The thread running through: weaving social practice literacy into Functional Skills English curriculum design

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to investigate how adult learners' experiences of college-based literacy learning, in relation to their own knowledge and experiences, can inform the development of curriculum tasks for Functional Skills English, taking a social practice approach. To achieve this, I seek to investigate how could using stories of experience and learners' own aspirations help curriculum development for adult literacy learners and what do learners' stories of experience tell us about their progress. Finally, I seek to investigate how this work inform our constructions of self.

To answer these questions, this thesis is qualitative, using an interpretative approach to an ethnographic inquiry, exploring my own practice. I have also described it as action research in nature, as it seeks to identify solutions to a specified problem: how can curriculum tasks be adapted, considering the problem of disconnect. To achieve this, narrative inquiry has been employed to draw on learners' and colleagues' stories of experience, which creates a double hermeneutic because it not only seeks to answer the research questions but to also create suitable curriculum tasks, which shape learners' meaning-making.

This is achieved through collecting data from curriculum tasks, including the initial assessment task, written curriculum tasks, and the speaking and listening summative assessment. Data has also been collected through focus group conversations, through my own field journal documenting classroom discussions and staff discussions, and through interview conversations with a colleague. To analyse the data generated, I identify Reflexive Thematic Analysis, in the style of Braun and Clarke (2006; 2022), to ensure a reflexive approach, which is important to allow opportunities for action and change (Usher, 1996).

The social practice approach takes account of who the learners are, incorporating motivations and aspirations for learning, allowing the programme to be designed appropriately. It also accounts for the importance of female adult learners' roles as mothers and carers. Developing curriculum tasks which enabled learners to write from their own experience enables scaffolded learning to learn new ways of writing, whilst removing a significant learning burden. When adult learners feel successful in their learning this builds their confidence, thereby increasing the likelihood of progress and success. It also gives adult learners the opportunity to *restory* themselves, changing their internal narratives of who they are as learners, therefore impacting how we construct ourselves.

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'… we need to keep re-examining what adult literacy can be'

Collins, 2019, p.38.

1.1 Introduction

This thesis considers the seeming disconnect between a skills-focused, functional approach to teaching adult literacy in further education and the reality of the adult literacy learners' experiences and needs. It focusses on a cohort of twenty adult literacy learners and their motivations for returning to learning, and considers how their everyday experience can help influence literacy classroom practice and curriculum development. I have been teaching adult literacy for twenty years and, over that time, have witnessed a narrowing of adult literacy curricula. Over this period, I have become increasingly aware of the claims for employability that are made through functional approaches to literacy, and I have become increasingly concerned that functional approaches are what narrow curricula, leading to skills-focused approaches and teaching to the test, which do not necessarily best serve learners' needs. Most of my classes are Functional Skills English level 1 and level 2 classes, and most of the adults attending do so because they have particular motivations and aspirations. Over many years, I have been developing my practice to ensure both needs are met: that adult learners are able to demonstrate 'functional' literacy skills to enable them to achieve the Functional Skills English qualification (through what is effectively an aptitude test), but also to develop their own literacy practices to enable them to achieve their goals, such as progressing to higher education.

This research has developed out of a previous project, exploring learners' everyday writing practices, as it was fundamental in informing my practice and helped me develop not only my pedagogy but my identity as an adult literacy practitioner. Important strands of that learning include recognising motivation is important: the reasons adults are motivated to improve their literacies are intrinsically linked to the literacies themselves and tapping into personal motivations not only helps achieve goals but also creates further motivation to engage in relevant literacy practices, such as reading and writing. Another key thread of learning from the project was the importance of real-life authentic classroom tasks, informed by the work of Purcell-Gates *et al* (2001). I recognise that an important principle in my learning was a theoretical understanding of literacy as a social practice, as opposed to considering literacy only as a set of skills.

Rejecting a purely skills-focused functional approach as solely concerned with employability, which is such a narrow view of humanity, is a useful starting point for the framing of this thesis. Allatt and Tett (2019) note that when a human capital model is applied to adult literacy learning, "it prioritises skills-focused education" (p41), whilst reducing the person to merely their economic worth. Functional Skills qualifications were developed with employers, with a focus on employability (Dhillon *et al.*, 2011), rather than taking a broader social practice view of literacy (Heath, 1983; Street, 1984; Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Rejecting this narrower approach has helped me develop 'resources of hope' (Williams, R, 1989, Duckworth & Smith, 2017; Duckworth & Smith, 2018; Tett & Hamilton, 2019).

The context chapter outlines some important concepts underpinning my approach to understanding literacy as a social practice, rejecting a purely employability-focused model. Firstly, I shall consider my role as an adult literacy practitioner and my own professional development, which has led me to this understanding. As this project is practice-focused, practice-led and practitioner-undertaken, this will serve to introduce to my research interests and to help position me as a practitioner-researcher.

Next, I will share a brief introduction to the development of adult literacy education in England, and to the development of a theoretical framework of literacy as a social practice. Then, I will follow this with an introduction to the learners, as it is important to understand how key the learners are to the shaping of this thesis. I will conclude with the intention of the project, including the research questions.

1.2 Researcher positionality

For the twenty years of my career as an adult literacy practitioner, literacy has been perceived within society as a political tool for promoting employability, controlled by the policies that shape it. I became an adult literacy teacher in 2003, as a direct result of increased teacher recruitment as part of the *Skills for Life* campaign, which had an intended target of seven million adult learners, thereby needing a skilled workforce of basic skills teachers. The target aim of increasing literacy was a perceived economical need, to 'up-skill' adults for employability purposes.

As Richardson (2020) states, no teacher enters the profession with an intention to teach people to pass exams, and I am no exception. Leaving behind a career as a graphic designer in advertising (working within the newspaper industry), I embarked on my own adult education journey by enrolling on an Open University degree, and changing my career to enter teaching, initially delivering The Prince's Trust Volunteers Programme in 2001. This was a values-based decision for me: as an adult volunteer in Girlguiding, I had recently completed the Queen's Guide Award, which focused my values on personal development, on community, on citizenship, and on supporting others. Working in advertising was losing its appeal, as I viewed it as an exploitative sector because its purpose is to push human behaviour, and I wished to be able to use my own knowledge, skills and abilities for a more fulfilling purpose.

The fact this coincided with the *Skills for Life* initiative, giving me the opportunity to pursue my goals through literacy teaching, is interesting in hindsight, and later in this chapter I explore the background of adult literacy education and its development, including the *Skills for Life* initiative. However, it is worth considering I was not fully understanding or enacting these values in my early teaching because it took time and experience, as well as developing my understanding through my subsequent studies. Of particular influence on my practice has been studying the concepts of *literacy and language as social, situated practices*, and learning about *women's writing*, both of which are underpinning foundational philosophies of this thesis. Studying these concepts whilst working as an adult literacy practitioner has been particularly informative, as I have been able to consider literacy through both a theoretical and practical lens, and to develop an understanding of the interplay between the two.

For my first degree as part of 'literacy in practice', undertaking my own project not only helped my developing understanding but shaped my pedagogy and was a first step to my developing identity as a practitioner-researcher. I fully intended to continue my studies to master's level when I was awarded my degree in 2011, but becoming a mother two days before my degree was awarded put my studies on hold. In 2019, I became involved in the FEResearchMeet movement inspired by the opportunity this afforded ordinary practitioners to share their research (Jones *et al*, 2020). I was able to reflect on how much my own research project, although small-scale, had influenced both my practice and my identity, and I recognised the importance of practitioner agency in creating meaningful professional learning (Appleby & Hillier, 2012). These experiences led to my own *tipping point,* (a concept explored through the literature review) whereby I applied for the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) Practitioner Research Programme (PRP), run at the University of Sunderland Centre for Excellence in Teacher Training (SUNCETT), in 2019.

