ADULT LEARNERS' EXPERIENCES OF

A LITERACY PROGRAMME

IN THE SOUTHERN UNITED STATES:

AN INTERVIEW BASED STUDY

B HART

MA by Research   2017

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the

requirements of the

Manchester Metropolitan University

for the degree of

MA by Research

Educational and Social Research Institute

the Manchester Metropolitan University

2017

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Abstract

The thesis investigates the experiences of a group of students following an adult literacy programme in a Southern State of the US. It grew out of reservations about the aims, pedagogy and structure of this and similar programmes, and a desire to explore the potential of a more holistic approach, which would take account of the personal experience and the cultural context of adult learners.

An interview study was conducted with six adults who were participating in the selected literacy programme. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How did students' personal experiences of literacy affect their success or otherwise on the adult literacy programme?
2. How did the literacy programme connect, or fail to connect, with students' personal experiences?
3. What are the implications for curriculum and pedagogy in adult literacy programmes?

The overall orientation of the study was broadly ethnographic, in that it was interested in the perspectives, beliefs, family background and cultural histories of the participants, and the meanings that they themselves attributed to literacy. Issues of empowerment, identity, pedagogy and achievement (or lack of it) were pursued. The resulting interviews provided a rich source of data, which were analysed using grounded theory, in the attempt to minimise the influence of the researcher's values and stay close to the participants' accounts. Key themes from the analysis included:

- The significance of affect and emotion
- The intergenerational transmission of failure
- How to convert positive attitudes into achievement
- The significance, and the problematics, of personal experience
- Resistance to writing
- 'Unacknowledged' literacies.

Above all, the research indicated that attitudes, identity and achievement were inextricably bound up with issues of race, class, poverty and the history of segregation in the South. The thesis considers the implications for curriculum and pedagogy in adult literacy programmes: in particular, how literacy programmes can be better tailored to the needs of adult literacy learners as part of a local community, and tackle issues of equality and access within that community.

Chapter 1.   Introduction

This thesis reports on a case study of a group of adults who took part in an adult literacy programme in a Southern State in the US. It studies their experiences as learners during the course, relating this to their personal lives, their earlier attempts to acquire literacy skills, and the impact that pedagogies can have on the student literacy experience. Although the study does not attempt to provide general answers to problems of adult literacy transitions, it does aim to come to a better understanding of some of the often hidden or less well known factors that bear on adult literacy. The study therefore attempts to provide a holistic picture of adult learners and their past and current experiences with literacy. It asks whether and how personal encounters with literacy may make it difficult for students to be successful in formal literacy programmes, and how formal literacy programmes may fail to connect with their experience to enable literacy development.

As the literature on adult literacy demonstrates (e.g. Cazden, 1988; Brice Heath, 1983; see Chapter 2 below) adult learners often have difficulties with moving from spoken communicative language to competence in reading and writing. They may have had few opportunities for expressing critical thinking, understanding what counts as quality of content, sentence structure, word level grammar, and organizing and writing extended texts. The nature of these difficulties may not only relate to the structure or pedagogy of the adult literacy programmes that they participate in however, but also to deep-seated personal, social and emotional issues in their past and ongoing lives.

The overall aim and purpose of the study is to generate insights into the experiences of adult literacy learners, as represented in my study, in order to contribute deeper insights into the dilemmas and difficulties that may be faced during the learning process, and to consider some implications for curriculum and pedagogy in this area. The research is based on an empirical investigation of how adult students experienced a literacy intervention programme in a Southern State in the US. The study was organised around three main research questions:

1.   How did students' personal experiences of literacy affect their success or otherwise in adult literacy programmes?

2. How did the literacy programme connect, or fail to connect, with students' personal experiences?

3. What are the implications for curriculum and pedagogy in adult literacy programmes?

Initial Reasons for Embarking on the Research

My interest in this study stems partly from my work as a drama teacher in the UK prior to relocating to the US. I was interested in achieving positive literacy teaching and learning methods through drama. A creative drama approach and the examination of drama sub-texts through use of the Stanislavsky System (Stanislavsky, 2008) was used in my curriculum to enable High School Students to achieve competence in written literacy. My teaching was based on principles of empowerment and performance confidence. Though I never conducted any formal research, the pedagogical approach seemed to be successful, as evidenced in successful class written projects. Students learned awareness of literacy code swopping. It appeared to enable students to be confident and knowledgeable about using many types of language, written and spoken, formal and informal, across a range of literary genres. Using Vygotsky's theory of proximal development (1978), literacy teaching and learning took place through supported reading, researching, thinking and writing about text, subtext and performance. It encouraged individual critical insights into how a particular character's words were being interpreted through performance, by them or professional actors. Students were invited to connect informal, culturally significant literacy with formal written and spoken literacy. Extension of vocabulary and formal sentence structure developed in a peer and teacher supported environment. The students made good progress in writing independently about their research, thoughts and ideas. These ideas were informed by working within a shared, rather than individually competitive learning environment. Learning included their out-of-school school life experiences. This pedagogical approach seemed, from the exam results and informal verbal feedback I got from visiting ex-students, to help to contribute to future long term confidence in using all forms of literacy in their adult lives.

By contrast to my UK experiences, drama as a school subject in the Southern US State where I came to reside focused mainly on the teaching of performance skills. Creative

drama and extensive use of drama texts to enable bridging oral to formal written literacy development was not part of the curriculums I experienced. This lack of creative drama approach might therefore have contributed to a gap between the students' informal literacy experience and the schools' accommodation of that literacy experience within formal literacy instruction. However, this alone could not possibly answer the question completely of why the learning statistics for the US were less than adequate, as reflected for instance in a US National Post-Secondary Education Cooperative Symposium on Student Success Summary Report (2007:3) it stated that:

> High School Graduation rates in the United States have declined in the last decade.

> If achievement gaps separating low-income students from their wealthier counterparts and African American and Latino students from White and Asian American counterparts are not closed, the nation faces dramatic shortages in the number of skilled workers needed to replace retired baby-boomers.

 I was concerned to know why this was happening.

There was a specific need of adult literacy competence within the local County. I wanted, therefore, to know how people were thinking about literacy, and whether there might be hidden social and historical factors associated with low rates of literacy for this particular community. Geographically, local communities were generally divided between black and white, as were churches, school districts and some local theatre groups. The communities were also physically divided from each other and other communities by a river. The State prison was mainly populated with male black and white working class inmates who were classed as less than literate by the reading testing system. (See Appendix A for details)

Background to the research

Having described the initial impetus for the study, I will now briefly describe the literacy programme that I focused on in the research, and how my own involvement in the programme contributed to my desire to conduct research on local literacy experiences.

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According to the most recent US census breakdown of the County and State's demographic (see Appendix A), the County, compared to the overall State percentage has smaller African American, American Indian, Asian, Hispanic or Latino populations and larger white American and over 65 populations. The County is approximately equal to the State percentage in terms of population living below the poverty line. The US national data indicate that literacy levels for black and Hispanics are below those of white adults. With this knowledge the State prison demographic and prisoners' personal views on their own ability to read at the minimal level seemed all the more troublesome.

A basic literacy programme, with minimal variations, was participated in by all of the State adult education establishments, including the local men's prison and adult literacy centre. The Division of Adult Education and Literacy (DAEL) within the Office of Vocational and Adult Education of the US Government stated on its website (2017) that it:

> Administers programmes that help American adults get the basic skills they need including reading, writing and math, English language proficiency, and problem solving to be productive workers, family members, and citizens.

When employed as an instructor on this basic adult literacy programme for entry into higher education, I found it, due to the short study time and emphasis on a short-term testing, to be limiting in extended literacy empowerment. Despite my best efforts to change this short term focus, I was unable to do so. I wanted to fully understand why. I decided to research outside my place of work to provide a degree of objectivity in my findings about students' experiences. I chose the local literacy centre for my study. I obtained the programme's training Manual, attended a tutor training session run by the centre and interviewed adults about their experiences. I also asked for and obtained samples of the interviewed students' written work for further analysis (See Chapter 3 for details of the methodology used in the study).

What I found from researching the programme experience at the literacy centre was that there was little evidence of extended experience of writing sustained prose. There was predominantly training for word-focused text – filling in gaps and comprehension. Emphasis was on vocabulary, rather than writing and reading for meaning, knowledge

or enjoyment. Paper and pen and computer testing was predominant. I proposed that the students' biggest issue was that they were afraid of getting things wrong – which adults often are – and this was confirmed by my interviewees. Students appeared to be able eventually to pass a basic literacy test, or for some the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) with the help of the programme but did not seem to be able to participate in extended writing (e.g. what was expected at college). On the other hand, students were given a limited reading test when entering the programme. I thought that they may have had literacy skills that were not identified on the programme, and therefore concerned they may have seemed more 'illiterate' than they were.

The instructor training Manual has a quote on its front cover by Winston Churchill about never giving up. I was struck by this quotation. Though tenacity is at the root of literacy learning it seemed inappropriate to have a quote from a white English male figure that had nothing to do with the local community. It seemed reminiscent of colonialism and the historical oppression of white domination through slavery which was part of the area's past. Many plantations are still open for historical visits and remembrance. I was also concerned about the idea that there was, by referencing Churchill, an aligning of literacy with war and winning and losing. Literacy empowerment is, I would argue, about mutual support and help and an enjoyment of words, reading, writing, thinking and expressing. This quote seems to imply that literacy is about a battle, winning over the student rather than empowering them democratically. Another quote was included in the Manual, again by a white, wealthy male, to sum up what was taught and how it was taught. The quote was by William J. Durant, 'Woe is to him who teaches men faster than they can learn' (C.F. Literacy Council Manual 2010: 26).

Durant was the co-founder of General Motors. The original context of the quote is the need to avoid mistakes that could be costly to industry and the production of cars. When put in the context of literacy empowerment the quote seems to support teaching at the learner's pace. This is a valuable point to make, but only if the person in the learning position is not being limited by a skewed expectation of less than they are capable of. It also aligned the human beings taking the programme with an object, a car. That they are all the same, produced on a conveyer belt for others to use. The quote also indicates the power of the teacher over the learner. The teacher of

profound wisdom is again seen in this Manual, through this quote, as a white wealthy male. These two quotes suggested to me that there were many things I needed to fully understand. I studied the Manual contents further with centre staff to see if this illuminated any difficulties in my understanding.

The table of contents included what was termed the four areas of literacy: Alphabetics, Comprehension, Fluency and Vocabulary. It then went on to focus on components of reading instruction: Phonological Awareness, Word Attach Techniques, Phonics, Direct Instruction, Word Families, Fluency, Skill Books, Journals, Sight words, Vocabulary, Word Parts, Language Experience Approach, Comprehension, Spelling, Student Writing, Lesson Planning and 500 most frequently used words. The emphasis of this programme seems to be on reading and vocabulary.

Although there was a section about student writing and journals, there was no evidence of journal writing in the written work examples I was given. When I asked the centre about the journals I was told the students rarely wrote in them. Short term, 'fill in the gap' exercises appeared to be their main experiences of writing. I took part in one session of the training programme. It was made up of volunteers, who were members of the local community without training or qualifications in literacy teaching. All were white, and included a concerned parent who wanted to train to be an instructor in order to learn how to teach literacy to his first child. As the description of the programme progressed one person spontaneously asked about opportunities to write. This was responded to with the advice that students needed to learn to read first. Nobody in the group asked about extended writing again. We took part in exercises about the literacy learning programme requirements and that was the training for that day. What concerned me most was that the Manual did have a section about student writing. It stated extended writing should be happening. However, for whatever reason it was not. It also worried me that the format of the Direct Instruction teaching approach could not be diverted from except in minimal ways to meet individual student's needs and experiences.

Another part of the content section that troubled me was the Language Experience Approach. This required the student to talk about something and the tutor would then write down what they had said. The tutor would then read it back and the student

would, the Manual professed, often want to make changes because they had heard how they had got it 'wrong'. This type of exercise approach was supposed to teach awareness between informal and formal written literacy. But this judgemental approach also transferred a negative message about there being shame associated with people's oral language, culture and forms of expression, rather than focusing on differences in a positive way between spoken and written forms of language.

The latter part of the Manual contained a section entitled The Frank Laubach Story and Learning Principles. Laubach's picture is accompanied by a quote by him which contains the idea that a literate person is a different person, 'A literate person is not only an illiterate person who has learned to read and write, he is another person. He is different. To promote literacy is to change man's conscience by changing his relation to his environment. It is an undertaking on the same plane as the recognition and incarnation of fundamental human rights' (C.F. Literacy Council Manual 2010: 103).

The article goes on to say Laubach was understood to be the 'mender of old baskets' because he had taught adults to read and write. It was not, as with the above quote, an idea that the majority of the students would want to identify with as it implied they were lacking in some way and unable to think for themselves. It was also, due to the era it was taken from, sexist in its tone and content. Many of the students were African American women and this was, yet again a white man talking about men becoming literate and broken people who needed to be mended. This idea of literacy and difference again made me think about colonialism and of white male domination over others' identities: trying to eliminate a person's cultural experience to create a supposedly superior one rather than empowering them to be who they already are in a multi-literate environment.

Laubach was a missionary in the Philippines where he wanted to bring literacy to Islamic tribes. The article does not state anything about literacy within their language. He developed phonic charts with pictures to help people learn to read in English. He said he was failing because he did not love them as equals and acted in a superior way to them. He changed his approach, the article states, to truly love them. He believed he then began to succeed in his mission. He was unable to build schools and train teachers in his methods because he had no money during the Great Depression.

Incorporated from his philosophy in the US literacy programmes today is the idea that everyone can teach another to read. The programme, the Manual states, therefore emphasises loving your students, using charts as memory aids and incorporating one-on-one tutoring. However, more than a century later, the emphasis on love and equality appeared to exist alongside, consciously or unconsciously continuing assumptions about cultural deficit.

The Learning Principles in the Manual includes a section entitled the Learning Pyramid. This displays what it terms the average retention rates for different training methods according to the National US Training Library. The most successful methods are, it states, Teaching Others, 90%, Process of Doing, 75%, Discussion, 50%, declining to Demonstration, 30%, Audio Visual, 20%, Reading, 10% and Lecture, 5%. But it is not clear, with regard to this programme, how ways of teaching others and the process of doing are actually carried out, and how they contribute to developing literacy skills. From the examination of the programme Manual there is a place for connecting and enabling through student's own writing development, but in practice this did not seem to be happening very much. Students and in fact instructors were loved by the centre but had to comply with the limitations that the programme's literacy approach imposed.

Further concerns arose for me when I was teaching the similar generic adult literacy programme at the local community college. I was given a grammar book to use with all students that expressed how African American students might find parts of the formal literacy learning difficult. The idea again of one cultural expression being inferior to another and as a consequence less able caused anger and embarrassment for African American students and everyone. We critiqued the book together as a class. I asked the programme organisers for the book to be removed. Conceptions of identity, knowledge and power were therefore taken for granted for both the instructors and the students. Topic choice was made for the students and instructors by the programme's use of national generic tests. The test results proved the success or otherwise of the programme. The national, generic short term testing is organised and run by Educational Testing Services, a non-profit global organisation that provides testing services to fulfil the US government adult literacy basic standard competency policy requirements. I also realised that the multiple choice literacy test that I used to

test the students at the end of the programme had cultural references that were unfamiliar to my students, such as reference to the Leaning Tower of Pisa. I asked for the test to be devised by the staff and made more relevant to the local community as a helpful step to empowerment. I was informed this would be worked on by full time staff in charge of the programme. I therefore hoped, as thinking about this approach had begun, a culturally appropriate new test would be produced.

The concerns I had about the learning barriers of the programme applied therefore to both the community college and the centre where I was conducting my research. Staff and students had to comply with what was being asked of them with little opportunity for questioning. At my work place there was not time in a staff meeting situation to discuss together with other instructors what our experience of teaching literacy was like in the classroom. I was given work and classes on a termly, part-time basis. Part-time instructors were not obliged or paid to attend termly staff meetings.

It seemed to me that the learning situation associated with the programme I was teaching was unfair. I could not understand why it needed to be this way. I experienced students, when they first attended, as very angry and frightened. Many were trying to establish careers and a steady income for themselves. Many were in a poverty trap. One student I taught slept in the back of her car. All were trying to improve their lives. Failure to pass the college's standard 'fill in the gap' literacy test meant they could not continue pursuing their career ambitions. Many expressed feeling held back and frustrated by having to be on the programme. Those who had failed the college's generic literacy entry test were then obliged to take part in the basic literacy programme for three months. If they passed the programme's final literacy test they were able to go on to complete the college courses they wanted to do. The emphasis had to be, as noted, on reading and writing for the test, even though extended writing was advocated by the department. I tried to concentrate on reading, discussion and writing development with my groups. Having come from a more flexible teaching background, my personal view was that focus on a short term test result was wrong and oppressive. Students were beginning to become confident and lose their anxiety and fears through reading and writing together. The class participants sometimes talked about their background and literacy life experience during this process. I also thought I could help them to get over their current fears by encouraging

literacy through their own interests. However, this type of teaching and learning interaction was difficult due to a lack of time. I was instructed that, literacy wise, I was just required to put a 'Band-Aid' on the situation; it was all I had time to do. I was told to help the people pass the test and let them move on. The literacy 'Band-Aid' imagery became synonymous to me with a gagging rather than an enabling of literacy and life empowerment for the students and staff.

I met many students as a community college instructor. Groups were made up of up to thirty people. When I first met the students many had an expectation that I was going to dominate and disadvantage them in some way further because the programme was compulsory. Students were very reluctant at first to mix with each other for group work. Their anger would abate as time went on and some level of trust and friendship was developed between us all. I was working with adults who had not chosen to be there. Trusting the working environment therefore was difficult and confusing and I would only be able to write about what was hidden and unspoken by researching the situation.

Finally, when first looking to be a teacher in the South, along with the negative literacy statistics, my concern about fairness was ignited by my own treatment before being allowed to obtain a teaching position. My experience followed a similar pattern to the one I later went through as an Instructor with adult students. No regard was given to my previous knowledge and experience. Before being able to take part in any university programme or teaching role I was told that none of my qualifications or experience was valid in the US, State and County. I would have to take part in the GRE Test and then train again through a master's degree in education course. The term GRE stood for Graduate Record Examinations and was a replacement qualification for a high school diploma. It had first been brought into being for people returning from military service in the Second World War who had missed out on their high school education. The test was used to enable university entrance. Its testing focus followed a similar format to the programme I ended up teaching and researching. Testing of maths and literacy skills were through multiple choice questions and the test took place under timed conditions. The positive results of this enabled me to join the degree programme at the local university. However, the testing experience itself was limiting, austere and isolating taking place on a computer at the local testing centre.

