangible changes in their literacy and language practices can be theorised as a process of ‘conscientization’ (Freire, 1970). By developing a ‘critical consciousness’ and challenging their old subject positions as failures, the participants are beginning to understand their respective problems with literacy as surmountable which is representative of new forms of agency within the field of education.

The narrative theme of struggle appears to go hand in hand with the theme of transition in the life stories articulated. The process of constructing new subject positions and negotiating meanings in relation to the discourses they are

exposed to through their interactions within the adult literacy course context seems fraught with risk and uncertainty. The participants each articulated anxieties about failing to achieve their education goals, and some were tentative about the progress they were making in terms of their literacy and language practices. For example, Jacob spoke about 'the spectre of dyslexia' returning and scuppering his progress, and Sarah of her ambivalence about her capabilities to undertake undergraduate study due to being inarticulate. This illustrates the point made by Youdell (2003) that identity ascriptions seem inescapable.

The participants' narratives suggest that the participants are actively engaged in identity work to address the tension between previous subject positions as failures and the emerging subject position as an adult learner. In accord with other research (Allat & Tett, 2018; Bynner, 2017; Forster et al, 2018; Tett, 2016), the participants each identified various wider benefits of their learning experiences which help to valorise their emerging subject position as an adult learner. The narratives suggest that factors such as the achievement of qualifications, level progression, gaining access to other higher level courses, and comments from significant others about changes in their literacy practices function as tangible indicators that corroborate their emerging subject position as an adult learner with capabilities to transcend recognised barriers, and negotiate new routes to achieving their goals (Wenger, 1998: 53). As Jacob so eloquently put it: 'And I suddenly became aware, I thought wow, this is the time when people are not inhibited by their constraints . . . I can reinvent myself, and that was a really defining moment for me to see that it was possible . . .' (Int 1: 19).

Jacob's revelation that he does have the capacity to reinvent himself and is not anchored in a discourse of failure typifies the fundamental outcome being articulated in the other participants' narratives of transition. For example, James' narrative about becoming someone who can read and write; Sarah's narrative about becoming a teacher and breaking the language barriers associated with her isolation; and Sarah's narrative about becoming her journey to become more confident in her journey to becoming a university student. Such narratives illustrate Tett's argument that adult literacy learning experiences can offer participants the 'use of a different discursive framework through which to interrogate their experiences, and this had enabled them to engage in the authoring of new selves and new social relations and thus new figured worlds' (Tett, 2016: 440).

# Chapter 5 - Conclusion

## 5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I draw some conclusions from the thematic analysis of the life stories, and show how the research findings make a contribution to knowledge about the outcomes of formal adult literacy learning in a Further Education context. The chapter begins in Section 5.2 by detailing the key limitations of the research. In Section 5.3 the key research questions are addressed directly in relation to the findings. The chapter closes with Section 5.4 which makes some recommendations for further research.

## 5.2 Limitations

The recent narrative 'turn' (Plummer, 2001: 2) in qualitative social research has come about as narrative methodologies offer researchers a window into the ways people construct narrativised understandings about their lives. In many narrative approaches to research life stories are viewed as texts (Foucault, 1972, 1980), the analysis of which can provide detailed theoretical insights into participants life histories and the meanings they ascribe to their lives (Barton, 2007, 2009; Bruner, 1990; Carless & Douglas, 2017; Goodson and Sikes, 2001). Biographical narratives also provide a basis for analysing the ways broader discourses shape the narrative themes and meanings within those texts (Souto-Manning, 2014).

As McAdams writes:



'Life stories are psychosocial texts that are jointly crafted by the individual himself or herself and the culture within which the individual life has meaning. Our autobiographical stories reflect who we are, and they also reflect the world in which we live.' (McAdam, 2001: 117)

In defence of narrative approached to researching social life, Carless and Douglas (2017) posit six key qualities of narrative research. These have been outlined below, followed by some of the key limitations commentators have identified with the narrative approach used in this research.

1. In contrast to quantitative research approaches that tend to focus on 'the global' picture, biographical methodological approaches are used to construct detailed understandings of participants' life stories and representations of lived experience within 'particular' contexts. This enables researchers to construct highly detailed and believable representations of their lives that do not 'tidy away' the messiness of human life. As the findings of this research illustrate, despite the many commonalities in the participants' narrative themes, each participant articulated a unique life story that was constituted by a broad variety of narrative themes that cannot legitimately be reduced to a singular discourse about becoming an adult literacy learner.
2. Narratives provide deep insights into the meanings participants associate with their lives, people are experts on their own lives. The act of telling stories is viewed as a meaning making process (McAdams, 1993), and on this basis narrative interviews provides researchers with a forum for drawing

on the participants' 'expertise' and 'co-construct meaning through a reciprocal, dialogical interaction' (Carless and Douglas, 2017: 1).

3. Biographical narratives often include a longitudinal aspect and therefore provide insights into the participants' 'trajectory of life across time' (Carless and Douglas, 2017: 1). The longitudinal perspective offered by participants' life stories is useful for helping researchers analyse the ways participants construct understandings about the series of events in their lives. In turn, this helps to situate the significance of particular episodes in the broader context of the participants' life story. This lends a richness to the data that is often absent from quantitative methodologies that tend to gloss over the complexity of human experience.
4. A focus on biographical narratives can be used as a basis to analyse the shaping influence varieties of cultural narratives or discourses have on participant's understandings of their lives and the ways these understandings change over time in response to new life experiences. Narratives therefore can be used by researchers to illustrate the interplay between social structure and agency and the ways participants 'negotiate their identity, morality and behaviour within their particular life context' (Carless and Douglas, 2017: 1).
5. The representations of the life stories made by researchers offer insights into the lived experiences of the participants. Storytelling is a socially situated act that draws on experience in a given moment in time - it is in this sense 'embodied' in experience (Carless, 2010). Such insights that reveal holistic and emotionally rich nuances in the meanings participants associate with

given experiences are able to challenge more reductionist representations of people's lives presented by research that take less holistic, less humanistic approaches to theorising human experience.

6. Narrative research demands ethical relational engagement (Carless and Douglas, 2017: 1) and presents ethical challenges when considering what is the right way to conduct research into people's lives. By foregrounding the voices of participants, narrative research valorises the research participant to the status of 'expert' on themselves and provides a conduit for amplifying the silenced stories of otherwise marginalised groups. The holistic approach to generating data about people's lives can illuminate some of the complexities of human experience that are tidied away by reductionist narratives articulated in dominant discourses.

Despite the many cited advantages of using a narrative research methodology (Carless and Douglas, 2017; Goodson and Sikes, 2000; Clandinnin and Connolly, 2001), like any other research approach there are associated theoretical limitations. Discussions about the limitations of narrative approaches to research are generally premised on questions about the validity of both, the methodological processes used to generate data, and the status of the research findings in terms of the legitimacy of the knowledge claims being made. In social research, the validity of knowledge claims greatly depends on those claims being believable and sufficiently legitimated by evidence. This entails researchers clearly set out the research intentions, and detail the theoretical paradigm used to generate the data and construct the findings. As Germenten (2013) argues, 'Discussions about truth and evidence are

fundamental in the philosophy of science, where every research paradigm creates its own way of looking at “truth” (Germeten, 2013: 615).

The truth or, more accurately, validity of a knowledge claim therefore is not inherent in the knowledge claim itself, but is dependent on the believability of the knowledge claim in relation to the theoretical model being used. Thus, it is incumbent on researchers to convey the rigour of the research conducted so as to instil readers’ faith in the verisimilitude of the knowledge claims. As Polkinghorne (2007) writes, ‘. . . a statement or knowledge claim is not intrinsically valid; rather its validity is a function of intersubjective judgement. The validation process takes place in the realm of subjective interaction, and validity judgements make use of a kind of communicative rationality . . . that determines what is accepted as legitimating evidence. . .’ (Polkinghorne, 2007: 474)

In the social research there are two fundamental epistemological paradigms that posit different notions of verification and therein what constitutes legitimating evidence for making a knowledge claim. On the one hand, empirical paradigms aim to legitimate objective and generalisable knowledge claims based on evidence generated through ‘procedures for establishing formal and empirical truth’ (Bruner, 1986: 11). According to Bruner (1986), empiricism is based on a logical-scientific model that ‘attempts to fulfil the idea of a formal mathematical system of description and explanation’ (Bruner, 1986: 12). On the other hand, interpretative epistemological paradigms make knowledge claims based on hermeneutical evidence that focuses social phenomena such as language, meaning and social practices. Knowledge

claims in this paradigm do not purport to be objective or testable, but aim to construct believable accounts that have verisimilitude (Bruner, 1986: 13) with the participants' lived experiences, actions, intentions, vicissitudes in given social contexts. Many of the limitations associated with narrative research methodologies are based on empiricist critiques that suggest that knowledge claims generated by narrative research lack sufficient grounds or processes of verification. Below, I have outlined some of the key limitations relevant to the narrative methodology used in this research.

Firstly, as detailed in the methodology section, I acknowledge the inherent limitations associated with the entire interpretative process involved in generating the data and constructing the research findings. The biographical data generated by way of semi-structured biographical interviews is shaped by a range of contingent social influences, including: the accuracy of the participants' memory about the experiences articulated; the participants' power to choose what and how they decide to articulate and what they decide to not articulate; the researcher's position of power to influence the interview situation regarding the focus and purpose of the interview, the interview technique, and the questions asked. The contingent range of influences within the interview situation means that the life stories told are essentially a selective commentary on events - uniquely crafted version of a life story which probably differs from the ways it is told by the participants at other times and places. This contingency of, and variance in, the life stories articulated by participants raises methodological concerns pertaining to the verisimilitude of the data generated, and therein the believability of the research findings. In particular, the post hoc nature of autobiographical narratives is a potential issue here as the meanings

attributed particular events in the interview context may not have been apparent or significant at the time of the event (Bathmaker and Harnett, 2010).

Commenting this point, Bruner (1990) maintains, 'There is something curious about autobiography. It is an account given by the narrator in the here and now about a protagonist bearing his name who existed in the then and there' (1990: 121).

Similarly, the contingency of narratives tell us something about their meaning-making function: they function to describe past events, but also as a way of explaining the present (Bathmaker and Harnett, 2010). The meanings persons ascribe to past events are continually re-constructed in relation participants' present subject positions and the varieties of discourses they are appropriating in different social contexts to validate their current situations and the course of events that they understand to have led to this current situation. So the personal narrative articulated in the interview context is potentially a 'brand new' version of their life story as the story being told is serves a very particular function in a unique story-telling context. Thus, the uniqueness of the interview context and the life stories told within it raise questions about the verisimilitude of the data generated.

Secondly, the research data presented are based on an extremely small sample of only four participants, therefore from a positivist perspective the extent to which the findings can be said to be generalisable regarding the broader field of adult literacy education can be disputed. This is a limitation of biographical research that is, to an extent, less of an issue with large-scale, quantitative

research that is better suited to establishing statistical trends in data that claim to corroborate the representativeness of the findings.

In response to this critique, narrative research does not set out to establish generalisable truth claims that are objective or representative of social realities. The analysis treats the interview data as 'texts' (Foucault, 1980) and sets out to understand the meanings and subject positions constructed by participants within these texts that have been shaped broader discourses. Any commonalities and differences established in the findings are not theoretically problematic within narrative research paradigms, on the contrary they are illustrative of the complexity of the ways people make sense of their lived experience. This is an inherent strength of narrative research, not a limitation, for the rich data generated, along with the transparency of the research process used to generate the data, substantiates the verisimilitude (Bruner, 1986: 13) and trustworthiness of the research findings respectively.

On this basis, it can be argued that the analytical representations of the participants' lives presented in this research potentially have verisimilitude and resonance with the experiences of other adult literacy learners in similar contexts. Indeed, the findings of other research (BIS, 2013; Barton, 2007, 2009; Barton and Hamilton, 2012; Forster et al., 2018; Metcalf & Meadows, 2007; Tett, 2014) about adult literacy learning featured in the literature review strongly suggest this is the case.

Thirdly, the research findings and analytical portrayals of the participants' lives are limited in that they are essentially only a snapshot in time. Given that the

participants' narratives about their learning lives and the outcomes of their literacy learning experiences were voiced while they were still on the course, it is important to acknowledge the likelihood that their understandings would probably change in time as the significance of their learning experiences gradually manifests. Thus, the verisimilitude of the findings about the outcomes of literacy learning is decidedly time-constrained, in that it does not provide insights into the broader impact literacy learning has on their future learning lives once they left the course. A longitudinal study, that conducted a further interview with the participants a year subsequent to them leaving the course would overcome this limitation and enhance the findings greatly. Data from this additional interview would enable researchers to establish if participants understood the course to have been instrumental in helping them in their literacy practices and learning lives. In addition, the interview would enable researchers to determine if, and in what ways, the participants' narratives about the benefits of literacy learning changed.

Despite the contingency of the narrative data and the portrayals only being a snapshot in time, there is significant value for the participants in the process of narrativising their lives within an interview context. The biographical interview presents participants with a unique opportunity to talk exclusively and in depth about their lives, and explore the significance of given life episodes and therein construct new meanings and understandings that may prove beneficial. On this basis, a body of thought from commentators such as Clark and Rossiter (2008), De Groot (2018), Egan (2005), Goodson et al. (2010), Kelchtermans (2010) and Westheimer (2016), amongst others, advocate the notion of narrative learning processes as a pedagogic model. In the main, the notion of narrative learning



resonates with humanist, critical and social justice pedagogic approaches that at their core aim to help marginalised groups of people better understand how they are ‘narratively constituted and narratively positioned’ (Clark and Rossiter, 2008) in dominant discourses that perpetuate the interests of powerful groups in society (Westheimer, 2016). It is argued that critical / narrative learning approaches engender learning experiences have value in terms of ‘advancing components of civic, professional and worldview development’ (De Goot, 2016).

### **5.3 Addressing the research questions**

In this section the two key research questions that framed the focus of the analysis are addressed directly. In discussing the findings, I illustrate the ways in which the analysis builds on existing research and makes a contribution to knowledge.

#### **5.3.1 Key research question 1: Do the participants’ course learning experiences change their literacy and language practices in ways that help them in their lives within and beyond the education context?**

The research methodology used to analyse the outcomes literacy learning combines a sociocultural theoretical lens with a biographical research methodological approach that aimed to generate data necessary to conduct a thematic analysis of the participants’ learning experiences in an adult literacy education context. The lens provided a way of establishing highly detailed insights into the less tangible outcomes of literacy learning that are so often glossed over in other large-scale quantitative research (BIS, 2010; Metcalf,

Meadows, Rolf, Dhudwar, 2009). The lens avoids some of the theoretical and methodological issues associated with other approaches for four key reasons: it acknowledges that literacy practices are not universal but are socially situated, emergent and multiple; it does not restrict the focus of the analysis to participants' experiences in the course context, but encompasses an analysis of the ways in which their literacy learning experiences are affecting the participants' lives beyond the course context; the analysis does not tacitly share the pedagogic assumptions valorised by the functional skills / acquisition paradigm of literacy learning privileged by policy makers in the field.

Similar to other research in the field (Barton, 2007, 2009; Forster, Petrie and Crowther 2018; Tett and Maclachlan, 2007; Tett, 2016), the analysis aimed to provide a highly detailed representation of the lived experience of adult literacy learning. The biographical method used in this research generated extremely rich data about the participants' lives and their understandings about the ways the course is affecting their literacy practices in other social contexts. The method also took into account the nuanced, less tangible benefits of learning articulated by the participants which is so often missed by other research that frames the analysis of literacy learning in terms of level progression, skills acquisition and employability. By widening the focus of analysis to include the participants' life stories about their previous formal learning experiences, as well as stories about their present lives beyond the course context, this meant that in contrast to other research, the analysis was able to situate the episode of undertaking an adult literacy course in the broader context of their life stories,

and therein better illustrate the significance of their literacy learning experiences and the effect they believe it is having on their lives.

Findings from the analysis showed several commonalities as well as some differences in the narrative themes about the significance of the participants' course learning experiences. In accord with the findings of other research (Barton, 2009; Metcalf, Meadows, Rolfe, Dhudwar, 2009; Tett, 2014) all of the participants recognised that they have a literacy learning need, or skills deficit that represents a significant barrier for them in achieving their respective goals. Three of the participants suggested that their difficulties with reading and writing was a significant problem for them in their everyday lives. A dominant theme in all the participants' narratives was that returning to education via an adult literacy course represents a significant episode in their lives, and is helping them to address their literacy-related difficulties in pursuit of their respective goals.

Each of the participants considered their course learning experiences to be manifesting in significant and beneficial changes in their literacy and language practices, and their self-esteem as adult learners. They each believed that such transitions, coupled with the attainment of qualifications are advantaging them in terms of them being able to access future education and work opportunities which they previously considered to be unobtainable. All the participants regarded themselves as being more adept in their reading and writing practices, and were becoming more confident in terms of studying in formal learning

contexts. Such outcomes are consistent with other government research in the field (BIS, 201, BIS 2013; DfES, 2003; DfES, 2004; Metclaf, 2007; Tett, 2016). Research conducted by the department of Business Innovation and Skills (BIS, 2013) concluded:

A major finding from the evaluation, on which there is relatively little in the existing evidence base, was the accrued benefits to health and well-being amongst learners. Life satisfaction, mental well-being, locus of control and self-esteem all showed a significant increase amongst learners. The greatest increase was in mental well-being and self-esteem. This presents evidence of health and well-being benefits associated with basic skills courses (BIS, 2013, ix).

Consistent with the findings of Forster, Petrie and Crowther, (2018) the analysis showed that the participants' narratives suggested a range of broader benefits associated with their course learning such as increases in self-esteem, greater confidence in education settings and the formation of new imagined futures in education. Such narratives are illustrative of the participants changing their subject positions and can be understood as a participatory learning process (Lave and Wenger, 2001) through which new learner identities are constructed. To explain further, as a result of their literacy learning experiences, the participants are gradually appropriating the particular forms of knowledge and working practices (Holland & Lave, 2009) that are valorised in the literacy learning context. Their literacy and learning practices - their ways of being and knowing - are becoming patterned in ways that mean they have a greater

degree of symmetry with the cultural practices and discourses in which they become positioned in. Their identities as adult learners become shaped accordingly and they gradually become 'a fish in water' (Bourdieu, 1984).

As a result of this patterning of their literacy and learning practices, they gradually become more adept at navigating the cultural landscape, and exhibit a greater mastery over the forms of knowledge objectified in the curriculum. Such changes in the participants' practices increase their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) within the adult literacy context, and in turn is manifesting in them progressing up the learning levels and attaining qualifications, all of which (Bourdieu, 1984) reifies their emerging identity as an 'adult learner' who has new opportunities in the education field. To use Lave and Wenger's terminology, they are in the process of becoming 'Experts' or 'Old-timers' (Lave and Wenger, 2001).

Although literacy and learning practices are socially situated and do not transfer unproblematically between contexts (Thorndike, 1923; Pea and Kirkland, 1987; Salomon and Perkins, 1987), the data strongly suggests that the participants' are becoming more confident about their literacy and language practices in other contexts as a result of their course learning experiences. For example, Jacob, Sarah and James each identified several examples of the ways they think that their learning experiences have helped them in their everyday literacy-related tasks, such as writing emails, completing formal work reports, reading more complex texts, and using a broader range of vocabulary. Whether or not

they are actually more proficient in their literacy practices as a result of their course learning experiences cannot be convincingly ascertained from the narrative data. Changes in a person's literacy competency is very difficult to establish without rigorous testing (Metcalf, 2007), and much other research about the impact of adult literacy learning lacks sufficient evidence to show increases in literacy competency (Beder, 1999; McIntosh, 2004). What this research does show is that the participants' emerging subject positions (Foucault, 1990, 1991) as adult learners mean they are scripting themselves as being increasingly confident in meeting the literacy demands within other settings. In turn, the data strongly suggests this newfound confidence is manifesting in them considering new imagined futures in education with three of the participants considering university study as a more realistic prospect. Thus, the role of storying is a fundamentally important dynamic of learning in terms of becoming a lifelong adult learner. Indeed, the second key research question focuses on exploring the significance of identity transitions in relation to the outcomes of adult literacy learning experiences, and it is to this question that I now turn.

### **5.3.2 Key research question 2: Does adult literacy learning affect changes in the participants' learner identities, and if so, what is the significance of changes in identity?**

The findings from the analysis make a contribution to knowledge as the narrative methodology foregrounds the participants' voice as way of providing trustworthy representations of the lived experience of learning and the process of their subject positioning an adult literacy learner. The analysis provides

detailed insights into the narrative constructions and the way these have been shaped by a bricolage of societal discourses they have been exposed to within the course context as well as in other contexts in their lives. In this respect, the analysis illustrates the intertextuality of the narrative constructions relating to the participants' understandings about literacy learning that are not always shaped by neoliberal discourses of education that emphasise employability skills as the most important outcome of literacy learning.