My own narrative is fundamental to the development of this research, as my own sense of developing self and understanding of the environment my teaching is enacted in is formed. This links directly to the importance of my learners' stories of self, and to how I share the participant's stories within the thesis. Story-telling, in terms of the development of self and of meaning-making, is a key thread which runs throughout this thesis and, as a result, I have further expanded of my understanding of my researcher position through a vignette chapter later in the thesis (chapter 3).

1.3 A (short) history of adult literacy education in England

To understand the context, it is useful to consider the history of adult literacy education in England. After compulsory schooling began in 1944, it was initially assumed that everyone would learn to read and write at school. There were small pockets of adult basic education through the 1950s and 1960s, but these were predominately locally organised efforts and usually learner-led provision run by volunteers (Papen, 2005). Those targeted were often considered 'under-educated' working class (McCaffrey, 1989), demonstrating an early approach to literacy development for employability purposes.

In 1973, the first national strategy to improve the nation's literacy and to address issues of illiteracy, the *Right to Read* campaign, was launched. This was triggered as the result of a BBC investigative programme, 'On the Move', aired in 1975. From then, and through the 1980s, adult basic skills provision began to become more formalised (Papen, 2005). This coincides with a changing view of literacy in the academy (Barton, 2007), which is explored further in the following section.

The greatest historic change in adult literacy (and adult numeracy) education came following the election of the New Labour government in 1997. Sir Claude Moser, the chair of *The Basic Skills Agency*, was commissioned to report on adult basic skills and the following report, entitled *Improving literacy and numeracy: a fresh start* (Moser, 1999), highlighted social and economic reasons for improving the nation's basic skills, with a particular focus on perceived disengaged and deprived groups. As a result, in 2001 the (then) Department for Education and Skills (DfES) launched *Skills for Life: the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy*, which took a more formalised approach with standards, related curricula, standardised assessments called National Tests, leading to recognised qualifications which were mapped to the (then) National Qualifications Framework.

The research literature shows both much support and much criticism of such a standardised approach (Duckworth, 2014; Jones, 2018). On the plus side was a huge financial investment by the government, but there was also some concern that standardised assessment excludes some learners, possibly those in most need of support (Duckworth, 2014).

It is worth noting that this new focus on adult literacy was against a backdrop of change and improvement strategies across the educational sectors; literacy also became a priority in primary schools, with *The National Literacy Strategy* (Department for Education and Employment, 1997) running from 1997-2006 before being replaced by a similar strategy: coupled with the *National Numeracy Strategy* (Department for Education and Employment, 1997) and collectively known as the *Primary National Strategies* (Department for Education, 2010).

The adult literacy and adult numeracy National Tests (which consisted of a reading test only), which were a part of the *Skills for Life* strategy, were replaced in 2010 by Functional Skills qualifications in English and maths, after a three-year pilot. Functional Skills are intended to be a much more problem-solving approach to using basic skills, theoretically ensuring young people and adults are developing skills and becoming functionally literate (and functionally numerate) in everyday life,

especially in work. Considering what it means to be functionally literate is important and is explored in more detail in the Literature Review chapter.

The initial plan for Functional Skills was to ensure it was a widely valued qualification that would be suitable for all. The literacy qualification was intended to be a 'complete' qualification, encompassing speaking and listening and writing, not just reading. It was at one time suggested that students completing academic qualifications in English and mathematics would also be expected to complete Functional Skills qualifications too, to ensure a literate and numerate workforce (Dhillion *et al*, 2011).

With the advent of the global financial crash in 2008, the new Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010, and the following austerity, these plans were never truly realised. In reality, the new Department for Education, led by politician Michael Gove, favoured academic qualifications over Functional Skills, and seemingly favoured a narrowing of literacy provision, particularly in primary school (Cushing, 2019).

The combination of the global financial crash and the impact of austerity changed the intention for Functional Skills, even after the success of the *Skills for Life* strategy, which achieved its target a year early, with 2.8m nationally recognised qualifications achieved (Department for Innovation, Universities & Skills, 2009).

At the time of writing, it appears that the current Conservative government, along with previous Conservative-led coalition governments, believes employers favour the problem-solving, 'real' and everyday skills developed through Functional Skills (Department for Education, 2018; Ofqual, 2019). However, this stance is not without problems, as will be explored in the Literature Review chapter.

It can be argued, with the implementation of Functional Skills qualifications (from 2007 to 2010) and Functional Skills Reform (from 2019), Functional Skills have led to a narrowing of curricula, as adult literacy (and adult numeracy) professionals were expected to teach from a set of 'standards', as opposed to a broader curriculum and, as a result, 'teaching to the test' has become more common (Daley *et al*, 2015). This is also reflected in the change of name for adult literacy qualifications to 'English', whereas studying 'English' would previously be considered as the learning of English as a second language or the academic exploration of English as a subject.

1.4 Literacy as a social practice

Not only has adult literacy provision developed through policy over time, but the academic view of what literacy is has changed. It is worth considering how an academic view of literacy (or literacies) as a social practice has developed, as this has implications for adult literacy curriculum development and teaching practice.

For the past forty years, traditional views of literacy have been contested. The original psychology-based, cognitive approach, that literacy is a set of skills that we 'have', began to be challenged in the 1970s, through different disciplines, such as linguistics, anthropology, psychology, and education. Language and literacy began to be understood as *situated* in social settings (Halliday, 1978), rather than something that exists separately from the humans that enact it.

Since the 1980s, much of the anthropological and ethnographic research into literacy practices has highlighted a disconnect between school and home literacies, whereby different literacies are important and prevalent in different domains (Heath, 1983; Street, 1984). Through his research into the mismatch between home and school literacy in Iran, Street (1984) identifies two different models of literacy. He described what we would now recognise as a set of functional skills as an *autonomous model* that represents literacy as a set of technical skills, separate from any social,

cultural, or political context that literacy is enacted in. It could be argued that this model views literacy as something we 'have' rather than something we 'do'.

The second model he describes as an *ideological model*. This is a social and situated model of literacy practices in use, understanding literacy as something that is entirely embedded in social, cultural and political contexts. This has helped develop our current understanding in terms of literacy as a social practice (Papen, 2005). It could also be argued, therefore, that the ideological model, or literacy as social practice model, views literacy as something we 'do', as opposed to 'have'. Taking this view, literacy is not a set of skills to be 'given' to a person (Barton, 2007; Freire, 1972; 2017), but rather a development of relevant practices in context.

From the mid-1980s onwards, academics at Lancaster University, led by Barton and Hamilton, built on Street's work, developing literacy research using a social, situated approach to practice (which was then known as The New Literacy Studies) and, through a large-scale research project, they discovered a similar pattern in the literacy practices of adults in Lancaster, England (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). From their work, a national research and development centre, the Literacy Research Centre, was founded in 2002 and was funded by the government. It was part of a larger research development consortium, named the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy, with a purpose of supporting the then *Skills for Life* initiative. At the time, significant links between research and policy were made and the *Skills for Life* initiative was well reviewed (Research Excellence Framework, 2014).