As part of my degree I worked with teachers who already taught in the local education system. Meeting the teachers was more helpful to me than the test or even the master's in the sense of helping me to further understand local attitudes to educational policies. For example, the use of the wooden paddle as punishment in schools had only recently been banned in the local County. This was a very different approach to educational discipline and social justice than I had previously experienced in the UK as a teaching professional.

I listened to examples from teachers and the professors teaching the course of issues that concerned them. A white teacher remarked they would be falling short in their teacher performance assessments and pay if they did not have a minority quota in their classrooms. I was taught the teaching literacy elements of the master's course in the same way the basic literacy programme was run. The professor of this course talked of how Phonics for reading was the only way to help black and poor white working class students. I found it difficult to fit in with this 'learning' environment and was fearful to write about my experiences within the university setting. Group discussions were generally about group presentations of a particular learning skill. When on work placement, as part of my degree, in an outlying rural school and in a suburban school less than two miles from the university, students in both schools spoke of not knowing where the university was or how to get there. I wanted to be part of an educational system that was about empowerment not about oppression and segregation. Equality of opportunity in education was a philosophy I had tried to live my life through.

When on another placement workshop with teachers and teacher assistants I managed to enable everyone, as part of my assessment task, to take part in a short play extract. It was clear African American contributors were extremely gifted in performance and in analysing what the play and language meant to them; however they were all the teacher assistants rather than teachers. African American women in my basic literacy class were also very capable. Many could already write extended prose but were diagnosed as having literacy problems because entry to the college did not test sustained writing. When talking with students in my class, issues relating to the time of desegregation arose. An African American student discussed how it all went wrong because of the desegregation of schools. She spoke of how it was better

before desegregation and how opportunities to advance educationally had been much greater for a black person when schools were segregated.

I wondered at times if I was imagining the extent of the problems. Perhaps I did not understand the local people and the situation well enough. I felt powerless to fully help enablement for all. The legacy of colonialism, consciously or unconsciously, seemed evident from the current comments made by both black and white members of the local population. The only way I could understand fully was through further research about adults' experiences.

I decided to locate my research in the local literacy centre which was first opened in 1970 by a local Baptist Association and became a not-for-profit organisation in 1983. The centre was run on a confidential basis and instructed students individually through the literacy programme to meet the Government's basic standard Adult literacy requirements. The main data for the study, as described further in Chapter 3, comes from extended interviews with six students who were following the adult literacy programme. The six participants spoke about their lives and their past experiences of literacy and of education in general, their reasons for attempting to improve their literacy, and their views of the literacy programme. These rich accounts formed the basis for the analysis provided in Chapter 4 of the significance of personal, cultural and institutional factors in adult literacy acquisition.

Chapter 2.   Approaches to Literacy: A Review of Relevant Literature

Introduction

> So the question is formed: for whom will English be taught. Of equal
> importance, how will it be taught? And to what end? Will we […] enable
> pedagogies […] to dialogue with and through text with the intention of
> expanding understandings of self and society or will we make the divorce
> between literacy practices and the lives of learners permanent and final? Will
> we support uses of reading and writing that provide students with open forums
> for construction of identity or will we continue to look the other way in some
> farcical and potentially destructive game of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell?' Will we
> encourage complex transactions with a range of texts that allow marginalized
> learners to realize their dreams and aspirations without sacrificing their
> cultures, or will we continue to merely replicate and reify a culture that will
> continue to marginalize others? (Fecho, Amatucci and Skinner, 2007:46).

In this chapter I review some of the research literature on the teaching, learning and
testing of literacy. The research on literacy is vast, and I focus therefore on work that
situates the teaching and learning of literacy within cultures and communities, as this
work is of most relevance to my research. I do not discuss therefore, except in passing,
theories which conceptualise literacy in terms of the acquisition of 'basic skills' such as
decoding Phonics, and the mastery of grammar, vocabulary and spelling; although I do
discuss and critique the policy context of adult literacy teaching in the US, which is
based on such narrow models. Instead, I discuss below a range of approaches which
insist on understanding literacy as sociocultural practices:

a) Involving more than grammar and vocabulary (for instance, 'Whole Language'
   approaches, and those which emphasise the importance of function and
   communicative purpose)

b) Indissolubly entwined with the cultural contexts in which literacy is used (for
   instance, approaches informed by anthropology or the ethnography of
   communication)

c) Inextricably shaped by power, ideology and unequal access to the social goods afforded by literacy (for instance, Critical Discourse Analysis; Critical Race theory)

Approaches to Literacy: Communication, Culture, Class and Ethnicity

Whole Language Approaches

When I began studying for my master's in curriculum instruction in 2003 at my local US University, there was a 'how to teach literacy' module as part of my High School teaching course. Here I was lectured about teaching literacy through Phonics and basic skills exercises. There was a Whole Language module but this was not available to teachers studying for the high school curriculum instruction qualification. The 21st century has seen further advances in critical theory about teaching literacy. However, a Phonics/Skills vs Whole Language teaching 'debate', with skills 'winning' in terms of curriculum instruction, was still the main emphasis in this institution during my time of study. Whether to teach literacy through an emphasis on Phonics at the expense of Whole Language continues to be debated in US education today. My own narrow learning experience at that time confirmed my interest in more socially just literacy learning approaches other than Phonics, and these form the main focus of this critical review.

A Whole Language approach to literacy learning was a movement for change in literacy education advocated by a number of practitioners and researches during the late nineteen seventies and eighties. Newman (1991) an advocate of Whole Language, cited Goodman & Goodman (1972), Mayher (1990) and Edelsky (1990) as major contributors to this change of thinking about literacy learning. She argued that these scholars promoted an approach to learning literacy based on thinking about the purpose of literacy rather than just skills. Agreeing with Mayher's view, Newman contended that Whole Language was about the learner participating with, rather than repeating what a teacher had told them to say or write. She explained, 'The learning might be unconscious but the motivation for performing the tasks which led to the learning is supposed to be a sense of personal meaningfulness for the learner' (Newman, 1991:73).

Newman (1991:74) further explained how, for teachers Whole Language represented:

> A teaching framework that was able to foreground learners' intentions, the social nature of learning, the significance of taking risks, and the learners' control over learning. In this way the teacher becomes a participating learner in the learning context.

She claimed that Whole Language was in many ways experimental in its emphasis. It involved having firstly a mental theory in mind about how life was. This theoretical idea or hypothesis would then be investigated by the student with the instructor. A continual transaction between past and continuing life encounters would be engaged in through Whole Language by student and teacher within the process of the investigation. She emphasised learning, '… is as much a collaborative social process as it is an individual one' (Newman, 1991:74).

Edelsky (1993:549) argued that Whole Language can include Direct Instruction and Phonics but what is different is the purpose. A Whole Language teacher will teach an aspect of punctuation because it is required for the person's purpose of wanting to complete a particular piece of work for a specific reason. It is not because it is a skill required by the curriculum guide or by a 'skills' understanding of literacy.

Newman (1991:74) described how the Whole Language view translated into her own teaching:

> I am forced to base my moment to moment judgements not on my advice of experts but on how my students react and engage with the learning situation we are in. The students' questions, their decisions, the connections they are making, specific requests for information/ help become opportunities for me to discover new things both about learning and about how to assist my students.

She acknowledged that there had been problems in implementing Whole Language approaches in schools. Newman argued that there had been a misinterpretation of Whole Language when it became a teaching device rather than a way of being with literacy. The author described how educators and students negatively explained it as '…doing, adopting and using Whole Language' (73).

According to Moorman, Blanton and McLaughlin (1994) critics of Whole Language such as McKenna, Robinson & Miller (1990) and Adam (1990) argued that Whole Language supporters had not done enough to back their Whole Language success claims up with sound research. They contested studies that had been done disproved the Whole Language argument completely. Whole Language promoters such as Edelsky (1990) claimed such cynicism was due to fear by opponents of having to change ways of doing literacy.

Insightfully, Moorman, Blanton and McLaughlin concluded that turning the approach of Whole Language into a 'debate' implying a winning or losing stance was not helpful, 'Truth becomes a function of which side piles up the most points; serious issues and concerns raised by the losers become ignored' (Moorman, Blanton and McLaughlin, 1994:309). This view accords with my experience of this discussion.

Functional Approaches

Social Semiotic approaches to literacy and learning were also advocated during the latter half of the twentieth century. One of the main pioneers of this approach was Michael Halliday. Halliday (1978) developed the theory of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG). Through this approach he argued for analytic social cognisance of language. Language acquisition was fundamentally a matter of *learning how to mean.* Knowledge of the setting around which the text evolved was where learning took place. Hasan (2002) also argued for language awareness and social connection. She emphasised it was the language appropriate to a social situation that determined the text structure, 'The readiness to receive information, the very perception of what constitutes appropriate information is fashioned through the specific experience of discourse' (Hasan, 2002:547). Halliday (1993:93) elaborated:

> Language development is learning how to mean: and because human beings are quintessentially creatures who mean (i.e. who engage in semiotic processes, with natural language as prototypical), all human learning is essentially semiotic in nature.

He illuminated his functional theory further, 'Language is not a domain of human knowledge; language is the essential condition of knowing, the process by which experience becomes knowledge' (Halliday, 1993:94).

For Halliday, language learning should not be isolated but connected to all other aspects of learning, 'Learning language, learning through language, learning about language' (Halliday, 1993:113). He emphasised that functional literacy emphasises:

> Not only a developmental continuity right through from birth, to adult life with language in home, neighbourhood, primary school, secondary school and place of work but also a structural continuity running through all components and processes of learning.

The author stated that a functional approach led to literacy empowerment because, 'Learning is learning to mean and to expand one's meaning potential' (Halliday, 1993:113).

Genre Theory

From Halliday's functional literacy theory the idea of structural continuity and social context was developed further into Genre Theory. Genre Theory extended thinking to provide a broader theoretical understanding of literacy as sociocultural practice. Martin & Rose (2008) developed what became known as the Sydney School of Genre Theory. Through Martin & Rose's (2008:5) descriptions of how they observed student work they illuminated their sociocultural literacy genre emphasis. They state that they attempted to:

> Identify and name the different kinds of texts that are found, by looking closely at the kinds of meaning involved – using global patterns to distinguish one text type from another and more local patterns to distinguish stages within a text.

Martin & Rose (2008:6) further defined gaining literacy through a genre as:

> Staged, goal orientated social processes. Staged because it usually takes us more than one step to reach our goals; goal oriented because we feel frustrated if we don't accomplish the final steps; social because writers shape their texts for readers of particular kinds.

Perhaps one of the most important motivations for my study is that Genre Theory also recognised that power and inequality are often associated with writing genres, with some groups having less familiarity than others with a diverse range of genres. Theorists, like the Sydney School therefore recommended teaching genres explicitly and directly – a position that Whole Language advocates criticised as too formulaic. One of the main points of Genre Theory however is that different genres of language – e.g. news reportage, doctor-patient communication, novels, adverts – have different rules and conventions, and that it is necessary to learn, understand and use these conventions. Hyland (2003:27) summarised teaching and learning through genre as teaching the knowing of why writers make linguistic and rhetorical choices. He contended:

> Genre is in part a social response to process. It suggests that because writing is a means of connecting people with each other in ways that carry particular social meanings, it cannot be only a set of cognitive abilities (…) To understand it fully and to teach it effectively we need to include in this mix the writer's experiences together with a sense of self, of others, of situation, of purpose and – above all - of the linguistic resources to address these effectively in social action.

Hyland (2003:21) identified three forms of Genre Theory. The first is The New Rhetoric Approach. This focuses on the situation where the writing is taking place and how this influences the writing. The second is the ESP (English for Specific Purposes) approach:

> A class of structured communicative events employed by specific discourse communities whose members share broad social purposes. These purposes are the rationale of a genre and help to shape the ways it is structured and the choices of content and style it makes available.

The third is based on Halliday's (1978) Systematic Functional Linguistics (SFL). This model of genre Hyland explained, stresses, 'The purposeful, interactive and sequential character of different genres and the ways language is systematically linked to context through patterns of lexico – grammatical or vocabulary and rhetorical or stylistic features' (Hyland, 2003: 22).

Hyland (2003:22) emphasised the intricacies of how this way of learning:

> Systematically links language to its contexts of use, studying how language
> varies from one context to another and, within that variation, the underlying
> patterns which organise texts so they are culturally and socially recognised as
> performing particular functions.

Hyland (1994:23) surmised how this would contribute to equality in society:

> The exploration and description of these patterns and their variations has been
> the focus of Genre Theory and the resources it exploits to provide
> disadvantaged learners with access to the cultural capital of socially valued
> genres.

Hyland (2002) noted that Genre Theory has been subject to critique on the grounds
that genre texts studied have been too limited and more analysis was needed of
spoken genres and pertinent genres for 21st century literacy. He also stated that critics
contended, 'Access to the dominant genres of our culture does nothing to change the
power structures that erect and support these prestigious practices' (Hyland,
2002:125).

Hyland stated that all theories of genre engaged in the idea that groups of texts are
similar, or completely different, and that texts could be categorised as one genre or
another. However, he argued that contrary to his critics there was a growing body of
research that examined language variations. This, Hyland (2002:118) argued, revealed
another level of understanding about genre:

> How clusters of register, style, lexis and other features reflect the different
> personal and institutional purposes of writers, the different assumptions they
> make about their audiences, and the different kinds of interactions they create
> with their readers.

The further the research into Genre Theory goes, he argued the more is known about
how to enable teacher and student to be more successful in their genre learning.

Critical Discourse Analysis

This work explicitly addresses the issue of power and ideology at work in language and literacy, combining a focus on (a) how discourse norms are tied to institutions that define what counts as knowledge – e.g. psychology, the law, education; (b) how these discourses are reflected in the fine details of speech and writing. Gee (1999) described this as the distinction between Discourse with a Capital D, the power discourses used by institutions, and discourse with a small d, the often unseen discourses that go on within institutions. He made explicit the link between literacy as valued in schools and the interests of the white middle classes. He discussed how we all hold unconscious cultural/discourse theories that help us make sense of texts and of the world.

Gee argued for a greater understanding of the meanings of words. He stated that when looked at more closely in context words always have real meaning and this can be attached to or different from particular groups socially and culturally. In terms of the mind's ability and how we learn Gee also argued that the mind is far from being instruction following. It is able to work in figurative and general ways. He contested, 'The human mind is a 'pattern recognising' device that works by primarily storing experiences and finding patterns in those experiences' (Gee, 1999: 53). Therefore, he argued, individual genre patterning experiences have to be recognised by everyone in the literacy learning relationship before learning can take place.

Hyland (2003:19), in his discussion of Genre Theory, similarly reiterated how lack of genre specific teaching advantaged the middle class who have been exposed to the values of the culturally dominant and shared the educator's awareness about particular and important genres and the possibility of difference within the forms of communication that possess cultural wealth. He cited African American educator Delpit (1988:287) who emphasised:

> In this country students will be judged on their product regardless of the process they utilized to achieve it. And that product based as it is on the specific codes of a particular culture, is more readily produced when the directives of how to produce it are made explicit.

Hyland (2003:20) further remarked about the perils of not teaching genre:

Students outside of the mainstream, therefore find themselves in an invisible curriculum, denied access to the sources of information they need to succeed. Thrown back on their own resources they are forced to draw on the discourse conventions of their own cultures and may fail to produce texts that are either contextually adequate or educationally valued.

Fairclough (1989:3) in his development of Critical Discourse Analysis similarly argued that understanding different forms of language and their corresponding power had become even more important for current life:

It is not just that language has become perhaps the primary medium of social control and power, though that is noteworthy enough; language has grown dramatically in terms of the uses it is required to serve, in terms of the range of language varieties, and in terms of the complexity of the language capacities that are expected of the modern citizen.

As with Hyland, he argued it is important to know about the density of language capacity in order to understand how language adds to enabling the power that certain people can have over others.

Community Literacies

Community Literacies have been a focus of research which attempts to clarify what might be going on for people when they approach a literacy experience or event. Street (1993) argued that for him the notion of the literacy event meant more than just the behaviour that goes on. He argued that we have representations in our head of each type of literacy event that we have learned and socialised into. When we participate in literacy practices, he claimed, we are not only participating in the event, 'but the conceptions of the reading and writing process we hold when we are engaged in the event' (Street, 1993:83). Street discussed how there had been changes in the focus of adult literacy research, with the move to look at the power circumstances within literacy praxes and what was meant by culture. Adopting an ethnographic perspective (see Chapter 3), Street argued that culture was about what was going on in life: how people were using objects and signs to make meaning in their lives.

Barton (2001) argued that a social perspective on literacy was essential for understanding where literacy was going in the future. He stated that there should be no divisions of status between different forms of literacy (for example, novels, academic articles, shopping lists); rather, more focus on what is similar and different between different forms of text and how they are all influenced by social conventions. Barton discussed how the links between the spoken and written are intricate and important to recognise. In contrast to other linguistic theories, he argued that the way the spoken word is used has often come from the written. It is therefore important to look at different genres and domains of literacy to see what patterns and outcomes emerge.

The notion of community literacies has been important in the development of the present study. It has encouraged me to attend to the cultural significance of literacy within particular communities, and to consider a wide and diverse range of spoken and written texts, as these figured in the accounts of the research participants.

Ethnography of Communication

Work within the tradition of the Ethnography of Communication, as its name implies, adopt an ethnographic approach which attends closely to local literacy practices and events as these are embedded in the cultures and communities of those involved. From such a perspective, literacy processes are understood as inside the person and at the same time outside, as social processes which enable people to relate and link with one another. Southern researcher Shirley Brice Heath (1983) completed a thirty year study in South Eastern North Carolina about the learning space between the individual, their background, teacher knowledge, literacy curriculum requirements and long term reading and writing development. It is worth describing this work in more detail here, since it has been particularly influential for the present research. In her study, in the 1980's and 90's Brice Heath analysed the different ways of communicating and experiencing literacy and language between the educational institutions, powerful mainstream users and communities and families in the neighbouring areas. She was particularly interested in how the intersection of these contexts impacted individual and community literacy development.