The intertextuality of the narrative themes illustrates the diverse ways their course learning experiences are helping the participants to overcome difficulties in their lives which are not reducible to issues associated with income and employability. Commensurate with other research (Metcalf & Meadows, 2007; Tett, 2016; Forster et al, 2018), the analysis shows the diversity of wider learning outcomes identified by the participants which are not restricted to progression in education, increases in employability and income, although this was a dominant theme. This is perhaps an indication of the dominance of neoliberal discourses and their shaping influence upon their understandings of the benefits of literacy learning. The participants' narratives also suggest a diverse range of other discourses have also had a significant shaping influence on their understandings about the way they have benefited from their literacy learning. For example, the narrative themes resonate strongly with discourses of criminal rehabilitation, mental health recovery, personal enlightenment, dyslexia, social alienation, educational marginalisation and single parenthood, to name but a few. The significance of these narrative

themes can be analysed using the concept of identity which, as the data in this research suggests, is a fundamentally important dynamic of learning.

The diversity of narrative themes in the participants' life stories suggests that their sense of identity as learners emerges through a process of subject positioning (Foucault, 1990; 1991) in a diversity of discourses. What is clear from the analysis is that through their experiences in the adult literacy context, the participants have been exposed to alternative education discourses which they are appropriating as 'cultural scripts' (Polkinghorne, 1995) to construct different understandings of their learning lives. The narrative themes of becoming an adult learner, improved confidence in education settings, developing greater proficiency in reading and writing, criminal rehabilitation, mental health recovery, and being dyslexic are all indicative of this subject positioning in discourses. In particular, the narrative themes associated with education and literacy learning strongly suggest the participants' subject position as adult literacy learners with potential is gradually displacing their previous subject positions as learners who are disadvantaged or 'failures' (Tett, 2016).

This dominant narrative theme of 'no longer being a failure' was shared by Sarah, Jacob and James, each of whom suggested that their dyslexia diagnosis on the course was a significant episode them in helping them understand their problems with literacy and language. Their narratives suggest that their subject position as a dyslexic learner means they each now relate the difficulties they



have experienced with literacy and learning as resulting from their dyslexic processing difficulties, not as a result of being 'a dunce'. In this sense, dyslexia discourses and their subject position of being a dyslexic learner provides them with a new conceptual framework, or cultural script (Polkinghorne, 1995), for rationalising the barriers they have experienced with learning in the school setting and in their adult lives. In the interviews, all three participants attributed undiagnosed dyslexia as being the principal reason for their struggle with learning at school rather than attributing it to a lack of intellectual ability.

From their vantage point as dyslexic learners, the data suggests that the participants are able to critically reflect on their learning histories and reject the disadvantageous subject positions which they have identified with for most of their lives and therein begin conceptualising beneficial possibilities about their education and careers, such as advancing their careers and studying for a degree in a university context. In this respect, the data suggests that from their new subject positions, the participants are 'thinking the unthinkable' (Foucault, 1988) and are beginning to transcend inhibitive patterns of practice that have characterised their learning lives in formal education settings.

Despite the evidence of significant changes in the participants' subject positions as adult learners, the analysis shows that the participants are tentative in appropriating new discourses and positioning themselves as adult learners with potential to succeed in the field of education. Each of the participants' narratives suggest that they were considerably uncertain about the

verisimilitude of their emerging subject positions as adult learners, and expressed concerns about their literacy competencies as well as doubts about achieving their education aspirations. In this sense the process of positioning as a lifelong learner is fraught with risk, uncertainty and involves an ongoing struggle to verify the verisimilitude of those positions. The reason being, such scripts are seemingly in tension with their discursive positions within other cultural scripts that they have used previously to understand their lives prior to them participating the adult literacy context.

The data suggests that to resolve this narrative tension, the participants are embroiled in an ongoing meaning making process of validating the efficacy of their adult learner identity using various social signifiers available to them within the course and in other social contexts. This identity work then, involves the participants continually mediating the tensions and contradictions between the contrasting cultural scripts they are using by merging them together to form a coherent narrative that has authenticity for them and their experience of becoming an adult learner (Polkinghorne, 1988).

It is this process of identity construction and the attendant struggle involved in realising aspirations that constitutes an important element of the learning process. In my experience as an adult literacy lecturer, like the participants in this research, it is not uncommon for adults returning to education to find the experience of returning to education destabilising as they struggle to make sense of their learning experiences and mediate the tensions they encounter

between who they are and who they want to become. This process of struggling to close the gap between their 'intended learner identity' and their 'actual learner identity' is a fundamental dynamic of learning (see: Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Participating in any social or learning activity within an unfamiliar social context exposes people to new discourses, which can create tensions between who one is and who one aspires to be in an ongoing process of becoming.

#### **5.4 Summary**

This research adopts an interpretative biographical approach to researching the lived experiences and learning outcomes of four adults studying in a further education context. In the current political climate where neoliberal ideologies concerned with human capital and economic competitiveness dominate the pedagogic paradigms and discourses surrounding adult education, interpretative research that foregrounds the voice of educationally marginalised groups of adults stands to make a pertinent and timely contribution to the existing body of research about the outcomes of adult literacy learning. By foregrounding the participants' voices about their learning experiences, the research has value in that it serves to interrogate the dominant pedagogic assumptions of neoliberal paradigms of education that so often disregard or gloss over the human dimension of learning.

The representations of the participants' life stories in this research provide some highly detailed insights into the variety of ways their lived experiences of studying on adult literacy education courses are affecting their lives beyond the

course context in a range of beneficial ways. The thematic analysis of the participants' life stories clearly illustrates that their narratives about the significance of their course learning experiences are comprised of an intertextual range of narrative threads that have been shaped by a bricolage of discourses they have been exposed to over their lives. Although the narrative of improving their employability and skills was a dominant common theme in the participants' life stories about their reasons for joining an adult literacy course, other narrative themes associated with everyday life struggle such as motherhood, mental health, rehabilitation, criminality and combating difficulties with dyslexia were all equally as significant to their stories about their difficulties with literacy, language and learning.

The findings illustrate various differences in the participants' narrative themes, but also showed that several dominant narrative themes were common to their life stories. For example, Jacob, Sarah and James articulated a narrative of struggle, disadvantage and failure to describe their previous experiences of learning in formal education contexts. Their narratives about their difficulties with literacy and language in adulthood strongly imply that their disadvantageous positioning in the school learning context is the root cause of their lack of confidence regarding their literacy, language and learning capabilities. The analysis indicated that such personal narratives of 'failure' or 'disadvantage', in effect, meant that the participants have been unwittingly complicit in their own oppression in the field of education, in that they have tacitly accepted the veracity of their disadvantaged situation. Without recourse to alternative 'liberating' education discourses (Thompson, 1980) such as those associated with adult literacy and lifelong learning discourses, Jacob, Sarah

and James have, for most of their lives remained oppressed 'docile bodies' (Foucault, 1991) who have habitually considered themselves as having limited opportunities in the field of education. From a Foucauldian perspective, such commonalities in the participants' narrative themes illustrate how the meanings persons ascribe to their literacy learning experiences become patterned, and to a degree, regulated by the dominant discursive practices within given learning contexts (Foucault, 1971, 1988).

In his revered book, 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (Freire, 1971), Paulo Freire posited the principal argument that, 'Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world' (Freire, 1971). Clearly, government funded adult literacy education programmes such as New Labour's Skills for Life strategy (DfEE, 2001) serve instrumental objectives of neoliberal policies that primarily aim to develop human capital. The findings in this research show that in practice, while these instrumental objectives are to a degree being met, the learning experiences are profoundly transformative and are constitutive of practices of freedom.

To illustrate further, participants' narratives regarding the adult literacy course context compellingly suggest that their learning experiences are having a transformative impact on literacy practices and their identities as learners. The findings show that through their learning experiences on the adult literacy

course, the participants' have been exposed to various lifelong learning and adult education discourses, and are engaged in a process of appropriating a range of education discourses to re-author their narratives about their previous formal learning experiences as well as their imagined futures. In particular, they are gradually resisting the legitimacy of their previous subject positions and are displacing the narratives of disadvantage and failure with narratives of possibility and aspiration. In this sense, the adult literacy context and the discourses available within it are functioning as a modern day pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire, 1971) in that it is helping the participants to critically resist their positioning as 'failures' and to construct more advantageous adult learner identities that have greater agency in the field of education. The findings suggest that the process of repositioning involves an ongoing struggle of meaning making whereby the participants are negotiating the cultural landscape of education in the search for signifiers that substantiate their emerging identity narratives as adult learners. In this respect all of the participants expressed anxieties about their potential to achieve and the risk of failing to close the gap between their current situations and their imagined futures in education.

The findings show that learning is a multifaceted, dynamic process of meaning making and becoming, which cannot be usefully reduced to crude measures of skills acquisition and the attainment qualifications. The findings suggest that this process of becoming an adult learner is highly de-stabilising for the participants as they critically reflect on the meanings of their learning experiences and begin to actively question the legitimacy of the ways they have been disadvantageously positioned in the education field for most of their lives.

In this sense, the participants are no longer 'docile bodies' who passively accept the oppressive implications of their previous discursive positions, but on the contrary are beginning to re-author their lives using alternative discourses that are helping them to 'think the unthinkable' (Foucault, 1991).

The narrative themes in the life stories strongly suggest that their course learning experiences are helping each of the participants to take more control over their learning lives, and are developing a newfound agency in surmounting what they considered to be insurmountable barriers regarding their literacy practices and learning opportunities. In light of this, it can be argued that despite the qualification-driven emphasis of adult literacy courses in the current neoliberal climate, the findings in this research shows that in effect adult literacy learning contexts are transformative spaces that can engender profoundly significant and beneficial changes in people's lives.

One of the principal contributions of this research is that the findings show that through their learning experiences the participants are actively engaging in critical processes of conscientization (Freire, 1970) regarding their learning lives; they are beginning to 'think the unthinkable' and realising that have the agency to resist marginalising discursive positions that have blighted their lives. By appropriating alternative lifelong learning education discourses in their narratives understandings of their lives, there are indications that they are forming more agentic learner identities. They are more acutely aware that it is possible 'reinvent' themselves, resist oppressive discourses in which they are

positioned, and therein author alternative personal narratives in the unwritten chapters of their life stories. The excerpt from Jacob's interview depicts the moment when he stumbled on this revelation:

'I had this moment, I call it the 'Madonna moment' when I thought, do you know what, look at this person, she's made herself, she's re-doing herself, she's reinventing herself all the the time. And I thought well maybe, here I am 46 years old, drug dealer etc, and these people are saying to me, look you may have dyslexia, let's start doing the 'ABC' again; I thought maybe, just maybe I can reinvent myself.'

### **5.5 Implications and recommendations for further research**

The research has implications for policy makers and practitioners who are committed to implementing more progressive educative practices that are effective in helping students transcend their literacy learning barriers. Firstly, I think policy makers need to acknowledge that literacy and language practices are socially situated and multiple, and therefore devise more flexible literacy curricula that give practitioners greater scope to respond pragmatically to the differentiated literacy learning needs of students. This would entail moving moving away from standardised literacy examinations that have a narrow focus on vocational writing tasks such as article writing, writing formal letters, speech writing etc. towards more learner-centred, or embedded models of assessment that can be tailored to suit students' particular literacy needs and interests. The reason being, the data strongly suggests that the participants joined the literacy course to improve their confidence in a variety of literacy practices that are not necessarily met by the vocational focus of the curriculum. For example, the



participants mentioned they wished to improve their confidence in aspects of literacy such as: essay writing, writing counselling reports, improving confidence in speaking English in social situations, improving their grammar, writing informal letters and emails to family members, to be able to read fluently.

A practical solution would be to replace standardised exam papers with standardised assessment criteria for the range of literacy levels. This would mean that practitioners would have greater freedom to contextualise or embed the assessment methods and devise literacy curriculums that better suit the needs, purposes and interests of adults studying in different education, community and work situations.

Secondly, policy makers need to acknowledge the 'liberating' dimension of learning as well as the 'domesticating' dimension identified by Thompson (1984). The findings of the analysis show that the process of storying their lives using is highly beneficial to the participants for making sense of their learning experiences, re-evaluating their education opportunities and constructing a more positive outlook on their learning lives. For example, the data suggests that as a result of their course learning experiences, the participants' exposure to various education discourses such as Skills for Life, lifelong learning and dyslexia are helping them to construct aspirational narratives of possibility regarding their futures in education. As a result of this, Jacob, James and Sarah were each considering applying for further and higher education courses. This was something they would not have considered possible prior to the

literacy course as they each articulated narratives of marginalisation and alienation in talking about their previous experiences of formal education.

By devising a more innovative, holistic adult literacy curriculum that gives practitioners the flexibility to place more of an emphasis on the pastoral aspect of the learning process, this could better help people who have been disadvantaged in education to critically appraise their previous learning experiences and begin re-conceptualising imagined futures in education. In the current qualification-driven education system which places an acute emphasis on employability and skills, such progressive innovations at policy level are unlikely. Practitioners, however, could consider their own pedagogic practice and pioneer a more radical adult literacy curriculum that integrates critical pedagogies within the constraints of the existing adult literacy curriculum. This would make for interesting research. Such research would prove useful in establishing if such a pedagogic model works in practice and is effective in helping educationally marginalised adults consider possibilities in education they may have previously thought were unrealistic.

Given the limitations of this small-scale research for analysing the lived experiences of adult literacy learners, I recommend that a more comprehensive three-year longitudinal research analysis is undertaken that uses a larger, more diverse sample of participants studying in different institutions. This would enhance the validity of the data and generate more representative findings about the ways in which the participants' literacy learning experiences help

people return to education and transcend the literacy-related difficulties in their lives.

In particular, I would suggest conducting a series of biographical interviews with the participants staggered over the three year period. The data generated would be useful for analysing the significance of the participants' literacy learning experiences and evaluating the ways the participants' literacy practices and opportunities in education have changed over a longer time period. In conjunction with longitudinal analysis, I also recommend using mixed methods as a way of enriching the data and corroborating the findings. I suggest using 1:1 interviews with 'significant others', such as family members, long-term friends and course tutors, as a way of triangulating the histories and giving a more three dimensional picture of the participants' life stories.

The use of a series of annual reflective group discussions with participants about the significance of their course learning experiences would also be useful for enriching the data. Such discussions would provide a forum for participants to develop shared understandings about the meaning of their learning experiences and would prove useful for researchers in better understanding the challenges associated with returning to education and becoming an adult learner.

The experience of doing this research has helped me to understand more fully the idea that teaching and learning is a primarily a meaning making process

that occurs through people's participation in sociocultural activities within given contexts. This new understanding has changed the way I think about my own teaching practice in terms of what learning is, my pedagogic intentions and how best to achieve them. In learning about and applying a social constructionist lens to the analysis of literacy learning outcomes, the research findings convinced me of the limitations associated with the cognitivist model of learning. The participants' life stories compelling showed me that learning is by no means a uniform process of knowledge transmission and skills acquisition, rather it is a complex and highly personal meaning making process through which participants change their patterns in their literacy practices, and construct alternative, potentially beneficial understandings about their lives and the possibilities open to them in education.

To build on this research and the recommendations made, I am considering devising a rationale for a community-based literacy learning research project that could be delivered by FE colleges. The aim would be to pioneer an embedded adult literacy curriculum that is pragmatic in its structure so that it remains responsive to the specific literacy learning needs of people living and working in given social contexts. A social constructionist lens could be used to analyse the meaning making processes that occur and provide insights into the outcomes the participants' learning experiences.

End



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## **Appendices:**

- A1 About the participants
- A2 Ethics protocols: research information & consent documentation
- A3 Participant recruitment PowerPoint presentation
- A4 Interview questions
- A5 An illustration of Stage 1: coding the data (Interview 1 with Jacob)
- A6 An illustration of Stage 2: constructing Jacob's life story
- A7 Jacob's life story (in full)
- A8 An illustration of Stage 3: constructing a discourse analysis
- A9 Discourse analysis of Jacob's life story (in full)

## **A1 - About the participants**

### **Alice**

Alice is a 26 year old from Poland, who came to live in the UK with her boyfriend in 1998 to seek new opportunities to advance her teaching career as a German language teacher. Prior to emigrating to the UK, Alice graduated with a Master's degree in German Language, and has trained and worked as a language teacher in various school settings in Poland. Alice speaks German, Polish, Spanish and Italian fluently, however she arrived in the UK with a very limited understanding of English language.

The narrative of Alice's story suggests that she is passionate about education and indicates that she positions herself as having a disposition for learning languages in academic contexts. Alice spoke proudly of her academic achievements, and it is my interpretation that her identity as an academic and an aspiring teacher are very important to her. It is clear to me that she is mindful of the considerable time and effort she has invested in her education and now has an unswerving determination to make use of her academic achievements as a means of pursuing her long-term goals of becoming a German language teacher. Since moving to the UK, however, Alice's career plans have been set back due to her academic qualifications not being recognised in the UK. This has meant that Alice has had to resort to taking various low-paid manual jobs working in kitchens and in cleaning jobs, which has been hugely frustrating for her.

Alice said that the main reasons for joining the Adult Literacy and Maths courses were firstly, to improve her confidence in using English, and secondly to gain the formal qualifications required to access a GCSE English course and other teacher training opportunities she needed to advance her teaching career in the UK. In addition to these issues relating to her career, Alice intimated that she has also countenanced many other personal challenges since coming to England, such as becoming accustomed to the English culture, learning English from scratch, and being the victim of xenophobic behaviour. Understandably, these challenges appear to have had a significant effect on Alice's life and the way she now positions herself in discourses.

### **Sarah**

Sarah is a 26 year old single parent who joined a literacy course in September 2013 with a view to achieving the Level 2 qualification in English and Maths that she needed to progress on to an Access course. Sarah's long-term plan is to undertake a degree in counselling so she fulfil her long-term ambition of working with young people as a personal support worker.

Speaking about her school life, Sarah described how she consistently found learning academic subjects 'hard' and uninteresting. Sarah suggested that she was marginalized by the teachers in the classroom, who invariably focused their attention on the more able students. Sarah explained that this apparent lack of support at school, combined with very little encouragement from her parents, manifested in her

being dismissive of school as she came to see little value in it. She also explained that in retrospect, she thinks her difficulties with learning at school were partly due to undiagnosed dyslexia.

Sarah talked about her adult life in detail and explained how becoming a mother has changed significantly her outlook on life. In particular, she explained how the responsibility of becoming a single parent has made her realise the importance of education in terms of realising her career plans and providing financial security for her daughter. In Sarah's words, 'Everything is for her.'

Despite finding learning on the Adult Literacy course 'hard', Sarah suggested that the support she is receiving on the course is gradually helping her to overcome her difficulties with learning, in that she recognises that she is making some progress in terms of her literacy practices. The narrative of Sarah's story suggests to me that Sarah positions herself as an Adult Learner and that her exposure to the Lifelong Learning discourse in the Adult Literacy course setting has meant that she has re-evaluated the value of education. Her apparent determination to overcome the difficulties with learning that have plagued her school life, coupled with her single-mindedness to capitalise on her progress and realise her future career plans are telling signs of this transition in her outlook.

**James**

James is a 60 year old man who first joined an Adult Literacy course 4 years ago to improve his skills and understanding of the English language. In particular, James said he wanted to develop his knowledge of English grammar and to broaden his vocabulary with a view to becoming more articulate in his speech and in his writing. James talked in negative terms about his learning experiences at school, and attributes undiagnosed dyslexia as being the root cause of the various other issues he faced at school.

Since returning to education, James described how he has developed a 'thirst for knowledge' and is motivated to work assiduously on his English studies. James detailed the ways he thinks his use of English has improved markedly compared to what it was like three years ago, and spoke of the benefits of his learning experiences in terms of its profound effect on his self-esteem, his social life and confidence in his learning abilities. In particular, James described how being formally diagnosed with dyslexia has helped him to better understand and surmount the difficulties he has faced with reading and writing throughout most of his life. James detailed the ways he thinks he has benefited from the course regarding his literacy practices, describing how he is now able to read a newspaper from cover to cover, writes a daily diary for his daughters, and has more confidence generally in his reading and writing abilities. The narrative in James's story strongly suggests that undertaking the Adult Literacy course represents a significant event in his life that is helping him to construct new understandings about his difficulties with learning that have characterised much of his previous experiences of education. James clearly positions himself as a Lifelong Learner who is now more able to take advantage of further opportunities in education.

## **Jacob**

Jacob is a 56 year old student of Nigerian heritage who returned to education for the first time in his life by joining an Adult Literacy course in 2004. Jacob described in detail the many difficulties and continual sense of frustration he encountered with learning at school, which he explains as being the result of undiagnosed dyslexia. He explained how he strived to live up to his father's high academic expectations and excel while at school, and how his efforts were continually thwarted as a result of not being able to read. Leaving school without any qualifications, Jacob told a harrowing story of how he fell into a life of serious crime and substance abuse, which eventually culminated in him becoming an addict and being sent to prison.

Jacob explained that his decision to join the course was one of necessity, in that he says he reached a 'crisis point' in his life when he recognised that he needed to confront and overcome various literacy-related difficulties he had faced all his life which were now causing more serious problems for Jacob in his working life as a counsellor. Upon joining the course, Jacob was diagnosed with dyslexia. This was a welcome revelation for Jacob, as he suggests that this diagnosis put a lot of the issues he had experienced with formal learning in his adult life into perspective. Jacob explained that knowing he is dyslexic has helped him to better understand and rationalise his difficulties, which in turn assuages his anxiety about learning and brings a degree of equanimity in dealing with the various everyday social, emotional, psychological and practical challenges commonly associated with dyslexic processing difficulties.