Despite four decades of multidisciplinary work in the academy viewing language and literacy as a social practice, and despite the success of the *Skills for Life* programme, there appears to be little impact on current educational policy. Educational policy now favours a more cognitive-skills view, where literacy is something to be 'gained' to improve employment prospects (Allatt & Tett, 2019). Due to the links made to employment, the government claims this approach is socially just, whilst it is in fact anything but (Duckworth, 2014; Jones, 2018). The current general policy approach can be described as taking a deficit view of literacy, assuming those who do not meet the expected requirements are illiterate or, worse, are unintelligent (Jones, 2018). As highlighted above, this effect has slowly been worsening, with the advent of standardised qualifications, where certain groups, such as entry level learners or those not wishing to complete qualifications, are excluded.

Moreover, to be illiterate does not equate to a lack of intelligence (Barton, 2007; Jones, 2018). Street (1994) argues that the skills-focussed model is the dominant view of literacy in England and much of the Western world, where literacy as seen as necessary for developing high-order skills, such as critical thinking, and particular types of texts are favoured, such as the essay. However, these are not skills that are included in the current Functional Skills English qualification due to its focus on employability.

Certain types of literacy are favoured over others. In the current awarding body tasks (City & Guilds, 2024), the writing tasks are employment-focussed, such as emails and reports, and are viewed as 'proper' literacy, but more creative types of writing, by their absence, are not. As Street (1994) highlights, there are ideological viewpoints on literacy and therefore who holds the powerful positions in society prioritises certain literacies. The current neoliberal, employment-focussed, approach to education treats literacy as part of the economy, directly related to employability (Allatt & Tett, 2019). Therefore, the literacy chosen for employability purposes is implied to be the 'right' literacy, which can cause separation in teachers and learners' minds to what literacy actually is and what is actually useful to learn (Street, 1994). There is an implication about the types of literacy practices that are currently most valued (Allatt & Tett, 2019).

A consequence of employment-focussed education includes target setting, for achieving 'literate' adults. The British Association of Settlements campaign of the early 1970s had a target of 2 million adults (McCaffrey, 1989). Despite all the work done, there was still a perception that the number of 'illiterate' adults was growing, as by 1999, Moser reported a target of seven million adults to be targeted, with 2.8m adults achieving a Skills for Life qualification by 2009 (Department for Innovation, Universities & Skills, 2009). The current target is nine million adults (Department for Education, 2018). This appears, on the face of it, to be an unachievable target. However, it could be argued that different people are at need at different times in their lives, with adults often re-entering education at a time of change (Kantar Public and Learning and Work Institute, 2018). It could also be argued that what it means to be literate in the twenty-first century is very different to two decades ago.

Allatt (2017), having studied how adult literacy is currently viewed in policy, postulates that the current focus on employability influences a deficit view of adult learners. As adults are viewed by what they do not *have* in terms of skills and qualifications, not by what they *do* in terms of their personal literacies, it is understandable that many adults enter the classroom with negative views of themselves and of their abilities.

As a skills-based approach encourages 'teaching to the test' (Daley *et al*, 2015) and a focus on tests with right or wrong answers, critical thinking is not encouraged or taught (Hughes and Schwab, 2010; Daley *et al*, 2015). Furthermore, from her study into current government adult literacy policy, Allatt notes (2017), "Absent is any sense of reading for pleasure, creative writing or learning for its own sake" (p.45). The focus on tests also becomes target focused. The recent Adult Education Centenary Report (2019) raises issues with target-led approaches, including funding cuts narrowing provision towards the most-likely cohorts to achieve, again excluding certain groups of learners.

To summarise, and to paraphrase Yawson (2020), a London writer and philosopher who has documented Stormzy's rise to fame, policy makers do not understand how most people live because they do not live like most people. The key ideas around literacy theory and policy that are introduced here and will be further explored in chapter two of this thesis, the Literature Review chapter.

1.5 Who are the learners?

Having shaped this project to research my own practice, in particular my approaches to teaching literacy as a social practice whilst still achieving the aims of a Functional Skills English qualification, it was interesting to discover that Allatt and Tett (2019) had been researching adult literacy practitioner approaches to challenging a solely functional, skills-focused discourse, finding many practitioners feel restricted by the current approaches. It was a moment of realisation that I do not stand alone as a practitioner in my belief and values that adult literacy is more than skills. My priorities, both in my teaching and in my research, are to value both learners' motivations for study and their life experiences and, with that in mind, it is important to also consider who the learners are (Street, 1994; Barton, 2007; Freire, 1972; 2017).

As a community-based educator, a lot of my classes have historically been out in the community. At the time of the project, I was based in an adult and community team, within in a large, general further education college, who hold the local budget for adult community learning. This team was already greatly reduced from the directorate for adult and community which existed during the New Labour era, and prior to the funding cuts that have hit adult education since austerity. Before this enforced downsizing, the community classes I taught would usually be sited somewhere accessible to learners, either to target certain cohorts (such as parents or offenders) or to be more accessible

and welcoming to any adults who wish to attend (such as libraries). The pilot year of this project ran during 2019-20, which was unfortunately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, all existing community classes were cancelled off-site and for the academic year of 2020-21 all my adult literacy classes took place across our two main campuses: one in the north of the borough and one in the south of the borough. The adults (defined as anyone 19 years old or over) who joined these classes did so by their own motivations (as opposed to being referred by a third-party, such as a probation officer, support worker, or employer) and all the learners within the classes were working towards either a level 1 or level 2 Functional Skills English qualification, which is a funded course for adults, and attended on campus. Some also were enrolled for Functional Skills maths. It is worth noting that access and participation, as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, may have been affected (James & Thériault, 2020) for the hardest to reach learners, for example those who would struggle to attend formal classes on campus and the most vulnerable in the community.

The cohort of the study was self-selecting from my whole student group during the academic year 2020-2021. As noted, they chose to attend for a multitude of reasons, which became an important part of this project and is discussed throughout the thesis. Their attendance was in line with the college's adult community learning courses, so was thirty weeks long over one academic year, with the stated purpose being to achieve a qualification. Each class ran once a week for two hours. The majority of the learners are women and all the participants of this project are women, which became an important issue and is unpicked through the course of the thesis. As identified, the majority of my learners have historically been motivated to attend by their own personal goals or aspirations. This became the starting point for this project, which is further unpacked at the end of this chapter.

1.6 Research intention

Finally, the last part of this chapter considers the intention of this project and introduces the research questions.

Building on my previous research and my development as a practitioner (see chapter 3, where I expand on these ideas), I identified key issues within the delivery of Functional Skills English within my setting. The initial assessment writing task used across all level 1 and level 2 courses did not take account of adult learners' *experiences*, nor of their *motivations* for study or their future *aspirations*. These are all key concepts in developing the research, to explore and inform the developing curriculum. In line with this first issue, many of the given curriculum tasks were far removed from learners' experiences. Taking the principle that adult learners may not be able to complete inauthentic tasks effectively (Purcell-Gates *et al,* 2001), nor to transfer learning effectively to new contexts of domains (DBIS, 2012), these curriculum tasks are ineffective as learning opportunities.