Brice Heath researched in great detail the ways families learnt to use language at home and at school. She studied two communities who only lived a few miles from each other in the South Eastern United States. 'Roadville' was a white working-class community of families who had been involved for generations in the life of textile mills; 'Trackton' an African-American working-class community had older generations who had grown up farming the land, but current members worked in the mills. In tracing the families' language practices and the ways that children learned how to talk, Brice Heath found deep cultural differences between the two communities, and how both differed from the pattern of the townspeople, the 'mainstream' blacks and whites who held the power in the schools and workplaces of the region. Heath came from, lived and worked amongst the people she researched so extensively. Her study was informative and effective at a local level because she went into the local schools and talked about the local communication and informal literacy differences with the teachers and the learning communities to help them understand the subtleties of those differences. She also talked with the families about the differences in school communication. She created a literacy bridge to enable no part of the literacy curriculum to be invisible to any section of the learning community. Nevertheless, she expressed her frustration that her way of working with literacy events and practices within schools and local communities was never followed through at policy level.

Cazden (1988:54), who studied classroom communication from an ethnographic perspective, examined speaking rights, teacher's role and speech style within learning situations. She stated how this situation could prove unfair:

> Teachers have the right to speak and at any time to any person; they can fill any silence or interrupt any speaker; they can speak to a student anywhere in the room and in any volume or tone of voice. And no one has the right to object.

For Cazden, as for other scholars discussed above, such as Brice Heath and Gee, classroom discourse offers a very limited range of language practices, which some groups of learners may not be familiar with. Cazden (1988:60) advocated for greater opportunities for discussion and a move to choice by the students in order to accommodate topics that do not fit into the lesson structure and to enable positive

changes in reasoning and social significance. She argued that it was important in the teacher's role to change from asking the usual questions to more open-ended utterance types such as:

Make declarative statements

Reflective restatements

Invitations to elaborate

And (hardest of all) silence

With the change in questioning Cazden emphasised that teachers then needed to change their dialogue method away from only using a final draft approach to one that also included more investigation and probing. However none of this is likely to be effective without teacher and student's awareness of the full extent and reason for a change of mind model at such a literacy learning event.

Critical Race and Critical Race Pedagogy

Critical Race and Critical Race Pedagogy theory is a necessary perspective for my study and, I would argue, for all research about teaching and learning inequality. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) advocated for a critical race theory approach in education, drawing on the development of this perspective for legal research. This, they argued, is a useful lens to help analyse educational inequality. They advocated this for three reasons: 'that race continues to be significant in explaining inequality in the US; that US society is based on property rights rather than human rights; and the intersection of race and property creates an analytical tool for understanding inequality' (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995:48). They argued for research into the, 'social-structural and cultural significance of race in education as it is central to inequality'(Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995:50), and in particular for African American students who, they stated, continue to remain the most disadvantaged group educationally and socially in US society.

Ladson-Billings and Tate noted that the US Constitution was built on property rights originating from European Settlers taking civil ownership of land from the American Indian. The white settlers benefited from this form of 'democracy' and, as is well

documented, also forced very large numbers of African people to America to be used as slaves where they were legally categorised as property and denied human rights. The fact that society and US 'democracy' was based on property rights meant government had little incentive to secure the human rights for Africans. In the 1950's and 60's the civil rights leaders brought demands for social justice for African Americans and appealed to civil and human rights. They 'ignored' that society was built on the concept of individual rights being connected to property rights, preferring to concentrate on human rights. African Americans have remained disadvantaged ever since. The authors argued discussions around property tax relief signified, '…more affluent communities (which have higher property values, hence higher tax assessments) resent paying for a public school system whose clientele is largely non-white and poor' (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995:53).

Ladson-Billings and Tate also argued that, 'curriculum represents a form of intellectual property (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995:54). The quality and quantity of the curriculum varies with the property values of the school. Curriculum in mainly affluent white communities is broader than in mainly poor African American communities who are therefore denied the opportunity to learn as many programmes of study. Intellectual property is also contained within the real property of the educational institution, such as science facilities, which are more readily available in schools with the more affluent fundraising PTA's. They argued that the cause of African American poverty and lack of adequate school facilities is institutional and structural racism. Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995:55) referenced Wellman who reiterated, 'Culturally sanctioned beliefs, which regardless of the intentions involved, defend the advantages whites have because of the subordinated positions of racial minorities' (Wellman, 1977: xviii). The insights provided by critical race theory have been important in shaping the perspective adopted in the present research which, as noted, was carried out in a region of the US where the history and the present-day realities of race and racism permeate almost all aspects of individuals' lives.

Adult Literacy Learning

Discussing the facilitation of learning in higher education, Howie and Bagnall (2012) argued that 'deep' learning can be better achieved if the student has appropriate

background knowledge, a capacity to work at a higher cognitive level and a preference for working conceptually rather than with disconnected detail. Referring to Biggs' (Biggs & Tang 2007:391) model of surface and deep approaches to learning they argue that deep rather than merely surface learning can be facilitated by the teacher through strategies such as:

Teaching to bring out the big picture or underlying structure of the subject matter; along with the interrelatedness of the parts.

Teaching to get active responses rather than passive responses from students

Teaching to build on what students already know and assuming that they already know a lot

Engaging students misconceptions directly while teaching

Assessing for understanding of underlying structure, rather than facts only

Creating a positive working atmosphere

Emphasising depth rather than breadth of learning

And practising what they preach.

This advice is for all adult teaching and learning including the teaching of literacy.

Coker (2003: 662-666) researched through interview a sample of adult African American female learners. Her findings are particularly relevant to the present study, as African American women also make up a large percentage of my interviewees. Coker concluded from her study that learning motivation was expressed in three ways:

Self-development; family development; community development.

For the women in this study, self-development was a central motivating factor for pursuing higher education. The idea of achieving educational goals was very much part of their culture and lives. Education was used as a means of personal redefinition, empowerment and transformation (Mezirow, 1997).

For many African American women in this study, the pursuit of higher education was considered an endeavour that would not just benefit themselves

but their entire family (….).As in all families one, one person's joy and accomplishments are experienced happily by other members of their family. For the participants who had children, being a role model and making connections with their children by example was an important motivation.

Although the women in this study recognized the importance of individual and family development, they were also very mindful of the effects their achievements would have on the larger African American community. Having a connection with a community helped to increase their sense of identity and personal political activism. All the women in this study possessed a strong sense of racial identity, purpose and direction, which appeared to provide them with enhanced meaning for their personal journeys towards development. They were very much aware of the realities of racism and sexism.

However despite this and other research advocating broader, better funded and more culturally sensitive models of adult learning, and in particular, adult literacy, this has seldom been achieved at policy and community level.

The Teaching and Learning of Literacy in the US: The Policy Context

In the United States, recent institutional adult literacy policies and programmes have been shaped by an emphasis on individual cognitive and psycholinguistic perspectives (Pierson and Hiebert, 2010). Such programmes are focused on particular skills, reading for phonemic awareness, fluency and comprehension. Literacy Programmes that focus on the perspective of skills, including the one involved in my study, have been endorsed in the U.S. by the National Early Literacy Council in 2008, The National Reading Panel in 2000 and the National Institute for Literacy. However, the belief underlying this thesis, and most of the literature discussed in this chapter, is that more holistic approaches to the learning of literacy, rather than purely coding perspectives are necessary to deliver the national and State school literacy curriculum and to enable adults to learn and use literacy effectively in society for the 21st century.

In his State of the Union Address, President Obama (2013) stated that a more focused long term approach to literacy learning needed to begin with providing early childhood education for all:

Every dollar we invest in high-quality early childhood education can save more than seven dollars later on, by boosting graduation rates, reducing teen pregnancy, even reducing violent crime. In states that make it a priority to educate our youngest children -- like Georgia or Oklahoma -- studies show students grow up more likely to read and do math at grade level, graduate high school, hold a job, form more stable families of their own. We know this works. So let's do what works and make sure none of our children start the race of life already behind. Let's give our kids that chance.

Literacy teaching and learning approaches for children were not specified by the President; only that literacy learning should begin early, be for every child and should be linked to a social world where every learner was able to live and contribute in a positive way to the economy. For secondary teaching he argued,

Four years ago, we started Race to the Top, a competition that convinced almost every State to develop smarter curricula and higher standards, all for about 1 percent of what we spend on education each year. Tonight, I'm announcing a new challenge, to redesign America's high schools so they better equip graduates for the demands of a high-tech economy. And we'll reward schools that develop new partnerships with colleges and employers, and create classes that focus on science, technology, engineering and math, the skills today's employers are looking for to fill the jobs that are there right now and will be there in the future.

He advocated that post elementary literacy learning be focused on an enabling capability within specific job frameworks, tailored for commercial industry requiring high-tech, science, math and engineering job fields needed now and in the future. He did not however argue how he was going to be able to enable his own request. When would Government, State and not-for-profit adult literacy learning programmes change? President Obama funded the teaching of literacy through a skills based approach with the main aim of enabling students to pass the High School Diploma through the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE), and gain entry to the basic job market. The situation, other than a new President has not changed over the intervening four years. While successive generations of policy makers and leaders have

expressed high ambitions for a literate population, funding and provision for literacy have remained within narrow constraints.

It is worth examining the report of the Gordon Commission (2012) as this acknowledges the problems within current testing approaches, the difficulty of establishing equality within testing for the 21st century and steps that were being taken to improve the situation. The commission was established in 2012 by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), the testing service that provides all of the national testing requirements, to investigate what should be the nature and use of educational testing in the 21st century. It was headed by chair of the Commission, Dr. Edmund W. Gordon, a psychology professor. The rest of the commission was made up of academics and professionals working within education. In 1968 Gordon had been elected a member of the National Academy of Education, and had a long-standing relationship with ETS. Gordon, when visiting my local university described how, for him growing up in North Carolina during the 1930's, being able to pass the national tests was the only way as an African American student to get to university. He also talked however about the problems that had arisen with national testing. These concerns were also expressed by the Gordon Commission (April 2012):

> The nation's drive to develop standards-based accountability for schools has led to tests that, with only few exceptions, systematically over-represent basic skills and knowledge and omit the complex knowledge and reasoning we are seeking for college and career readiness.

The research questions being asked of communities by the Gordon Commission all over the US were:

> Educators: From your unique perspective, what do educators need from assessment, and how can testing be used to improve teaching and learning?
> Parents: What do parents want and need from assessment in education?
> Students: What do you seek from educational assessment and testing?

However, despite the recommendations of the Gordon Commission adult basic literacy skills testing is still taking place and being funded in the local community using the same approach.

Recent changes at school level made by the Local Board of Education in the County in which the present research was located reveal social difficulties are still part of the community's battle for equality of literacy education. A recent newspaper article by Dr R. W. Smith from the local university entitled 'When Magnet Schools Fail to Attract' acknowledged these difficulties and agreed that new funding should be used more positively to help rectify the problems. The author argued that resources to promote diversity, improve achievement and support students living in poverty had been jeopardised by policy moves to support 'neighborhood' schools, which was destroying aspirations for social and racial 'balance', and introducing a *de facto* re-segregation.

As these policy discussions indicate, race, poverty and inequality are *always* at the heart of literacy education. The obstacles that some groups and individuals face can never be tackled by focusing only on the linguistic processes involved in learning to read and write, such as decoding, vocabulary acquisition, sentence structure or command over genre.

Conclusion

bell hooks (2003) argued that wherever there is a learning situation there are matters of power and control. She argued that there needed to be found ways to work together where the classroom did not become a means of control. She emphasised that this was not just about what goes on in the classroom but also within the student body of diverse people. Here was also a place where dominance might occur with some forced by others into subservience or silenced.

The literature discussed in this chapter resonates with hooks' argument. In order to avoid the effects of race, class and inequality and create a positive learning environment it is important within institutions and outside to create a sense of whole community. My analysis in the chapters that follow attempts to provide insights into the nature of the learning environment and its links, or disconnections, with the community literacy practices that were valued now and for the future by the participants in the research. The ultimate aim of the research is to gain a better understanding of what adult literacy education looked and felt like, by giving a more equal voice to some of those who were involved, in the hope that this might inform future research and provision.

Chapter 3.   Methodology and Design of the Research

The research was designed to investigate how adults experienced an adult literacy programme. The resulting interviews produced stories that touched on the social, educational and the philosophical. Rather than try to impose a particular theory onto such a wide research I looked for a theoretical way forward to enable the small sample of participants' discourses about their experiences to speak for themselves in conversation with me and the reader of this thesis. In order for the process to be unforced it was important to acknowledge that as a teacher I was also coming to this research with my own experiences of formal literacy learning, experience of how I could be a teacher in the State and teaching a similar programme. I needed to be open therefore to learning from the research at the same time as interpreting it theoretically.

Early attempts involved the use of Nvivo10 software for the analysis of qualitative data. To gather information from the interview data through an analysis of the spoken vocabulary word length used by the participants – on the assumption that spoken word length might relate in some way to progress in literacy or lack of it. This scientific and positivistic approach had a limited significance for the study. Consequently, I wanted to use a methodological approach to help understand the data in a less simplistic and closed way.

Grounded Theory as a Method of Analysis

I therefore turned to grounded theory as a more open approach that, as Charmaz (2000) states, is a putting back together of things that have happened by collaboration between the researcher and participants. Consequently, I turned to the possibilities of using grounded theory within a broadly ethnographic orientation that attends to the culture and the lived experiences of the participants as relevant approaches for my data. This, it was hoped, would illuminate my thesis question and data and contribute more effectively to understanding the meaning and cultural significance of the programme for the participants. As Corbin (2008:49) reiterates when discussing grounded theory:

> The end product of the research endeavour is not a set of findings or a few
> themes. Rather it is an integrated theoretical formulation that gives

understanding about how persons or organizations or communities experience and respond to events that occur.

Although the sample was small, located in a specific part of the US and the interviews only took place one time, the interview data is rich and wide-ranging. Additional data included an initial questionnaire and examples of written work collected over a three month period. By reflecting upon the process I went through in my grounded analysis of the participants' interpretations of events (below) I will hopefully contribute to an authentic theoretical outcome to be researched and challenged again.

While I will argue that grounded theory has provided a powerful resource for revealing recurring concerns expressed in the interviews, it has to be acknowledged that grounded theory has been subject to critique. Thomas and James (2006) for instance suggest that critics have challenged the claims to building 'theory' embodied in grounded theory, calling into question the predictive power of the method. They also suggest that in common with other critics such as Layder (1993) and Robbrecht (1995) grounded theory method tends to impose a rigid and formulaic structure on the data, which restrains the authentic voice and interpretive capacities of the participants. They challenge, moreover, the status of, 'theory', asking why grounded theorists should want, in 'discovering' something to call that which is discovered 'theory?' (Thomas and James 2006: 7). Charmaz (2006), through her own interpretation of grounded theory answered such critiques and questions. She argued in her later developments of grounded theory for a version that allows a richer notion of interpretation, and is sensitive to issues of culture and social justice. Her multi-layered approach to interpretation, she argues, enables findings and discoveries to develop into a grounded theory based on equality. This theoretical approach, according to Charmaz, in turn contributes supportively to the analysis of data in further studies of any subject.

I have attempted, in the spirit of Charmaz's idea of equality and co-construction between researcher and participant, to be sensitive throughout to the richness of the participants' narratives, and the complexity of the experiences and perspectives that they have expressed. My analysis takes account of Charmaz's 'Criteria for Grounded Theory Studies in Social Justice Inquiry' (2005: 528):

Credibility

- Has the researcher achieved intimate familiarity with the setting or topic?
- Are the data sufficient to merit the researcher's claims? Consider the range, number and depth of observations contained in the data.
- Has the researcher made systematic comparisons between observations and between categories?
- Do the categories cover a wide range of empirical observations?
- Are there strong links between the gathered data and the researcher's argument and analysis?
- Has the researcher provided enough evidence for his or her claims to allow the reader to form an independent assessment – and agree with the researchers claims?

Originality

- Are the categories fresh? Do they offer new insights?
- Does the analysis provide a new conceptual rendering of the data?
- What is the social and theoretical significance of the work?
- How does the current work challenge, extend, or refine current ideas, concepts and practices?

Resonance

- Do the categories portray the fullness of the studied experience?
- Has the researcher revealed liminal and taken-for-granted meanings?
- Has the researcher drawn links between larger collectives and individual lives, when the data so indicate?
- Do the analytical interpretations make sense to members and offer them deeper insights about their lives and worlds?

Usefulness

- Does the analysis offer interpretations that people can use in their everyday worlds?

- Do the analytic categories speak to generic processes?
- Have these generic processes been examined for hidden social justice implications?
- Can the analysis spark further research in other substantive areas?
- How does the work contribute to making a better society?

Ultimately, although I do not specifically engage with each of these individually, these are the criteria on which I would want my work to be judged, within the constraints of a small scale, exploratory study. In relation to Charmaz's criteria concerning 'credibility' for instance, I feel I have provided enough evidence to help enable the reader to form an assessment and hopefully agree with my initial concerns about generic adult literacy programmes (see Chapter 4). In relation to the criteria concerning 'originality' the categories I chose within my analysis are perhaps already partially understood. However I feel that my analysis offers insights in a new way because the participants went beyond my initial concerns about generic literacy programmes and spoke about the internal, often unseen effects of a lack of literacy empowerment. These included the repercussions on them psychologically when they were trying to live and work in the outside world. In relation to Charmaz's criteria concerning 'relevance' I feel this study illuminates how the taken-for-granted meanings of what literacy teaching and learning are about for such programmes are too simplistic and how the learning process is much more complicated involving the necessity of social and cultural consciousness. In her 'usefulness' section if generic adult literacy programmes continue to be used I hope that this study speaks to the very essence of what literacy learning processes are. To know the very real social injustice implications if they are to remain hidden and not included in programme policy writing.

For this reason it was also necessary to adopt an ethnographic perspective that takes account of the history, culture, practices and perspectives of the participants (cf. Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). In accordance with an ethnographic orientation, I focused on a few cases to facilitate in-depth study. My categories were not built into the data collecting process but were generated out of the process of data analysis. The interview analysis included as the authors advocate, 'Interpretation of the meanings, functions and consequences of human actions and institutional practices and how

these might be implicated in local and wider contexts' (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 3). The additional data in the form of questionnaire responses and examples of written work were supportive but subordinate to the rest of the data analysis.