The narrative in Jacob's story suggests that joining an Adult Literacy course and positioning himself as a dyslexic learner has helped him to become more confident about being in formal learning settings and is also more confident in his reading and writing practices in other contexts. Jacob also described in considerable detail how fundamentally important his course learning experiences have been to him in terms of his rehabilitation back into society, highlighting how the course has helped him psychologically to overcome his deep-seated fears about being negatively stereotyped as an ex-criminal with no prospects. The narrative in Jacob's story suggests that he has reconstructed his understanding of what it means to be an ex-offender and the education discourses he has been exposed to on the course and his positioning as an Adult Learner have been integral to the re-construction process.

## **A2 - Ethics protocols: research information and consent documentation**

### **Doctoral Research WRITTEN CONSENT FORM**

This consent form is used to gain your written consent to your participating in this research project, and to confirm that you fully understand what your part in the research entails.

#### **Consent Checklist**

##### **Please tick**

I have read and understood the research Information Sheet, and have discussed my involvement in the project with the researcher.

I am fully aware of what my part will be in the study, how long it will take and how the research data will be used.

I know that my taking part in the research project is strictly confidential and that any personal information I disclose will only be seen by members of the university's research team.

I know that all personal information I disclose is protected by the Data Protection Act (1989) and that all personal information will be stored securely.

I know that my identity will remain completely anonymous if data from my interviews is used in research paper.

I freely consent to taking part in the research project.

I know that I can withdraw from taking part in the research project at any point and without any penalty whatsoever.

I know that if I have any issues or concerns, I can address them with either the researcher directly, or with the researcher's Director of Studies at the University of Plymouth at:

Dr Peter Kelly (Faculty of Health, Education and Society)

Email: [peter.kelly@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:peter.kelly@plymouth.ac.uk)

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**Your Signature:**

**Name (print):**

**Date:**

**Contact Address:**

As principal researcher, I confirm that the purpose of the research and the participants' involvement in it has been fully explained to the above named participant.

**Researcher name:** Christopher Grundy

**Researcher signature:**

## **DOCTORAL RESEARCH PROJECT**

### **INFORMATION SHEET**

#### **About me and my research**

My name is Christopher Grundy and I am studying for a Professional Doctorate in Education with Plymouth University. Since I joined the teaching profession in 2001, I have always questioned how students' learning experiences influence changes in their lives, and it is this interest in how learning can change lives which inspires my research.

#### **About the research project**

I aim to interview four adult literacy students in order to write four detailed case studies about their learning lives. The case studies will analyse students' life stories, focusing on their learning histories and the ways (if any) they think the literacy course is influencing changes in their lives.

The kinds of questions I am interested in asking include:

- What do students think about their learning experiences on the course?
- Do students think the course has benefited them in any way or not?
- Do students think the course has changed their English use in any way?
- Have students changed the way they think about education and themselves as learners since joining the course?
- Do students think differently about their future since joining the course; and if so, in what ways?

#### **What is the purpose of the research?**

Although Adult Literacy courses are often highly successful for helping adults to achieve qualifications, it is not clear how students benefit from their learning experiences. One of the main questions my research is interested in is how useful courses are for helping adults to return to learning and developing their English use and confidence as learners.

It is my hope that the outcomes of my research can be used as a basis for developing new ways of teaching adult literacy, so that students in the future have more creative and meaningful learning experiences that better meet their needs.

#### **How will the students be selected?**

I will select the students for the project based on their suitability and availability.

#### **What will I have to do?**

If you agree to take part in the research project, you will be invited to attend three one-to-one interviews at times and locations of your choice. Each interview will last for about an hour and will be carried out in a very relaxed and friendly way.

The first interview will invite you to talk about your life and previous learning experiences. The second and third interviews will focus on exploring your thoughts about your experience of the literacy course, and whether or not any changes in your life have occurred since joining the course.

If you decide to take part in the research, you will need to read and sign a Consent Form which confirms you have read this Information Sheet and clearly understand what is involved in taking part in this project.

I think being involved in this project could prove to be an exciting opportunity for you to talk about your life and discuss your experiences of learning in a unique way. I am sure that you will enjoy the experience of being interviewed, and hope that the experience will prove to be both interesting and thought provoking.

### **About the interviews**

The interviews will be conducted in a very relaxed and informal way so as to make you feel as comfortable as possible.

If you feel uncomfortable at any point during the interview, you are free to ask the interview to be paused or to stop completely. If you feel really upset about anything discussed in the interview, I can arrange for you to have further confidential support or counselling offered by the college.

- The interviews are completely confidential.
- You do not have to answer any questions if you do not want to.
- The interviews will be digitally recorded and typed up.
- The interviews have no hidden research agenda or intention to deceive or mislead you

### **The research paper**

A draft copy of the research paper will be given to you for you to read and make sure that you are happy with how I have represented you. Should you not be satisfied with any part of what I have written, I will arrange to meet with you so we can discuss the paper and make any changes you feel are needed.

### **Right to withdraw**

You are free to withdraw from taking part in this research at any point. If you decide to withdraw from the research project, there will be no penalty or ill feeling towards you whatsoever.

### **Confidentiality and security**

This research project is conducted in accordance with Plymouth University guidelines and is compliant with the Data Protection Act (1989).

Please be aware that:

- the interviews will be digitally recorded and typed up.
- notes may be taken during the interview.
- all the interview information about you will remain completely confidential. Your identity will be protected at all times by being anonymised.
- All information will be stored safely and securely. Electronic data will be stored on password-protected computers. Individual files containing personal information stored on discs or memory sticks will be encrypted. Any hard copies of data will be stored in locked filing cabinets and will be physically shredded when no longer required.

### **Who will read the research?**

The final paper will be published as a doctoral thesis by Plymouth University, and will only be available to staff and students at the university. Before publication, the research will only be read by my supervisors.

### **Contact**

If you would like any further information about the research project, you can either contact me directly or my Director of Studies, Dr Peter Kelly, at Plymouth University.

My details:

**Email:** [cgrundy1@gmail.com](mailto:cgrundy1@gmail.com)

**Mob:** 07557 780958

Dr Peter Kelly:

**Email:** [peter.kelly@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:peter.kelly@plymouth.ac.uk)

## **Project Schedule**

Thank you once again for agreeing to be involved in this research project. I sincerely hope and trust that you will enjoy taking part. If you have any questions or concerns about your involvement in the project, then do feel free to discuss them with me. Below, I have outlined the schedule for the project so that you are clear about my plans for what will happen and when.

### **Informal meeting**

This is an opportunity for you to ask any further questions about your involvement in the project. I will talk further about my background, why I am interested in this research and what the focus of the project is. We will also discuss the Timeline exercise and sign the consent form.

### **First conversation (April)**

Here, we will focus on your life story and reasons for joining the course.

### **Second conversation (June)**

In our second meeting we will continue where we left off, talking more about you, the course and your learning experiences.

### **Third conversation (August)**

In this last interview, we shall talk more about your learning experiences and discuss any changes that may have occurred in your life since you joined the course. We will also talk about your thoughts about the future.

### **Group discussion (September)**

I am considering arranging a group discussion with all four of the students involved in the project. This would be a great way of sharing your learning experiences with others and developing new understandings about your education journey. I will discuss this opportunity with each of you, and if you are all happy to take part will schedule a mutually convenient date.

### **Feedback (November)**

Over the summer, I will type up the interview and begin writing your case study. I will send you a copies of both, and will invite you to comment on how I have represented you in the case study.



## **Biographical timeline**

To prepare for your first meeting with me, I think it would be a really good idea to create a simple timeline of your life so far which identifies key people, experiences and events you consider to be an important influence in your life history. Doing a timeline should prove to be an unusual and interesting way of thinking about your life, and indeed, you may find that you learn something about yourself in the process.

Your timeline will provide a useful structure for our conversation in the interviews.

You are free to include whatever you want in your timeline, however, below I have listed some things you might consider including:

- **Place and date of birth**
- **Family background / home life**
- **Important people who have influenced your life (friends, family members, teachers etc)**
- **Important events or episodes**
- **Primary school experiences**
- **Secondary school experiences**
- **College or university experiences**
- **Learning experiences that have happened outside of school / college**
- **Occupation / job roles and positions you've had**
- **Important achievements**
- **Other interests or pursuits**
- **Ambitions and aspirations**

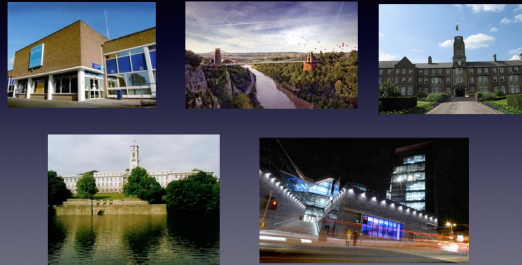
# A3 - Participant recruitment PowerPoint presentation

## An Invitation



Chris Grundy

## Looking for answers in education



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## A4 - Interview Questions

### Interview 1: Questions

1. Tell me a little about your life.
2. Thinking about school, what was it like for you?
3. Were you supported or encouraged with your school work by your friends or family?
4. Did you leave school with any qualifications? What were they?
5. What did you do when you left school?
6. Did you join any college courses or do any training after school?
7. If so, how did you get on?
8. Why did you decide to join an English course?
9. In what ways do you think your English needs to improve?
10. What are your thoughts about the course so far? How are you finding it?
11. At this stage, do you think the course is benefiting you in any way?
12. What do your friends, family and partner think about you joining the course? Are they supportive?

## Interview 2: Questions

13. How is the course going? How does it compare with other courses you have done?
14. At this stage, do you think the course is useful to you in any way?
15. And what about your English? Have your English skills changed in any way since joining the course?
16. Have you changed the way you think about yourself / as a learner in any way since joining the course?
17. Has anyone that knows you well made any comments about how you or your use of English have changed since joining the course?
18. If you could go back in time, what advice would you offer to yourself about school and education in general?
19. Have your thoughts or ambitions about the future changed in any way since joining the course?
20. In your honest opinion, what aspect of the course (if any) has been most valuable or useful to you so far?

### Interview 3: Questions

21. How has the course gone?
22. Do you think the course has been useful to you in any way (e.g for education, work, or for every day life?)
23. And what about your English? Has your use of English changed in any way since we last met? Have these changes (if any) been useful to you in any way? If so, how?
24. Have you changed the way you think about yourself as a learner in any way since joining the course?
25. Have you made any new plans for the future since we last met? Have these plans been influenced by the course?
26. Has anyone that knows you well commented about the ways you or your English use have changed since joining the course?
27. Are you considering joining any other courses when your English course finishes?
28. In your honest opinion, what part of the course (if any) has been most valuable or useful to you and your life outside of the course?
29. Would you recommend the course to a friend? Why?

## A5 - An illustration of Stage 1: coding the data (transcript of interview 1 with Jacob)

Int:

In any way you want, John, tell me about your life.

Jacob :

I was born in north London, Camden Town to a Nigerian father and a Welsh mother, and from the evidence from the pictures it was a really - I was quite a happy and well looked after child. And I have four siblings: three sisters and one brother, and I grew up, I think as a typical Londoner - didn't do much at school, took off, thought I'd be a bit of an entrepreneur, got involved in all sorts of bits and pieces, got involved in dealing drugs and ended up with a severe dependency for the best part of 25 years, and done all the bits and pieces, gone to jail and everything that is associated with that sort of lifestyle, and then pitched up, as it were, here in sunny Plymouth aged 46 and into a treatment centre - I got funded to go into a treatment centre, went in and suddenly the light switched on and I thought 'Oh dear me, this is what's really being going on - not the delusion I'd been telling myself.' And at that point, I knew I was really, really ill. From the detox unit, I went to a secondary unit and spent six months there, then sort of consolidated what I learnt in the primary treatment centre and learnt a bit more, got out and started getting back to school and realised that I had no education, had a dyslexic assessment at Martin's Gate, here in Plymouth, found out that I was dyslexic, and thought something needs to be sorted out, I need to carve something out from the mess, so to speak; and I went on this journey of sort of adult literature classes and doing vocational courses and ended up getting a job as a support worker, which led to me a Diploma in Counselling. On the way to that, I met one of Plymouth's finest women - I'm sure. Julie took off in early recovery to Spain to run her father's cocktail bar, bought some property out there, but fortunately we got out before it all collapsed, came back and turned up with no job or anything. We had baby, a wonderful daughter, Romany, who is six now, got a job as a support worker and trained to become a counsellor, which brings me up to today.

Int:

I want to go back to childhood, really, and thinking about your first experiences in primary school, could you tell me a little more of your experience of school and of learning in school?

Jacob:

I think my earliest memories of my first school, which was Buck Street School, must have been about four, and I can remember screaming in my mum's arms, saying I don't want to go there - I hated it, I think, primarily, my whole experience of school was coloured by an accident I had when I was three years old. At three years old, I climbed over the garden gate and went into the road, got knocked over and had my leg broken in four places, so I was in hospital for six months and in convalescence for five months, so I think that had some play in how I developed; and I think I was a pretty needy child. I was like clinging to mum and that sort of thing because mums didn't stay in hospital then. So when I got to school, I think that's why I didn't fit well into school, I didn't feel that it was good in school. I went from that school to another school, St. Mary's, in Summer's Town, and I can remember there, I think there was bloody nuns or something, which used to beat across the knuckles with rulers, but I can, as I'm sitting here now talking, I can remember a teacher - not sure - I was probably five or six, and I was really, really fond of this teacher, so I enjoyed being in the class and learning and playing about and all the rest of it; I can still remember her, so she must have had quite a powerful impact on me.

Int:

So, she had an influence on how you thought about school and learning?

Jacob:

From the smoky memories of it, I think because I liked her I was happy in that class; I would engage and do things. I think it was more about a sense of 'Oh, I like this person so I will go and make being in there a lot easier.'

Int:

So before that then in Buck Street, at what age did you . . .

Jacob:

I can only remember sort of saying to my mum that I don't want to go there, I don't think I was there for very long, I can't remember how long I was there. But I can remember, I can remember enjoying the times when stories were read to kids and et kids had some quiet time - I remember that. But a more sort of significant experience in school was when I was - it's jumping a bit - but it was when I was 13, thereabouts, and I had tis English teacher named Miss Gean, who I was terribly fond of as well; and I can remember having some sort of an epiphany at that moment in time. This woman sort of sat me down and something mad happened - I don't know what is was, but she got me interested in English and I started to apply myself. And at that point, I could not say the alphabet at thirteen, but with her help, somehow, I went out and I has this wonderful day where I was looking at words and I could read them for the first time, and I thought, 'Oh my God!' It was quite emotional actually remembering. [laughs] I thought, 'Shit! I can read, I can read, I can read!' And my best understanding of it was that, sort of, stuff must have been building up or I must have been depending on seeing words, and it must of got to some sort of critical mass before sort of the light switched on and remember it happened in a day! I can remember the date, but it was a day when for the first time I could bloody read. All the way through that when I wasn't able to read, I didn't know - it's jumping a bit - I didn't know until I came to Martin's Gate, aged 46, I was not sort of consciously aware that there was two sounds to a letter.

Int:

So, between St. Mary's School and thirteen, you weren't able to read at all.

Jacob:

No. Not at all. I mean, I imagine I must have been able to read easy words, those sort of things.

Int:

Ok, and how did you get by in that time with school, not being able to read?

Jacob:

Nightmare. It was, I think it was quite difficult. I think I was in sort of the dunce's classes and acted out and all the rest of it; so I think I could only do little bits of reading and writing. And I think what was more difficult was my mum, I don't know what was wrong with her - I



think she had some sort of mental health issue. I think she got diagnosed, I'm not quite sure, but the relationship between her and my father was really difficult, and she felt that she desperately needed to get away. So from an early age she abandoned us with my dad. And she would come back and my dad would be running around, apparently, going nuts looking for us if we had been dumped in a hospital or dumped in a foster care place that sort of thing. So, I think the whole of that period was extraordinarily difficult. And, em, I think like the social services were involved in our lives and they was trying to help, but I get the sense that I really couldn't apply myself at school and I was in remedial classes and playing truant and that sort of thing.

Int:

So, picking up on that point about your mum and dad there, were you supported or encouraged with your school work by your mum and dad or by friends?

Jacob:

My dad, bless him, and a horrible moment - 13 again - came to school and it was really difficult, culturally difficult for my dad because my senior brother who's passed away now, ended up with three degrees, aged 21, and culturally I think my dad thought, 'lovely: I'm in England, all I have to do is put clothes on my kids' back and food in their tummies and they're going to be lawyers and barristers. He sent money to pay for my brother's school in Nigeria, and slowly dawning that the child that I left in Nigeria is far and away like doing ten times better than these lot. So, what happened, my dad, bless him, came to the school, and I'd been bunking off - not going to school, getting up to all sorts of crime, and he came to the school with me for some reason - can't remember what it was, but I remember we was outside the school gates and my teacher told my dad that I wouldn't be doing any exams, and my dad burst into tears.

Int:

So your dad was quite supportive?

Jacob:

At that point, because I'd never seen him cry before, so it was quite powerful, but he took me at that point, took me home and I went through purgatory from that moment because he tried to tutor me and teach me. And he taught himself to read and write, so every

Thursday night my dad, bless him, would sit me down and would start doing an English dictation, and start going through the grammar and all the rest of it, but I didn't know I had dyslexic tendencies at the time and he didn't know, so it was a really difficult, but he tried desperately to help me.

Int:

And of course it was a different time then wasn't it, in that dyslexia wasn't so readily recognised. So, your dad was supportive and your mum was unable?

Jacob:

Yeah, she was . . . she was like, and I love her dearly but she was like a Fagin type character, going stealing and shop lifting and doing a bit of fraud here and there, and it was extraordinary when I look back - absolutely extraordinary. So, at times, with my experience of school there was some really good people in there. Like, I can remember an art teacher, who was delighted at St. Dominic's, my primary school, where she turned around and said to me, 'Look, you've got good colour co-ordination and a piece of art', and I was ecstatically happy with that sort of thing. So, there was really, I get the sense there was really lovely teachers about and there was real support, but I don't think nobody knew what the bloody hell was wrong with me - what my problems were.

Int:

You mention St. Dominic, where does that fit in, in the scheme of things?

Jacob:

I went to Buck Street, then I went to St. Mary's, and then I left St. Mary's and went to a school called Carden Primary School, and left Carden to go to a school called St. Dominic's, and that being sort of . . . what age do you start primary school?

Int:

Normally, it's between 4 and 5.

Jacob:

I think I went to St. Dominic's about the age of, say, 6 or 7, something like that.

Int:

So St. Dominic's took you up to secondary school. So thinking about secondary, you said you met Miss Gean and had an epiphany there, and that's when you started being able to read. Would you say that friends and family were supportive of you at secondary school?

Jacob:

My dad. My friends, my peer group - I was in to crime by then and bunking off school - all that sort of thing, so I left school with no exams or anything, but dad still desperately tried to sort of keep me on track, as it were. At thirteen, I ran away from home and went to live with my mum; yeah I went to Bow Boys School in east London. And 'em, I did a year there and it was just a nightmare.

Int:

So you left school at what age?

Jacob:

I think about 14, something like that.

Int:

And that was with no qualifications.

Jacob:

Yes.

Int:

What did you do when you left school.

Jacob:

After that, my dad realised that I was in trouble and he said to me, 'Look, you need to get a job.' And I remember thinking myself, 'No! I need to go to college!' He said, 'Look, you've not applied yourself, you need to get a job with your hands.' So I went back to the careers advisor, and ended up getting a job as a trainee maintenance engineer in a big hotel in King's Cross.

Int:

Ok, how did that go?

Jacob:

Until I was about 19 it went really well; I was good at the job - bit of personality and that got me by, and really connected with the people, but em, I had this gnawing sort of thing in me. I would go out at that age, there was something in my head where I thought I need to get an office job, I need to be using my brains. And I thought the only way it is going to happen is if I go to college; and I thought right, I was really interested in electronics. So I thought I'd sign up to the night school and go to electronics. But I went in, and I didn't have the maths; and I used to look at these places and actually drink them in. I'd think, 'God, I'd love to be in there.' But I sort had to keep 'doing the do'. So I think what happened is that I turned all that sort of 'wanting that - can't get that', so the best thing I can do is make money. So, I went to where I was doing bits on the side, I really got on well at that place, but in the end I ended up getting the sack for being late too many times. But, within that, I had said to the boss of the place, Paul Myers, lovely fella - encouraged me to start buying stocks in the stock market and all theta game. I said to him, 'Look, this is a dead end job mate, I'm going nowhere.' He said, 'It doesn't have to be like that, what do you want to do?' I said, 'Well, em, I want to be an electrician.' He said, 'Fine. Go away, find out how to do that and we'll do day release.' But, obviously because I didn't have the bloody reading and writing it was not an option. So, there was this kinda angst of being caught between these aspirations and desperately wanting to do something, and getting the door open bait and people saying 'yeah, you ain't as stuck as you think - you can do this', and then realising that, you know what, I can't even take advantage of the opportunities because of this thing, whatever it was and I didn't know what it was at the time.

Int:

This thing being?

Jacob:

Dyslexia. Not being able to bloody read or write. I think I must have missed a whole lot of school, being in hospital for 11 months between 3 and four, not settling into school; I think

there must have been a bit of that; probably a good bang on the head might have helped. God knows.