A benefit of the Functional Skills English qualification is, even though it is based on a set of skills-focused standards, teachers are allowed to design their own curriculum tasks if they are able, which enables me to design both the initial assessment and curriculum tasks with the aim of developing knowledge and skills towards learners' progression, through shifting literacies knowledge through different domains. Using the well-established teaching techniques of modelling and scaffolding (see Vygotsky, 1986), different styles of writing can be explored in ways that learners can adopt for their own independent writing development. The restrictions of COVID-19 have impacted this project, in ways explained in the Methodology chapter, but have possibly also served to sharpen my focus on developing specific transferable literacy practices in straightforward ways.

As the project has developed, another important aspect has been identified, which is the importance of story-telling in an adult literacy classroom. By this, I mean the opportunities that learners sharing

their experiences offer because literacy, in itself, is meaning-making, not just for myself as a practitioner, but for the learners engaged on the programme. Many curriculum tasks become a double hermeneutic: serving to meet the need of the task itself, but also to offer opportunities form meaning-making for both researcher and participants.

1.7 Evolving and identifying research questions

As my knowledge and understanding have evolved slowly over the time of my academic studies, so my research questions have evolved slowly over the period of this study. Initially, during an early PRP workshop at SUNCETT, there was an opportunity to identify research questions based on my early thinking for the project. These questions 'stuck' with me for some time and, although they did not seem to fit the project, were difficult to let go of. As I began to collect and analyse early data for the project, both through pilot and early data collection in the second year, I began to evolve my understanding of data analysis in a way that helped me rethink these questions. My early intent had been too broad, not focussing on the detail of my research, and did not seem to encapsulate my developing understanding of literacy as a social practice well.

As the research developed, I began to deepen my understanding of the potential for analysis of the data, that it could not only inform my curriculum development but also offer a deeper opportunity to understand learners' approaches to meaning-making and their perceptions of themselves as learners.

Therefore, to explore these ideas fully, I identified three core research questions:

1. How could using **stories of experience and learners' own aspirations** help curriculum development for adult literacy learners?
2. What do learners' **stories of experience** tell us about their **progress**, whilst recognising literacy learning as a social practice?
3. How does this work inform our **constructions of self**?

To achieve this, the design of this project is ethnographic, with an action-research approach to curriculum development in the setting of adult literacy teaching practice. It takes an interpretative approach, which is explored in the Methodology chapter, and has been informed by Connelly and Clandinin's (1990) *Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry,* which is key to the methodology. Whilst Connelly and Clandinin's (*ibid*) work focuses on the power of teachers' stories, this project uses this method to explore learners' stories of experiences and considers how exploring learners' stories can influence curriculum development. It uses Reflexive Thematic Analysis, as developed by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2022) to identify themes throughout the data, which enables me to keep the human experience at the heart of the project, without minimising learners' voices to snippets of data. Whilst the most common metaphor for learning is a journey, I have used the metaphor of a learning tapestry to describe this project in an attempt to best represent the rich tapestries of learning and life-experience adult learners bring into the classroom. Metaphor is an important aspect of meaning-making in language, and is explored further in the literature review.

1.8 Chapter summary

This chapter attempts to outline the intentions of the project, and the key motivations behind it. I have explored my role as an adult literacy practitioner and how my own professional learning has helped my understanding of literacy as a social practice, causing me to reject an employability, skills-focused model. An important aspect of this work is recognising the importance of the opportunity for teachers to research their own practice, so this has been a useful opportunity for me to position myself as a practitioner-researcher, which I will expand on in my personal vignette chapter, chapter

3. I have also explored who the learners are, and the types of learning that is impacted by an endeavour such as this.

Furthermore, to fully understand what I mean by a disconnect between functional literacy and literacy as a social practice, I have explored the development of adult literacy education in England, and the development of a theoretical framework of literacy as a social practice. Finally, I have introduced the intention of the project, giving examples of possible ways to design curriculum tasks to teach more than skills, and have included the research questions and intended approach. In the next chapter, I explore the relevant literature, to identify some of the key issues and ideas suggested by this introduction.

2 Weaving the narrative: literature review

'This economic discourse then tends to drive a curriculum that prioritises narrow employment skills-focused learning that neither respects learners' own goals nor values their life experiences.'

Allatt & Tett, 2019, p.42.

2.1 Introduction

As explored in the context chapter, interdisciplinary theoretical approaches from linguistics, anthropology and sociology have increasingly challenged traditional, psychology-based understandings and the relevance of such understandings on language and literacy in education (Barton, 2007).

In this chapter it is my intention to further explore relevant literature to better understand factors which have shaped the Functional Skills qualification, but will also explore research literature which is useful in challenging a neoliberal approach to adult literacy education. The consideration of further and adult education as a neoliberal project (Orr, 2020), including the impact of twenty-first century concerns such as austerity (Mendoza, 2015), is a useful lens to understand how adult literacy provision has been impacted into a narrower and narrower skills-focused concept.

I will then explore the literature to place Functional Skills English in practice, looking for opportunities to develop pedagogy and curriculum through a social practice lens. This will also be an opportunity to search for any obvious gaps in the literature, such as how to *mobilise* literacy skills outside the classroom, and then how to account for learner experience. Learner experience is such a common theme in adult literacy research, so it will be important to explore to find ways to account for learners' motivations for learning. This links directly to the concepts of women's literacy storytelling, which I will explore in turn. Women's literacy is an important opportunity to understand and frame the impact of adult learning, intergenerationally, but I will also use as an opportunity to explore purpose. Storytelling remains an important aspect of adult literacy provision, and this inquiry, despite being largely invisible in the Functional Skills standards, and will be the last consideration of this literature review.

2.1.1 Literature collection

My initial search was through *Research and Practice in Adult Literacy (RaPAL)* journal. I also explored the work of the *Lancaster Literacy Research Centre* as the original home of theories of literacy as social practice, previously known as the New Literacy Studies. I looked at the work of known adult literacy professionals and researchers, including through attending relevant conferences, so was also able to explore their work for relevance to my project.

Further, I conducted a search for literature within Google Scholar, Google, and within the online library the University of Sunderland. The describers used include: 'Functional Skills English', 'Functional Skills', 'Functional Skills reform', 'adult literacy', 'adult literacy as social practice', 'literacy as social practice', 'learning to write', 'discourses of writing', 'women's literacy', 'women's writing'. This brought a huge range of articles, as literacy is such a well-researched topic, but it was important to now filter these searches to find relevant articles. Some articles, whilst ostensibly about adult literacy, did not directly inform the topic. Several articles held relevance but were very dated. In some of the most recently published, I also checked through the reference lists. I usually read the article abstracts, and sometimes the conclusion, to help me determine how useful each article was.

Finally, I have included any relevant government documents that relate to the policy on, and delivery of, Functional Skills English, as well as reference to awarding body materials.

As the thesis has developed, especially after analysis, I returned to searching the literature to ensure anything relevant is covered and nothing new has been published that I have missed. For example, a recent report has been published on the effectiveness of Functional Skills but its focus is on apprenticeships rather than adult learners (Kobayashi, 2024). I have not found any instances of other adult literacy practitioners specifically investigating the disconnect between Functional Skills English and a view of literacy as a social practice, although it is written about by academic researchers, mainly Allatt and Tett (2018). I believe the closest work to my own is that of Duckworth (2014), whose work is explored below. However, I note our work differs in that her work takes a critical approach to adult education, whereas mine is a liberal approach. As with all literature reviews, this is not exhaustive, and it is also possible there is work that I have not been able to access due to paywalls.