I drew in particular on Shirley Brice-Heath's (1983) pioneering ethnographic study of communication in rural communities in the Carolinas. She, like me, was a white woman teaching literacy in the South in a generally unofficially segregated community with predominantly black and white working class disadvantaged community members. As I was British, and in that way an 'outsider' to Brice Heath's experiences of being born and raised in the South, I found reading and learning about her background and how segregation affected her life growing up illuminating. Her efforts to try to eliminate educational, in particular literacy injustice, helped me to understand where I was living and teaching literacy, and past and current policy problems. Although her studies were nearly fifty years old and based around school age students, they contained nearly a decade of informative data. Her knowledge helped in the analysis of my data. For example when talking about the differences between black and white working class literacy traditions she discussed the black community of the fictitiously named Trackton. She explains how community members shifted between the oral and written texts. She wrote about, 'The intricacies of the unconscious patterns during language learning of using oral themes and repetitions with variations on these themes and improvising on a phrase' (Brice Heath, 1983: 211). I realised in my analysis that this and more detailed cultural knowledge was not being utilised by many adult literacy programmes.

I also found bell hooks' work, particularly in her book 'Teaching to Transgress' (1994), helpful and insightful when analysing my research data. As a black woman who had grown up with injustice and did not believe in cookie cutter teaching and learning approaches, hooks (1994: 13) argued:

> Progressive, holistic education, 'engaged pedagogy' is more demanding that conventional critical or feminist pedagogy. For, unlike these two teaching practices, it emphasizes well-being. That means that teachers must be actively involved committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students.

hooks advocacy of 'engaged pedagogy' chimed with my own aims and values relating to literacy education, and helped to focus my attention to particular dimensions of the interview data. It is clear therefore that the analysis provided in Chapter 4 is, as noted above, the result of an interaction or co-production between the participants and the researcher.

Design of the Study

Location of the Research

The interviews took place at not-for-profit literacy centre in a Southern State of the US between January and March 2012. The centre is a medium sized prefab building built at a junction where the redundant railway line meets the busy one-way road system. It is opposite the local newspaper production depot. The building is painted a bright blue which helps it to be seen when negotiating the one way system.

The rooms in the centre are small. Participants work in booths by themselves with headphones or in a room with a tutor, as they practice and prepare for literacy testing. Another building adjacent to the main centre is used for the readers' theatre where students read aloud short performance readings.

Next to the secretary's office in the centre is a library. It is small but has a large window which brings in a lot of light. A main road is visible through the window with many cars and trucks passing by. The interviews took place in the library which has a table and a number of comfortable chairs. It has shelving with literacy exercise books and some reading books. Boxes are placed under the window and contain more literacy exercises sheets.

Participants

A questionnaire was administered to all of the students registered on the literacy programme at the start of the study to get an overall impression of where the students were at in their learning. This was a simple tick box design at the request of the programme manager. The questionnaire was of limited value in providing insights into participants' literacy to date. However it did reveal some basic information about literacy related interests and activities outside the home. This provided some

contextual data for the subsequent grounded theory analysis. From the completed questionnaires I asked the secretary to suggest a minimum of six volunteers to participate in the study, and obtained written confirmation from six participants and their tutors that they were willing to take part. I have included the six participants' questionnaires in Appendix B. Additionally samples of written work provided by the interviewees are included in Chapter 4.

Vignettes of the Participants

Chrissie

Chrissie is African American and in her late sixties. She has lived all her life in the study's County in North Carolina. Chrissie is divorced and has a young adult son. She is unemployed and has been coming to the centre for over a decade. She takes part in church activities and is passionate about literacy empowerment. She lived through the civil rights movement.

Jess

Jess was born in 1958 in North Carolina in the County where the study took place. She is African American and the last born of five and has two sisters and brothers. Both her parents are deceased. After high school she spent two years in higher education on a degree course and she joined the army for a short time. She is not employed and has suffered a mild stroke. She loves sports and got into college through a sports scholarship. She has a daughter and two grandsons. She has been coming to the centre and participating in the programme for over a decade.

Walter

Walter is African American in his mid-eighties and was born in North Carolina but migrated to New York as a young man to look for work. He lived in New York until he returned recently to North Carolina. He has a second wife and adult children who live nearby. His wife also attends the centre. He has worked in a mill and as a chauffeur and caretaker. He now earns a small income by doing neighbours' yards and collecting cans and recycling them at the local store for a small fee. He has recently lost a lot of weight through a gym routine to help with cholesterol and blood pressure issues and says he enjoys exercise. He is eager to return to work.

Stan

Stan is African American. He is in his late forties and has lived all his life in the study's County and North Carolina. He has been on kidney dialysis for some time and receives treatment frequently. He is unemployed and lives alone and near his mother.

Bill

Bill is Caucasian American and in his early sixties. He has been attending the centre for approximately six months. He was born in North Carolina and moved to New York as a child. He recently returned to live in the study's County with his wife and young adult male and female children. He has worked as a truck driver and fireman and is currently unemployed.

Ann

Is African American and in her sixties. As a child growing up she became ill with polio and as an adult has had difficulty walking. She had a son whilst in high school who had recently died at the time of the research. She was not employed but was helping out with young children at a grandparent club to help with her grieving process.

The Data Used in the Study

The timing and sequencing of: questionnaires, interviews and written work examples.

- By January 2012 established case studies, signed consent forms and created interview timetable
- By 12 January 2012 case studies completed questionnaires supported by tutors where required
- By end of March 2012 interview and transcribed six case studies discussions about their completed questionnaires and aims and objectives of the study
- By end of April 2012 one visit to collect writing samples, up to five per person, written by case studies over a three month period
- Timetable was flexible to accommodate the centre's needs

The principal data on which the study is based is a set of six interviews, one with each participant. The interviews were semi-structured and open ended, and built around the following questions:

1. How did you come to join the literacy programme?

2. Do you have some writing you feel proud about?

3. What is the most important requirement for helping someone to read and write?

4. What is/are your goals now?

5. Has coming here changed your identity at all?

While these questions were used to provide a broad common structure for the interviews, the conversation almost always opened out to cover a wide range of other issues of relevance to the participants. As I discuss in the next chapter, many of the interviewees spoke of deeply personal feelings and experiences associated with literacy, in both their past and present lives. All six interviews were transcribed, and these transcripts formed the basis of the analysis described below.

Participants were also invited to provide one or more examples of their writing. However it appeared that the interviewees had produced very few examples of sustained written text during their participation in the programme. I briefly refer to the written work that was given to me in Chapter 4 and discuss the status of writing on the programme and its role in the participants' lives. As described, the emphasis was more on reading and vocabulary than writing.

The Centre's secretary helped me with administrative issues, such as providing a file in the general office for consent forms and for volunteer tutors to place the questionnaires and written work examples, when they had been completed, at a time that was convenient for them. She would also e-mail me if an interviewee was running late or had to change the interview time and day. I made sure I was flexible and available at any time that was convenient for the interviewees. Most interviews ran at their allotted times and were uninterrupted. Each person was interviewed once for approximately an hour to an hour and a half. I tried to ensure all interviewees were happy after the interview and always checked back as to how they were with the centre secretary, who was also a volunteer tutor.

Ethical Issues

I assured the programme manager and participants that data findings and all write ups would be anonymised and that the data and analysis would adhere to the guidelines of the British Educational Research Association and to those required by Manchester Metropolitan University. Sensitivity to ethical issues was paramount, particularly as participants might find some of the discussion uncomfortable as it was about their personal literacy. Consequently it was made clear that withdrawing from the study at any time was possible if participants or the programme manager ever wanted to.

Research Questions

As explained in Chapter 1, the study was organised around three main research questions:

1. How did students' personal experiences of literacy affect their success or otherwise in adult literacy programmes?
2. How did the literacy programme connect, or fail to connect, with students' personal experiences?
3. What are the implications for curriculum and pedagogy in adult literacy programmes?

Reflexivity

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) note that Reflexivity is a key concept in ethnographic research – i.e. the obligation to reflect on the effect that the researcher may have had upon the participants and on the knowledge produced. Therefore I had to ask myself to what extent my own values and assumptions as an educator may have a shaped the design of the study and my interpretations. I certainly began with questions about the programme in order to help identify its validity or otherwise. However the ensuing data from the interviews embraced more than the required answers. Also I was aware of being involved in an 'insider' vs 'outsider' research situation. I was both inside and outside, as someone experienced in literacy education and living and working in the community; yet still, as a white, British woman, an outsider to the culture and everyday lives of the participants in a black community in a Southern State. Hammersley and Atkinson when discussing being an insider/outsider describe how

each ethnographer whether an insider or an outsider has, '… immediate access to different sorts of information' (2007: 87). I therefore referred to Brice Heath and hooks amongst others to help me fill in the information gaps as an ethnographer insider/outsider in my particular situation. By researching the teaching and learning process of the programme outside my place of practice and my own teaching, as Somekh (2005) describes when discussing action research and reflexivity this helped me, 'By freeing interpretation from some of the constraints of memory and individual perception and also enabled me to look at my own practice from another point of view' (Somekh and Lewin, 2005: 90). Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that researchers can never fully free themselves from their own prior values and assumptions. Despite my concern to be as faithful as possible to the participants' perspectives, my own values will have, as noted above, inevitably influenced the analysis.

Analysis: Applying Grounded Theory

Once the interview data had been gathered and transcribed. I began to try several ways to code the data. As described above, I began with a closed, literacy skills approach, not dissimilar to the programme's, identifying units of analysis to code for meanings using Nvivo10. This limited view, as noted, did not enable deeper examination of the interview data. I therefore began to look at the data for units of analysis: for what Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) describe as, 'Coding for feelings, actions and events'. The aim as the authors state, 'Was to deconstruct the data into manageable chunks in order to facilitate an understanding of the phenomenon in question' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011: 600).

After analysing similarities and differences in how people responded, their comments were collected into units of analysis for coding. Initial categories to emerge included:

1. Participants' social and working lives
2. Participants' experience of schooling
3. Participants' attitude to reading and writing
4. Strategies participants have used to cope with poor literacy skills

It was clear that that after looking at coding within these four categories for feelings, actions and events that the focus was still too generalised, and that my initial goal of

identifying a positive or negative view of the programme was too limited. Deeper analysis of the four categories attended to topics seemingly unrelated to the programme's explicit aims and format and resulted in three further major categories:

1. Prior Experiences of Literacy
2. Being on the Programme
3. Unacknowledged literacies

After scrutiny of these three categories' interconnectedness according to the principles of grounded theory, certain themes emerged which appeared to run through all the above categories, namely, (a) participants' enjoyment of literature; (b) their love for their tutor and (c) the tutor's personal encouragement of literacy skills. In turn, these themes led to the identification of deeper issues of fear, shame and blame, enabling denser concept based relationships among codes and categories.

The issues of fear, shame, and love of tutor and one's own enjoyment of literature were not explicitly articulated together as part of the programme's learning relationship approach and Manual. Integrating these code concepts found within the data had not been done before for adult formal literacy programme policy. I will suggest in the concluding chapter that the themes found in the interviewees' data could contribute to the development of literacy learning theory and to literacy programme policy change. Corbin (2008: 49) includes, 'A theory is a set of concepts that are integrated through a series of relational statements' (Hage, 1972: 79). While it is beyond the scope of this limited study to generate an entirely new theory, I will argue therefore that the insights it has revealed have a contribution to make to the theorising of adult literacy development.

I would argue that the use of grounded theory, albeit in a tentative and exploratory way, allowed me to discover dimensions of the participants' experiences and attitudes that I would not otherwise have noted. Moreover, it allowed me to perceive possible relationships between these dimensions even though they were not usually explicitly linked in the participants' accounts. Love of tutor and tutor encouragement about literacy skills, for instance, was generally explained by the participants as separate to their feelings of fear and shame and enjoyment of literature.

I will suggest in the concluding chapter that the dimensions of adult literacy experience identified through the analysis – e.g. positive personal and individual feelings about literature and negative feelings of fear – could be integrated within literacy policy and skills programmes, such as the one studied here, to enable building of literacy confidence and self–esteem.

Chapter 4.   Analysis: Themes Emerging from the Interviews

Introduction

In this chapter I identify and discuss the major themes emerging from the grounded analysis of the data, and begin to raise questions concerning adult literacy, to be explored in the concluding chapter. The main body of the chapter is organised into sections according to three major themes:

1. Prior experiences of literacy
2. Being on the programme
3. Unacknowledged literacies

Sub-themes are discussed within each of these categories. At the end of each these sections there is a discussion of the issues raised.

Prior Experiences of Literacy

As noted in the previous chapter, a questionnaire was administered to the whole cohort to gain some general background information about literacy experiences and practices (see Appendix B). The majority of the items were in the form of closed questions. While I do not analyse the responses in detail, it seems apparent that the participants' experiences of reading, technology and in particular writing outside the programme, in their families and communities, were somewhat different to what they are actually doing and writing about at the centre. They all had participated in oral storytelling and this was not being utilised in their writing by the programme. Their enjoyment of fiction or historical fable or fact from the storytelling is not part of any cultural writing experience within the programme. Already therefore it is clear that the kinds of literacy experiences offered by the programme were not tailored to the everyday practices of participants – although as I will discuss later, the tutors did appear to take account of participants' interests in selecting written texts for them.

A final question invited the respondents to answer the open-ended question *What do you enjoy doing most at CFLC?* The six participants who took part in the interviews gave the following responses:

Chrissie = I enjoy working with my tutor. She is a loving giving, and understanding person. She has a beautiful personality. (written by interviewee in print with correct use of lower and upper case letters)

Walter = learning to read /write (written by interviewee in print all lower case letters)

Jess = meeting with my tutor (written by interviewee in print all lower case letters)

Stan = Learing (written by interviewee in print with correct use of upper and lower case letters and spelling error - learning)

Bill = Volunteers (request for word to be written for him by his tutor)

Ann = What I like most is when I come in to CFLC. My tutor and I work on things like math which is a difficult subject for me. In leaving CFLC I have a better understanding of math; also my reading comprehension has improved. (written by interviewee in cursive with correct use of upper and lower case letters)

It is already evident in these brief responses that, irrespective of participants' success or otherwise as measured by testing, the tutors were held in high regard, and certain elements of participation on the programme appeared to be of considerable personal value. This is an issue which is discussed further below.

Themes Emerging from the Analysis

1. Prior Experiences of Literacy

During, and very often from the start of their interview all participants talked of their prior experiences of literacy and the impact this had had on their lives and prospects. From their dialogue about this it was possible to identify a number of sub-themes which are discussed below.

Institutional and Cultural Racism

In Chrissie's narrative she communicated strongly and forcefully about how racial discrimination was the reason for her lack of overall positive educational progress as a child. When explaining why she had joined the programme she immediately related

her joining to a discriminatory white female teacher from her childhood educational experiences.

Chrissie talked about how she had attended elementary school in the South during the time of desegregation. She discussed how she endured discriminatory experience there after integration of schooling took place. Before discussing her day to day negative school experience, she strongly condemned the local education board's racism. She argued that as part of the integration process she was given no choice about where she went to school. She retold how she was forced at the end of second grade to stop attending her African American populated school in her black home district. Here, she said, she had felt safe to learn and all the teachers and students knew each other. She explained that the families were told by the local County education board, that at the start of her second grade all the children were required to be bussed into a white district to attend a large multilevel school where they did not know any of the teachers:

> School was fine until I got ready to go to second grade. That's when they decided to integrate the schools and the area where I was in I had to go to a white school (pause). That's when my life changed because leaving a small, one level building that's fixed like an L shape. You get of your bus and go straight into your classroom. Everybody know everybody you know? I mean teachers were all your mothers and going to a four, five level building, that secure whole block…

Lack of further educational progress was, Chrissie argued, because of what happened to her after being required to be bussed to a school in a white district. She recalled having racially biased white teachers and peers at her new school who were assigned to teach her and her fellow black students. Chrissie described a lack of help and support by the white teachers when dealing with racism by her peers. Being racially abused by white students in the playground she had gone to her white teachers for help but, she said, they looked at her in an equally discriminatory way as her peers and ignored her pleas to intervene and stop the racism:

> When kids would tease me on the playground and I would go tell white teachers they would look at me like you are you know they wouldn't say it but the eyes would tell me you are a nigger, so...

Chrissie also described a second scene when a white teacher called her the N word within the school premises. She described the consequence of the white teacher's voiced prejudice towards her:

> But one man really told me that, that was it, I, I gave up. I wasn't going to fight no more and I just, I got in line, went back into that classroom and sat there and gave up.

She explained that she never again tried to assert her human right to be enabled to gain knowledge in school.

Along with the education board and teachers Chrissie gave an account in her narrative of how the school administration also reinforced discrimination for teachers through negativity about teaching certain groups. She argued that both black and white teachers did not want to teach an F level class because they did not want to be associated with the students, black and white working class who had all been labelled by the school administration as less intelligent and were being taught in a class together:

> They sectioned us off. They had a level that's A, B, C, D and G's and F. I was in the category G's and F and those classes a lot of the teachers didn't want to be in the classroom, they think we're stupid and dumb.

> And there were some white ones in there too, they felt that they should not have been with niggers. And we would have black teachers that were well educated and the white teachers would put the black teachers in and they were your classes and they didn't like that, they were angry and bitter.

The teachers, in particular the black teachers, had worked hard Chrissie stated to be able to become teachers. They feared that by working with the F level students they in turn would be labelled deficient and N lovers by the administration, and stopped from progressing in their teaching careers. Consequently, she said no progress was made for students in the F classes.

Despite her traumatic childhood experiences of white teachers, Chrissie nevertheless stated that, as an adult, she was going to trust a white female teacher now by joining the programme:

> White people took my education away from me, but God allowed a white woman to give it back to me.

It is interesting that reference to racism and racial issues was implicit rather than openly discussed by the other interviewees. Chrissie was the only participant who explicitly identified racism as an important element in her previous experience. Nevertheless, as I will argue below, issues of race are intertwined in complex ways with the accounts of poverty, disadvantage and lost opportunities in several of the other interviews.

Intergenerational Transmission of Literacy Problems

Several of the interviewees appeared to feel that literacy problems were being transmitted across generations in their families. For instance, Chrissie described how her own son started to have difficulty with learning to read at the beginning of third grade when she felt unable to read with him anymore. She described how the problem was compounded by the school he attended having large class sizes and inexperienced teachers unable to give him adequate attention. She enabled her son to succeed at school by, she said, withdrawing him until the local County education board found him a Magnet school place with smaller class sizes. Magnet schools were first initiated in the 1960's to help desegregate schools. Each school focused on a particular area of interest to enable student from a variety of school districts to attend. Students would therefore attend the school because of their shared educational goals and as a way of encouraging voluntary desegregation.