Int:

So, you left school, went to your first job working in a hotel; how long did you do that for and what did you do after that?

Jacob:

I eventually got sacked for being late too many times; I had started spinning out at that sort of time, think I dealing Cannabis alongside working. I got into illegal fruit machines and em, market stalls, and happened upon whoever was doing this, and started up this cleaning company, and I used to go into the cleaning company and look at all the paperwork and that, and this guy and sent the boss of Sony, the representative of London, we was doing there place in there in Grovenor Street, and I saw this leaflet, this business proposal someone had sent about these bubble gums, you can buy these bubble gum machines, so I bought bubble gum machines. So, from 19, I was selling drugs, managing my bubble gum machines, I was a part-time debt collector and I had some market stalls; so I was nicking pound notes from everywhere.

Int:

So you were doing that up to what age?

Jacob:

What happened, right, it's crazy 'cos I had made a conscious decision, right, irrational as it seems, but I remember making it, I started to sell cocaine and I was getting lots of money out of it at about 19 or 20; and what was happening was that I was finding I didn't have enough time to devote to my more entrepreneurial stuff because the time I was devoting to that side was taken away time from earning money from the coke, and the coke was giving me a decent amount of money. So, it made business sense to give up the entrepreneurial stuff and focus only on the coke, which ultimately led to my demise, really. But at the time, for a 19 year old, and I was like looking at my dad thinking like, you're a bit of a mug -

you're still, know what I mean, riding your bike, still going to work and all that, and I'm nicking this money. It was like, you had it wrong, mate - I got it right, sort of thing.

Int:

Ok. And what would you say was the next significant episode in your life following that period?

Jacob:

I was so naive and so caught up in this stuff that em, that someone had given me some white heroin, and said to me, 'Have a bit of that.' I had lots of really cool people round me, saying to me, 'Look man, what you are doing is out of order, you're gonna get Karma sort of thing; and I was like don't talk about it. And a younger guy said to me, 'Try some of this stuff.' And I think if it was an older person, I would have like sort alarm bells would have been ringing and I would have said 'Sling your hook', and em, because people were saying to me stuff like if you're selling this shit you'll end up taking it. I was like, what you talking about, I'm not a mug, I'm here for the money. But I had been smoking since 9 years old, cigarette, so I was probably at that gateway addiction, if you will. **So, I take this smack anyway,** and **it was like the alexia of life, it was like all my anxieties, everything just flowed away.** And I think that was really sort of a seminal point in my life, and what had happened I started selling heroin and about 22, I had, sitting there, I had woke up one night and was in racks of pain and all the rest of it, which was withdrawal symptoms, but I was so naive, I didn't understand what was happening to me. So I had nicked a bag of weed, a bottle of brandy, my dad's Scotch - I was living at my dad's house with my sisters and that, I've got 8 ounces of heroin under the floorboards, and I phone up my pal and say, 'Listen, something's happened to me - get down here.' He drives me out into the country and I come back in the morning so I can get awake because of my dad, and I'm in the house and a guy came in to buy some heroin of me, and he said to me 'A ha - you're clucking.' Which is terminology for withdrawing. I looked at him and said, 'What you talking about?' He said, 'You're withdrawing.' I said, 'Don't talk rubbish to me.' He said, 'You've got a habit.' And this was days we used to sniff heroin. So he said, 'If you sniff that, you'll be alright.' So, my sister's are around getting dressed and that, so I sniffed it [clicks fingers] - I was right as rain. All my planets lined up and it was like at that moment someone took a hammer and smashed me in the back of the head and said, 'See, silly bollocks, this is what we is talking about - this is what was going wrong.' And, this is the

danger, and like it came to me in one of those moments - bang! And, when I look back now, I didn't have the language to express; I couldn't go to my dad and say listen I've got a heroin habit; I didn't even have that language. The thought of going to a doctor didn't enter my mind or anything, and it's almost as if I internalised all that fear, and thought shit, I am in trouble, I am stuck, I need to get more drugs and that's what I done. So I think that was pretty significant - that sort of defining moment as it were.

Int:

The moment where you realised you were addicted?

Jacob:

Yeah.

Int:

So what was the outcome of that realisation?

Jacob:

That's it, sort of, the compulsion and the grip of dependency deepened and I was just militant then. It's like I done everything; I just ended up in jail for . . . for everything. And how I done it, I don't know, I escaped huge 14 year sentences and all that; I was arrested for robbery, demanding money with menaces, for kidnap, blackmail - I was out of control.

Int:

So, at that point of realising you were addicted, you chose to feed the habit rather than do something about it.

Jacob:

Yeah, yeah. It was mad, it's dreadful, but I had this wonderful, wonderful woman at that age, right, but she was this sophisticated hostess stroke prostitute, but I was a kid and she was stunning and I ended up living in Mayfair with her. So I was running round, 22 years old with like a light on top of my head in a Morgan, screaming at the police 'nick me', flying around in this wonderful Morgan with this bird. And she knew that I was in trouble, and she dragged me, she went herself with me to one of these private doctors and pretended

that she had a habit to this opiate substitute. So I'm like, lovely, sweet, dunno what you're talking about, ain't really have a problem, but, sort of, trying to hold it together, anyway I'm taking these things and I run out, I take them because I'm still using, I say I'm stopped but I'm still using - I phone up and say, 'Listen, where are those things?' She says, 'I haven't got them.' So I start getting agitated now and say, 'Where are they? Where are they?' And she says, 'I've took them.' And at that moment I'm screaming down the telephone and I'm saying, 'You stupid bitch, do you realise what you've done? You've gave yourself a habit; you've thrown away your life, your beauty on this stuff.' And I had another epiphany and I thought oh my god, this is what she's been saying to me - 'cos I couldn't hear it from her, but I realise now what she was saying to me: she said to me you're really great, you're a fabulous geezer, you're throwing your life away for that.

So, anyway I thought right, I'll try and make some changes, so I went to a doctor in Harley Street, sat down blah, blah, blah, and this doctor said ok, you're doing well, let's have your partner in and talk about it with your partner. And I'm sat down, she's sitting there and this woman started to speak, right, and I could not identify myself in her words! I thought, 'Who is she talking about?! She's not talking about me, but it was me, and I was so sort of disconnected from how I impacted on people - I was absolutely astonished when she was talking about it. Sorry, does that answer your question?

Int:

Yeah, Yeah - it's fine.

Jacob:

I tried to sort of address it with her help, but I was mad - I loved it as well. And some idiot come from America, and this was this thing called at the time, it was freebase, and it was like washing cocaine back to freebase. And nobody knew how to do it. So, I went out, my pals - I gone to prison for a little while, I come back out and my sort of older pals was at it, they were doing in ghettos freebasing thing. So, I was like, 'let me in', but they wouldn't teach me .



So I went out, and lucky enough and robbed someone for a kilo of coke. So I sat down and practices doing it myself, and I found this magical sort of formula. Now I could take powdered cocaine, wash it with really dangerous chemicals and produce this wonderful crystalline cocaine you could smoke. And suddenly I was in demand; I had people all around London phoning and saying, 'Will you come and wash this for me?' So I'd get my attache case, put all my chemicals in it, put my glass pipes in it and be across London into hotels washing up coke for people. So, there was a lot of kudos to it, a lot of money, lovely feelings, it addressed all my anxieties and my fears - it was meeting my needs of aspirations for using my brain, so I was caught into for a long time.

Int:

So when that period of your life come to an end; when did it start to change?

Jacob:

About 2004, I'd been doing loads of smuggling to India and robbing people in India and all sorts, and I had a sort of a break down and gone on this trip: I'd gone to India, gone to Naples picked up this money, flew to India to buy this heroin which we eventually robbed this people, but on the wall was this big sign - I kid you not, a big sign, and I'm happy with a habit, I'm smashed to bits, I've just got the mask on; and there was this big sign saying in this smuggler's house saying 'Are you part of the problem or part of the solution?' And I had this moment and I thought, 'Fuck, I'm part of the problem, I'm about to rob you, I'm part of the problem!'

Anyway, I come back - we went on this horrible, horrible gut-wrenching journey through air space, but we a had a little bit of a koo, where we could get out of international air space at Skkiple, and get into the domestic airline sort of flow so we could avoid the rigours of being stigmatised by being international - we were just domestic, so there was less chance of getting caught and we'd get out at Naples. And I've got masses of anxiety by now, and I'm really depressed, and I had tis moment where it was insane, it was mad, we'd done all this stuff, robbed these people, my end of it was about forty two grand, but we had landed at the time when the currencies were changing, so I had all this lira or whatever was called then - Italian money - and it was going to be converted. So we had to run around Naples exchanging all this money - loads of money and getting Euros for it. Anyway when that's

all done, I'm sitting thinking, Fuck, right, I gotta get this money to London and something broke in me and I thought fuck, oh dear me. I was petrified - I phoned up this poor woman and said, 'Look I need you to smuggle this money for me.' And after I realised, for probably one of the first times, 'Oh god, this is not about the money, this was about the possession of the supply; I wanted the heroin. The money meant nothing to me, so I think I started to break down. Just to put in there, what led to this route - I went into prison, and I was beaten and tortured by prison officers in em, where was I . . . Brixton or Scrubs or somewhere and the nearly killed me, man. It fucking traumatised me - excuse me. I think I suffered trauma there, right, it was many years ago but it was horrendous, I kid you not, it was like a bit deep, and I came out. So now I had the habit, that really entrenched addiction, I had the trauma of that and I used on top of that. I locked it all down, so I would have probably got out earlier if I didn't get traumatised by that so it led to all this madness.

Anyway, after that I come out of that and I thought, 'Oh, this is not right, I'm getting all this money and it's not making me happy. I ended up going on another trip to Jamaica and I freaked out - ended up having a massive panic attack in Jamaica because I run out of heroin and was smoking crack cocaine, and I had a psychotic episode. I managed to get away from the Jamaican police, get back on a plane to England and I come to England broken. And em, at that point the last woman that was with me left - I blamed her for spending my money and drugs service - I think I was getting 20 milligrams of methadone a day. I was so crazy by then that no-one would work with me and there was no criminal activity going on or anything. So, I was going to get this methadone on a daily basis and this woman turned around and said to me, 'Look, are you ok?' And I went to put on a face and say 'yeah' and it just . . . all the tears come out; and she said to me 'Do you want to go treatment?' And I was petrified - I didn't know what treatment was about, and I said look, do you know what, I thought to myself I can't lie to my sisters any more, I can't give the kids any presents. So I'm saying now, I am so ashamed of myself, because despite having earners I was looking like a tramp really for what I was. So I was like I can't come to Christmas, but put my name on the presents and I will pay you in a few months and I think I had a real emotional break down at 46 and they gave me the funding to go to treatment, thank goodness.

Int:

So that brings you up to 46. And was that 2004?

Jacob:

2005.

Int:

So you started receiving treatment then and what happened next?

Jacob:

After treatment? I found out that while I was in treatment, really good people, they sent me to . . . they said, 'Look you need to start getting up, getting out and doing voluntary work,' and that sort of thing. So I said, 'Look, I really need to address this; I can't bloody read and write - the assignments in there nearly bloody killed me!' So they sent me to Martin's Gate - you know Martin's Gate?

Int:

Yeah.

Jacob:

I went to Martin's Gate where I met Chris and a lovely lady, and they assessed me, and at that moment I thought well, because I used to live in this fear of stigmatisation, fear of judgement, like I had moments when I would see another drug dealer busted, and that would fill me with fear and I was like I'm locked in this, I can't escape this now; I am a heroin dealer, I'm a smuggler, I'm a robber . . .

Int:

So you were still dealing at this time.

Jacob:

No, no, sorry, I apologise, I'm going back, I was saying that when I got here all this started to break down, cos I was like accepted. I had this moment, I call it the 'Madonna moment'

when I thought, do you know what, look at this person, she's made herself, she's re-doing herself, she's reinventing herself all the the time. And I thought well maybe, here I am 46 years old, drug dealer etc, and these people are saying to me, look you may have dyslexia, let's start doing the 'ABC' again; I thought maybe, just maybe I can reinvent myself. And that's what sort of went on, I think I got around that sort of . . . I got some sort of inner resilience to say alright, forget that stigmatisation, you can - there is a way you can go back to school and start again without the shame, without the guilt; because that's what held me in really, was that before I was too ashamed to try and learn to read and write again, or to go to these places to get help.

And, so then I moved out into supportive housing, I got voluntary work, I was a reception at Plymouth Art Centre, which was superb for me because it was like, I couldn't accept myself as I was, but I was getting indications that other people could accept me as I was, and so going into that environment was great; and I was doing the day services and that sort of thing; then I met my woman there and my partner, Zoe, and em, an opportunity came up: her dad is a property developer, and I moved into a flat with her by this time, and there was an opportunity to go to Spain and buy a property and run this cocktail bar in a place called La Manga, Spain. So, she was a corporate bank manager at the time; she gave that up, she's a bit nuts, and we, eh, moved to Spain, which on the one hand was a bit of a disaster because I was just getting to grips with the old dyslexia and I had all me sounding cards and I had got up to a certain level in the class with Ann Louise and Chris, and went to Spain and I tried to source a private tutor, but that wasn't working out, and I stopped doing the bloody English.

Int:

What year did you go to Spain?

Jacob:

You got me now, about 2008 / 2009.

Int:

. . . and ran a cocktail bar.

Jacob:

Madly, yeah. It was crazy. Well, 'run' is bit of a big title, I sort of helped out, did the deliveries and all that, and served bits and pieces, but essentially I suppose I helped manage it, yeah. It was great.

Int:

So in running a cocktail bar, how did you get on with the reading and writing side of things.

Jacob:

Just rubbish. In Spain, of course it was a different language, so I could not make head nor tail. **We had an interpreter there, and I actually took a health and safety course and had to use the interpreter to achieve the bloody course - it was nightmare! So it was really difficult. So I would like have to overhear people say, 'that word is that - you use the different words or the different pronunciation,'; I just lost it, it was another mystery to me. And my coping strategies were to avoid at all costs any need for writing; if there was forms or anything to be filled out, I would take them away to a quiet place and work on that sort of stuff.**

Int:

Ok, so when did Spain finish and what happened next?

Jacob:

Em, we was there for - so it must have been 2010 / 11, things slowed down out there. We had our daughter out there, by this time she was three months old and she got really ill, terribly ill, we didn't know she was terribly ill but we'd come back to England because the old Spanish banks were in trouble, but we didn't quite know that was the reason at the time, but they offered us a deal where we could sell our property back to them and wipe our hands of Spain if we wanted to. So, the idea was that we bought a £260,000 apartment out there; the idea was to buy that and in five years sell it and make a profit. And the subprime mortgages had hit, and the banks were slowing down so they turned around and said, 'Look, boom, there's a deal if you want it, there's been some bad management or something - I can't remember the terminology, it was on the bank's behalf, so we are offering people this. So, luckily, we took the deal at the time and it happened to be the right deal. So I came back here with Romany and it transpired that she was really poorly: she had something wrong with her tummy, so we were really lucky we came back.

I pitched up here again; I was on unemployment benefit and all that game and no, not one bit of my fibre wanted to go to work. I was like, right, now I've got my chance, I'm gonna do this, I'm gonna go and do the learning and end up in university and all the rest of it.

Int:

That was your motivation: university?

Jacob:

Yeah, yeah.

Int:

What brought that motivation about - why university?

Jacob:

It's there all my life; I think it's my dad. He was a loving and caring man, but he was like, he was very authoritarian and to him, if you weren't a doctor or a lawyer, you weren't anything. And I think that's the message I picked up, that to be anything I need to obtain this university degree. And it's like my sister behind me, Deborah, the next one down, Josephine, she got a really good degree in Queen's University, London in English Literature, and she's lived in Italy and all over the world. She's now living in San Palo; she lived in Italy 15 years, she's worked in Hong Kong, she's a right international service manager - she's successful. And we was in the car - we just picked my dad up from the airport, and my dad turned round he says 'How did your university go?' And she says 'I got a 2:1 or something Dad, or a first or something' And he said, 'Ah, but you're not a doctor yet!' So, [laughs] she just shrugged her shoulders like . . . yeah, and I forgot to add a really powerful moment in that my dad who was now 96 years old could have been 102 by the time he died, turned around and said he didn't want to die in England; he wanted to die in Nigeria, which just smashed me for six because I didn't really have any funds or any whereabouts, and I was in early recovery and all that. Anyway, long story short, we managed to . . . my brother went back, renovated his house and got my dad back to Nigeria where he was happy for a few months before he passed away. So, ultimately I've got to give, I was the prodigal son returned, really, I've got to give him his dying wish which was a blessing - absolute madness. But in terms of this, I went on the old university thing, it's still in my nut, my partner said you can't do this, you can't - you've got to go and get a

job. I was like 'but, but, but , but . . .' So, I had to go and . . . fortunately I bumped into the manager of the treatment centre I was in, and it just so happened that they had a support workers job. And I shamelessly went and used my daughter and said, 'Look at my new baby, have you got a job?' And he said, 'You'll do, and he gave me like the anointment - so I went up there and I can't bloody read or write or anything, I never had a proper interview, I must admit, so I was a bit touched really. And I got the support workers job, and when I was doing that it was a nightmare. They really, bless them, put up with me rubbish notes, I had to sit down and write them legible and all the rest of it. Bit of a nightmare, but somehow I embarked on a Diploma in Addictions course, which was a bloody level 4 - Access to University, and I done it man! I don't know how - it nearly killed me, but those assignments just smashed my head and my partner, bless her, used to proof-read them, she just went mad. And it was like an Access course in a year, and I stupidly thought yeah I can do, I'm doing nightshifts, I can do college in the day, three day placement and I can do my work on a nightshift and it just weren't happening.

Int:

So that was Level 4 course in Addiction and Counselling.

Jacob:

I think it's level 4.

Int:

And you achieved that with the support of your partner.

Jacob:

Yeah, yeah.

Int:

So you achieved that, and you're now here in 2014 studying on a Functional Skills English course, so what brought you back here to do an English course?

Jacob:

I done a DTTLs or PTTLs course as well and passed that.

Int:

Right, when was that?

Jacob:

After that, so this was like a year ago, and if I'm at home sitting there with no pressure and the books, I can get through it, but if I'm under pressure . . . anyway, to answer your question, what brought me here was I to a job - between the support work, right, I went for a job as a housing related support worker to work specifically with people with dependency issues in the community and was successful. And it was part of Broad Reach - they've got a day service and there was this job going in that day service, and there was people saying you might as well go for it - try it. So, I went down and to my amazement, I got the job. So I was off and running now; I was out in the community and working with people in the community. Then, a counselling job came up and people were like why aren't you applying for it? And I was lie, 'Ow, I don't know about that.' I applied for it, and to my astonishment they gave me the job. So I get into the job now and it was ok, but then the deputy manager changed the format for the discharge reports and the mid-term reports into a 17-section format. And this just done my head, and is still doing today. I had a few appraisals and they were saying to me 'Look, we think we are going to let you go because your performance is not up to expectations, you can't write reports and all the rest of it. So it was like, the last eight months of being in absolute purgatory, because now I'm thinking I've got all this responsibility and I've done all this graft, I've got where I'm going and it's undone me again - it's finally got me! So I said to them I really want to try and do something. They said to me we'll work something out.

So I thought right, the first place to come is to go back to where I left off from when I left for Spain, get hold of Chris, got back into that and started to address it. There's been some slow progress there. They was looking at funding to get me some assistive technology-based sort of stuff, but I didn't have a dyslexia assessment, so they couldn't access funds, so they went out booked me the Dragon software - speak detect software, to try with that. So I'm here doing this and that's why I'm back here to bloody bring myself up to a speed where I can do the job I've got.



Int:

So, you're now back with Chris doing Functional Skills English, and what are you focusing on? What would you say is your main objective on the course?

Jacob:

To develop my understanding of grammar, which really seems difficult to me. To get a better grip on sentence structure and planning reports and all that, and the spelling. To improve all that and my main aim is to get to a place where I can do my job without the stress and worry of not being able to write a bloody report. So that frees me up then to develop my career and perhaps one day get that bloody degree. [laughs] And I think what I would really like to do is something with ethics, morals and stuff like that because I think, I need, I'm one of the counsellors that need to understand the underpinning so I can understand why the rationale is the way it is. Why people do things; I think I'm happiest when I feel I'm getting a grasp of that sort of stuff. So I think I'd be interested in some like that.

Int:

Right. We're coming to the end now of this conversation; so what are your thoughts about the course so far - you've already commented on that a little saying that progress is slow, em, so maybe you like to comment on that, on why you think progress is slow.

Jacob:

I know why the progress is slow, is because I am not doing the homework. And I think this is bloody me; this is so incredibly important that I'm still at that sort of place where the worry of it and the stress of it causes me to procrastinate with it, to sort of not get the action there. And I think that's why primarily it's been slow, which has got to stop.

Int:

So without doing the homework that is slowing up the progress, but on the reverse side of the coin how do you think you are benefiting from the course, if at all?