2.1.2 A consideration of metaphor

Functional literacy, which is explored below, is a common metaphor for literacy used in government policy, which has particular implications (Papen, 2005). Coffield (2008) notes that our use of metaphors in discussing teaching can have serious connotations. Our choice of metaphors is directly related to how we make meaning (Taylor, 2008) and can lead to different ways of thinking (Sfard, 1998) and yet metaphor is common in describing literacy, for example, 'deficit' metaphors and 'skills' metaphors (Barton, 2007). Teaching and learning is also littered with metaphor: geographical metaphors, such as Schoen's (1984) 'swampy lowlands'; reflective metaphors (ibid, 1984); and journeying metaphors, which I later liken to a 'hero's journey', a well-known story shape. Because of the importance of metaphor in shaping our meaning-making, I try to highlight relevant metaphors throughout the thesis and the impact they have. My own choice of metaphor (in my title and chapter titles) is inspired by women's work of spinning and weaving, but is also inspired by story: we often talk about 'spinning' or 'weaving' a tale, of the 'threads running through' our stories (and research projects) and of the 'fabric' of a story, of our being, or of society. This metaphor has become an important device for my understanding of experience: how new learning may be weaved into an existing tapestry of experience and how previous experiences can be examined and unpicked to be resewn. There are several metaphors used by different researchers and practitioners throughout the literature review, which I will be considerate of when synthesising my own narrative.

2.2 Positioning Functional Skills English in policy

> *'In the policy documents, the assumption appears to be that literacy is about gaining qualifications to help people find and sustain employment with little or no consideration of adults who, rather than looking for work, may simply wish to improve their skills to be able to read with their children, help with homework, or play more of a role in their community.'*
>
> *Allatt, 2017, p.52.*

In the previous chapter, I described a disconnect between an understanding of functional literacy and of literacy as a social practice, and explored this disconnect through the dual lenses of practice and theory: through the historical development of adult literacy education in England and through the widely recognised development of literacy social practice theory (previously known as the *New Literacy Studies*, or NLS). The purpose of this exploration was to demonstrate how the concept of literacy has evolved from a cognitive skills-model (Ivanič, 2004; Barton, 2007) to a more complex

situated, social understanding of literacy (Heath, 1983; Street, 1984; Barton & Hamilton, 1998), which Wasik and Van Horn (2012) describe as a 'plural view', whilst demonstrating how simultaneously government policy has grown adult literacy provision under the guise of 'up-skilling' the nation. It was noted that adult literacy provision was a previously well-researched field of study. This lessened after 2010 due to a change of government priorities (including the end of *Skills for Life*) and reduced funding for research, mainly due to austerity measures. This change of priorities impacted the introduction of Functional Skills by not only changing the intent of the qualification (Dhillon *et al.*, 2011) but also by reducing large-scale research into adult literacy, such as the work of the Lancaster Literacy Research Centre at Lancaster University. Functional Skills qualifications began to be phased-in, fully replacing Skills for Life and Key Skills qualifications by 2012. Because the government change coincided with the launch of Functional Skills, it could be argued this led to a further narrowing in policy of what literacy is and how it should be taught.

2.2.1 Functionally literate

In the opening chapter, I identified issues which caused a narrowing of adult literacy curricula, due to the policy approach to a skills-focused employability discourse. To fully understand the implications of this, it is worth first exploring what it means to be *functionally literate.* A fundamental aspect of being human is language, but language is complicated and not fully understood (Finnegan, 2015). However, language and literacy are repeatedly reduced into simplistic understandings, for the sake of directing current educational policy in England (Allatt, 2017), often taking a prescriptive rather than descriptive view (Cushings, 2019; 2020). This is still at odds with a continuously developing academic view of literacy: Rowsell and Pahl (2020) coin the phrase 'living literacies', to define any research exploring meaning-making through everyday activity.

Literacy has long been viewed as a social justice issue (Hamilton, 2012) and an opportunity for human development (Miller & McKenna, 2016; also, see the United Nations Development Programme). However, as a result, for many years, the concept of 'being literate' has also had economic connotations, not just for individuals but for whole nations. Literacy has come to be seen as a marker in human development (Miller & McKenna, 2016; also, see the UN Human Development Report, 2003) but has also become a marker of employability (Papen, 2005; Tett & Hamiton, 2019) and therefore economic success (Miller & McKenna, 2016). According to Papen (2005), such studies influence and 'add weight' to the idea that Britain's economic performance is, in part, influenced by the literacy capacity of its workforce. It is noteworthy, that the current government has repeatedly declared 'war' on illiteracy despite being responsible for education of children and adults for the last thirteen years, therefore presumably not overly impacting illiteracy very successfully (Rosen, 2021b).

It is worth exploring the concept of 'functional literacy' through this lens of economics. According to the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics, literacy is:

> the ability to identify, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society. Generally, literacy also encompasses numeracy, the ability to make simple arithmetic calculations. The concept of literacy can be distinguished from measures to quantify it, such as the literacy rate and functional literacy (2023).

This seems to present a 'plural view' (Wasik & Van Horn, 2012), acknowledging the breadth and complexity of a social practice, encompassing literacy ability, learning, individual's goals, developing

knowledge and, importantly, the capacity to participate in social settings. Interestingly, employability is not mentioned in this definition. It does, however, distinguish between literacy and functional literacy.

UNESCO Institute for Statistics defines 'functional literacy' as:

> The capacity of a person to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective function of his or her group and community and also for enabling him or her to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his or her own and the community's development (2021).

Again, this definition focuses on a person's capacity to participate in their society, at varying levels, for 'effective function' in their own, or their communities', development. Employability is not explicitly referenced but we could assume that it is implied that one effective function could be within the workplace, without assuming that is the most important aspect of one's life.

The general definition of 'functional literacy' appears to differ in English policy. The Department for Education (2018) describes Functional Skills almost entirely with an employability focus:

> Functional Skills qualifications should provide reliable evidence of a student's achievements against demanding content that is relevant to the workplace. They need to provide assessment of students' underpinning knowledge as well as their ability to apply this in different contexts. They also need to provide a foundation for progression into employment or further technical education and develop skills for everyday life (2018).

The Department for Education (2019) notes employers were consulted when reforming the Functional Skills qualifications, designing them "to better equip individuals with the skills required to succeed in the workplace" (DfE, 2019), despite the fact that Functional Skills were initially designed to meet employers' needs (Dhillon *et al.*, 2011) so presumably should have already been serving this purpose. It is worth noting the focus is on perceived knowledge and skills, not on thinking critically or being able to develop literacy to meet individual's needs and goals. It is also worth noting that the Department for Education is clear that learners need to be able to transfer knowledge and skills to different contexts, which is a key idea within this inquiry.

The employability narrative is one that has been used by successive governments since Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Government, under the guise of social inclusion (Hamilton, 2012). The rhetoric is of a literate and therefore successful workforce. And yet, the *2011 Skills for Life Survey* did not find the expected impact of the *Skills for Life* years. In fact, it noted there was "no improvement to low-level literacy skills" (defined as level 1 and below) (DfBIS, 2012, p.375). The report suggests the lack of significant progress could be due to people forgetting what they had learnt shortly after they finished their programme (*ibid*, p.377). Here is where it becomes very relevant that adult learners are taught in a way that they can transfer knowledge and skills to different contexts, something that I will return to later in the literature review. If it is the case that adults struggle to transfer skill-focused learning to other contexts, it makes an even worthier argument for adult literacy programmes to focus on authentic, real-life literacy practices, enabling adults to practise, and also to recognise the value of what they are learning.