Walter, who was African American, talked of what happened when his mother left the family home when he was still a child. How he had to become the provider along with his father for his seven siblings. He talked about the literacy problems her leaving produced for him:

> Yes I went to school and got to 'bout the seventh grade. See what happened my father would let me go but I wouldn't go that often.

He said he felt an expectation and responsibility to work on the farm with his father and to provide for the rest of the family at the expense of his own education:

> I had to stay home, stay home and work on the farm and all my brothers and sisters all of them went to college; I'm the only one that didn't get it.

He explained that his mother could read but her leaving meant he had no one to listen to him read at home:

> I didn't have no-one to help me with my lessons. When I come home from school there would be no one there 'cause my mother had separated and she had get off and my father he couldn't read.

Long absences and lack of appropriate support from school and his father being unable to listen to him read resulted, he said in him not learning to read.

Bill, who was white, explained that when he was having problems with reading he was not helped at school because that was the way it was at that time. He implied his parents were treated the same way when they attended school:

> I graduated High School in 1978 and back then you just kinda, your parents went to school and you just kind of got pushed through.

> They tried to put you in special reading classes and stuff, but you're talking thirty kids and if you didn't catch on you were just, and I graduated high school and people said well how did you graduate and I said well it's how school was back then.

Bill said his father and his son had difficulty with reading and gave a sense that he thought of his literacy problem as an affliction which he had inherited from his father and passed on to his son:

> My father he had the same problem; he couldn't read or write very well. My mother was a very good reader, very good writer, um and they even tried, my mother tried to er, but, just em for some reason I just couldn't grasp it and I'd get frustrated.

Stan, African American described how he thought another male member of his family had similar literacy problems to himself:

My nephew he maybe about the same as I, as far as reading some things. He can understand some things he can't. So I suppose he and me are in the same boat when it comes to reading and stuff, but I'm getting better.

Jess, African American explained she used to look after her daughter's son when her daughter worked. When she said her grandson had difficulty reading with her she said it was because he didn't like to read and that was like her:

I hate that my grandson take after me. He don't like to read. I hate that he got that from me because I don't like to read that's not my favourite thing to do is read.

I just felt he got that part of the DNA from my side. Um that's how I figured it out, 'cause he don't like to read like me.

She also discussed how teachers would compare her unfavourably to her older brother because he was the clever one and she would stop trying.

Shame, Fear and Blame

It was clear from the interviews that negative feelings of shame or fear were included, as well as blame, both of self and others. Chrissie blamed her early educational life experience on the fact that there was no clear, equitable educational direction during desegregation and integration at policy level:

It was a mess. They didn't know what to do. I know they had to start somewhere; they didn't have to start that way (pause).

No one, she argued really thought about the way it should be carried out in order for integration to be successful. She also blamed herself however. She described how, despite the racist abuse she experienced she might also have also been complicit in her own integration difficulties. Everyone was frightened of each other and did not know how to work with each other:

I gave up on myself and never tried. Like I said it was a challenge, you know we all had to get over fear before we could know the potential of each other. We never gave each other a chance, we was too scared, of each other.

At the heart of all the bigotry was fear of difference, according to Chrissie. This was required to be worked on by everyone together in order for it to be overcome:

> It was scary and the people was scared they was scared to they'd never taught black kids so we didn't know we'd never had white teachers, everyone was scared.

She talked of the frustration and anger she felt of being made to be, as she described it, 'the middle'. The middle was for her the inability to become empowered in any way. Literally stuck in the middle of what was supposed to be positive educational change for everyone. Though she said she was helpless at school she emphasised she gained an inner strength from being 'the middle'. This inner strength, along with her religious faith, she said, sustained her through to her adulthood.

Chrissie talked of being told by her mother when still a child to go into herself like a cocoon to protect from the racial abuse she was experiencing at school. She illustrated how this pattern of 'being' behaviour, with its sense of fear and need for inner self-protection followed her into adulthood. She explained that her feelings of fear and shame meant she kept 'herself' a secret from her world, her church, her friends and family for fear of further ridicule. Chrissie blamed the stress of hiding herself for putting an added strain on her marriage leading to divorce. She illustrated the strain of having had to hide and contain her fearful thoughts when she talked of how she 'exhaled' with relief when she found out the programme was confidential.

Chrissie described her fear about coming back to an educational establishment. She stated twice she did not want to be there at the programme but felt she needed to be there. Through joining the literacy programme she also talked of how she was hoping to overcome her fears of mixing in society:

> I knew I need to be here not that I wanted I needed to be here. I have so afraid of the world that I lived in or live not really in it well I was living in it but to mingle with everyone else that was always a borderline, no.

For Chrissie, it appears therefore her difficulties with literacy are deeply connected with a low sense of self-worth, which she associates in turn with the experience of racial abuse as a child, and the internalisation of her pain.

Walter also spoke of shame. He explained how the school left him in a lower age class for reading. As he grew tall he described how humiliating it was for him to be left in that class:

> I'd stay home and work and then I'd get behind and then I grow big and then I got behind and be with those kids and I'm a big, old tall fella with those little kids and I really got behind workin on that farm.

Bill blamed his friends and himself for trying and failing to help him to read. As a child he described what was difficult for him:

> Back then I don't know why I couldn't grasp it (pause). Hyper you know active, outdoorsy wasn't much for (pause) catch reading

> I was always hands on learning and for some reason, the reading part I just couldn't grasp.

As an adult Bill added:

> It's bin an ongoing thing. I really haven't found anybody that could, you know, really teach me how to read.

> I have lots of friends and stuff, they er (pause) try to (pause) work with me and stuff, but for some reason I was just not catching on the way I was being taught.

He said his family and friends did not understand how to help him. Bill said they made him frustrated because they tried to help him by getting him to join letters together to make words. Bill discussed how Hooked on Phonics did not work for him as a teaching method when learning to read as an adult:

> My friends would try to get me the word rather than the smaller pieces to understand. Hooked on Phonics the word would be just blue. But where did you split the line? But what did you learn? You didn't learn bl, you didn't learn ur.

> The problem was (pause) I don't think people understand that sounds and stuff make a difference. Always tryin to teach, tell you how to read the book instead of breakin it down so I understand what sounds were.

He argued people did not do enough to help themselves and that was why he had joined the programme. Bill explained he kept his childhood poverty a secret from his children and they would never know how it had been for him. Again therefore, there is an element of shame associated with literacy difficulties, even when an individual might also be critical of efforts by others to teach them, or a flawed education system.

Stan explained that he blamed his literacy problems on the fact he had a literacy affliction:

> When I was growing up and I was younger I had problems with reading. I had dyslexia, a touch of dyslexia, so I just wanted to better myself and you know take it further.

> My social workers put me in a programme and the man told me I had a little dyslexia. And my mother told me when I was coming up. She gave me tests and stuff and she told me I had a problem with dyslexia.

However he also thought that school was to blame for his literacy problems:

> Being in a class and there was so many of us in there it was more students than it was teachers, it wasn't enough to help everybody. Just like everyone in the class learns different from others. And if you are in a school, there are more than forty or fifty students in a classroom. I dropped out in eleventh grade.

Ann, African American, described how she had a lot of time off school in her early years due to contracting polio and needing several surgeries. Other children would ridicule her for her disability she said and she did not remember how she learned. She said by High School she was placed in a lower ability group because that was the way it was. She said she thought at the time she should not have been there and the work was too easy:

> They put me in a special class because they really said I couldn't learn and it was really so strange because when I got there the work was easy. It was just too easy. So one of the teachers she was tryin to get me out of the class, but they didn't want to move me out of that class and I had gotten pregnant, ye (pause).

Nevertheless Ann also blamed herself for not doing well in her class situation when working for her GRE as an adult. She said the teacher 'poured knowledge into her' in the classroom but when she got home she could not work on tasks he had set because it was the way he spoke and not her way of communicating.

Jess explained she held teachers responsible for her negative school experience. She described how her teacher humiliated her at school when she tried to read aloud and got a word wrong:

> I shied away from school because one of my teachers, I raised my hand and she made me spell a word, a simple word and I didn't know how to spell it and she embarrassed me. Ever since then I did not raise my hand, never again in High School.

She described how it was in the eleventh grade and related this to unhappy experiences going all the way back to first grade:

> Then I took a reading class in the eleventh grade and tried to learn how to read. They say (pause) read a book. I don't know how to read this book. You know what I'm saying that was a failure too. Tried to get help all this time and I have not received no help. When I was in first grade I got a spank (pause). First and second grade I got a spank with a paddle.

Jess explained that she graduated high school because she 'passed the tests' and went into higher education to study for a degree. Despite these successes, she said she continued to have had difficulty reading and no one was able to help her. She said the only person that got close to helping her was a sociology teacher but that help was very late on and too late to enable her to continue with her degree.

Jess also blamed herself:

> I can't understand what I'm readin. I never could understand what I read and stuff like that.

> I think I had a learning difficulty but they didn't classify me as having a learning disability. I went two years to college. My tutor tried to help me but I couldn't comprehend.

Adult Disempowerment and Social Isolation

The adverse long term effects of childhood experiences of shame, blame, fear and literacy problems were poignantly described by the participants. Nearly all spoke of continued emotional disempowerment and social isolation and stigma of feeling non-literate – of being shut out as adults from pleasures and experiences that were available to others and having to settle for reduced opportunities in life. Chrissie described past memories that still affected her emotionally today. How she realised that after desegregation she was, as a child completely powerless as a black person within the formal educational setting. She said she then understood she was always going to be racially abused at school for being black by the dominant white educational establishment. She explained that having her black identity denied and ridiculed daily was the point when she described herself as then slipping through the cracks of learning and becoming invisible:

> That's when I slipped through the cracks you get tired of people and children calling you niggers, nasty spitting on you.

She explained how it had taken her need rather than want to trust in herself to come to the programme and work with a white teacher. Her earlier school bussing experience also still affected her emotionally. During this part of her narrative she cried emphasising the mental pain she still felt about the emotional memory of the anguish and social isolation she endured as a child:

> I wanted to go back to the little school with all my friends (pause crying) and I couldn't do that and I guess that's why I chose not to trust nobody because I felt they would be taken away from me to (crying continues and eventually eases)

Chrissie described further past memories that were still painful. After being put in the F level group at her school, Chrissie described being made to sit at the back of the class. The teacher would walk by her, she said and see her doing nothing more than colouring paper 'chain' dolls. As it was not, according to Chrissie, institutionally acceptable to help a black child, or any child in the F group; the teacher just left her doing what she was doing. She said she was assessed by her teachers every year as an F student and asked to walk across the stage to be given a certificate for 100%

attendance every end of semester assembly day. She explained how badly this abusive treatment made her feel, like an object more than a person:

> In third grade I walked across the stage, I was an F student, but I got a certificate for coming to school every day. They just passed me from one grade to the next.

Chrissie illuminated through another descriptive scene, how she would walk to school carrying her books there every day, even though she knew she was never going to be allowed to read or talk about them. She felt that her educational conscientiousness as a child was rewarded with unacceptable, neglectful and negligent behaviour towards her by her educators. Conscientious enough to attend school every day but not enabled to progress because of her F grade discriminatory educational experience.

Chrissie was however forceful when explaining that in her opinion, lack of clear equitable direction and guidance at policy level was responsible for generating powerlessness and anger and a lack of trust within her self and many other African American children:

> A lot of children that didn't learn those five years. They learn how to hate, they learn how to be angry, they learn a lack of trust. It wasn't change it was because a Government, a school board said you have to.

Chrissie illustrated further frustration about the limitations this past experience had imposed on her as an adult experiencing the world. She was not, she said able to try other foods from other countries as she could not read the menus. She stated she frequently passed the windows of restaurants, and watched the people laughing and talking inside. She said she had to remain outside because she was unable to read.

Through her explanation about her daily travel Chrissie expressed her feelings of helplessness, loneliness, alienation and disorientation. She explained she was too afraid to go on journeys other than known routes as she hated detours being unsure and unable to read notices about where she was going and worried about getting lost.

She described how she had visited the library as an adult and walked down the isles touching the books. She explained that as an adult she was tired of being dependent

on the television for information and wanted to get books out of the library, read and think for herself.

Walter seemed emotionally resigned by his past experience in his interview. However he did talk about his memory of how he was passed through from one grade to another. He said he was good at Maths and that was how he got moved through school despite not having the literacy skills to be able to be fully empowered to be part of the world as an adult:

> I was good in Math that's how I made the class. Back in those days if you were good at something they moved you on.

Bill also said that as a child at school when he was having difficulty with reading he was passed on to the next class without being helped because that was the way it was at that time. He also said it was also his fault he did not read as he was active and did not like to sit and listen. He, like Chrissie talked of his disempowerment and frustration as an adult with having to rely on second hand information for knowledge. He said he wanted to be able to read, think and form his own opinions about current events:

> You know you get a few things off the TV and news and stuff but you can't know (pause) um (pause) socialise with people and have the right stuff to talk to them about you know about what happened in the news or what happened in the neighbourhood 'cause you're getting second hand stuff from everyone else.

> I've never had a problem comprehending. It's the problem of being able to read what I've read.

Bill described in his story the disempowering effect on him concerning his living experiences growing up. How he had grown up in poverty with a lack of basic living amenities as a child. He said he did not have running water and had to go out of the house to get it. Provision of food and parental employment was not always consistent. He stated that he had always been determined that he had to continue to keep his past a secret from his now adult children so they did not realise what he had gone through.

Stan described being bullied and ridiculed in class by his teacher and then his fellow students when he tried to read aloud and got a word wrong. He said that it was this ridicule that disempowered him and stopped him from participating in literacy again until he joined the programme:

> When I was in school most teachers would pick a student and read stuff out loud and I always had problems doin that so that was my weakest points that I tried to not have to do when I was in school was read out loud 'cause I know I couldn't read as good as some of the others (pause).

> Well they were' judgemental, like when the teacher would ask me to read something out loud, but I might stumble or something an could hear the kids laughin so I would never volunteer to read.

Stan said using literacy in life had always been difficult for him leading him to a dead-end for him career wise:

> I went to beauty school but I had problems with the written stuff. I was alright with oral everything orally but when it came to reading the written stuff I couldn't understand it so I graduated but I really couldn't take the State board as far as like the written part, I didn't pass that 'cause I didn't understand it.

He said as an adult he had some functional literacy but mainly relied on his mother to help him with most literacy tasks.

Ann described the emotional impact on her thinking after suffering polio as a child. Other children at school inflicted emotional pain on her through ridicule because, she said, they did not understand difference and disability. She explained how this had impacted her empowerment to remember how she had learned as a child:

> I don't remember how I learned to do a lot of things because when I was two months old I had polio and so I don't remember a lot about my early life.

> I remember going to school and they would pick at me and I couldn't understand why because you know when you're little – well what did I do I didn't do it to myself, but kids don't understand when they see you and you're different. I remember goin to school but I don't remember learnin.

Hopes for the Future

In spite of their unhappy experiences, most of the participants still expressed hope for their literacy future and for their families. Chrissie stated she was determined to provide a better literacy life for her son. She described how he had started to have problems with reading at the beginning of third grade when she felt unable to help him anymore and the school he attended was unable to help him adequately. She said her son was just repeating words by memory rather than actually reading independently. She described how she took him out of school until the local County education board allowed him a place at a school with smaller class sizes. He was, she emphasised, reading at grade level by the end of the next academic year. She stated how by withdrawing him from his school until a suitable one was found she had managed to give him the optimistic future he was entitled to:

> I said listen it's not your life it's not my life it's his. He's going to have his. I used to tell the Lord I refuse, this is where it stop, stop. It stop at me, that chain has been broken and sold (pause).

Chrissie argued, through use of a stark image of the chains of slavery, about the necessity to end cycles of lack of literacy, disempowerment and social isolation and vulnerability. This final statement by Chrissie to fight for her child's right to literacy and empowerment was said by her with a determined tone.

Bill had, he stated, managed to provide a comfortable life for his children working as a firefighter, long distance driver and having a wife who also worked and provided an income. However, he was happy to have moved to the South where taxes were lower and he was going to learn to read.

Stan detailed he had considerable problems in his life despite being on the programme. He was having weekly kidney dialysis. His mother was very elderly and he did not know how he would cope when she died. Unlike the other interviewees, Stan did not express much hope for the future.

Ann stated she did not relate to the GRE test but did want to pass it. That joining the grandparents club had helped her deal with the grief of losing her son and feelings of social isolation, gave purpose and empowerment to her literacy life and the notion she could trust in loving again.

Discussion

Historical racism is closely intertwined with educational experiences and with literacy in particular for these participants. This may also connect with the historical and the cultural geographical position of the South. Bussing, large class sizes and chronic low expectation of children from certain communities affected their experience of literacy. Attempting to understand the emotional impact of this and other past events on their present social empowerment was also an important strand of the interviewees' literacy stories. Themes of blame including self-blame, fear, shame, stigma, poverty, class, cultural differences, and their long term negative emotional memories all combine and are interrelated in the literacy lives of the interviewees.

How might this affect literacy learning? Many participants spent a lot of time in their interviews sharing very painful memories about their past literacy life experiences. From their discussion, past life experiences and literacy were inextricably bound together in participants' present memory and experience with literacy. The question arises as to how the effects of such experiences could be countered. One possibility might be for tutors to invite participants to engage and reflect on such personal experiences as part of the learning on the course, in the hope that this would help them to overcome obstacles to their development as readers and writers. However, such work might be difficult for tutors, who might need counselling education in order to handle sensitive issues.

There is also the question of how these sometimes traumatic memories might actually be engaged with within a literacy programme? Is it possible, necessary or too traumatic for participants to have to relive again their experience in a short term reading and writing exercise? Perhaps the programme should try to explicitly address previous experiences and the emotions that learners may have about literacy in some other more long term way such as a creative writing piece or working through the lens of fiction or nonfiction. How, for example, if a participant is writing in a short term exercise but writing incorrectly for formal English and testing purposes by using informal cultural vernacular present tense, does a tutor approach this sensitively in order to enable healing and empowerment of formal literacy? A more affective approach by tutors, in the attempt to adapt their input to the needs of different participants, would require, if they did not already have it, historical cultural

awareness and a more long term approach to formal literacy writing development. It is the formal literacy teacher's responsibility to try and enable positive empowerment as they teach. But if not able to work in a sensitive way, then perhaps there is no point in being a teacher or a participant of formal literacy learning programmes.