Jacob:

Yeah, 'cos, when I came to see Chris again, my senses were scattered to the four winds, and my anxiety levels were through the roof and was desperately sort of really struggling. And I came back into that sort of familiarity and Chris, being who is and I'm listening and now lets focus. And little bits clicked into place and I thought yeah, it sort of allowed me to refocus and I thought this is doable, let's bring it down from here where it gets stuck in the impossible and bring it down to a bit of normality and a bit of focus and that sort of structure and focusing enabled me to put some of the action in. And when I first started this, I was like 'why is that, why is that, why is that?' Now I've learnt to trust in and think ok, this is a huge subject, there are many variations, it's really quirky stuff, and what we are being delivered in this moment in time is connected to the rest of it, so if we can just deal with this at this moment in time and focus on this, the rest will come; I've learnt to trust in that. That's working really well.

Int:

Great. Final question: what do your friends, family, partner think about you joining the course and are they supportive.

Jacob:

People are astonished, they think 'what, you can't read, you can't write' sort of thing. I think for my partner there's two bits of it: she thinks God, he's sort of addressing this, and there's a bit of it of it with her where she's still sort uncomfortable with it, and worried about the stigmatisation of it - that's a bit uncomfortable for her, but she's incredibly supportive. And my family and friends just think the fact that I've still, after everything that's happened, still got the sort of will to address these issues and carry on, they think it is nothing short of a bloody miracle. [laughs] And I do get that myself, 'cos' it was so difficult to be told I get the job, right and that's sort of one of my mad thoughts years and years ago, I need an office job, I don't want to be working out in the all this stuff, I need that. And I finally get my own office and all of a sudden the spectre of the dyslexia or whatever it is rears its ugly head again. And I think 'Oh no!' And there is a point where I think just give it up, man; just stop, but that's not an option. So to answer your question, yeah, yeah: they're really supportive.

Int:

Fantastic. I think we will leave it there. Thank you very much.

## **A6 - An illustration of 'Stage 2': constructing Jacob's life story**

To illustrate how the participants' life stories were written in Stage 1, below I have provided extracts of the data and how I used it in writing Jacob's story. This writing followed a three-step process, as follows:

- (i) selecting and chronologically ordering relevant quotations highlighted in the coding process in order to form a coherent linear structure to the representation of Jacob's life story;
- (ii) writing a basic narrative outline based on these chronologically structured significant events;
- (iii) writing a more elaborate discursive account of Jacob's life story.

Below, I have illustrated these three stages in more detail.

### **(i) Selected quotations from Jacob's interview data collated into chronological life events**

#### **Father's influence and expectations about academic success:**

It's there all my life; I think it's my dad. He was a loving and caring man, but he was like, he was very authoritarian and to him, if you weren't a doctor or a lawyer, you weren't anything. And I think that's the message I picked up, that to be anything I need to obtain this university degree. (Int 1:22)

So, ultimately I've got to give, I was the prodigal son returned, really, I've got to give him his dying wish which was a blessing. (Int 1:23)

Yeah, I think there's been, if I take originally, because it's taken many years I think, the fear, the shame, the guilt, the fear of stigmatisation that was attached to me not being able to write; I think my dad, I think I said to you before, he was really authoritarian, a lovely man, but in his head, if you did not become a doctor, a lawyer or something, you weren't doing very well. So he sort of . . . I got that message. (Int 3: 4)

**School:**

I think, primarily, my whole experience of school was coloured by an accident I had when I was three years old (Int 1:5)

I don't think nobody knew what the bloody hell was wrong with me - what my problems were. (Int 1:7)

**Work:**

I had a few appraisals and they were saying to me 'Look, we think we are going to let you go because your performance is not up to expectations, you can't write reports and all the rest of it. So it was like, the last eight months of being in absolute purgatory, because now I'm thinking I've got all this responsibility and I've done all this graft, I've got where I'm going and it's undone me again - it's finally got me! So I said to them I really want to try and do something. They said to me we'll work something out. (Int 1:25)

So I get into my new job and I had my six month appraisal and I know I am really good at what I do, so it was a real shock when my line manager told me basically that your not meeting the expectations. And the knock-on effect of the written work and note taking and all the rest of it, the notes need to be concise, the dates, times and all the rest of - and it was just all over the place; And when I was really stressed with it, it had a knock-on effect to my other time keeping, supporting the team, being in places on time and all the rest of it, because I was consumed with this problem. So that's when I elected to come here. (Int 2: 8)

I really struggled with the note taking, the writing was appalling; I would sit there sort of taking notes and think that was ok, and look back on my notes and it was a mess (Int 2:5)

**Tensions between Jacob's situation and his learning aspirations:**

So, there was this kinda angst of being caught between these aspirations and desperately wanting to do something, and getting the door open a bit and people saying, 'Yeah, you ain't as stuck as you think - you can do this', and then realising that, you know what, I can't even take advantage of the opportunities because of this thing, whatever it was and I didn't know what it was at the time.' (Int 1:9)

'If I didn't have this job, I will soon have the ability, even if I lost the job, I will soon have the ability to go and get a job anywhere else. It might sound a bit grandiose, but also that if for any reason I didn't find a job I wanted or anything, I believe that I would be able to take, once I get a better grasp on the old English, then there will be nothing stopping me; I think could go out, go back to being an entrepreneur without the criminality and probably make a nice few quid.' [laughs] (Int 2: 10)

So it's had a really powerful impact on me, it was like I've been in tears of anguish and apathy and just nearly beaten to the core, because I'm thinking my God, after all this work, this not being able to read and write thing, is finally gonna do me - it's finally gonna screw up my income, my family and everything built. So I got into a really difficult place with it. So I think to sort of get over that, is almost . . . and again I think I'm being a bit 'thingy' I suspect, but it feels like it is almost the final hurdle, which is a good place to be. (Int 2: 10)

**Breaking Bad - crime, drugs and dependency:**

So, there was a lot of kudos to it, a lot of money, lovely feelings, it addressed all my anxieties and my fears - it was meeting my needs of aspirations for using my brain, so I was caught into for a long time. (Int 1:15)

So, it made business sense to give up the entrepreneurial stuff and focus only on the coke, which ultimately led to my demise, really. But at the time, for a 19 year old, and

I was like looking at my dad thinking like, you're a bit of a mug - you're still, know what I mean, riding your bike, still going to work and all that, and I'm nicking this money. It was like, you had all it wrong, mate - I got it right, sort of thing. (Int 1:11)

### **Drug dependency:**

And I'm sat down, she's sitting there and this woman started to speak, right, and I could not identify myself in her words! I thought, 'Who is she talking about?! She's not talking about me, but it was me, and I was so sort of disconnected from how I impacted on people - I was absolutely astonished when she was talking about it. (Int 1:14)

### **Rehabilitation:**

'Suddenly, the light switched on and I thought, 'Oh dear me, this is what's really being going on: not the delusion I'd been telling myself.' And at that point, I knew I was really, really ill. (Int 1:1)

### **Dyslexia:**

So, that's how I saw myself as this person that couldn't. So over time, and going back - that's going to stay with me for years and years; so entering into these places to do this kind of thing is huge, so I saw myself as somebody who was less than other people, that had this immense difficulty and that there was something wrong with me. And I found out that I had dyslexia, and that separated a lot from what I thought the damage I had done to myself through dependency - it kind of filtered that out, I thought yes, alright there is a rhyme and reason for it, perhaps I'm not so damaged because of that - there's an understanding for it and that was at the age 46. (Int 3: 5)

' . . . thought something needs to be sorted out, I need to carve something out from the mess, so to speak; and I went on this journey of sort of adult literature classes and doing vocational courses and ended up getting a job as a support worker, which led to me a Diploma in Counselling. (Int 1:1)

And my family and friends just think the fact that I've still, after everything that's happened, still got the sort of will to address these issues and carry on, they think it is

nothing short of a bloody miracle. [laughs] And I do get that myself, because it was so difficult to be told I get the job, right and that's sort of one of my mad thoughts years and years ago, I need an office job, I don't want to be working out in the all this stuff, I need that. And I finally get my own office and all of a sudden the spectre of the dyslexia or whatever it is rears its ugly head again. And I think, 'Oh no!' And there is a point where I think just give it up, man; just stop, but that's not an option. (Int 1:28)

### **Reinventing the self - transitions in identity:**

' . . . deep down, I saw myself as someone with real learning difficulties, like almost as a disability level thing, which to some degree I think is a bit true. So I was still caught on a deeper level in this 'there's something wrong with me, this is shameful, you shouldn't be like this a your bloody age.' And I've managed to move from that to a place where I'm much more comfortable and less shameful about it.' (Int 3: 5)

' . . . when I got here all this started to break down, cos I was like accepted. I had this moment, I call it the 'Madonna moment' when I thought, do you know what, look at this person, she's made herself, she's re-doing herself, she's reinventing herself all the the time. And I thought well maybe, here I am 46 years old, drug dealer etc, and these people are saying to me, look you may have dyslexia, let's start doing the 'ABC' again; I thought maybe, just maybe I can reinvent myself. And that's what sort of went on, I think I got around that sort of . . . I got some sort if inner resilience to say alright, forget that stigmatisation, you can - there is a way you can go back to school and start again without the shame, without the guilt; because that's what held me in really, was that before I was too ashamed to try and learn to read and write again, or to go to these places to get help. And, so then I moved out into supportive housing, I got voluntary work, I was a reception at Plymouth Art Centre, which was superb for me because it was like, I couldn't accept myself as I was, but I was getting indications that other people could accept me as I was, and so going into that environment was great. (Int 1:19)

I suddenly became aware, I thought wow, this is the time when people are not inhibited by their same constraints, that you are free to screw up if you want and make mistakes (Int 3: 8)



So I thought, do you know what, maybe it's ok, maybe you can, I can reinvent myself and that was a really defining moment for me to see that it was possible and the other bit of it really was that people would allow you to do it. So, I've worked through a lot of my inhibitions. And a huge thing as well is I was not consciously aware of human beings that went on, for the most part, un-judgemental. That was also a revelation to me. [Laughs] So I think finding myself in environments where I truly feel people, for the best, are non-judgemental and will be supportive of you and allow you to flourish is, it's been a great, great help to me to sort of lay off all my inhibitions and go for it, despite how I feel about it.

(Int 3: 8)

Within adult learning, it's, to my mind, it is that kind of thing: I've come in with all my baggage and I wasn't judged. People were there to support me despite what I was, or despite how I saw myself. (Int 3: 8)

I think . . . the new me that has been developing over these last eight years, sort of still prior to getting clean, all the things I built my self-esteem on are external: cars, money all that sort of stuff, being a villain - they was all sort of valuable things to me, they gave me a sense of who I am despite the morality of it. There was sort of a bit of kudos in it; I felt I was sensible that I had value in that it was a subculture. So when I come into this world now, it was like 'Oh my God!' - I had to really face the fact that I had been completely deluded, I had to face the fact that I couldn't read and write, so I had no sort of value in this sort of world. So, coming to a place where I have got a grip on this now, it's had a massive effect on my self esteem . . .' (Int 2: 9)

' . . . so when I was coming to a place where I was struggling with the work I started to realise, 'Oh my God!', all my sort of self worth and sense of my self was reliant on this bloody job.' (Int 2: 11)

'So I think em, my identity as a learner is, in a nutshell, I'm very sort of determined, a not gonna give up kind of learner - if you can be that sort of learner I suppose. Yeah, so I do see myself as a very sort of a learner with tenacity and is prepared to put up with all the difficulties.' (Int 3: 6)

‘ . . . amongst all the confusion and my existence, I really attached my sense of self to all really crazy things and sort of all the criminality that comes with that. So in this journey where you realize that it’s been a falsehood, you’ve been lying to yourself, these things are vacuous and tissueous, if there is such a word, that they’ve got no real sort of value and you realise that you haven’t got transferable skills at that point, you’re asked by society and those around you to say right recover! You’re asked to put down everything you’ve known, and everything you’ve sort of sense of self on and to take up this world you’re frightened of and fearful of, and that you know nothing about - you’ve got no sense of your own worth and you feel like it will be against you anyway. So it’s a huge undertaking.’ (Int 3: 12)

‘Fundamentally, I can see sort of crystalised, in that the original tension led to causation. I interpreted that to be that I was bad, I was immoral, I was stupid or whatever, or all those things, you know what I mean; that was the interpretation I put on it, and that carried through my whole life and led to me going underground with this. Because, for whatever reason, I was a very determined and resourceful person, so where I couldn’t meet the need, an identified need, it led everywhere and affected not only myself, but everybody else. Now, with the awareness of dyslexia, and I look back and I can identify and say ok, when I am explaining myself to people now, I’m not immoral, bad, disruptive necessarily, I was someone who had an unmet need. The difference is now, with dyslexia, and I can sort of conceptualise that I have got it, a huge part of that is that I am able to express myself in a new way, the historic part of it. But also, like conceptualise what is going on with me now and link it up, and get my needs met because I can say to my employers, for example, listen, it’s not because I’m dumb, I’m lazy, I’m this, I’ve got this condition and it’s this and it’s that, and they say ok, and meet my needs.’ (Int 3: 25)

**The course:**

To develop my understanding of grammar, which really seems difficult to me. To get a better grip on sentence structure and planning reports and all that, and the spelling. To improve all that and my main aim is to get to a place where can do my job without the stress and worry of not being able to write a bloody report. So that frees me up then to develop my career and perhaps one day get that bloody degree. (Int 1:26)

The most valuable has sort of been the inclusiveness. For Chris to understand better than me my learning styles, and the sort the non-judgmental approach towards things because I came in with massive anxieties and my head was all over the place, and that was really good. His sort of, 'nothing's an issue and there's ways of working with it' - that's been really good. The learning plans and tailoring work specifically to my needs - I gave him some of my reports and he's gonna analyse them, which was your suggestion, so he's gonna analyse them and look at them. So that individual approach has been really helpful' (Int 2: 14)

They really drive me to distraction with their witty remarks and banter an all that. No, they are a great bunch. I think what's interesting about it, is that their sort of, at least historically I would go into these environments and be really sort of in the feeling state of the society stigmatisation, so it was like shame and embarrassment, so guilt about being here as an adult and all that; that is really . . . I don't get that from people, that is not evident in the classroom; and I think that really opens it up to getting on with the work, getting through that stuff. So the guys in there, I think they are a really cohesive group, they have been there and have known each other, they all do mathematics together, so it's a really good learning environment. (Int 2: 16)

' . . . the classmates are so giving and supportive of each other - they express the same sort of belief that this is great, and of course they hold you and the other teachers in high esteem because of that - because they found something of value I think. And to face their fears almost as well as the English.' (Int 3: 13)

**Indicators of beneficial transitions:**

' . . . my anxiety levels were through the roof and was desperately sort of really struggling. And I came back into that sort of familiarity and Chris, being who he is and I'm listening and now let's focus. And little bits clicked into place and I thought yeah, it sort of allowed me to refocus and I thought this is doable . . . Now I've learnt to trust in and think ok, this is a huge subject, there are many variations, it's really quirky stuff, and what we are being delivered in this moment in time is connected to

the rest of it, so if we can just deal with this at this moment in time and focus on this, the rest will come; I've learnt to trust in that. That's working really well.' (Int 1:27)

'I sort of had this assumption, I think, that other people just wrote as they spoke and just fluently done it. It's sort of realising that this is not the process that people have to stop and think 'Ok, how is that spelt.' (Int 2: 2)

'I think ok, something tangible is happening at some sort of increased awareness of the structure of a sentence is coming to me; and again I think I would describe it more as an awareness rather than a practical ability. And this is really, along with other things has increased my capacity, which in turn has increased my sense of my suppose self-esteem and all that sort of stuff. Like now I'm carrying four clients and they all need discharge reports pretty soon; I nearly completed one, I've got one ongoing and sort of, three months ago, this would have caused me huge anxiety. It's like there's this pile of work and I'm like how am I going to address it? And I think, with this increased ability and this increased sense of competency has led me to be able to think more clearly rather than get taken over by the anxiety and the worry of it.' (Int 2: 2)

**Validation:**

'[My manager] is impressed with my personal development, she's impressed with the dedication I do put in to my work; she's always telling me that I can express verbally really well. My work colleagues, similarly think I do really good work and can really express myself and line manager said to me that I'm one of the few practitioners that actually when we have group therapy sessions, and we have a group process after with the counsellors, and she says I'm one of the few people that actually brings the whole group process in to our process and explore that - which is a really good developing talent. My partner - I know she will probably disagree - is impressed with my fortitude and my ability to overcome all my struggles and all the rest of it, and em, my family think I'm extraordinary because they knew what I was like in the past and what I've become now and are immensely proud of me. So I get a lot of clues. I get good feedback from Chris, even though he's like me to do a bit more homework. So generally, people have a really a positive attitude about me, people think I'm quite a capable person.' (Int 2: 11-12)

**The future:**

‘But long term I would like to work towards becoming more effective at what I do, and I can see that if I apply myself in this particular organization, I can see myself, if I done a bit of maths and a bit of English qualifications, ending up being a senior counsellor or service manager or something like that. Long term, I could see myself as, yeah, manager or something like that; sounds a bit large, but I can see that as a possibility.’ (Int 2: 13 - 14)

**Methodology - Jacob’s reflections on being interviewed about his life:**

‘Well, its sort of the slow realisation I’m coming back to the ways I used to act to procrastinate and sort of magically hoping that someone sitting there drip feeding me is going to make a difference. And we had a conversation which also contributed to my motivation a bit. You say it’s like describing the using of English and the using of these things as something that’s got to be practiced. You can’t just sit there as in mathematics, I think you said, and sort of get the concept and use it, English is very different in that you have got to use it, and that sort of resonated with along with my procrastinating. And this is just mad because it is a really, really important issue I need to address and get on top of. And I suppose I realise that just coming and sitting in the classroom and doing that will not do it. And that’s been a motivation.’ (Int 2: 1)

‘Nothing springs readily to mind, but it is an interesting process and its kind of good to hear myself speak about some of things and express some of these things. Because I went away last time from our conversation and it had a good sort of . . . and I thought ‘Ah, alright, this is a new way of doing things, so I enjoy the process and it’s beneficial.’ (Int 2: 16)

‘That gave rise to an understanding of perhaps we’re not learning in the correct or very helpful way; I would say to some degree I was like, ‘Alright teacher, teach me!’ So that new information, sort opened a new vista on what English is: it is not like a mathematical solution focused thing, it is more an organic process that in time you can fall in love with, I suppose. In that way, it has opened my eyes to that this can be more organic, this could be something that I’ve not noticed before. . . ‘ (Int 2: 17)

'Yeah, it's been great taking part in it, and I think in a really fundamental way it points to the real importance of . . . I don't want to sound like I'm talking platitudes here or something, but there's real importance of getting people young and increasing their self-worth and abilities and their skills and all the rest of it; because, as it seems to me to be, the human condition that if someone can't meet their own needs they'll probably be on a course to not only sort of cause themselves great pain, but cause everyone else around them great pain. And if you can get in early, I suppose a lot of that would be avoided to some degree.' (Int 3: 28)

## **(ii) Narrative outline for Jacob**

### **Family:**

- Well looked after child - grew up as a typical Londoner in Camden Town
- Father: supportive / high academic expectations - pervading influence - pressure to fulfil
- Mother had MH issues & abandoned

### **School:**

- Struggled as a result of learning difficulties / accident / home life
- Dunces class, negative positioning / felt different to others: Shame, humiliation
- Tension between aspirations / reality of not achieving and frustrations result in hating school, being disruptive and regularly playing truant
- Aged 13 - Miss Keane - significant influence also got you reading for first time
- Left school at 14 with no qualifications, negative learning identity
- Discourse of disadvantage and marginalisation - a dunce - as negatively positioned by teachers and by father, made tangible by no qualifications and not being able to read. Integral to this personal narrative is

### **Working life:**

- Father - guidance - mundane job - hotel in King's Cross

- Still harboured aspirations - mentally challenging - electrician - day release course
- Wanted to take advantage of opportunity - but reading and writing continued to present barrier
- Tension between aspiration - reality of your situation returned to haunt you - anxiety
- entrepreneurial aspirations - market stall, slot machines, bailiff work, dealing drugs
- Negatively positioned and barrier caused by poor education / English / quals - father's legacy

### **Breaking bad - crime, drugs and dependency:**

- Came a moment when you decided it was a mug's game and abandoned education and career as way of achieving aspirations
- Fell into life of more serious crime dealing drugs- achieved financial success through crime - escalated
- Resolved tension between aspirations and reality
- Life of petty crime escalated into more serious crime when decided 'everyone else was a mug'
- got involved in dealing drugs / jail / drug dependent for 25 years
- Harley Street: realised was ill, deluded / 'Need to carve something out of this mess'
- Discourse of criminality provided Jacob with a new way to understand his life - unlike education and work discourses, criminality provided him with a way of positioning himself as a success with all the trappings of wealth. Enabled him to abandon previous position in other discourses and dismiss them as a mug's game.

### **Reinventing the self - transitions in identity:**

- Identity tensions / transition: struggled with anxiety, inhibitions, shame and trust issues
- Haunted by father's resonating influence and the spectre of dyslexia = barrier at every turn

- Drug treatment centre in Plymouth - 46
- Significant episode: 'Madonna moment' - moment realised possible to reinvent yourself
- Liberating moment as profound implications for you educationally / personally
- New foundation - means to resolve shame and guilt associated with difficulties
- Dyslexia discourse provided a way of understanding the difficulties he faced in education and a method for rationalising and combating his difficulties. Defining himself as a dyslexic learner has helped him to generate coping strategies and construct new imagined future / prospects in education he previously thought was unobtainable.