Another concern raised by the report is a consideration of the impact of 'teaching to the test' and the resulting impact on skills-loss:

> Concerns have been raised about the impact of 'teaching to the test' in Skills for Life programmes, the main concern being that the pressure on achievement targets has led to a

> narrower curriculum in teaching, focused only on passing the tests (i.e. on developing skills only in those areas covered by the National Test, a particular concern for literacy where the test coverage in terms of the curriculum has been most limited), with associated cramming and very context-specific skills development. Such approaches may lead to more rapid skills loss after achievement than approaches focused more on consolidating skills. (DfBIS, 2012, p.377).

But reforms which lead to a further narrowing of curricula surely promote further teaching to the test, thus creating a continuous cycle of reform and narrowing, without actually impacting or improving literacy education (Cridland-Hughes & Schreuder, 2022). Crowther and Tett (2001) highlight that if literacy is only viewed through an economic lens, this excludes any ideas around citizenship.

Despite the apparent lack of success of successive initiatives, such as *Skills for Life* (DfES, 2001), focussing on literacy as skills, the Department for Education continued with a commitment to developing Functional Skills, as we have explored, based on 'standards' rather than a broad curriculum. The resulting initiative is the even narrower and targeted Functional Skills suite of qualifications (Ofqual, 2019). The commonly-held 'skills' view of literacy prevails (Papen, 2005) and policy continues to be shaped to serve the neo-liberal education agenda (Allatt & Tett, 2018).

2.2.2 The neo-liberal education agenda

In this section, I consider the effects of a neoliberal approach to further education. By neoliberal education, I mean an economic approach to education based on a free market, where certain education sectors are considered a 'business' rather than a public service. The change to further education came about after incorporation, whereby colleges became responsible for their own budgets and embraced New Public Management (Smith & O'Leary, 2013). New Public Management is a concept by which the economics of colleges become the driving force in how colleges are managed and run.

As a result, the rhetoric of success and narrative of failure has played out over and over in education for decades, and we are no strangers to it in the further education (FE) sector. Orr (2020) suggests: "Despite its size and importance, the FE system in England has become an exemplar of policy failure" (p.508). Critics protest at the continuous presentation of FE to both simultaneously be the saviour of our society, whilst it is constantly undervalued and under-funded (Orr, 2020), whilst Hodgson *et al* (2015) describe FE as an "important but invisible sector" (p.10). Noting the continuous policy churn, Orr (2020) is clear: "FE remains chronically underfunded and vulnerable to the caprice of policy" (p.508), which leaves FE "ill-prepared to address the nation's social and economic problems" (p.507). The expectation from the Department of Education that FE's true purpose is one of 'social mobility' and 'economic development' (Orr, 2020) is a mismatch from reality, given those are the factors that are ignored when considering the 'success' of educational reform as discussed above.

FE has been continuously affected by policy churn, under the guise of 'improving standards'. A current example of this is the introduction of T-levels, to replace previous vocational qualifications. Policy churn has significant impacts in practice. Orr (2020) notes there have been twenty-eight pieces of legislation and more than fifty Secretaries of State responsible for FE since the 1980s (p.508). Possibly the single greatest impact of legislation was the decision to incorporate FE colleges in the 1990s. Incorporation in 1992-93 took English FE colleges out of the control of their local authorities (see Orr, 2020; Lucas & Crowther, 2016). Incorporation created a "market in the sector" (Orr, 2020, p.509), whereby colleges are pitted in competition against each other for students. Helena Kennedy (1997), in the 1997 Kennedy government report examining FE, stated there was a

growing concern that the new ethos encouraged colleges acting "not just to be business-like but to perform as if they were businesses" (p.3).

After incorporation, colleges' funding now came directly from the government and FE was effectively considered to be privatised (Groves, 2015). As a result, funding has become "the lever most frequently pulled to enforce the implementation of policy in English FE" (Orr, 2020, p.509). And yet, the recent Augur review (2019) found that FE is chronically under-funded, as it has repeatedly had its funding cut under the guise of 'austerity'. Subsequent FE reforms, under successive governments across the political spectrum, interpret the concepts of widening participation and social mobility (see Groves, 2015; Orr, 2020) as a mandate for the "economic benefits of qualifications" (Grove, 2015, p.28). Groves (2015) believes the neoliberal management of education demonstrates that its purpose is:

> …purely to serve the interests of political economy in a post-socialist society. All other educational experience was classed as irrelevant, or at very best something that could be paid for as a product bought by a consumer (p.28).

This view of FE as having a social justice and economic development agenda is prevalent in justifying the neoliberal agenda. Avis (2020) suggests:

> During its ascendancy the advocates of neoliberalism positioned the free markets as both serving the interests of all members of society and as being the most appropriate way to manage economic and social relations. Neoliberals sought to present the free market as inevitable and without a realistic alternative (p.9).

And yet, according to Dunt (2020), history shows us that free markets are not a perfect system and are not always successful. The financial crashes of the 1930s and 2008 show that a free market, laisse-faire approach to economic capitalism is not successful and in 2008 governments around the world had to step in to bail out banks (Dunt, 2020).

2.2.3 Austerity and its impact

Much of the justification for stripping the funding out of the public sector in general, and out of education more specifically, has come as a result of the UK government's austerity programme created in 2010, after the global financial crash of 2007/8. By 2008, the international financial market had crashed. This was the result of banks selling debt, known as 'credit', at a rate that individuals could not afford to pay back, then bundling up parcels of debt to sell on to investors, known as 'collateral debt obligations' (Mendoza, 2015; Dunt, 2020). Mendoza (2015) suggests that this was enabled by long-term collusion between governments and the financial-services industry, which enabled a system without appropriate checks and balances. What happened next was the primary cause of the future austerity programmes. Governments bailed out the banks with public money, effectively nationalising some banks, such as Northern Rock in England (Dunt, 2020). Mendoza (2015) notes: "… instead of these corporations (banks) simply collapsing, this extraordinary mountain of private debt was converted into public debt by the Bank Bailout" (p.19). In the UK, the equivalent spending to funding the entire education system for twenty years was spent bailing out the banks (Mendoza, 2015).

If the result of the crash was global recession, then the reaction was, unfortunately, government-mandated austerity. Initially, Greece had austerity enforced on them by the very industry that had brought about the crash, enabled by larger and wealthier European nations (Dunt, 2020). Even though this was not successful, causing Greece's GDP to drop and unemployment to rise to a rate of over 50%, countries around the world followed the plan of austerity, using public money to pay back

the result of private mistakes. Austerity is not a sensible approach to restoring a nation's wealth, but public spending is (Dunt, 2020). History has demonstrated that public spending puts money into the pockets of the nation's workers, who then spend that money, thus improving the overall economy (Dunt, 2020). Austerity has the opposite effect: it strips money out of the pockets of workers, and puts it in the pockets of the wealthy, who do not spend it, but remove it to off-shore accounts avoiding taxes and, therefore, stripping the economy further (Mendoza, 2015). According to Mendoza (2015), the purpose of austerity, therefore, is to privatise the public sector, thus dismantling social democracy to benefit the few, not the many.

The UK government's decision to follow a programme of austerity resulted in cuts in public spending, such as local council funding cuts. As a result, councils across England cut back on local services to balance the books (Dunt, 2020). This has resulted in a massive loss of services across the country, including the closure of libraries (Flood, 2019) and of children's centres (Smith *et al*, 2018). At a time when education could have enabled the development of the nation, in reality the funding in FE and adult education was drastically cut. As explored in the context chapter, the impact on the FE sector has been great.