How could the traumatic experience of race in a Southern State be handled positively? It is difficult to know how it can work if current injustice still prevails on a national and local level. Tutors would need to be able to handle personal information about any personal trauma, possibly ongoing and not only in memory, in sensitive and productive ways whilst living in the same society themselves. Would participants and tutors be open to this? There are also ethical issues in encouraging learners to talk about deeply personal issues, either in a group, or individually with tutors. Professional boundaries would need to be made to enable empowerment.

Perhaps the positive accounts discussed by participants in the other two sections below about their love for their tutors, the centre and literature might override the negative short term literacy experiences required for testing that no one seems that focused on. In this way the fragmented memories of shame and blame expressed here might stop getting in the way of the participants thinking. These are all questions for further research study and contemplation in the final concluding chapter.

2. Being on the Programme

Outline of the Programme

This section addresses the participants' accounts of being on the programme. As noted in an earlier chapter all but two had continued on the same programme for several years. Walter and Bill joined the programme less than a year before the research was carried out. The objectives of the programme from their Tutor training manual state:

- To understand ways to help students practice phonological awareness, word families, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, skill book practice
- To emphasise the importance of journals for reflection and to review main points of the session, dialogue journals, personal journals, calendars and lists

I will briefly outline here some key features of the programme, since these are referred to in the interviewees' comments below. The programme pedagogy has a specific

Direct Instruction teaching and learning format that is followed by all tutors and participants. One of the goals of this approach is helping to train participants to be able to pass college entrance online numeracy and literacy tests and the GED. After first meeting the programme organiser, participants are then placed in an individual booth where they are tested online for maths and reading levels. The reading level is found through a reading and comprehension multiple choice test. Participants can be retested at any time to check their reading level progress. Their test result is confidential to them, the programme and their tutor.

Their tutor then meets them once a week and takes them through a series of multiple choice exercises and word puzzles from the Challenger reading and comprehension, spelling and grammar skills books [*Challenger Adult Literacy* book Series, New Readers Press, 2012]. This series is graded by levels of reading comprehension difficulty that match the online testing. Participants start at the level indicated by the result of their initial reading test. Participants also read a book, generally non-fiction, with their tutor. Their ongoing reading book is, according to their interviews chosen by their tutor with the participants' interests in mind. They work one to one with their tutor. The programme includes a group comprising a reading and speaking group that meets once a week where participants read levelled pieces for speaking performance. Only one of the interviewed participants, Chrissie, attended this group. Tutors are volunteers from the community who participate in a six hour training programme where they are tutored by the programme organiser in the Direct Instruction teaching and learning approach via the Challenger books. The programme has a small library area with donated books. Participants can take home books to read.

Being on the Programme: Participants' Accounts

At the point of joining the programme Chrissie stated, 'The literacy council became my home one of my home.' She described what the process and philosophy of being on the programme was about for her:

> Ok when we was here when first she was telling us about the confidential you
> know everything is one on one with yours own tutor and your own little booth
> an nobody else is in there with you an whatever grade level you're on that's
> between you and your tutor an it's not like they just pull somebody of the

street and stick them with you, no they have to go through a class an they talk to them they train 'em.

She explained what the programme organiser had promised her would happen when she joined:

> She got out of her chair 'cause she was sitting behind the big desk and we were on the other side an she got up out of her chair, came around and sat on the edge of her desk in front of us she held em my hand and she said you have nothing to worry about everything going to be fine and you know you're going to be reading books, newspaper Oh I just can't wait because you know you're going to blossom and I'm like I want that, I long for that for so, so many years.

When working on writing with her tutor at the programme Chrissie explained how her tutor talked about her handwriting fears. How it did not matter how she wrote at the moment and later, after practice it would not be a problem:

> I wanted to read but I didn't want to write, but she (tutor) said you got to write. She said reading is good but it all comes together and she would write down words and she would say I want you to copy and I said what with my chicken scratch, she said now it doesn't but later it won't. She never looked down on me.

Chrissie articulated how the initial reading test meant she had to start from the beginning of their programme as a non-reader. She reiterated that she wanted to read rather than write:

> When I came here I couldn't read or write because I was second or third grade level and when she said well I'll need notebook, pencil, and I am saying to myself I didn't come here to write, I want to read, I just wanted to jump in and read. It wasn't that easy, I had to learn my vowels, my alphabets. I had to go from day one then up, and next day came and she brought me a paper, she brought me a tablet and a pencil, and I couldn't say no to her because she went to Wal-Mart and she bought some tablets and she was so excited and I said, OK.

Through use of the exercises she explained how hard she had found it to learn to write in standard form:

> When we was in Challenger and you are given twenty words, well ten words in a paragraph, she would say before I got to that paragraph she would go over the words and spell them and she would choose ten she said it doesn't matter if they are misspelled and I wrote the paragraph, it was an address and she went over it and here she always use a red pen and she had messed up the whole paper with her red pen but one day I know I would have less red pen and I strive for that and I rewrite it and my sentence made sense. It is that one to one relationship with a tutor and a student. It is not a month or a year thing take it one day at a time.

She said her tutor told her she was a writer, but she did not believe herself to be one. She included a narrative of her understanding of standard form. How her written sentence did not make sense as it was in the African American vernacular form of putting the past and present tense together. Her tutor explained to her why her (the tutor's) use of tense when writing sentences in standard form made the sentence make more sense:

> She would write it but write it correctly. She'll say read your sentence now read my sentence, it will make more sense and tell you more about what's going on. If you are speaking in the past, it is the past but you are going to put the past and the present together.

Bill stated he had continually tried to learn to read and write but thought no one way e.g. Phonics or reading in context worked. He said the programme was helping because the teacher used varying approaches, such as puzzles as well as the exercises and read the words for him to help him understand:

> Up in New York my wife and some friends of mine were always, we were reading the books and stuff but (pause) they didn't know how to, work with someone you know to teach them how to read. They were tryin to get me to read the word but here they read the word and it gets you to understand it.

> It's a lot easier than someone sayin you know here's the word and I'm going to try and help you figure it out.

I would get frustrated and wouldn't do it anymore.

He said he could not write because he needed to work with his tutor on spelling correctly the 150 most commonly used words she had given him to learn before doing any writing. He described his writing on the programme through the exercises he had done:

I was having some difficulty. See (exercises) this focuses on various things and (tutor) corrects me on them.

Bill explained what he had been doing on the programme and the progress he had been making through the skills books and ongoing online reading testing results:

I guess they tested me and I was at a 3.3 level, now I'm at a 6.9, but they also said that the book I was reading out of I needed to go the next one higher, so another couple of months I'm goin to be moving on to that book and they are going to test and see where I'm at after that. It's only bin six months I've bin comin with my tutor an this is how far I've come whether it's learnin certain sounds and stuff it makes it easier to decode the words that's what your telling yourself and that's what I'm doin. Now I can read this book and read 80% of it and there's still words in there that I struggle with but I can read 80% of this book and underst and have the word right.

Well these books here (gets out exercise books from bag) they teach you, but they teach you, a lot of this is repetition goes over and over again the same thing.

And you know this is stuff we work on and this is what they have me do is this and then you have to copy on this side from memory what you try to do then you flip it over and try to write it without seeing the word, and it works (pause) I have to keep goin over some of it but, you know (pause).

Stan said he was a little more confident after coming to the programme with such tasks as reading his mail at home. Stan explained what he enjoyed about working with his tutor:

Like my aide now I really like we sit down and go over things together, she like doesn't do all the reading she lets me do the reading an then she helps me

when I stumble or when I get to a word that I don't understand she helps me pronounce it out and everything, so she really help me to be able to come to a word and if I'm not too sure about it, you know maybe, you know break it, break it down to understand it.

Jess said she really wanted to learn to read and her tutor had given her a book about Tiger Woods to read because she liked sport. She said she had found love from the tutors at the programme:

Everyone here does wonderful. The whole programme, they got so much love in this place, I feel that love, 'cause if I didn't feel that love, I wouldn't have come here no more.

She said her initial reading test (some ten years ago) showed she was an average reader and she stated she could write. She explained her problem was with spelling and how her tutor was helping her:

I took a test I came out at Grade Six, an average reader. I could write, but couldn't spell. I be tryin to learn how to spell. I spell out the word if I don't know the word he'll sound it out and write it.

The tutors were trying to make reading material relevant personally e.g. Jess, who liked basketball, had read a book about golfer Tiger Woods. To enable the building of self-esteem and confidence through personal reading choice is a complex and sensitive issue.

Walter stated what he did on the programme and why he was enjoying it:

Well no, like a enjoy what we're doing now 'cause the lady like she like show me the words, I get the sound of the words I'm pretty good on the words. I get the spell board I may know how to spell it, but I get the sound of the word pretty good so at my age I'm doing pretty good.

He then compared the similar way he was working on the programme to the way he worked when at school over seventy years ago:

Well they used to write it on the board, like she do she write it on the board, then we have to copy it off.

Walter explained why the programme is important to him:

> Well, no I didn't change my life, no but it give me something to look forward to 'cause I know every Thursday I got a class an I'll enjoy that, but it ain't changed my life 'cause when I'm home I work round the yard and round the house an fix things, the lawnmower, tools and sometimes I'll clean cars, peoples cars, I can do that to, clean house.

Ann described her tutor in a personal positive way:

> I love my tutor she special she's a good tutor.

She went on to describe the process of joining the programme:

> Well I did take a test. I think I took a readin test and a Math. They give you two tests. Yes and you just score and I think that shows where you are and where your starting, yes.

Ann explained how her tutor was helping her on the programme:

> Yes, and they're helping me here to it. I just bring my stuff here and she helps me with my math and everything else.

> I just read the book, I'll read the story and then they'll have questions about what I've read and then I just answer the questions and that's when the comprehending come in 'cause and it depends on the story 'cause you know different things are simple for me and then certain things are a lot difficult it depends on the gist of the story of the comprehending and then I really have to break it down and my tutor she go read it and they take it apart, so that I can understand and then I take it home and I read it and then I come back and then I tell her about the story you know.

When talking about her experiences of writing on the programme Ann explained:

> Ah (sigh) I don't think I've done any writing. My tutor have talked to me about writing 'cause she said she think I would do well. You know they have a reading thing that they do where they act out plays, you know and she said she think I would do well there 'cause she said that I read well, but I haven't got into that yet. No (pause).

Anne said she came to the programme in order to have one to one support helping her with the GRE as she thought she could not learn in a classroom situation. When working for the GRE she explained:

> I just want to stop and not do it anymore because you feel like you're not goin (sigh) to get it right and you want to get it right and you don't want to make mistakes.

Examples of Participants' Written Work

I include here some examples of the participants' written work. These were not numerous or substantial enough to permit detailed textual analysis, but are included to give a flavour of the kinds of writing the participants had attempted.

Chrissie

Small Talk

Is it time? No!
Are you sure? Yes!
Will I be comeing out with you all? No!
Why not, we all grew up together.
I know, but some grow fast than others.

Don't worry about them.
Let's get back to me.
I cannot wait to see the out side world.
I best it, oh, I don't know how it looks.
I am just ready.
We are all ready

You look chanting this morning.
Oh, you can see me?
Can you see me? Yes!
We bloomed beautifully.
The others will blossm later.
It is good that God smiled down on flower DD!

The poem was written by Chrissie when she first started at the programme. The reading test had assessed her at 2/3rd grade reading ability of a 4/5 year old. The second piece was written nearly a decade later in in 2009.

What ~~████~~ Literacy Council Is Doing For Me

~~████~~ was forty six years old and reading on a second or third grade level. When I come to the ~~████~~ inter-view and tested me. That's how I knew what grade level I were on.

They match tutes with students. That's how I got ~~████~~ a retired teacher. With ~~████~~, in four and half months, she had me on a six grade level. She was teaching me to write full float sentences, learning how to sounded out words, learning how to spell them and she gave me lots of home work. We work in the Megawords Books, Focus on Phonics Books and Challengers Books. By the end of 2003, I was writing three to four paragraph sentences, that moded sense. My first printed megawords shot story was in the year of 2004. And from then on I was making history.

It is six years later and I'm speaking for the Literacy Council for fund raiser and speaking at other Literary Councils to encourage them to bring my brothers and sisters out of the black hole.

Have you been to a Spelling Bee fund raiser? I have, it was a wonderful feeling to sit there and listen to words that I didn't know they existed. That was amazing.

I thank Jesus for giving me my needs, I thank the ~~████~~ Literacy Council for opening their door and I thank you for reading my essay.

70

Walter

a | i | e | o

1. m _a_ p

2. m _o_ p

bug | gun

3. _guN_

4. (m a n)
    p a n

5. (dad)
    d i d

Walter had been at the programme a short time and this was an example of the writing he was doing in connection with reading and vocabulary.

Jess

Interview 0

I was born in ▮▮▮▮ in 1958. My mother's name was ▮▮▮▮ and I was her fifth kid. I have two sisters --- ▮▮▮ and ▮▮▮ --- and two brothers --- ▮▮ and ▮▮▮. My father was ▮▮ ▮▮.

I have a daughter. Her name is ▮▮▮. I have two grandsons named ▮▮▮ and ▮▮▮.

The bad stuff that happened to me was that I was molested when I was little girl by my father and the Pastor. I was about eight years old and when I told ▮▮▮ he did not believe me.

My schooling was not great because some teachers embarrassed me because I could not spell simple words. But the sports were great. I played basketball, track, and softball for ▮▮▮ High, and I was very good. In fact, I was the Most Valuable Player in all three sports. Then I played basketball and softball at ▮▮▮ for two years. I really tried hard but still I flunked out.

Jess, a high school graduate had no writing examples to share. This was a piece of writing she produced for me after her interview.

Stan

The Children Are going to have
a birthday party. The games they
Are going to have. At the party
is going to be baseball. The party
is going to be in the day time.
Some of the food will be cupcake.
And sandwichs and muffin and pretzel
A gallon of tie. We Are going
to put some of the food in the
basket. And do not for get the
napkin. And next week we will
have a picnice. And I hope the
flower will have some nice blossom's
And do not for get the blanket to
put on the grown. And hop the
insect Are not bad.

3-18-12

Stan contributed a written example of a given list of words put into sentences. It was produced after the interview.

Bill

Home work

They They they They They They with (woo)
From from From From from
by by by by by by by   what
buy buy buy buy buy
word word word word word word word
siad siad Siad siad Siad siad siad
There There There there There There There
Their Their Their Their Their Their Their
each each each each each each each
which which which which which which which
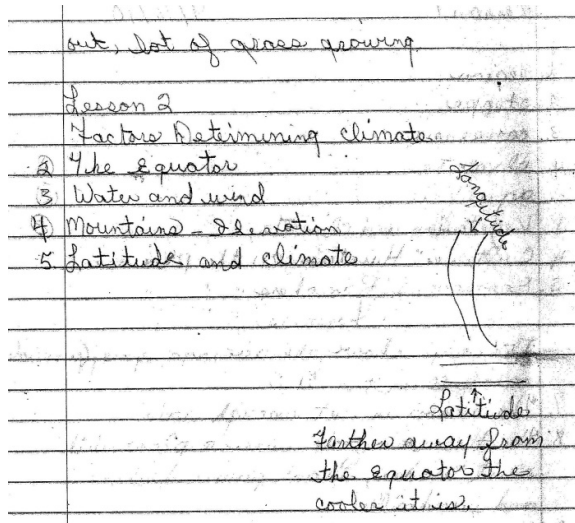ch witch witch witch witch witch witch witch
do do do do do da do do
due Due due due due due due due due
r it it if iF iF if if if if if if if if if if if
other other other other other other other other

Bill had been on the programme for six months. This is an example of the written vocabulary work he was doing.

Ann

Ann was assessed as a competent adult reader and writer. She had this one example of written work to share.

Discussion

In this section, Being on the Programme, I discuss in an integrated way. Nevertheless, certain aspects of the accounts recurred. These include: warm feelings towards the tutor; positive aspects of being on the programme, and negative attitudes toward writing.

One of the dominant themes, therefore, was that of participants' enthusiasm for their tutors. They were very positive in a personal way about their relationship with their individual tutor. Warmth was expressed through words such as 'love', 'special' and 'good'. There was some evidence of tutors trying to tap into their personal interests. The participants appeared to be very cognisant of what the tutors wanted them to do and yet often appeared unable to do it in order to pass the course. It is worth considering why this might be the case, as it raises important issues relating to the possible links between literacy learning and personal affective memories and anxieties. For instance it leads us to ask how far is the Direct Instruction teaching approach of the programme capable of handling these affective dimensions of learning? This approach is tacitly built on a cultural deficit model (e.g. Bereiter& Engelmann, 1966) that seeks to impose formal literacy as a new language to replace the dialect and vernacular practices of the learner, via highly scripted teacher directed instruction. It therefore assumes that the task of literacy teaching is one of remedying or correcting

shortcomings in the literacy experiences and practices of certain groups and communities. However, the strong feelings expressed by the participants suggest that such cultural deficit models could increase participants' feelings of anxiety and therefore impede their progress. It may be the case that tutors recognised the limitations of the Direct Instruction model, since we have seen there was a tension in the data between this required approach and evidence of tutor attempts at personalisation of learning.

At the same time, there did appear to be some attention to participants' personal experiences and interests on the programme. The participants expressed positive feelings about coming to the centre, despite their inability to pass the programme and GED and move on into higher education and the formal job market. Is it the programme or coming to the centre that fulfils an unstated need for them? What is that need? Further nurturing phrases, such as 'coming home' are used by participants to express their feeling when joining the centre. Does this mean a feeling of belonging is important to literacy development? How important then are feelings of belonging for literacy learning? Why if they feel at home at the centre and loved by their tutor are they not developing and passing the programme?

Written work was minimal and seemed focused on reading exercises. Chrissie wrote an expressive poem on entry to the programme but this independent, strong voice does not seem to have been developed through much writing. Her second much later piece of writing was written purely at the request of the Programme organiser to help raise funds for the programme. Walter seems only to be doing vocabulary recognition. Stan and Bill again are working on vocabulary exercises. Ann appears to be doing very little writing at all just comprehension exercise of a given article. The written work was asked to be what they produced over a three month period. Both Stan and Jess's example were produced after the interview. Considering Chrissie, Jess and Ann and Stan had been coming for nearly a decade and even Bill and Walter who had been coming for around six months they had few examples and no writing containing their ideas. It was also notable that several of the participants themselves expressed a lack of interest in, or dislike of writing. For the majority, the ability to read appeared to be more important.