**Course experiences and outcomes:**

- Experiences on course have helped to improve skills and confidence in using English language and develop coping strategies for dyslexia.
- Has not changed education aspirations, but re-ignited them
- Helped to change / reinvent learning identity and view of education and possibilities
- In particular, knowing that Jacob has dyslexia has been a meaningful revelation that clarifies and explains so much for him about his learning history.
- Knowing that Jacob is dyslexic has provided a basis to construct a new identity narrative and re-written the way he understands and tells his life story.
- Jacob realises that the difficulties he faced with formal learning are not necessarily to do with a lack of ability, but is more to do with an absence of adequate support and undiagnosed dyslexia.
- This resolves Jacob's sense of guilt and shame in respect of not achieving at school and fulfilling his father's aspirations; this also provides a basis for Jacob to begin confronting and gradually overcoming barriers he faced for years and resolving some of the associated personal tensions.

**(iii) An extract of Jacob's life story about school based on the narrative outline and selected quotes**



## **School:**

Jacob said that his father had a significant influence on his educational aspirations as he tried ardently to achieve at school and desperately wanted to prove himself to his dad. Despite his endeavours to fulfil his father's expectations, however, unlike his brother and sister, who excelled in academia, Jacob says he felt different to other children and continually struggled with his school work and the 'shame' of not being able to do it. Jacob described his early experiences of school as a 'nightmare' (Int 1:4); and explains how he found himself being placed in the 'dunces' class' (Int 1:4) with teachers who he thinks did not really know how best to support him with his work. In Jacob's words: 'I don't think nobody knew what the bloody hell was wrong with me - what my problems were.' (Int 1: 4 -5)

In talking about this episode in his life, Jacob says that he now realises that these difficulties, in part, were due to his undiagnosed dyslexia, but also explained how he thinks a childhood accident had a significant negative affect on his school education. In Jacob's words:

'I think my earliest memories of my first school, which was Buck Street School, must have been about four, and I can remember screaming in my mum's arms, saying I don't want to go there - I hated it, I think, primarily, my whole experience of school was coloured by an accident I had when I was three years old. At three years old, I climbed over the garden gate and went into the road, got knocked over and had my leg broken in four places, so I was in hospital for six months and in convalescence for five months, so I think that had some play in how I developed; and I think I was a pretty needy child. I was like clinging to mum and that sort of thing because mum

didn't stay in hospital then. So when I got to school, I think that's why I didn't fit well into school, I didn't feel that it was good in school.' (Int 1: 2)

Jacob suggests that his difficulties at school were compounded by his home-life, for his mum was suffering with mental health-related issues which meant his that his dad was left with the responsibility of raising the family and holding down a full-time job, while at the same time caring for his mother. Circumstances at Jacob's home became, in Jacob's words, 'extraordinarily difficult' (Int 1:4) as his mum abandoned the family as she felt that 'she needed to get away' (Int 1:4). In the quote below, Jacob describes the ways he thinks the emotional trauma of his home life affected him at school:

'It was, I think it was quite difficult. I think I was in sort of the dunce's classes and acted out and all the rest of it; so I think I could only do little bits of reading and writing. And I think what was more difficult was my mum, I don't know what was wrong with her - I think she had some sort of mental health issue. I think she got diagnosed, I'm not quite sure, but the relationship between her and my father was really difficult, and she felt that she desperately needed to get away. So from an early age she abandoned us with my dad. And she would come back and my dad would be running around, apparently, going nuts looking for us if we had been dumped in a hospital or dumped in a foster care place that sort of thing. So, I think the whole of that period was extraordinarily difficult. And, em, I think like the social services were involved in our lives and they was trying to help, but I get the sense that I really couldn't apply myself at school and I was in remedial classes and playing truant and that sort of thing.' (1.5)

This pattern of behaviour seems to characterise most of Jacob's school life in the various schools he attended in London. This pattern of behaviour culminated in one significant incident when Jacob's father was summoned to his school one day: 'So, what happened, my dad, bless him, came to the school, and I'd been bunking off - not going to school, getting up to all sorts of crime, and he came to the school with me for some reason - can't remember what it was, but I remember we was outside the school gates and my teacher told my dad that I wouldn't be doing any exams, and my dad burst into tears.'

Jacob went on to describe how this incident led to his dad attempting to tutor him in English at home, however, Jacob suggests that due to his undiagnosed dyslexia learning at home remained a difficult process. In Jacob's words: 'At that point, because I'd never seen him cry before, it was quite powerful, but he took me at that point, took me home and I went through purgatory from that moment because he tried to tutor me and teach me. And he taught himself to read and write, so every Thursday night my dad, bless him, would sit me down and would start doing an English dictation, and start going through the grammar and all the rest of it, but I didn't know I had dyslexic tendencies at the time and he didn't know, so it was a really difficult, but he tried desperately to help me.' (Int 1.5)

It wasn't until Jacob met Miss Keane, at the age of 13, that he learned how to read. Jacob said: 'I can remember having some sort of an epiphany at that moment in time. This woman sort of sat me down and something mad happened - I don't know what it was, but she got me interested in English and I started to apply myself. And at that point, I could not say the alphabet at thirteen, but with her help, somehow, I went out and I had this wonderful day where I was looking at words and I could read

them for the first time, and I thought, 'Oh my God!' It was quite emotional actually remembering. [laughs] I thought, 'Shit! I can read, I can read, I can read!' (Int 1: 3)

Despite this success with reading, Jacob continued to play truant and got involved in criminal activity with his peers. A year or so later, with a decidedly dim view of school, Jacob decided to leave at the age of 14 with no qualifications and seemingly no career prospects to speak of. Despite his negative experiences of learning in the school setting, Jacob remembers being keen to return to education shortly after leaving, however, faced difficulties with the mathematics involved in the course. In Jacob's words: 'So when I came out of school, I desperately wanted to do something, and I can remember seeing like, I think it was to be, train to be, in night school to be an electrician or something. And I was desperate, I went in, I really had to steal myself to go into the night school; and they started asking me about mathematics and just failed abysmally. I thought, oh God, I can't do that, and I come out and I was gutted.' (Int 1. 9)

At this juncture, Jacob's dad advised him that he should look for a job:

'... my dad realised that I was in trouble and he said to me, 'Look, you need to get a job.' And I remember thinking myself, 'No! I need to go to college!' He said, 'Look, you've not applied yourself, you need to get a job with your hands.' So, I went back to the careers advisor, and ended up getting a job as a trainee maintenance engineer in a big hotel in King's Cross.'

## A7 - Jacob's Life Story (in full)

### Background

Jacob is a 50 year old male, who was born and raised in London by his Nigerian father and Welsh mother. He describes himself as being a well looked after child who grew up as a 'typical Londoner in Camden Town' living with his parents, and his elder brother and sister. Jacob attended several different schools in his formative years and received strong support and encouragement from his father to do well at school. Jacob recalls that his father had high academic expectations of all his children as he attached great value to education and academic success, and therefore was adamant that all his children were to graduate with a degree as a way of them establishing high status careers in either law or medicine:

'It's there all my life; I think it's my dad. He was a loving and caring man, but he was like, he was very authoritarian and to him, if you weren't a doctor or a lawyer, you weren't anything. And I think that's the message I picked up, that to be anything I need to obtain this university degree. And it's like my sister behind me, Deborah, the next one down, Josephine, she got a really good degree in Queen's University, London in English Literature, and she's lived in Italy and all over the world. She's now living in San Palo; she lived in Italy 15 years, she's worked in Hong Kong, she's a right international service manager - she's successful. And we was in the car - we just picked my dad up from the airport, and my dad turned round he says 'How did your university go?' And she says, 'I got a 2:1 or something Dad, or a First or

something' And he said, ' Ah, but you're not a doctor yet!' So, [laughs] she just shrugged her shoulders like.' (Int 1:22)

## **School**

Jacob said that his father had a significant influence on his educational aspirations as he tried ardently to achieve at school and desperately wanted to prove himself to his dad. Despite his endeavours to fulfil his father's expectations, however, unlike his brother and sister, who excelled in academia, Jacob says he felt different to other children and continually struggled with his school work and the 'shame' of not being able to do it. Jacob described his early experiences of school as a 'nightmare' (Int 1:4); and explains how he found himself being placed in the 'dunces' class' (Int 1:4) with teachers who he thinks did not really know how best to support him with his work. In Jacob's words: 'I don't think nobody knew what the bloody hell was wrong with me - what my problems were.' (Int 1: 4 -5)

In talking about this episode in his life, Jacob says that he now realises that these difficulties, in part, were due to his undiagnosed dyslexia, but also explained how he thinks a childhood accident had a significant negative affect on his school education. In Jacob's words:

'I think my earliest memories of my first school, which was Buck Street School, must have been about four, and I can remember screaming in my mum's arms, saying I don't want to go there - I hated it, I think, primarily, my whole experience of school was coloured by an accident I had when I was three years old. At three years old, I climbed over the garden gate and went into the road, got knocked over and had my leg broken in four places, so I was in hospital for six months and in convalescence for

five months, so I think that had some play in how I developed; and I think I was a pretty needy child. I was like clinging to mum and that sort of thing because mum didn't stay in hospital then. So when I got to school, I think that's why I didn't fit well into school, I didn't feel that it was good in school.' (Int 1: 2)

Jacob suggests that his difficulties at school were compounded by his home-life, for his mum was suffering with mental health-related issues which meant his that his dad was left with the responsibility of raising the family and holding down a full-time job, while at the same time caring for his mother. Circumstances at Jacob's home became, in Jacob's words, 'extraordinarily difficult' (Int 1:4) as his mum abandoned the family as she felt that 'she needed to get away' (Int 1:4). In the quote below, Jacob describes the ways he thinks the emotional trauma of his home life affected him at school:

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that I really couldn't apply myself at school and I was in remedial classes and playing truant and that sort of thing.' (1.5)

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what is was, but she got me interested in English and I started to apply myself. And at that point, I could not say the alphabet at thirteen, but with her help, somehow, I went out and I has this wonderful day where I was looking at words and I could read them for the first time, and I thought 'Oh my God!' It was quite emotional actually remembering. [laughs] I thought 'Shit! I can read, I can read, I can read!' (Int1: 3)

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'... my dad realised that I was in trouble and he said to me, 'Look, you need to get a job.' And I remember thinking myself, 'No! I need to go to college!' He said, 'Look, you've not applied yourself, you need to get a job with your hands.' So I went back to the careers advisor, and ended up getting a job as a trainee maintenance engineer in a big hotel in King's Cross.'

## **Working Life**

Initially, Jacob enjoyed working and found it rewarding, however, he began to find the work mundane, and realising it was 'a dead end job' decided that he wanted to do something more academically challenging in an office job. One of Jacob's work colleague's suggested that he should train to be an electrician and perhaps go back to college on a day release course. The idea of going to college appealed to Jacob, and he wanted to take advantage of the opportunity, however, he feared that the difficulties he faced with reading, writing and maths would again present a barrier for him:

'So, there was this kinda angst of being caught between these aspirations and desperately wanting to do something, and getting the door open a bit and people saying, 'Yeah, you ain't as stuck as you think - you can do this', and then realising that, you know what, I can't even take advantage of the opportunities because of this thing [dyslexia], whatever it was and I didn't know what it was at the time.' (Int 1: 9)

At the time, Jacob's anxiety concerning his academic abilities was compounded by various other indicators he discerned in and around the work place. Jacob recalled one exchange with a manager of the hotel he was working at which confirmed his subject position as someone who had a difficulty with learning. In Jacob's words:

'And one day, in one of my early jobs as a trainee maintenance engineer which is a glorious title for a general handyman, there was this big entourage of senior managers, there was this huge hotel, a 700 room hotel - and there was this really posh, well-heeled group of chaps walking round and em, someone asked me a

question, the manager of the hotel asked me a question or something and I said something about something being yellow, and he wasn't being unkind, and he said it's not pronounced like that - spell it. And I was rooted to the spot with this huge feeling of shame: I couldn't spell 'yellow' and couldn't pronounce it. So, that's how I saw myself - as this person that couldn't. So over time, and going back - that's going to stay with me for years and years; so entering into these places to do this kind of thing is huge, so I saw myself as somebody who was less than other people, that had this immense difficulty and that there was something wrong with me.' (Int 3. 4 - 5)

### **Breaking bad: crime, drugs and dependency**

Jacob struggled to hold down a full-time job and moved between various different jobs working in hotels and as a cleaner. Around this time, Jacob said he also worked as a part-time debt collector and subsidised his income with various other business enterprises, which included running market stalls, managing a series of bubble gum machines, and dealing cannabis (Int 1. 10). At the age of 19 or 20, Jacob's illegal activities escalated as he started dealing cocaine as well as cannabis. Realising that dealing cocaine was significantly more profitable than his other business ventures, Jacob made the conscious decision to abandon them in order to devote more time to buying and selling cocaine. As Jacob says:

'What happened, right, it's crazy 'cos I had made a conscious decision, right, irrational as it seems, but I remember making it, I started to sell cocaine and I was getting lots of money out of it at about 19 or 20; and what was happening was that I was finding I didn't have enough time to devote to my more entrepreneurial stuff because the time I was devoting to that side was taken away time from earning money from the coke, and the coke was giving me a decent amount of money. So, it

made business sense to give up the entrepreneurial stuff and focus only on the coke, which ultimately led to my demise, really. But at the time, for a 19 year old, and I was like looking at my dad thinking like, you're a bit of a mug - you're still, know what I mean, riding your bike, still going to work and all that, and I'm nicking this money. It was like, you had it wrong, mate - I got it right, sort of thing.' (Int 1: 11)

### **Rehabilitation and recovery**

At the age of 45 - 46, Jacob says that he suffered a psychotic episode while he was in Jamaica running from the authorities. Upon returning to England from his foray in Jamaica, a friend of Jacob's encouraged him to seek medical attention for his drug dependency which he then realised was getting seriously out of control. Fortuitously, Jacob received funding for treatment in a rehab clinic located in the south west, where he says he had the grim realisation that he had been an addict for the best part of 25 years. In Jacob's words, 'Suddenly the light switched on and I thought, 'Oh dear me, this is what's really being going on — not the delusion I'd been telling myself!' And at that point, I knew I was really, really ill. (Int 1:1)

While receiving treatment for his addiction, Jacob says, 'I found out that while I was in treatment, really good people, they sent me to . . . they said, 'Look you need to start getting up, getting out and doing voluntary work,' and that sort of thing. So I said, 'Look, I really need to address this; I can't bloody read and write - the assignments in there nearly bloody killed me!' So they sent me to Martin's Gate. . . ' (Int 1.18)

Jacob conceded with the advice of his counsellors and remembers thinking:

'Something needs to be sorted out: I need to carve something out from the mess, so

to speak; and I went on this journey of sort of adult literature classes and doing vocational courses and ended up getting a job as a support worker, which led to me studying for a Diploma in Counselling.’ (Int 1: 1)

In the quote below, Jacob explains in some detail why undertaking a literacy course represented a huge personal step for him in terms of his rehabilitation and reintegration back into society beyond the confines of the treatment centre. Jacob suggests that doing the course was important for him in transcending his criminal identity, overcoming his fear of stigmatising, and learning to trust others would not judge but accept him, regardless of his criminal past. He describes the episode of undertaking a literacy course as a ‘stepping stone’ which served to enable him to explore who he is and begin establishing his subject position of being an adult learner and ‘test the water’:

‘These people understood what I was fighting against and what I was trying to save myself from; they understood, but then, to take that outside of that environment was like a huge no, no’: the stigmatisation the barriers are just huge, and particularly being one of society’s worst taboos: is like a drug dealer and a heroin drug dealer, destroying other people’s lives - the taboos like that are pretty massive, jails and all the stuff. So I think a fundamental point was, if you will, finding my way from the treatment centre to a stepping stone outside of the that environment which was the learning environment, and then in some way because they understood, that bit of it gave me the confidence to sort of take that side - sorry, I’ve lost my train of thought. But to take it outside the treatment centre was just a daunting prospect, but because I was guided and pushed and had to do something, I said I need to address this issue, find myself in a learning supportive environment, that was an extension from

the treatment centre into another sort of 'acceptance'. So it was like almost you could test the waters there and think ok, if other people can do it then maybe - and so it is like a domino effect.' (Int 3. 9-10)

Things were also changing for Jacob in his personal life at this time in his life, as it was around this time that he met his present wife and became a father to his first child. Jacob suggested that becoming a father underscored the need to develop his use of English and the importance of being successful in his studies, and in his newfound career path as a counsellor. In talking about this, Jacob said:

' . . . I realised, on some level it is quite sad, I realised, I went into my daughter's parenting class the other day and she phrases exactly as I'm doing and she's six. And I think this is one of my hugest fears about having a kid, was if I can't read how you going to be doing the stories and all that with the child. It is a bit difficult because when she gets stuck with a word, I can't sort of readily say to her it's because it's this and it's that. But, she sort of is doing the same sort of work as me as well, so I suppose that's sort of made me feel a bit better about myself in terms of I might be able to support her or she'll be able to support me in the near future. [laughs]' (Int 2.3)

### **The Adult Literacy course and becoming a dyslexic learner**

It is on his adult literacy course that Jacob was first diagnosed with dyslexia and began receiving specialist support, and working with other adult learners who also experienced difficulties with reading and writing. Jacob suggested that discovering that he had dyslexia was useful to him for developing coping strategies for his learning difficulties, and it also made him realise that perhaps the difficulties he faced

with learning all his life were not necessarily the result of any physiological issues, or damage caused by his long-term substance abuse. In Jacob's words:

'So, that's how I saw myself as this person that couldn't. So over time, and going back - that's going to stay with me for years and years; so entering into these places to do this kind of thing is huge, so I saw myself as somebody who was less than other people, that had this immense difficulty and that there was something wrong with me. And I found out that I had dyslexia, and that separated a lot from what I thought the damage I had done to myself through dependency - it kind of filtered that out, I thought yes, all right there is a rhyme and reason for it, perhaps I'm not so damaged because of that - there's an understanding for it . . .' (Int 3: 5)

It is clear from this quote that Jacob's awareness of the concept of dyslexia and positioning himself as being dyslexic provided a conceptual framework for not only rationalising the difficulties he encounters with literacy, but it also provides him with an alternative way / narrative / personal script for making sense of his life and the reasons why he fell into a life of crime. Jacob elaborated on this in some detail saying:

'Fundamentally, I can see sort of crystallised, in that the original tension led to causation. I interpreted that to be that I was bad, I was immoral, I was stupid or whatever, or all those things, you know what I mean; that was the interpretation I put on it, and that carried through my whole life and led to me going underground with this. Because, for whatever reason, I was a very determined and resourceful person, so where I couldn't meet the need, an identified need, it led everywhere and affected not only myself, but everybody else. Now, with the awareness of dyslexia, and I look

back and I can identify and say ok, when I am explaining myself to people now, I'm not immoral, bad, disruptive necessarily, I was someone who had an unmet need. The difference is now, with dyslexia, and I can sort of conceptualise that I have got it, a huge part of that is that I am able to express myself in a new way, the historic part of it. But also, like conceptualise what is going on with me now and link it up, and get my needs met because I can say to my employers, for example, listen, it's not because I'm dumb, I'm lazy, I'm this, I've got this condition and it's this and it's that, and they say ok, and meet my needs.' (Int 3: 24 - 25)

### **The spectre or dyslexia**

Jacob disrupted his English studies for a year or two, but rejoined in 2004 following a work appraisal that highlighted significant concerns managers had with the standard of English featured in client reports he had drafted. Jacob said, 'I had a few appraisals and they were saying to me 'Look, we think we are going to let you go because your performance is not up to expectations, you can't write reports and all the rest of it. So it was like, the last eight months of being in absolute purgatory, because now I'm thinking I've got all this responsibility and I've done all this graft, I've got where I'm going and it's undone me again — it's finally got me!' (Int 1: 25)

Naturally, this setback was highly disconcerting episode for Jacob, as it not only represented a potential threat to his livelihood, but also re-ignited his old anxieties that surrounded his fear of failure to fulfil his father's expectations and succeed in a professional career. Jacob realises this, saying, 'I finally get my own office and all of a sudden the spectre of the dyslexia or whatever it is rears its ugly head again. And I 'Oh no!' And there is a point where I think just give it up, man; just stop, but that's not an option.' (Int 1:28)



Despite his concerns about the spectre of dyslexia finally undoing everything he has worked for, Jacob suggested that he remains optimistic that his dyslexia represents the final barrier for him, and that he is resolute in his determination to overcome that barrier. Jacob elaborates on this saying:

‘So it’s had a really powerful impact on me, it was like I’ve been in tears of anguish and apathy and just nearly beaten to the core, because I’m thinking my God, after all this work, this not being able to read and write thing, is finally gonna do me - it’s finally gonna screw up my income, my family and everything built. So I got into a really difficult place with it. So I think to sort of get over that, is almost . . . and again I think I’m being a bit ‘thingy’ I suspect, but it feels like it is almost the final hurdle, which is a good place to be.’ (Int 2: 10)

### **Validation of personal progress**

Evaluating the tangible benefits of his learning experiences on the adult literacy course, Jacob spoke about his increased self-esteem, competence, and how he is less likely to become anxious at the prospect of writing reports in his job role as a counsellor. In Jacob’s words:

‘And in my report writing at work, I’m beginning again, it’s increased my awareness and I’m becoming more familiar with the breakdown of sentences, that a sentence must have a subject, a subject must have a verb, and phrases; and there was a lovely term I came across the other day, a ‘particular verb’ and that sort of thing, and that’s really sort of, and I think ok, something tangible is happening at some sort of increased awareness of the structure of a sentence is coming to me; and again I

think I would describe it more as an awareness rather than a practical ability. And this is really, along with other things has increased my capacity, which in turn has increased my sense of my suppose self-esteem and all that sort of stuff. Like now I'm carrying four clients and they all need discharge reports pretty soon; I nearly completed one, I've got one ongoing and sort of, three months ago, this would have caused me huge anxiety. It's like there's this pile of work and I'm like how am I going to address it? And I think, with this increased ability and this increased sense of competency has led me to be able to think more clearly rather than get taken over by the anxiety and the worry of it.' (Int 2: 3)

Jacob's sense of progress with his education and its positive influence on his proficiency at work have been validated to him by a range of other people in different contexts. In his professional role as a counsellor, Jacob says, '[My manager] is impressed with my personal development, she's impressed with the dedication I do put in to my work; she's always telling me that I can express verbally really well. My work colleagues, similarly think I do really good work and can really express myself . . .' (Int 2: 11-12)

Jacob's partner and family have also supported him and recognised his achievements and the personal progress he has made. Jacob said, 'People are astonished, they think, 'what, you can't read, you can't write' sort of thing. I think for my partner there's two bits of it: she thinks God, he's sort of addressing this, and there's a bit of it of it with her where she's still sort uncomfortable with it, and worried about the stigmatisation of it - that's a bit uncomfortable for her, but she's incredibly supportive. And my family and friends just think the fact that I've still, after everything

that's happened, still got the sort of will to address these issues and carry on, they think it is nothing short of a bloody miracle. [laughs]' (Int 1.28)

Elaborating further on his partner's view of his progress, Jacob said, 'My partner - I know she will probably disagree - is impressed with my fortitude and my ability to overcome all my struggles and all the rest of it, and em, my family think I'm extraordinary because they knew what I was like in the past and what I've become now and are immensely proud of me. So I get a lot of clues. I get good feedback from Chris, even though he's like me to do a bit more homework. So generally, people have a really a positive attitude about me; people think I'm quite a capable person.' (Int 2: 11-12)

### **The future**

Thinking about the future, Jacob says that in the 'long term, I would like to work towards becoming more effective at what I do, and I can see that if apply myself in this particular organisation, I can see myself, if I done a bit of maths and a bit of English qualifications, ending up being a senior counsellor or service manager or something like that. Long term, I could see myself as, yeah, manager or something like that; sounds a bit large, but I can see that as a possibility. (Int 2: 13 - 14)

Jacob says he realises that his literacy practices need to improve further in order to achieve his long-term career goals, and now has the confidence derived from his successes so far to continue with his studies and build on his achievements.