The purpose of this section has been to position Functional Skills within current policy, to best understand how adult literacy education has been affected by the myriad of powers at play within a neo-liberal education system. Classroom-based adult education has been largely affected by austerity-induced funding cuts, with funding down 50% since the start of austerity (Sibieta *et al*, 2022). I have explored what is meant by being *functionally literate* and, by examining a neoliberal employability-focused lens, its impact on policy. A significantly important finding is that previous proficiency-type tests have not necessarily improved learners' abilities, apparently through a narrowing of curricula and teaching to the test. An important aspect of this thesis will be to consider this in light of practice: how can we develop adult literacy curriculum tasks that significantly increase the possibility of transferable knowledge, skills and abilities? In the next section of this chapter, I shall position Functional Skills in practice, by focusing on recent research.

2.3 Positioning Functional Skills English in practice

In this section, I intend to explore the possibilities for challenging employability skills-focused narratives through practice, for developing an effective Functional Skills English curriculum. As noted above, there was an abundance of research into not only the effectiveness of the *Skills for Life* initiative, but into appropriate evidence-based approaches to practice. Since the introduction of Functional Skills has coincided with the financial crash of 2008 and subsequent recession, there has been little such research into Functional Skills provision.

2.3.1 Domains and border crossings

Barton and Hamilton (2000) make the explicit link between understanding literacy as situated and the consideration of different domains, such as home, school/college, work and community. They note that "there are different literacies associated with different domains of life" (*op cit*, p.10). In her seminal work, Heath (1983) identifies how children whose home language and literacies are closest to school literacies are most successful in the classroom. This does not mean other children have little in the way of literacy practices, but that their lives are literacy rich in ways not recognised or similar to classroom literacies (Heath, 1983). Often, some of the more traditional literacy practices are more oral than written, affecting how literacies are perceived (Heath, 1985). Therefore, for our adults, some may live very literacy-rich lives, but still have less 'access' to the types of literacy valued in classrooms (Papen, 2005; Barton, 2007). This is how a deficit view of individual's literacies can develop. Gillen and Burnett (2020) believe current ideas about school literacies, such as the 'word

gap', are deficit concepts, whereby it is implied by those using such labels that learners lacking skills are deficit themselves in some way. Heath (1983) takes a much more positive view, in valuing all literacy practices, and Crowther, Maclachlan and Tett (2010) emphasise the importance of teaching practice that focusses on learners' strengths, rather than perceived weaknesses.

For adults, Barton and Hamilton (2000) note that the home is an important domain for adults' 'literacy lives' (p.10) and relate this directly to adults' identity. Furthermore, they highlight the difference between work and home literacies: "work is another identifiable domain, where relationships and resources are often structured quite differently from in the home" (*ibid*, p.10). It is notable that adult learning classrooms will be another domain where relationships and resources again differ, meaning that learners need to negotiate how this domain operates and all the associated ideas around teaching and learning.

Smith (2005) uses the metaphor of *mobilisation* to demonstrate the complexity of moving knowledge, skills and abilities between different domains. The purpose of describing literacies as *mobilised* is to demonstrate that there is not a simple or straightforward *border crossing* between domains which learners can easily transfer knowledge, skills and abilities across. Rather, mobilising literacies is complex, and the purpose of this part of the research project, *Literacies for Learning in Further Education* (LfLFE), was to gain a "critical understanding of the movement and flows of literacy practices in people's lives" (*op cit*, p.321). An interesting finding of the LfLFE study (Smith, 2005; Pardoe & Ivanič, 2007; Ivanič *et al,* 2009) which is relevant to this project is that students did not connect classroom literacy practices with their wider literacies, lives and experiences. Although the recommendations were generally college-wide focusing on vocational subjects, not basic skills specific, a recommendation for practice is "bringing (a) selection of everyday texts into class" (Ivanič *et al,* 2009, p.125). As noted, Purcell-Gates *et al*'s (2001) findings also state the importance of authentic texts and Appleby and Barton (2008) argue that authentic literacy tasks help learners to 'make links' to their everyday lives. As Smith (2005) argues that mobilising literacies is a complex practice, linking into individuals' views of themselves and how they make sense of the world, rather than simple border crossings, it seems there may need to be more than just authentic texts to enable this. One aspect of this may be not just the complexity of moving knowledge, but the complexity of different domains and how learning happens (Lave & Wenger, 1991). It should be acknowledged that not only do learners' need to be able to transfer or mobilise their learning and literacies into different domains, but that the different purposes of those domains creates further complexity. Tummons (2023) states "When someone enters a new community of practice they have to do a lot of relearning or learning: they can't simply 'carry' what they've already learned with them" (p.90). Therefore, an adult learner is not only mobilising literacies, but must be able to learn and understand the different settings or domains in which they are enacted. There is a gap in the literature between the problem of learners' being unable to transfer their learning, and a possible solution. One aspect of this is learning new ways of learning in adult education, a necessarily new and unfamiliar environment, but another aspect is how closely classroom practices relate to their everyday lives and practices. Crowther, Maclachlan and Tett (2010) suggest that in adult literacy classrooms learners develop their literacy skills, but it is in the learners' everyday lives that they purposefully and meaningfully practise them. Therefore, adults' opportunities *to* practise are important (note the shift from practice as a noun, describing adults' practices, to practise as a verb, the opportunity to practise learning).

2.3.2 Practise makes perfect

This consideration of meaningful, purposeful practising of skills and abilities can inform pedagogy in ways that literacies can be used to build participation and likelihood of learner engagement to

practise. The notion of 'practise makes perfect' is an important consideration (Scattergood, 2019d), but as Clarke (2017) states, adult learners need motivation to practise. Clarke (ibid) highlights, "This is not going to happen, however, without an adult learner feeling that the 'practice' relates sufficiently to their real lives, in other words to their 'social practice' whether it be their workplace, home or family" (p.38). Again, this links back to the importance of authenticity. To understand this better, it is useful to consider Heath's (1983) concept of *literacy events.* A *literacy event* is any action in which literacy plays a part, for example: reading bedtime story; writing a journal entry; or a literacy (speaking and listening, reading or writing) task in a Functional Skills English classroom. For adults to be motivated to practise their knowledge and skills outside of the classroom, to participate in meaningful, purposeful literacy events, there needs to be powerful motivating factors, such as links to personal social practices (including reading and writing for pleasure). Clarke (2013) describes this as a 'virtuous circle', whereby the more learners enjoy reading, the more they read, the better they are at it, and the more they enjoy it and want to read.

Further work which builds on this theme includes the work of Cremin, exploring the importance of reading for pleasure in primary schools. Cremin (2014), also pushing back against a skills-focused education system, highlights the importance of the social practices of communities of readers in creating meaningful learning opportunities through practice. Cremin (2014) identifies that children's reading cannot be considered in isolation, but recognises the impact of recognising the shared reading lives of children, their teachers, and their families. This is particularly significant for informing this study, as many of the participants are mothers and some may be motivated to support their children's learning, and intergenerational literacy practices and events (such as bedtime reading, shared cultural traditions).