How might passing a national literacy testing programme that is in many ways impersonal, treats literacy as a set of fragmented skills and does not attend to the interests or needs of individual learners be made to happen? As participants expressed feeling at home at the centre and that tutors had had concern for their interests and general well-being, how might the affective connections between the tutor and participant be developed to enable and feed into the acquisition of the formal skills that are valued in literacy testing? Could this ever be successful with participants who have emotionally fragmented memories linked to literacy and an institutional demand for a Direct Instruction approach? These are important questions for further discussion in the concluding chapter.

3. Unacknowledged Literacies

Perhaps one of the most significant themes throughout the interviews concerned the ways the participants had coped with a lack of literacy. However, using one valid definition of literacy is difficult because of its diverse involvement with many different forms of literacy practices. Hultin and Westman (2013:1) argue:

> Literacy practices as places where subject positions are constituted – subject positions that offer specific ways of understanding the self and the world and thereby also enable and restrict the subject's action.

It emerged from the interviews that individuals may have literacy skills that are not identified in formal testing, or indeed by the participants themselves. This section explores the issue of 'unacknowledged' literacies and the strategies that participants used to help them to make sense of text. It also identifies the ways that some participants sought out engagement with books and text, even if they were unable to read these in the strict sense of the word.

Chrissie discussed her love of books, stories and reading throughout her school years and how she participated now with books:

> I think that's why I kept going to school because I knew she was going to read every day and that was the best time and I wish that I could read like that. I love books, I love carrying them the whole twelve years, I would carry my books back and forth, home to school because there was a library to study and I thought what place have they been or travelled, where are they going and

then I would open my books, but I couldn't travel because I couldn't read. I carried my books in.

Yes, I do bible study at home. I love books; I get on the bus, take a book and I read. I love words. I love using new words. When I come to a word I look it up, I'm fascinated by words. I have pictures in my house that have words, sayings round them and people come into my house and so many words and I say yes I love words.

From what Chrissie says there is pleasure and sensuality to be gained from engaging with books, even if one cannot read them, in ways that go beyond mere 'pretence'. Her remarks suggest that one can have a love of words without formal skills in decoding longer stretches of text. In the interview she spoke of enjoying the word 'illuminating' that I had used and hoped to use it again herself.

Walter discussed being in a literate world. He began by including descriptions of early stage reading and writing acquisition and how he used this knowledge to help him in his job:

Take checks, make deposits for them, pick up checks, everything, I did everything.

I had a sense of direction when I see the word and I see the sign I would know it I could see it I could spell. I could see the letters when I see the address I know it when I see it.

Well now writing, I learned how to write pretty good, I can write pretty good, I learned how to write, it's just hard for me to learn how to read and pronounce the words, you know just pick up something and read it, but writin I can write, I can sign my name, anything, I can do it alright.

I was spellin, when I see the letters, I know the letters, spell the r, you know they would give me the name , give me a piece of paper, give me the name, when I get there I know it, I don't know I spell, I read…

I know the signs, I know the signs, when I see the signs I know what they mean.

He then described in more detail how he does not only have the ability to read letters and match them to an address as single signs but is also able to put letters together and read simple words at the programme:

> Right now I can pick up somethin an read a few words, long words I don't know.

> I do a word puzzle, I know how to do that to, so I got things to do when I'm not doing things outside, you know got things to do outside.

When talking about reading longer words he describes this as something he does do at home where he asks his wife for help when he needs to:

> Yes a bigger word sometime I can pick them up, I can spell it an get the sound of it an pronounce it like that, sometime I can do that, I enjoy doin that. Sometime I know what they mean and sometime I don't an I ask my wife.

Walter described being able to read to some extent, but like Chrissie, he judged he had not been required or expected to learn to write:

> Yes well I know how it was supposed to be done, I may not be reading but I would look at something an know how it was supposed to be done, I can't do it myself, I can't spell but I know in my head and my mind how it's supposed to be done.

> Yea back in the day I used to write good, that's how I learned how to write. I can print real good. I had a pretty good hand, learn how to space the words don't put them all on top of each other and after a while you are supposed to put a period, like when reading after a sentence you are supposed to stop with the period, or a question mark you are not supposed to go on an so on an so on an soon you are supposed to stop.

> Well I just had no reason to write, no one wanted that and if I had to write somethin, a form I got someone else to write it. But you had to know how to add up, how to give change an all that.

Jess described how she graduated from High School by passing tests and attended higher education for a degree but had found it difficult:

I went two years to college. My college days were numbered, I flunked out. My coach gave me a tutor, but I couldn't (pause) I didn't know the words. I was takin zoology.

She talked about the only person that was able to help her was a sociology professor but his help came too late for her and she had to leave her degree. She talked about writing and what she would like to write about:

My tutor asked me to write a book report, but that's about it. I'd be happy to do it

I write about sport, I love sports, I love basketball, softball, I don't like baseball, I like football, track and field, everything but baseball!

Although no written work was available for Jess, after the interview Jess produced a typed written statement for me after her interview where she described her life as she had done in the interview, and named the people she said had sexually abused her as a child. Her literacy seemed linked in complex ways with her abuse. Unfortunately, it was beyond the scope of this study, and indeed my own expertise as an educator, to address this distressing topic in detail. However I register it here as a matter worthy of further research, and arguably, of specialist counselling both for adult literacy learners who may need such support, and for their tutors.

Jess described herself as an average reader from the reading tests she has participated in as part of the course:

I took a test I came out at Grade Six, an average reader. I could write, but couldn't spell.

Stan explained how he used functional reading and writing in his every day activities but found reading difficult in tests:

I do writin if I have to, if I get mail or something and I have to answer something, I know how to write.

He concluded that if someone else had read the questions to him in a test he would have understood and been able to answer them.

Bill explained how his colleague did read the multiple choice questions for him in a work test situation and he then got the answers right. He said he always understood that what was being tested was important to get right in order to pass the test. He went on to describe how he listened to his reading choice whilst driving a truck long distance for his previous job:

> Well, I've got some books I want to read, James Patterson's. I have been listening to him on CD because that has the way I have been getting a lot of my information. You know if I want a book to read, I bought them on CD and I could play them in the truck. What got me really was the serious satellite and I used to listen to the book channel when I was driving.

Bill explained how he earned a substantial wage in New York as a fireman, but had difficulty coping financially because it all went on taxes and other living costs. He explained his and his wife's money went further living in the South and he was learning to read independently. He described how he wrote on Facebook to communicate with his family.

Bill described how in the past when working with others he saw how quickly some completed a new task. He stated that he in order to cope and not get frustrated with this and complete new tasks effectively himself he took a step back and gave himself more time to think critically to resolve a problem. He also described how he had difficulties in his job as a truck driver with finding places and how he coped by practicing the route several times in order to remember the directions.

Ann summed up in her interview her understanding of her own literacy:

> Oh yes I mean I'm told I'm a good reader and I write well. Yes. I am (pause) it's not that I don't know how to do these things it's that some areas I did need more help than others. Yes.

> I don't know anything about the government, I really don't read up on that, you know, and I think that's it because if you don't know, if you don't read up on a thing and you don't really hear it a lot, you're not around it then you don't know and when you hear people talking they may be talking about.

Yes just expressing it because that's what you do when you're writin it's like an expression for me, it's what I feel about what it is, what it's like, what it does for me, how it make me feel, you know, how it's bettering me.

Ann then discussed the literacy work she does with children at a local grandparents club:

Yes, because it's a place that I love goin and when I get there it's so relaxed and so peaceful, the teachers work with me. The kids when I come in, they got to know me now and they're like my little people, you know I just really love em. It's like I needed them more than they needed me, you know and they don't know that, but you see I know that and I've got so close to them it's scary. When I say scary it's like I don't want to draw back because this might, you know when they come they fight to sit at my table. They say I'm sittin with Grandma (name) today and this little boy gets so close to me and it's like I felt the love and I'm like Oh gosh I didn't know I was ever goin to feel the love like this for the little kids, but you know because I didn't quit and it was a fearful place and I was kinda afraid, but my supervisor she kept sayin she would tell me it's goin to be alright 'cause you're good with kids, she said I just see that you're so good with them and she know that I'd lost my son and that place, you know how could I ever get close to a child again, 'cause I didn't want to love someone and it's not mine and it would love me back and it's bin a good thing.

She then continued to talk enthusiastically about how she helped them:

Ye, what I do I have in the morning I do reading with them and then we do writing and then after lunch we do math and I didn't know this is something I can do I said Lord I am not a teacher, I don't know why lately I have all these kids round my table 'cause I am not a teacher and the kids they get around and you know they're so special 'cause they help me 'cause when I first went in I didn't really know how to flow with this and they would say no Miss (name) you do it like this, especially the older kids well no I'll pass the pictures out and this is how we do it Miss (name) and I'm helping her!

She also described how she had helped her own son:

When he was little oh yes. He was very, very smart, very intelligent. I spent a lot of time with him reading and helping him do his work and we were very close and you know so yes I read to him a lot (pause).

Discussion

Unacknowledged literacy experiences were talked about in some detail by the participants. It is clear from the data that literacy is a highly complex notion, and that it is not an all or nothing phenomenon. Participants had a range of literacy coping strategies and skills, such as spelling out words, recognising what signs meant and calling on friends and colleagues and family for literacy support. Heightened use of critical thinking and spatial-memory was acknowledged by participants in the data. Listening to literature and personal liking for a particular author was also expressed. Therefore there were many instances of diverse engagements with text in the interviews.

It was important to note that many of the participants expressed experiencing a sense of pleasure, engagement and enjoyment from reading, or from contact with books and literature in general. So what does this section's data about unacknowledged literacy mean for literacy programmes? All the participants have so far failed to pass the programme. The question remains as to why they continued to fail, and why they nevertheless found the experience empowering in some respects. How did literacy and literature continue to be important for most of the participants despite failure on the tests?

There is also the question of what the participants' unacknowledged enthusiasm for literature speaks about? Rather than expecting the participants to engage with a generic literacy testing experience might literacy programmes and testing be more about individual participation in literature engagement? If so, how could this develop? Or is the programme empowering as it is?

Lastly, how might literacy programmes maximise on the unacknowledged skills and strategies that participants may bring with them? How could they exploit their diverse enthusiasms in ways that would actually feed into the kinds of literacy skills that are

valued in the tests? Nothing about the programme is a coherent whole. The questions that come out of the research are further discussed in the concluding chapter.

Conclusion

From this analysis in this chapter it is clear that the programme and participants did not, for whatever reason utilise the participants' previous knowledge and enthusiasm for cultural literature nor engage or focus on an individual level to help overcome issues such as: their experiences of Institutional and cultural racism, intergenerational transmission of literacy problems, adult disempowerment, social isolation, and hopes for the future. The centre itself, however, was a place of safety for the participants, who felt loved by the people who ran it; but perhaps not in a way that is helping to enable empowerment overall in society. But is this lack of progress and further participant vulnerability a fault of the centre workers' lack of cultural understanding, participants' inability to overcome emotionally personal past disempowerment, a lack of equality in society, or failures of educational programme policy makers. There is likely to be more than a single issue at play here. To avoid hooks' (1994) fear of 'cookie cutter' approaches to issues of equality of opportunity, one might ask: is it therefore miscommunication, intentional or otherwise and/or fear of difference that continues to stop progress for everyone from happening? The questionnaire responses suggested that many of the participants were involved in oral storytelling, and lived with family and friends who all read and write. From their written work it would seem the participants can, write to varying degrees, yet there was no evidence of their journal writing and development at the centre over the three-month period of this study. The concluding chapter will discuss these issues and questions and reflect on my own practice.

Chapter 5.   Conclusion

> To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can
> learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also
> believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that
> our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and
> spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares
> for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary
> conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin. (hooks 1994:
> 13)

Introduction

As a literacy educator on a similar programme to the one studied, the adult learners I
taught had problems initially with moving from spoken to written language acquisition.
As I taught the programme over time with different groups I felt these problems may
not only possibly relate to the structure or pedagogy of the adult literacy programme
we were participating in but also to participants' deeply-felt social and emotional
issues about literacy. The emphasis of the generic programme was on passing a
multiple choice literacy test and five paragraph either/ or argument essay, in keeping
with the national GRE test requirements. The programme had little thought for
individual participants' social and emotional needs. Nor did it emphasise, or have the
time for active critical thinking and extended writing practice.

My own past professional experience of teaching written literacy had also included
teaching drama at a High School. Engagement with reading, gaining of vocabulary and
extended critical essay writing practice were learned in an ongoing and individually
active developmental way. The pedagogy depended on the play choice and characters
and themes to be studied being approached sensitively to help meet the social and
educational needs of students. For students who expressed anxiety and dislike of
writing, working though drama provided a non-confrontational way to move from oral
to written work. Students learned to overcome their literacy reading and writing fears
through the oral study of fictional, culturally respectful, characters or through devised
work they had created to turn into written play form. I was concerned that an
individual, non-formulaic, approach that helped move an adult student from oral to

written language was not possible within the generic adult literacy programme format of the State and County where I was teaching.

The overall aim and purpose of the study therefore was to try to gain deeper insights and understanding of the problems surrounding the process of working toward written literacy through a small study of six participants. It was hoped this would help inform teaching pedagogy and future adult literacy programme planning. To recapitulate, the research was based in the Southern State in the US where I was living and teaching. The study was organised around three main research questions:

1. How did students' personal experiences of literacy affect their success or otherwise in adult literacy programmes?
2. How did the literacy programme connect, or fail to connect, with students' personal experiences?
3. What are the implications for curriculum and pedagogy in adult literacy programmes?

I judged a qualitative methodology was most appropriate and best suited to my research questions. I ultimately adopted a grounded theory approach in the analysis of my data as argued by Charmaz (2005) in order not to prejudge what participants would say, to be sensitive to what the participants told me in their interviews, and to allow the analysis to be grounded in the interview data. I therefore became a researcher whose critical approach was part of the analytic process. Nevertheless I had, due to my previous teaching experience, my own biases. For instance, my initial research focus was almost certainly influenced by my anxieties about written work not happening because it was not being done through the orally democratic process of drama. However researching how participants experienced a literacy programme enabled me to look more deeply into the issues relating to resistance to writing that came out of the data. In turn this has raised issues for further research, which I discuss further below.

Questions and Issues Arising from the Research

In this section I revisit some of the themes identified in the preceding analysis chapter, and explore some issues and implications for research and practice in literacy education.

The Significance of Affect and Emotion in Adult Literacy

The participants associated powerful emotions and feelings – both positive and negative – with their experiences and attitudes to literacy. Participants talked of feeling that they had 'come home' when attending the centre. Feeling 'safe' emotionally and physically seemed to be bound up in the participants' literacy development. Trusting the person emotionally that they were working with was also mentioned several times. This was often their tutor but sometimes, as they became more confident, family members and friends. Moreover, despite lack of success in the tests, several of the participants expressed very warm feelings associated with books and reading.

The participants also revealed many negative emotions associated with literacy, some of which had their origins in their childhood experiences of prejudice, poverty and reduced opportunities. Fear, shame and guilt appeared to be entwined with abilities and attitudes in complex ways. Nevertheless, most of the participants continued to express hopefulness for the future.

The Intergenerational Transmission of Difficulties with Literacy

Many of the participants thought they were repeating the literacy patterns and challenges experienced by their parents or grandparents and had fears that they might pass these on to their own children. For instance, some participants held beliefs that illiteracy was part of their DNA and genetically passed on because they had been told that as children. Perhaps reading choice might be one area for further study to understand if it can help overcome these fears. I argued in my analysis that personal reading choice was a complex and sensitive issue. The data indicated psychological negative memory barriers were holding participants back without them being aware or aware and unable to do anything about it. For example, one participant talked of wanting to get rid of the negative memory thoughts that stopped her from being able to learn. The issue of intergenerational trauma has been examined recently by a number of scholars. Walkerdine, Olswold and Rudberg (2013) suggest that it is important to try to understand the 'bodied' memory of transference of trauma engendered by such things as historical slavery from one generation to the next. Similarly, Bright (2016) proposes the notion of 'social haunting': he identifies an

intergenerational transmission of 'precarity' to young people living with the inheritance of the destruction of their communities by the closure of the mines in the 1980. The intergenerational relationship with an individual's current negative experiences of literacy and writing might be an area to study further. This in turn might help in guiding positive reading choice and teaching approaches for adult programmes in the South where the study took place.

Trust and love of the centre and tutors was, as already noted, expressed by the interviewees. Specialist tutor training and agreement to participate in teaching with a focus on intergenerational transference of trauma issues might perhaps mean further literacy success could be developed in order to achieve as well as enjoy literacy, and in particular the written form. Such an approach would need to be carefully piloted. It would require a deeper analysis of the ethics of this approach to literacy learning to make sure there was a good enough support system, and might also require changes to confidentiality agreements. Confidentiality was a central to the ethos of the centre involved in the study. However this means that participants who wanted to talk together in a supportive way about their literacy experiences would not currently be able to do so as part of the programme. A more collective approach, focusing on shared experiences across the generations, might enable a literacy family to develop with positive implications for achievement. In this sense, adult literacy centres would be similar to a positive community library. This approach, which could be broadly described as *therapeutic discussion*, becoming part of the programme is therefore worthy of further study.

It was notable that some participants were taking practical steps to interrupt the intergenerational transmission of literacy difficulties – for instance in the demand made by Chrissie for her son to go to a Magnet school, which had been beneficial for his literacy. Starting from their inception in the 1960's a study of Magnet schools and their journey to eradicate race-based educational inequality might be visited for further research.

Converting Positivity into Achievement

One of the most surprising issues to emerge from the study was the extent to which most of the participants expressed positive views of their experience, even where they

had failed repeatedly to pass the formal testing. In particular the support of their tutors appeared to be valued, and more generally most participants took some enjoyment from participating in the programme. Perhaps educators and communities should recognise these positive experiences as providers of hope and purpose for difficult lives. However, this sense of hope may not go far enough in the pursuit of literacy empowerment for all. In fact, celebrating difficult lives as forever hopeful in the face of deficit and disempowerment could be understood as widening, rather than diminishing the achievement gap, by encouraging quietism or false optimism. One key question for future research therefore is whether and how this positivity could be harnessed further in ways that would enable achievement on the tests, and close the large gap between positivity and attainment.