Interestingly, despite everything that has happened to Jacob, his plans for the future still include fulfilling his father's dying wishes of attaining a degree. He stated that ' . . . my main aim is to get to a place where can do my job without the stress and worry

of not being able to write a bloody report. So that frees me up then to develop my career and perhaps one day get that bloody degree. (Int 1: 26)

Taking stock of his life and the many of problems he has faced with dyslexia, low self-esteem and confidence with formal learning, Jacob offers a simple but sobering final word on the fundamental importance of recognising and supporting a child's specific learning needs early. In light of Jacob's own life story, his words also underscore the implications of what can transpire if this does not happen:

'Yeah, it's been great taking part in it, and I think in a really fundamental way it points to the real importance of . . . I don't want to sound like I'm talking platitudes here or something, but there's real importance of getting people young and increasing their self-worth and abilities and their skills and all the rest of it; because, as it seems to me to be the human condition that if someone can't meet their own needs they'll probably be on a course to not only sort of cause themselves great pain, but causes everyone else around them great pain. And if you can get in early, I suppose a lot of that would be avoided to some degree.' (Int 3: 28):

## **A8 - An illustration of Stage 3: Constructing a discourse analysis**

Below, using an extract from the 'Findings and Analysis' chapter, I have illustrated how I applied Willig's (2001) guidelines in writing the discourse analysis and merging it with the life story I wrote for Jacob in Stage 2. In the extract below, the text has been annotated with numbered brackets to indicate how the analysis relates to Willig's numbered guidelines for conducting a discourses analysis. Willig's (2001) guidelines for conducting a discourse analysis are as follows:

7. Identifying discourse constructions: finding the different ways the object of analysis is referred to in the text.
8. Locating discourses: deciding the way the object is being represented / portrayed / conceptualised within different discursive constructions.
9. Action orientation: what achievements and effects for the participants manifest as a result of these constructions.
10. Positionings: Identifying the subject positions that are made available to participants within these discourses.
11. Practice: identifying the emerging possibilities for action associated with the participants' alignment with subject positions.
12. Subjectivity: the ways the subject positions influence participants' experiences, thoughts and feelings

## **Extract of the discourse analysis about Jacob's school life**

[1] The narrative in Jacob's story about his school life highlights that his father had a significant influence on his the value he attaches to education as being a means of achieving a successful career. [1] Jacob recalled that his father had high expectations of all his children regarding their education and implied how, at the initial stages of his school life, he ardently endeavoured to fulfil his expectations. [2&3] The interview data clearly shows that this discourse regarding the importance of academic success has influenced the way Jacob thinks about and evaluates his education history. As Jacob said:

'It's there all my life; I think it's my dad. He was a loving and caring man, but he was like, he was very authoritarian and to him, if you weren't a doctor or a lawyer, you weren't anything. And I think that's the message I picked up, that to be anything I need to obtain this university degree.' (Int 1:22)

[1] A reoccurring theme in Jacob's interview data about his school life concerned the difficulties he experienced with learning at school. [3&6] In particular he made several references to his frustration and anxieties about not being able to read, which he considers to have been the fundamental and enduring barrier for him regarding his capacity to excel in his education. [4] Jacob described how, as a result of his ongoing struggle to achieve in school he eventually saw himself as being 'different' somehow to the other children in terms of his learning ability. Describing his early experiences of school as a 'nightmare' (Int 1.4), he recalled that he found himself in the 'dunces' class' (Int 1.4) with teachers who he suggested did not know how best to

support him in overcoming his apparent difficulties with learning. In Jacob's words: 'I don't think nobody knew what the bloody hell was wrong with me - what my problems were' (Int 1:7). [4] It is clear from Jacob's narrative about school that he positions himself as being a disadvantaged learner, or 'dunce', who was failed by his school teachers.

[2&4] Across the three interviews, Jacob drew on a range of discourses to make sense of his learning difficulties at school, all of which position him as a victim of circumstance. Jacob suggested that in retrospect, he realises that his difficulties with learning at school were influenced by a range of factors including: undiagnosed dyslexia, a traumatic childhood accident, and issues associated his home-life and parents' relationship.

## **A9 - Discourse analysis of Jacob's life story (in full)**

### **Background**

Jacob is a 50 year old male, who was born and raised in London by his Nigerian father and Welsh mother. He describes himself as being a well looked after child who grew up as a 'typical Londoner in Camden Town' living with his parents, and his elder brother and sister. Jacob attended several different schools in his formative years and received strong support and encouragement from his father to do well at school. Jacob recalls that his father had high academic expectations of all his children as he attached great value to education and academic success, and therefore was adamant that all his children were to graduate with a degree as a way of them establishing high status careers in either law or medicine:

'It's there all my life; I think it's my dad. He was a loving and caring man, but he was like, he was very authoritarian and to him, if you weren't a doctor or a lawyer, you weren't anything. And I think that's the message I picked up, that to be anything I need to obtain this university degree. And it's like my sister behind me, Deborah, the next one down, Josephine, she got a really good degree in Queen's University, London in English Literature, and she's lived in Italy and all over the world. She's now living in San Palo; she lived in Italy 15 years, she's worked in Hong Kong, she's a right international service manager - she's successful. And we was in the car - we just picked my dad up from the airport, and my dad turned round he says, 'How did your university go?' And she says 'I got a 2:1 or something Dad, or a First or something' And he said, ' Ah, but you're not a doctor yet!' So, [laughs] she just shrugged her shoulders like.' (Int 1:22)



## **School**

Jacob said that his father had a significant influence on his educational aspirations as he tried ardently to achieve at school and desperately wanted to prove himself to his dad. Despite his endeavours to fulfil his father's expectations, however, unlike his brother and sister, who excelled in academia, Jacob says he felt different to other children and continually struggled with his school work and the 'shame' of not being able to do it. Jacob described his early experiences of school as a 'nightmare' (Int 1.4); and explains how he found himself being placed in the 'dunces' class' (Int 1.4) with teachers who he thinks did not really know how best to support him with his work. In Jacob's words: 'I don't think nobody knew what the bloody hell was wrong with me - what my problems were.' (Int 1:7)

In talking about this episode in his life, Jacob says that he now realises that these difficulties, in part, were due to his undiagnosed dyslexia, but also explained how he thinks a childhood accident had a significant negative affect on his school education. In Jacob's words:

'I think my earliest memories of my first school, which was Buck Street School, must have been about four, and I can remember screaming in my mum's arms, saying I don't want to go there - I hated it, I think, primarily, my whole experience of school was coloured by an accident I had when I was three years old. At three years old, I climbed over the garden gate and went into the road, got knocked over and had my leg broken in four places, so I was in hospital for six months and in convalescence for five months, so I think that had some play in how I developed; and I think I was a

pretty needy child. I was like clinging to mum and that sort of thing because mum didn't stay in hospital then. So when I got to school, I think that's why I didn't fit well into school, I didn't feel that it was good in school.' (Int 1: 2)

Jacob suggests that his difficulties at school were compounded by his home life, for his mum was suffering with mental health-related issues which meant his that his dad was left with the responsibility of raising the family and holding down a full-time job, while at the same time caring for his mother. Circumstances at Jacob's home became, in Jacob's words, 'extraordinarily difficult' (Int 1: 4) as his mum abandoned the family as she felt that 'she needed to get away' (Int 1: 4). In the quote below, Jacob describes the ways he thinks the emotional trauma of his home life affected him at school:

'It was, I think it was quite difficult. I think I was in sort of the dunce's classes and acted out and all the rest of it; so I think I could only do little bits of reading and writing. And I think what was more difficult was my mum, I don't know what was wrong with her - I think she had some sort of mental health issue. I think she got diagnosed, I'm not quite sure, but the relationship between her and my father was really difficult, and she felt that she desperately needed to get away. So from an early age she abandoned us with my dad. And she would come back and my dad would be running around, apparently, going nuts looking for us if we had been dumped in a hospital or dumped in a foster care place that sort of thing. So, I think the whole of that period was extraordinarily difficult. And, em, I think like the social services were involved in our lives and they was trying to help, but I get the sense that I really couldn't apply myself at school and I was in remedial classes and playing truant and that sort of thing.' (1.5)

This pattern of behaviour seems to characterise most of Jacob's school life in the various schools he attended in London. This pattern of behaviour culminated in one significant incident when Jacob's father was summoned to his school one day: 'So, what happened, my dad, bless him, came to the school, and I'd been bunking off - not going to school, getting up to all sorts of crime, and he came to the school with me for some reason - can't remember what it was, but I remember we was outside the school gates and my teacher told my dad that I wouldn't be doing any exams, and my dad burst into tears.'

Jacob went on to describe how this incident led to his dad attempting to tutor him in English at home, however, Jacob suggests that due to his undiagnosed dyslexia learning at home remained a difficult process. In Jacob's words: 'At that point, because I'd never seen him cry before, it was quite powerful, but he took me at that point, took me home and I went through purgatory from that moment because he tried to tutor me and teach me. And he taught himself to read and write, so every Thursday night my dad, bless him, would sit me down and would start doing an English dictation, and start going through the grammar and all the rest of it, but I didn't know I had dyslexic tendencies at the time and he didn't know, so it was a really difficult, but he tried desperately to help me.' (Int 1.5)

It wasn't until Jacob met Miss Keane, at the age of 13, that he learned how to read. Jacob said: 'I can remember having some sort of an epiphany at that moment in time. This woman sort of sat me down and something mad happened - I don't know what it was, but she got me interested in English and I started to apply myself. And at that point, I could not say the alphabet at thirteen, but with her help, somehow, I

went out and I has this wonderful day where I was looking at words and I could read them for the first time, and I thought, 'Oh my God!' It was quite emotional actually remembering. [laughs] I thought 'Shit! I can read, I can read, I can read!' (Int1: 3)

Despite this success with reading, Jacob continued to play truant and got involved in criminal activity with his peers. A year or so later, with a decidedly dim view of school, Jacob decided to leave at the age of 14 with no qualifications and seemingly no career prospects to speak of. Despite his negative experiences of learning in the school setting, Jacob remembers being keen to return to education shortly after leaving, however, faced difficulties with the mathematics involved in the course. In Jacob's words: 'So when I came out of school, I desperately wanted to do something, and I can remember seeing like, I think it was to be, train to be, in night school to be an electrician or something. And I was desperate, I went in, I really had to steal myself to go into the night school; and they started asking me about mathematics and just failed abysmally. I thought, oh God, I can't do that, and I come out and I was gutted.' (Int 1. 9)

At this juncture, Jacob's dad advised him that he should look for a job:

'... my dad realised that I was in trouble and he said to me, 'Look, you need to get a job.' And I remember thinking myself, 'No! I need to go to college!' He said, 'Look, you've not applied yourself, you need to get a job with your hands.' So I went back to the careers advisor, and ended up getting a job as a trainee maintenance engineer in a big hotel in King's Cross.'

## **Working Life**

Initially, Jacob enjoyed working and found it rewarding, however, he began to find the work mundane, and realising it was 'a dead end job' decided that he wanted to do something more academically challenging in an office job. One of Jacob's work colleague's suggested that he should train to be an electrician and perhaps go back to college on a day release course. The idea of going to college appealed to Jacob, and he wanted to take advantage of the opportunity, however, he feared that the difficulties he faced with reading, writing and maths would again present a barrier for him:

'So, there was this kinda angst of being caught between these aspirations and desperately wanting to do something, and getting the door open a bit and people saying, 'Yeah, you ain't as stuck as you think - you can do this', and then realising that, you know what, I can't even take advantage of the opportunities because of this thing [dyslexia], whatever it was and I didn't know what it was at the time.' (Int 1: 9)

At the time, Jacob's anxiety concerning his academic abilities was compounded by various other indicators he discerned in and around the work place. Jacob recalled one exchange with a manager of the hotel he was working at which confirmed his subject position as someone who had a difficulty with learning. In Jacob's words:

'And one day, in one of my early jobs as a trainee maintenance engineer which is a glorious title for a general handyman, there was this big entourage of senior managers, there was this huge hotel, a 700 room hotel - and there was this really posh, well-heeled group of chaps walking round and em, someone asked me a question, the manager of the hotel asked me a question or something and I said something about something being yellow, and he wasn't being unkind, and he said

it's not pronounced like that - spell it. And I was rooted to the spot with this huge feeling of shame: I couldn't spell 'yellow' and couldn't pronounce it. So, that's how I saw myself - as this person that couldn't. So over time, and going back - that's going to stay with me for years and years; so entering into these places to do this kind of thing is huge, so I saw myself as somebody who was less than other people, that had this immense difficulty and that there was something wrong with me.' (Int 3. 4 - 5)

### **Breaking bad: crime, drugs and dependency**

Jacob struggled to hold down a full-time job and moved between various different jobs working in hotels and as a cleaner. Around this time, Jacob said he also worked as a part-time debt collector and subsidised his income with various other business enterprises, which included running market stalls, managing a series of bubble gum machines, and dealing cannabis (Int 1. 10). At the age of 19 or 20, Jacob's illegal activities escalated as he started dealing cocaine as well as cannabis. Realising that dealing cocaine was significantly more profitable than his other business ventures, Jacob made the conscious decision to abandon them in order to devote more time to buying and selling cocaine. As Jacob says:

'What happened, right, it's crazy 'cos I had made a conscious decision, right, irrational as it seems, but I remember making it, I started to sell cocaine and I was getting lots of money out of it at about 19 or 20; and what was happening was that I was finding I didn't have enough time to devote to my more entrepreneurial stuff because the time I was devoting to that side was taken away time from earning money from the coke, and the coke was giving me a decent amount of money. So, it made business sense to give up the entrepreneurial stuff and focus only on the coke, which ultimately led to my demise, really. But at the time, for a 19 year old, and I was

like looking at my dad thinking like, you're a bit of a mug - you're still, know what I mean, riding your bike, still going to work and all that, and I'm nicking this money. It was like, you had it wrong, mate - I got it right, sort of thing.' (Int 1: 11)

**Analysis: alternative criminal discourse - new status / kudos / success**

This decision to engage further in his criminal business ventures indicates a significant shift in Jacob's mindset, and is representative of a key turning point in his life that was to have profound implications for Jacob. For in choosing to abandon his legal business interests, it seems that Jacob was also turning his back on the 'straight world' and his enduring struggle to succeed in education and fulfil his father's wishes.

Jacob's described how he was excelled in his criminal activities and was beginning to reap tangible financial rewards that remained seemingly unobtainable in his previous line of work. From what Jacob says, it is apparent that his criminal activities provided him with the means of achieving his aspirations of wealth and status that was denied him in the straight world. As he says, 'So, there was a lot of kudos to it, a lot of money, lovely feelings, it addressed all my anxieties and my fears - it was meeting my needs of aspirations for using my brain, so I was caught into for a long time. (Int 1:15)

In dealing drugs and becoming increasingly immersed in the criminal scene, Jacob started using himself and eventually became addicted. Jacob said he found that using drugs provided him with a way of coping with some of his inhibitions and anxieties. '. . . I had been smoking since 9 years old, cigarette, so I was probably at that gateway addiction, if you will. So, I take this smack anyway, and it was like the

alexia of life, it was like all my anxieties, everything just flowed away. And I think that was really sort of a seminal point in my life, and what had happened I started selling heroin and about 22.' (Int 1: 2)

As time went on, Jacob's criminal activities escalated. Jacob described how began manufacturing and distributing a coveted form of crack cocaine in London, across Europe and in other parts of the world such as Jamaica and America. Jacob explained how being in demand brought him wealth and status, which he says helped him to allay some of his personal anxieties about his aspirations to feel successful. In Jacob's words:

'Now I could take powdered cocaine, wash it with really dangerous chemicals and produce this wonderful crystalline cocaine you could smoke. And suddenly I was in demand; I had people all around London phoning and saying, 'Will you come and wash this for me?' So I'd get my attache case, put all my chemicals in it, put my glass pipes in it and be across London into hotels washing up coke for people. So, there was a lot of kudos to it, a lot of money, lovely feelings, it addressed all my anxieties and my fears - it was meeting my needs of aspirations for using my brain, so I was caught into it for a long time.' (Int 1.15)

The interview data suggests that Jacob's lifestyle became self-perpetuating and led to a precarious lifestyle characterised by criminal activity, intermittent periods of time in prison and drug dependency. There eventually came what Jacob describes as 'a defining moment', when at the age of 22 Jacob first realised he had an addiction to heroin, however did not accept that he needed professional help. In Jacob's words:



‘ . . . it came to me in one of those moments - bang! And, when I look back now, I didn’t have the language to express; I couldn’t go to my dad and say ‘listen I’ve got a heroin habit’; I didn’t even have that language. The thought of going to a doctor didn’t enter my mind or anything, and it’s almost as if I internalised all that fear, and thought shit, I am in trouble, I am stuck, I need to get more drugs and that’s what I done. So I think that was pretty significant - that sort of defining moment as it were.’ (Int 1: 12)

Still in denial about his need for professional help, Jacob described how he continued in the same vein living a life of crime and using drugs on a regular basis until a girlfriend of his realised the extent of his problem and made an appointment for him to see a Harley Street consultant about his addiction. Here, Jacob explains how he had a moment of clarity: ‘This doctor said ok, you’re doing well, let’s have your partner in and talk about it with your partner. And I’m sat down, she’s sitting there and this woman started to speak, right, and I could not identify myself in her words! I thought, ‘Who is she talking about?! She’s not talking about me, but it was me, and I was so sort of disconnected from how I impacted on people - I was absolutely astonished when she was talking about it.’ (Int 1: 14)

### **Rehabilitation and recovery**

At the age of 45 - 46, Jacob says that he suffered a psychotic episode while he was in Jamaica running from the authorities. Upon returning to England from his foray in Jamaica, a friend of Jacob’s encouraged him to seek medical attention for his drug dependency which he then realised was getting seriously out of control. Fortuitously, Jacob received funding for treatment in a rehab clinic located in the south west, where he says he had the grim realisation that he had been an addict for the best

part of 25 years. In Jacob's words, 'Suddenly the light switched on and I thought, 'Oh dear me, this is what's really being going on - not the delusion I'd been telling myself!' And at that point, I knew I was really, really ill. (Int 1:1)

While receiving treatment for his addiction, Jacob says, 'I found out that while I was in treatment, really good people, they sent me to . . . they said 'Look you need to start getting up, getting out and doing voluntary work,' and that sort of thing. So I said, 'Look, I really need to address this; I can't bloody read and write - the assignments in there nearly bloody killed me!' So they sent me to Martin's Gate. . . ' (Int 1.18)

Jacob conceded with the advice of his counsellors and remembers thinking:

'Something needs to be sorted out: I need to carve something out from the mess, so to speak; and I went on this journey of sort of adult literature classes and doing vocational courses and ended up getting a job as a support worker, which led to me studying for a Diploma in Counselling.' (Int 1: 1)

In the quote below, Jacob explains in some detail why undertaking a literacy course represented a huge personal step for him in terms of his rehabilitation and reintegration back into society beyond the confines of the treatment centre. Jacob suggests that doing the course was important for him in transcending his criminal identity, overcoming his fear of stigmatising, and learning to trust others would not judge but accept him, regardless of his criminal past. He describes the episode of undertaking a literacy course as a 'stepping stone' which served to enable him to explore who he is and begin establishing his subject position of being an adult learner and 'test the water':

‘These people understood what I was fighting against and what I was trying to save myself from; they understood, but then, to take that outside of that environment was like a huge no, no’: the stigmatisation the barriers are just huge, and particularly being one of society’s worst taboos: is like a drug dealer and a heroin drug dealer, destroying other people’s lives - the taboos like that are pretty massive, jails and all the stuff. So I think a fundamental point was, if you will, finding my way from the treatment centre to a stepping stone outside of the that environment which was the learning environment, and then in some way because they understood, that bit of it gave me the confidence to sort of take that side - sorry, I’ve lost my train of thought. But to take it outside the treatment centre was just a daunting prospect, but because I was guided and pushed and had to do something, I said I need to address this issue, find myself in a learning supportive environment, that was an extension from the treatment centre into another sort of ‘acceptance’. So it was like almost you could test the waters there and think ok, if other people can do it then maybe - and so it is like a domino effect.’ (Int 3. 9-10)

Things were also changing for Jacob in his personal life at this time in his life, as it was around this time that he met his present wife and became a father to his first child. Jacob suggested that becoming a father underscored the need to develop his use of English and the importance of being successful in his studies, and in his newfound career path as a counsellor. In talking about this, Jacob said:

‘ . . . I realised, on some level it is quite sad, I realised, I went into my daughter’s parenting class the other day and she phrases exactly as I’m doing and she’s six. And I think this is one of my hugest fears about having a kid, was if I can’t read how you going to be doing the stories and all that with the child. It is a bit difficult because

when she gets stuck with a word, I can't sort of readily say to her it's because it's this and it's that. But, she sort of is doing the same sort of work as me as well, so I suppose that's sort of made me feel a bit better about myself in terms of I might be able to support her or she'll be able to support me in the near future. [laughs]' (Int 2.3)

### **The Adult Literacy course and becoming a dyslexic learner**

It is on his adult literacy course that Jacob was first diagnosed with dyslexia and began receiving specialist support, and working with other adult learners who also experienced difficulties with reading and writing. Jacob suggested that discovering that he had dyslexia was useful to him for developing coping strategies for his learning difficulties, and it also made him realise that perhaps the difficulties he faced with learning all his life were not necessarily the result of any physiological issues, or damage caused by his long-term substance abuse. In Jacob's words:

'So, that's how I saw myself as this person that couldn't. So over time, and going back - that's going to stay with me for years and years; so entering into these places to do this kind of thing is huge, so I saw myself as somebody who was less than other people, that had this immense difficulty and that there was something wrong with me. And I found out that I had dyslexia, and that separated a lot from what I thought the damage I had done to myself through dependency - it kind of filtered that out, I thought yes, alright there is a rhyme and reason for it, perhaps I'm not so damaged because of that - there's an understanding for it . . . .' (Int 3: 5)

It is clear from this quote that Jacob's awareness of the concept of dyslexia and positioning himself as being dyslexic provided a conceptual framework for not only rationalising the difficulties he encounters with literacy, but it also provides him with an alternative way / narrative / personal script for making sense of his life and the reasons why he fell into a life of crime. Jacob elaborated on this in some detail saying:

'Fundamentally, I can see sort of crystalised, in that the original tension led to causation. I interpreted that to be that I was bad, I was immoral, I was stupid or whatever, or all those things, you know what I mean; that was the interpretation I put on it, and that carried through my whole life and led to me going underground with this. Because, for whatever reason, I was a very determined and resourceful person, so where I couldn't meet the need, an identified need, it led everywhere and affected not only myself, but everybody else. Now, with the awareness of dyslexia, and I look back and I can identify and say ok, when I am explaining myself to people now, I'm not immoral, bad, disruptive necessarily, I was someone who had an unmet need. The difference is now, with dyslexia, and I can sort of conceptualise that I have got it, a huge part of that is that I am able to express myself in a new way, the historic part of it. But also, like conceptualise what is going on with me now and link it up, and get my needs met because I can say to my employers, for example, listen, it's not because I'm dumb, I'm lazy, I'm this, I've got this condition and it's this and it's that, and they say ok, and meet my needs.' (Int 3: 24 - 25)

### **Analysis**

Jacob's words seem to suggest that he found joining an adult literacy course and working with other adults in this setting profoundly useful to him in understanding his

difficulties and gradually building his confidence in being back in a formal learning environment. Jacob's words also suggest that this was very much a gradual and tentative process, as it is clear that Jacob continued to harbour deep-seated fears and inhibitions about establishing and validating his subject position as an adult learner within the formal learning context. In particular, he expressed concerns that his peers would learn of his criminal past and stigmatise him for it. Jacob spoke animatedly about his fear and anxiety of not being able to escape his criminal identity, and explains how he sees it as a constant threat to his transition back into a straight way of life. Speaking about this, Jacob said: 'I went to Martin's Gate where I met Chris and a lovely lady, and they assessed me, and at that moment I thought well, because I used to live in this fear of stigmatisation, fear of judgement, like I had moments when I would see another drug dealer busted, and that would fill me with fear and I was like I'm locked in this, I can't escape this now; I am a heroin dealer, I'm a smuggler, I'm a robber . . .' (Int 1. 18 - 19)

Despite these re-emerging fears, other experiences on the course certainly seem to have helped Jacob to actively re-evaluate and think more positively about his capability to transcend his criminal identity and reconstruct a new identity and future for himself that does not involve criminality. Jacob spoke of a significant cathartic episode he characterises as the 'Madonna Moment', where he first had the 'liberating' realisation during a session on his literacy course that it was possible to 'reinvent himself' and put in motion strategies for transcending his personal difficulties. In Jacob's words:

'I had this moment, I call it the 'Madonna moment' when I thought, do you know what, look at this person, she's made herself, she's re-doing herself, she's reinventing

herself all the the time. And I thought well maybe, here I am 46 years old, drug dealer etc, and these people are saying to me, look you may have dyslexia, let's start doing the 'ABC' again; I thought maybe, just maybe I can reinvent myself. And that's what sort of went on, I think I got around that sort of . . . I got some sort of inner resilience to say all right, forget that stigmatisation, you can - there is a way you can go back to school and start again without the shame, without the guilt; because that's what held me in really, was that before I was too ashamed to try and learn to read and write again, or to go to these places to get help. And, so then I moved out into supportive housing, I got voluntary work, I was a receptionist at Plymouth Art Centre, which was superb for me because it was like, I couldn't accept myself as I was, but I was getting indications that other people could accept me as I was, and so going into that environment was great' (Int 1:19)

### **Analysis**

Jacob's words suggest that aligning with the notion that it was possible to reinvent himself and construct a new way of thinking about his future filled Jacob with tentative flashes of optimism which were also eclipsed with the fear of failure. He recognised there were opportunities but also recognised the route to realising these opportunities was fraught with obstacles he was apprehensive about surmounting - in particular the taboo of his drug dealing identity. Elaborating on what Jacob terms as the 'madonna moment', Jacob said:

'I had all this fear of stigmatisation and I thought oh my God I'm sort of stuck. And I'm thinking what's the Madonna thing where she seemed to be, I think she was in her forties or something, and she was reinventing herself. And I suddenly became aware, I thought wow, this is the time when people are not inhibited by their same

constraints, that you are free to screw up if you want and make mistakes and she . . . it was really liberating to see her reinventing herself from what she had been in her early days to something else, and it was the first time I became consciously aware that you could do that. So I thought, do you know what, maybe it's ok, maybe you can, I can reinvent myself and that was a really defining moment for me to see that it was possible and the other bit of it really was that people would allow you to do it. So, I've worked through a lot of my inhibitions. And a huge thing as well is I was not consciously aware of human beings that went on, for the most part, un-judgemental. That was also a revelation to me. [Laughs] So I think finding myself in environments where I truly feel people, for the best, are non-judgemental and will be supportive of you and allow you to flourish is, it's been a great, great help to me to sort of lay off all my inhibitions and go for it, despite how I feel about it.' (Int 8 - 9)

### **The spectre of dyslexia**

Jacob disrupted his English studies for a year or two, but rejoined in 2004 following a work appraisal that highlighted significant concerns managers had with the standard of English featured in client reports he had drafted. Jacob said, 'I had a few appraisals and they were saying to me 'Look, we think we are going to let you go because your performance is not up to expectations, you can't write reports and all the rest of it. So it was like, the last eight months of being in absolute purgatory, because now I'm thinking I've got all this responsibility and I've done all this graft, I've got where I'm going and it's undone me again - it's finally got me!' (Int 1: 25)

Naturally, this setback was highly disconcerting episode for Jacob, as it not only represented a potential threat to his livelihood, but also re-ignited his old anxieties that surrounded his fear of failure to fulfil his father's expectations and succeed in a



professional career. Jacob realises this, saying, 'I finally get my own office and all of a sudden the spectre of the dyslexia or whatever it is rears its ugly head again. And I think 'Oh no!' And there is a point where I think just give it up, man; just stop, but that's not an option.' (Int 1:28)

Despite his concerns about the spectre of dyslexia finally undoing everything he has worked for, Jacob suggested that he remains optimistic that his dyslexia represents the final barrier for him, and that he is resolute in his determination to overcome that barrier. Jacob elaborates on this saying:

'So it's had a really powerful impact on me, it was like I've been in tears of anguish and apathy and just nearly beaten to the core, because I'm thinking my God, after all this work, this not being able to read and write thing, is finally gonna do me - it's finally gonna screw up my income, my family and everything built. So I got into a really difficult place with it. So I think to sort of get over that, is almost . . . and again I think I'm being a bit 'thingy' I suspect, but it feels like it is almost the final hurdle, which is a good place to be.' (Int 2: 10)

### **Analysis**

Reading between the lines, it's fair to say that Jacob's existence as a criminal was at times extremely chaotic, stressful and traumatic, however, listening to him speak about his departure from a life crime, it seems that this has also been considerably traumatic for him in terms of the many personal challenges he has had to face in establish his identity in the 'straight world' such as: overcoming his addiction, finding employment and embarking on literacy courses of study.

‘ . . . amongst all the confusion and my existence, I really attached my sense of self to all really crazy things and sort of all the criminality that comes with that. So in this journey where you realise that it’s been a falsehood, you’ve been lying to yourself, these things are vacuous and ‘tissueous’, if there is such a word, that they’ve got no real sort of value and you realise that you haven’t got transferable skills at that point, you’re asked by society and those around you to say right recover! You’re asked to put down everything you’ve known, and everything you’ve sort of sense of self on and to take up this world you’re frightened of and fearful of, and that you know nothing about - you’ve got no sense of your own worth and you feel like it will be against you anyway. So it’s a huge undertaking.’ (Int 3: 12)

By removing himself from everything he knew and excelled at in the world of crime, and in going through the process of rebuilding his life away from crime, he had in effect returned to the very situation he had been running away from for most of his life. Removed from the world of crime in which he excelled, Jacob no longer had the ascriptions of wealth and status that for years he had depended on to sustain his confidence and sense of self-worth. He was, in a sense, a ‘fish out of water’ (Bourdieu), and so had to learn to become a different person - establish a new identity in the ‘straight world’, which for Jacob meant facing up to his anxieties associated with the spectre of dyslexia and the fear failure in formal learning environments. In Jacob’s words:

‘I think . . . the new me that has been developing over these last eight years, sort of still prior to getting clean, all the things I built my self-esteem on are external: cars, money all that sort of stuff, being a villain - they was all sort of valuable things to me, they gave me a sense of who I am despite the morality of it. There was sort of a bit

of kudos in it; I felt I was sensible that I had value in that it was a subculture. So when I come into this world now, it was like 'Oh my God!' - I had to really face the fact that I had been completely deluded, I had to face the fact that I couldn't read and write, so I had no sort of value in this sort of world. So, coming to a place where I have got a grip on this now, it's had a massive effect on my self esteem because I was was my worst damning critic, and until I am happy with what I do the external cues don't matter any more, so when I was coming to a place where I was struggling with the work I started to realise, 'Oh my God!', all my sort of self worth and sense of my self was reliant on this bloody job. The threat of the job going and all that sort of stuff starts getting a bit dodgy and floating about. So I had to dig tremendously deep, really dig deep and suck it up. I had people round me - my supervisor - external supervision saying perhaps this isn't the place for you; I had my partner saying to me that's sort humiliating to have to go through this process, I wouldn't be able to do it. So she meant well but I'm like thinking shit, this is really dodgy. So, like I get to Chris and that slow process of digging deep sort of built an internal foundation, if I can use that term, that I've overcome this sort of external building of sense of me and this is really an internal sense that I'm slowly developing the ability even at 56. If I didn't have this job, I will soon have the ability, even if I lost the job, I will soon have the ability to go and get a job anywhere else. It might sound a bit grandiose, but also that if for any reason I didn't find a job I wanted or anything, I believe that I would be able to take, once I get a better grasp on the old English, then there will be nothing stopping me; I think could go out, go back to being an entrepreneur without the criminality and probably make a nice few quid. [laughs]

(Int 2. 9 -10)'

## **Analysis**

The quote above clearly illustrates that Jacob himself recognises he has made a definite departure from his criminal life and is in a process of finding his way in the 'straight world' and therein is constructing a new personal identity by aligning with alternative discourses to those associated with criminality. This shift is represented in Jacob's use of language where he talks about 'the new me', and uses the metaphor of 'changing worlds' to describe his departure from his criminal lifestyle. From his new subject position, he now considers himself to have been deluded in his criminal aspirations, and sees little value in the trappings of wealth he coveted as a criminal. This dismissal is indicative of a change in the discourse Jacob is using to understand the world, and is reminiscent of the way he dismissed the straight world as a 'mug's game' during in his initial forays into more serious crime.

Reflecting on his learning experiences on the adult literacy course, Jacob thinks that the course is helping him to make significant personal progress and that he is gradually overcoming his anxieties and changing the way he thinks about himself a learner. As he says, ' . . . deep down, I saw myself as someone with real learning difficulties, like almost as a disability level thing, which to some degree I think is a bit true. So I was still caught on a deeper level in this 'there's something wrong with me, this is shameful, you shouldn't be like this a your bloody age'; and I've managed to move from that to a place where I'm much more comfortable and less shameful about it.' (Int 3: 5)

Elaborating on the reasons for this change in his mindset, Jacob explains how knowing that he is officially diagnosed as being dyslexic has provided him with a conceptual framework for rationalising the difficulties he experiences with learning. Jacob's words suggest that the dyslexic diagnosis is also helping him to formulate

new understandings of the multitude of 'unexplained' difficulties and issues that have continually blighted his education since his formative years. This has proved invaluable in enabling him to achieve a degree of equanimity and is gradually engendering a newfound self-confidence regarding his academic abilities :

'Now, with the awareness of dyslexia, and I look back and I can identify and say ok, when I am explaining myself to people now, I'm not immoral, bad, disruptive necessarily, I was someone who had an unmet need. The difference is now, with dyslexia, and I can sort of conceptualise that I have got it, a huge part of that is that I am able to express myself in a new way, the historic part of it. But also, like conceptualise what is going on with me now and link it up, and get my needs met because I can say to my employers, for example, listen, it's not because I'm dumb, I'm lazy, I'm this, I've got this condition and it's this and it's that, and they say ok, and meet my needs.' (Int 3: 25)

This quote suggests that Jacob has clearly benefited from his learning experiences in that he less inhibited by his anxieties about failing, and feels more comfortable in placing trust in the people around him knowing that they will not judge or stigmatise him for either his criminal past or his difficulties with literacy. Elaborating on this, Jacob said:

'So, I've worked through a lot of my inhibitions. And a huge thing as well is I was not consciously aware of human beings that went on, for the most part, un-judgemental. That was also a revelation to me. [Laughs] So I think finding myself in environments where I truly feel people, for the best, are non-judgemental and will be supportive of you and allow you to flourish is, it's been a great, great help to me to

sort of lay off all my inhibitions and go for it, despite how I feel about it. Within adult learning, it's, to my mind, it is that kind of thing: I've come in with all my baggage and I wasn't judged. People were there to support me despite what I was, or despite how I saw myself. (Int 3: 8)

### **Validation of personal progress**

Evaluating the tangible benefits of his learning experiences on the adult literacy course, Jacob spoke about his increased self-esteem, competence, and how he is less likely to become anxious at the prospect of writing reports in his job role as a counsellor. In Jacob's words:

'And in my report writing at work, I'm beginning again, it's increased my awareness and I'm becoming more familiar with the breakdown of sentences, that a sentence must have a subject, a subject must have a verb, and phrases; and there was a lovely term I came across the other day, a 'particular verb' and that sort of thing, and that's really sort of, and I think ok, something tangible is happening at some sort of increased awareness of the structure of a sentence is coming to me; and again I think I would describe it more as an awareness rather than a practical ability. And this is really, along with other things has increased my capacity, which in turn has increased my sense of my suppose self-esteem and all that sort of stuff. Like now I'm carrying four clients and they all need discharge reports pretty soon; I nearly completed one, I've got one ongoing and sort of, three months ago, this would have caused me huge anxiety. It's like there's this pile of work and I'm like how am I going to address it? And I think, with this increased ability and this increased sense of competency has led me to be able to think more clearly rather than get taken over by the anxiety and the worry of it.' (Int 2: 3)

Jacob's sense of progress with his education and its positive influence on his proficiency at work have been validated to him by a range of other people in different contexts. In his professional role as a counsellor, Jacob says, '[My manager] is impressed with my personal development, she's impressed with the dedication I do put in to my work; she's always telling me that I can express verbally really well. My work colleagues, similarly think I do really good work and can really express myself . . . ' (Int 2: 11-12)

Jacob's partner and family have also supported him and recognised his achievements and the personal progress he has made. Jacob said, 'People are astonished, they think 'what, you can't read, you can't write' sort of thing. I think for my partner there's two bits of it: she thinks God, he's sort of addressing this, and there's a bit of it of it with her where she's still sort uncomfortable with it, and worried about the stigmatisation of it - that's a bit uncomfortable for her, but she's incredibly supportive. And my family and friends just think the fact that I've still, after everything that's happened, still got the sort of will to address these issues and carry on, they think it is nothing short of a bloody miracle. [laughs]' (Int 1.28)

Elaborating further on his partner's view of his progress, Jacob said, 'My partner - I know she will probably disagree - is impressed with my fortitude and my ability to overcome all my struggles and all the rest of it, and em, my family think I'm extraordinary because they knew what I was like in the past and what I've become now and are immensely proud of me. So I get a lot of clues. I get good feedback from Chris, even though he's like me to do a bit more homework. So generally,

people have a really a positive attitude about me; people think I'm quite a capable person.' (Int 2: 11-12)

### **The future**

Thinking about the future, Jacob says that in the 'long term, I would like to work towards becoming more effective at what I do, and I can see that if apply myself in this particular organisation, I can see myself, if I done a bit of maths and a bit of English qualifications, ending up being a senior counsellor or service manager or something like that. Long term, I could see myself as, yeah, manager or something like that; sounds a bit large, but I can see that as a possibility. (Int 2: 13 - 14)

Jacob says he realises that his literacy practices need to improve further in order to achieve his long-term career goals, and now has the confidence derived from his successes so far to continue with his studies and build on his achievements.

Interestingly, despite everything that has happened to Jacob, his plans for the future still include fulfilling his father's dying wishes of attaining a degree. He stated that ' . . . my main aim is to get to a place where can do my job without the stress and worry of not being able to write a bloody report. So that frees me up then to develop my career and perhaps one day get that bloody degree. (Int 1: 26)

Taking stock of his life and the many of problems he has faced with dyslexia, low self-esteem and confidence with formal learning, Jacob offers a simple but sobering final word on the fundamental importance of recognizing and supporting a child's specific learning needs early. In light of Jacob's own life story, his words also underscore the implications of what can transpire if this does not happen:



'Yeah, it's been great taking part in it, and I think in a really fundamental way it points to the real importance of . . . I don't want to sound like I'm talking platitudes here or something, but there's real importance of getting people young and increasing their self-worth and abilities and their skills and all the rest of it; because, as it seems to me to be the human condition that if someone can't meet their own needs they'll probably be on a course to not only sort of cause themselves great pain, but causes everyone else around them great pain. And if you can get in early, I suppose a lot of that would be avoided to some degree' (Int 3: 28).