The Significance of Personal Experiences in Encounters with Literacy

Participants were all positive about wanting to talk about their fight for literacy because, it appeared, they wanted the study to tell the story of how people should be treated with respect. It was clear throughout the interviews that participants' current experiences and attitudes to literacy were, as already discussed, linked to their personal experiences and histories in complex ways. Not all demonstrated conscious awareness of how personal experience and history were still affecting them, or if they were aware, they did not always know how they were to be helped through it. One of the issues emerging from the study is the complexity surrounding discourses of personal experience.

Drawing on personal experience is strongly advocated in certain literacy models, as a way of generating stronger and more authentic engagements with texts. My research might be taken to provide further support for this position. For example, it appeared that Jess had stopped writing during the programme. After the interview where she described her experiences with literacy and family abuse she produced a piece of writing with the support of her tutor (see Chapter 4) naming her abusers and the influence of the abuse on life story. To this extent, encouraging personal reflection appeared to prompt writing activity where this might not otherwise have happened.

However bringing personal experience into the learning situation is a delicate matter that could have unforeseen consequences for participants. There are risks involved

without specialist training for surfacing traumatic or painful memories that may disrupt delicately balanced equilibriums. The economic cost of providing such additional training for such therapeutic discussion may not be seen as worthwhile for the short term requirement of multiple choice testing. Moreover, participants or tutors may be fearful or resistant to attempts to move away from basic literacy models in order to address emotion and personal investment. Painful memories and the task of confronting current inequality in society and community can be avoided by both tutor and participant if focus remains on Direct Instruction for a short term test.

The warmth that many of the interviewees expressed towards their tutors suggest that there was, to some extent, a personal dimension to the overall experience of the programme. However if this was more social than educational then again, although enjoyed by the participants, this contact may have unwittingly been benefiting the volunteer tutors at the expense of the participants' progress and achievement. Interviewing tutors about their experiences of the literacy programme, their relationships with participants and their own feelings about addressing personal experiences as an official element of pedagogy would be a further direction for future research.

The Significance of Writing

Issues associated specifically with writing emerged from the study. It is certainly the case that many of the participants themselves seemed to be resistant to writing. Perhaps because of the sheer difficulties that writing presents, such as getting the spelling right, mastery of genre, and the fact that writing is an individual and sometimes lonely activity. The opportunities to fail in sustained, expressive writing are particularly visible - there in black and white for the person to see and be reminded about every time they look at the page they have written on. In this sense participating in 'fill the gap' exercises may be a less threatening activity. But the word-level focus of the programme, though less threatening, militates against learning to write extended text, in diverse genres. The only opportunity to write, as noted in Chapter 5, was in the form of the participants' journals. But all remained generally unused. The word-level focus therefore denies participants experience with the forms of writing that they most fear.

There is also the question of the function of writing in the personal lives of the participants. Some thought that writing did not have a prominent place in their lives. It did not appear to be associated with pleasure in the way that reading was. Therefore it might be asked whether programmes should look for instructional methods that are more enjoyable and more related to the everyday writing that participants actually engage in, even where these are very limited. In the case of the participants in the study, these activities included social media activities, making lists, following directions.

Assuming that there are broader arguments for acquiring extended writing skills, even if these are not used in the everyday lives of many people, the question arises of whether the written tests need to be changed to enable more flexibility of learning of extended texts in diverse genres. Might learning through genres enable the time and flexibility to tackle literacy anxiety? The costs of administrating such types of tests would be great and participants would be required to attend programmes for more than the usual three months. However participants were returning again and again to try and pass the short term tests. The supposed three months necessary to pass the tests often turned into years with very little in extended writing skill to show for it. Perhaps a focus on genre might be of more benefit and require participants to be on such a programme for less time overall before they find achievement. Even though the main purpose for many programme participants is to pass a college entrance test, the question persists as to whether it should simply be accepted that it is necessary to learn to write, even if writing plays a lesser role in their everyday lives. This again is worthy of further study within the centre and beyond.

The Significance of Cultural, Historical and Geographical Factors in Adult Literacy Provision

My research showed how the participants' experiences were, in many cases, tied to their particular socio-economic and historical location. In particular the legacy of desegregation, racism and poverty affected all the participants. A therapeutic reading choice approach might be considered, not only to address personal anxieties, but also to sure that adult literacy policy and provision is tailored to the specific needs and histories of the communities that they serve. As I noted in Chapter 2, Brice Heath (1983) is an advocate of such an approach. She argues that with a more democratic

approach teachers relied on students to bring to the classroom their reading and writing needs and habits. They were involved in literacy exercise tasks but also in research where the basics of spelling etc. were monitored by the students themselves. They worked on projects to do with their local community and wanting to get it right meant they did not mind being judgemental about themselves in order to improve. But despite the extensive research of Brice Heath, her approach has never been accepted at policy level by any State or nationally. She discusses (2012) in her follow up study the significance that technology now plays in geographical migration from County to County in the study's Southern State for young people to enable achievement. However she notes that the post-industrial information age has widened the achievement gap. Poverty now plays an even larger part therefore in disabling achievement. This is reflected in the infrastructure of public transport, which is still minimal in the area where the study took place. Being able to get to places of study that provide a free technology facility is still a problem and again needs to be addressed by the Government to help all adult literacy policy providers. Either public transport needs to be improved or financial assistance needs to be given for those most in need to further alleviate anxiety.

Unacknowledged Literacies

The data showed that despite failure on tests, participants were engaged in a range of literacy related practices, even though some of these might not be recognised from conventional or assessment viewpoints. Stan was able to read and pay bills that came to his home. Much of the participants contact with literacy had a strong emotional dimension. Walter not only used his knowledge of letters as signs to guide him to get somewhere, and paid company cheques into the bank, but he stated with passion that it was this ability that had enabled him to have a successful working life as a driver and to be able to provide for his family. It was also important that he was trusted by his employer. Bill frequently used Facebook to write and keep in touch with his family. He also listened to audio stories whilst driving and had a love and knowledge of certain literary genres and authors. Chrissie loved the idea of being in contact with books, for instance through carrying them, walking down the aisles of a library and touching them, and using her imagination to picture the story. Ann had joined a grandparent

centre to cope with her grief at losing her son, and was helping children with their reading and writing, even though she herself had difficulties with literacy.

Many of the interviewees gave great significance to literacy and felt that their difficulties left a gap in their lives. A key question for further study is how this emotion and passion for literacy might be harnessed and developed constructively. As I have discussed above, reading choice, genre work and therapeutic discussion might tap into these powerful emotions and help to bridge the achievement gap. But more research is needed into the strange attachments and the diverse engagements with literacy that individuals may have, yet still not be considered 'literate' by themselves and others.

Strengths and Limitations of the Research

It needs to be acknowledged that this was a small study and so had a limited scope, in terms of the number of participants, and the range of issues that could be pursued. There was also the risk of my own values and assumptions influencing the analysis. For instance, as I have made clear above and in previous chapters, I came to this research with many years of experience as a literacy educator, and particular beliefs and assumptions as to how literacy should be taught. Even though I have attempted to stay 'close' to the data, and to allow the participants as full a voice as possible, it is inevitable therefore that my own convictions and tacit assumptions will have influenced the analysis and the interpretations that I have made on the basis of this. Nevertheless, the research has surfaced issues that I would not have anticipated. Perhaps most importantly, it has begun to reveal complexities underlying apparently straightforward educational assumptions. Many of these complexities lie beyond the scope of the present research to address in depth, and point to the need for further work.

Concluding Remarks

As a teacher, literacy is a part of my job whether I am teaching it directly or through another subject such as drama. It is also part of my own professional development. This research study has enabled me to understand more about the challenges we all face as adults when attempting to improve our literacy. The feelings of anxiety that can overwhelm the learning experience are not a unique experience. Past negative learning memories and family transference of literacy trauma can feel very real. The

study has highlighted major questions about adult literacy programmes. For instance how they need to be more sensitive to cultural variation and the issues of equality that are associated with this. If, as Brice Heath noted, literacy practices tend to reinforce the practices and the belief systems of white, middle class constituencies then what needs to be done to change this? Money and funding for improvements of transport infrastructure as well as the programme and to meet the basic nutrition and social needs of participants to alleviate anxiety have not as yet been made available. The programme I studied was being funded by a charity and the government – but only as long as they continued with the generic testing approach.

Perhaps the most significant, and intransigent, issues underlying an adult literacy programme such as the one studied here are *poverty* and *race.* Good nutrition, housing and education are necessary in order to have the energy and focus to learn to be literate. But poverty had often interfered with this process in the interviewees' accounts. The cycle of literacy disadvantage is difficult to break without governmental help and support for families disadvantaged by poverty. Without this, and the cultural and economic shifts needed to tackle the effects of racism on safety and self-esteem, anxiety will continue to interfere with learning. We are still a long way from fully understanding the effects of poverty, race, trauma and life experiences on literacy.

The research therefore does not solve, but rather further complicates questions around adult literacy. I have indicated, throughout, my commitment to an 'engaged' pedagogy in hooks' words. However my research shows how 'engagement' cannot be considered as an abstract ideal that can be applied in the same way across all contexts. 'Engagement' runs the risk of releasing feelings and emotions that may be painful or damaging. It necessarily intersects with the personal histories and values of tutors and participants, with the value systems and assumptions that prevail in the wider culture, and with the hard realities of limited funds in an underfunded sector. One is forced to wonder how substantial change can ever become a reality.

However I would like to end on a positive note that literacy achievement could begin to happen for everyone if policy makers locally and nationally looked to the already available qualitative research in order to change their approach to adult literacy programmes. They would find guidance from Brice Heath's (1983) ethnographic research. Here she discusses how positive it can be for literacy achievement for all

when teachers' ideas of what 'relevance' means are altered. Brice Heath emphasises the importance of changing the way that teachers teach, not their standards of understanding what clear writing is. Finding ways for reading and writing to make sense for all the students, she argues, is the way forward. In this way the teachers learn to believe in a reciprocal relationship, that their students can learn and that they can learn from their students. I would like to end my study with a quote from one of the teachers in the Brice Heath's (1983:314) study:

> The needs are many, the motivation is amazing; and the goal of learning from the students is for us to know what they have, not to tell us what they lack.

Appendix A.   Census Details and Demographic Context

Regional Demographic Context

The US census evidences for the year 2010 that the South Eastern County where the study took place has a population of around 362,000 and the city where the study took place has a population of around 100,000. The State has a population of 9,750,000 and a prison population of around 40,000.

The State's Department of Correction (2010) shows prison population statistics as: 93% male, 7% female; 57% black, 35% white, 2% American Indian, 0% Asian/Oriental and 6% other. The most frequent crimes are: Drug Possession 18%, Assault 11%, Larceny 11%, DWI, 10%, Breaking and Entering 10%.

The educational level of prison admission in 2010 was derived as an overall statistic from a generic test of reading level:

Grade (UK equivalent)	Claimed ability	Tested ability
0 – 6 (Primary)	1%	34%
6.1 – 11.9 (Secondary)	75%	45%
12.0 + (Post-secondary)	24%	21%

The local County had two main formal adult educational establishments, the University located uptown and the Community College which was located downtown.

Figure 1. Statistics from the 2010 US Census

Race/Ethnicity	State	County
White (not Hispanic or Latino)	60.1%	76.8%
African American	21.5%	14.8%
Hispanic or Latino	8.4%	5.3%
Asian	2.2%	1.2%
American Indian and Alaska Native	1.3%	0.5%
Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander	0.1%	0.1%
Other	4.3%	n/a
Identified by two or more	2.2%	2.0%
Age		
Percentage aged 65 and over	12.9%	13.9%
Poverty		
Percentage in poverty	16.4% (2015 ACS data)	17.3% (2015 SAIPE data)

Nationwide Literacy Demographic Context

Data for US adult population derived from US Department of Education, National Centre for Education Statistics, Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies and Development PIAAC 2012, published by US Department of Education, National Centre for Educational Statistics (NCES) is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Percentage of U.S. Adults Age 16 to 65 at Each Level of Proficiency on the PIAAC Literacy Scale, by Race/Ethnicity: 2012

Proficiency Levels and Cut Scores for Literacy	Literacy Task Descriptions
Level 5(376 – 500)	At this level, tasks may require the respondent to search for and integrate information across multiple, dense texts; construct syntheses of similar and contrasting ideas or points of view; or evaluate evidenced based arguments. Application and evaluation of logical and conceptual models of ideas may be required to accomplish tasks. Evaluating reliability of evidentiary sources and selecting key information is frequently a key requirement. Tasks often require respondents to be aware of subtle, rhetorical cues and to make high-level inferences or use specialized background knowledge
Level 4(326 – 375)	Tasks at this level often require respondents to perform multiple-step operations to integrate, interpret, or synthesize information from complex or lengthy continuous, non-continuous, mixed, or multiple type texts. Complex inferences and application of background knowledge may be needed to perform successfully. Many tasks require identifying and understanding one or more specific, non-central ideas in the text in order to interpret or evaluate subtle evidence-claim or persuasive discourse relationships. Conditional information is frequently present in tasks at this level and must be taken into consideration by the respondent. Competing information is present and sometimes seemingly as prominent as correct information.
Level 3(276 – 325)	Texts at this level are often dense or lengthy, including continuous, non-continuous, mixed, or multiple pages. Understanding text and rhetorical structures become more central to successfully completing tasks, especially in navigation of complex digital texts. Tasks require the respondent to identify, interpret, or evaluate one or more pieces of information, and often require varying levels of inferencing. Many tasks require the respondent construct meaning across larger chunks of text or perform multi-step operations in order to identify and formulate responses. Often tasks also demand that the respondent disregard irrelevant or inappropriate text content to answer accurately. Competing information is often present, but it is not more prominent than the correct information.
Level 2(226 – 275)	At this level, the complexity of text increases. The medium of texts may be digital or printed, and texts may

	be comprised of continuous, non-continuous, or mixed types. Tasks in this level require respondents to make matches between the text and information, and may require paraphrase or low-level inferences. Some competing pieces of information may be present. Some tasks require the respondent to: • cycle through or integrate two or more pieces of information based on criteria, • compare and contrast or reason about information requested in the question, or • navigate within digital texts to access-and-identify information from various parts of a document.
Level 1(176 – 225)	Most of the tasks at this level require the respondent to read relatively short digital or print continuous, non-continuous, or mixed texts to locate a single piece of information which is identical to or synonymous with the information given in the question or directive. Some tasks may require the respondent to enter personal information onto a document, in the case of some non-continuous texts. Little, if any, competing information is present. Some tasks may require simple cycling through more than one piece of information. Knowledge and skill in recognizing basic vocabulary, evaluating the meaning of sentences, and reading of paragraph text is expected.
Below Level 1(0 – 175)	The tasks at this level require the respondent to read brief texts on familiar topics to locate a single piece of specific information. Only basic vocabulary knowledge is required, and the reader is not required to understand the structure of sentences or paragraphs or make use of other text features. There is seldom any competing information in the text and the requested information is identical in form to information in the question or directive. While the texts can be continuous, the information can be located as if the text were non-continuous. As well, tasks below level 1 do not make use of any features specific to digital texts

White (65): Below level 1: 1, Level 1: 9, Level 2: 32, Level 3: 42, Level 4/5: 16
Black (13): Below level 1: 7, Level 1: 28, Level 2: 41, Level 3: 22, Level 4/5: 3
Hispanic (14): Below level 1: 15, Level 1: 28, Level 2: 36, Level 3: 18, Level 4/5: 3
Other (8): Below level 1: 3, Level 1: 14, Level 2: 35, Level 3: 34, Level 4/5: 14
Overall: Below level 1: 4, Level 1: 14, Level 2: 34, Level 3: 36, Level 4/5: 12

Legend: ☐ Below level 1 ☐ Level 1 ☐ Level 2 ☐ Level 3 ☐ Level 4/5

X-axis: Percent (0 to 100)

Appendix B.   General Literacy Awareness Questionnaire

Question		Interviewee						Y/N %	
		1	2	3	4	5	6	Y%	N%
1	Do you read sometimes?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	100	0
2	Do your family members read?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	100	0
3	Does your family read a lot?	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	67	33
4	Do your local community / friends / neighbors read?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	100	0
5	Do your local community / friends / neighbors read a lot?	Y	N	Y	Y	-	Y	67	17
6	Do you use any form of technology?	N	Y	N	N	Y	Y	50	50
7	Do you use any form of technology a lot?	N	N	N	N	Y	Y	33	67
8	Is any form of technology used by your family?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	100	0
9	Is any form of technology used by your local community /friends / neighbors?	Y	-	Y	Y	Y	Y	83	0
10	Do you tell stories / songs / poems to children or other people?	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	83	17
11	Do you listen to stories /songs /poems other people tell?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	100	0
12	Are some of the stories / songs / poems about real life?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	100	0
13	Are some of the stories / songs / poems made up?	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	83	17
14	Does your family tell or listen to stories / songs / poems?	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y	67	33
15	Do your community /friends / neighbors tell or listen to stories / songs /poems?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	100	0
16	Is talking different at home from talking outside home?	N	Y	N	N	N	Y	33	67
17	Is writing different at home from writing outside home?	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	67	33
18	Are you the first person in your family to work on your writing?	Y	N	Y	Y	N	N	50	50
19	Do you like tests?	N	Y	N	N	N	N	17	83
	Total Interviewee 'Yes' responses	13	15	12	14	14	16	Total	
	Percentage Interviewee 'Yes' responses	68	79	63	74	74	84	75	25

20 What do you enjoy doing most at CFLC?	
Interviewee 1	I enjoy working with my tutor. She is a loving giving, and understanding person. She has a beautiful personality. (written by interviewee in print with correct use of lower and upper case letters)
Interviewee 2	learning to read /write (written by interviewee in print all lower case letters)
Interviewee 3	meeting with my tutor (written by interviewee in print all lower case letters)
Interviewee 4	Learing (written by interviewee in print with correct use of upper and lower case letters and spelling error - *learning*)
Interviewee 5	Volunteers (request for word to be written for him)
Interviewee 6	What I like most is when I come in to CFLC. My tutor and I work on things like math which is a difficult subject for me. In leaving CFLC I have a better understanding of math; also my reading comprehension has improved. (written by interviewee in cursive with correct use of upper and lower case letters)

Interviewee key – 1: Chrissie, 2: Walter, 3: Jess, 4: Stan, 5: Bill, 6: Ann

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