The project, *Teachers as Readers: Building Communities of Readers*, examined teachers' and children's reading lives and the links, developing a *Reading for Pleasure* pedagogy, based in practice (Cremin *et al*, 2014). In creating a community of readers and in developing a love of reading, the teachers create an environment where reading is valued and enjoyed, and therefore practised. 'Reading Teachers' engage children through a rich understanding of children's literature, 'book talk', recognising and valuing children's reading practices, and by creating community. This work has seriously impacted not only primary teaching practice, but has also shaped policy. However, Clarke (2017) highlights that the evidence for reading for pleasure has not yet been enough to influence adult education policy, noting "Despite positive findings, the use of reading for pleasure still tends to be the exception rather than the rule." (p.41). One of the barriers she states is the 'pressure of accreditation targets' (*ibid*). Adult literacy practitioners' concerns of teaching 'skills' and teaching to the test would need to be overcome to ensure opportunities for creating reading for pleasure communities in adult educational settings. Duncan's (2014) work on reading for pleasure with adult learners is particularly useful for this aim, yet seems little known amongst practitioners. However, the *Reading for Pleasure* work seems to have captured the zeitgeist for primary practitioners, possibly due to the opportunity to push back against a narrow curriculum in primary too. Generally, it should be noted, policy has not been overly influenced by any social practice approaches (Papen, 2023). Mendoza (2015) suggests, "The National Curriculum has been dismantled as part of efforts to focus on retention of data and facts rather than understanding and creativity" (p.46). Possibly this is the very factor causing pushback for primary teachers and researchers, although it should be noted the size of the project and the subsequent work, including conferences, has ensured the work has been widely shared.

Arguably, the focus of the Reading for Pleasure project is to encourage children to become *independent readers*. Looking at other primary-based research into practice, a focus on Young and

Ferguson's (2021) *Writing for Pleasure* work is the importance of teaching students *how to be writers*, as opposed to merely teaching them how to write 'passable texts'. This is an important distinction, as it shapes the teacher's approaches in the classroom. Based on his own research, *What is it 'Writing for Pleasure' teachers do that makes the difference?,* Young (2019) defines a *Writing for Pleasure* pedagogy as: "... Any research-informed pedagogy which seeks to create the conditions in which writing and being a writer is a pleasurable, purposeful and satisfying experience." (p.13). Again, this is based in an approach of creating authentic, genuine, meaningful texts. Rosen (2018) promotes the importance of publishing students' writing rather than it just being shared between student and teachers, as this means a real audience is found. He states "It is through audience that we discover whether what we write is saying anything interesting. It is also through audience that we have to make the effort to get the surface stuff right: punctuation, spelling and presentation" (ibid, p.92). Publishing student work has the dual effect of creating a 'real' piece of writing, from first draft to being published, and of valuing students' writing. Clearly, taking research-informed, evidence-based approaches to creating educational environments which nurture and help develop independent *readers* and *writers* is a very different approach to a skills-focused one, whereby children are measured and judged through their knowledge of prescriptive grammatical rules and how they demonstrate them in writing (Cushing, 2019; 2020; Rosen, 2021a; Myhill, 2021).

There is nothing of the equivalent in adult literacy research currently and it is hard to see what is happening in teaching practice, which is largely invisible in current further and adult education settings without the benefit of research to put it back into the spotlight. Therefore, there is a gap here in the literature on how authentic and creative literacy events can lead to meaningful and motivating practise opportunities. However, a useful exploration is to see what recommendations can be made from a consideration of any basic skills projects which take a social practice approach to literacy education, whether explicitly stated or not.

2.3.3 Developing adult teaching and learning

Other adult literacy research projects that influence practice include the *Effective Writing Study*, an inquiry which explored effective teaching and learning of writing, by Grief and Chatterton (2007). The main findings of the inquiry included contextualised writing tasks. Contextualised writing tasks may fit well to some types of class (Ivanič *et al,* 2000), but in my adult literacy class the context of adult learners' lives is possibly the most relevant factor. For example, in other areas of teaching practice, learning can be contextualised to other curriculum subjects and tasks, as found by the LfLFE project explored above, but in general adult literacy classes, the learners themselves can become a resource for learning (Scattergood, 2022a). Other recommendations from the *Effective Writing Study* project include: creating a supportive atmosphere, which relates well to the idea of overcoming anxiety about making mistakes discussed above; reducing the load, which relates well to the idea of writing from experience; and 'talk can be work' (Grief & Chatterton, 2007), which relates well to dialogic pedagogy for developing writing ideas together.

There appears to be some significant overlap here with the findings of the *Adult Learners' Lives* (ALL) study, which was a three-year study undertaken by the Lancaster Literacy Research Centre at Lancaster University (Appleby, 2010). The project took a social practice approach and focused on what literacy practices were learnt in class, and what was learnt and used at home, so again is informative to this study. The research findings include: "learning is a product of a dialogue between what learners bring and what teachers bring" (Appleby, 2010, p.33); contextualised learning; and "good personal relationships are important for learning" (*ibid*, p.33). The significance of the social aspects of learners' lives is evident in these findings, which relate well to the above. Good relationships are an important aspect of developing a supportive atmosphere, where learners are

free to be themselves, share their own experiences, make mistakes, etc. The aspect of dialogic teaching, which relates to learners' experiences and being valued, is also evident. This relates back to idea of starting from where the learners are (Street, 1984; Hunt, 1987; Freire, 1972; 2017), not only in their knowledge but in their experience; recognising the rich tapestries of their lives and learning.

Experience also appears to be a common theme in practice. Allat and Tett (2019) interviewed seventeen literacy practitioners and found the importance of "using individual's wider experience" (p.52) was an important values-led aspect of teachers' practice. Based on the long experience of the practitioners, this should not be surprising as they should be aware of the intent of the original Adult Literacy Core Curriculum (BSA, 2001), which it states: "it is not just functional writing that is important; for many adults personal writing is a key to understanding and sharing their experiences" (p.102). Whilst it is understandably a values choice for practitioners, valuing adult learners as who they are and what they bring to learning, it appears to have been a key principle of the previous core curriculum, which anyone working pre-Functional Skills would be aware of.

Duckworth (2014a) notes that this is a key aspect of her research into learning trajectories, violence and empowerment in an adult literacy classroom. She describes, "A key drive of the curriculum design was to recognise the socially situated literacies the learners brought to the classroom" (p.162). However, Duckworth (2014a), through championing the learners' own social literacy practices, also challenges the idea that certain literacies only belong to certain people, encouraging learners to engage in more creative literacies, such as poetry and stories. There are less opportunities for creative writing in schooling, due to standardisation and testing (Cridland-Hughes & Schreuder, 2022), meaning learners' confidence in making mistakes is affected. Cridland-Hughes and Schreuder (2022) suggest this is because learners believe there is only one correct way to write (p.218). Yet, using creative literacies links well to the findings of the earlier LfLFE*,* as it was found that*:* "Many of the literacy practices that students choose to engage with in their everyday lives involve meaning-making and creativity." (Ivanič *et al,* 2009, p.64). This again demonstrates the disconnect between home and school/college literacies. This resonates with Clarke (2017) noting the pressure of accreditation targets often pushes more creative literacy opportunities, such as reading for pleasure, out of the adult learner curriculum. Yet, in engaging in more creative literacy practices, learners in Duckworth's study are able to reject previous negative educational labels, such as being labelled as 'thick' by a school teacher, and claim the power of language for themselves (Duckworth, 2014b). Duckworth (2014a) declares, "I knew from a young age that words had power" (p.174) and her practice demonstrates how, in taking control of their own language and literacies, adult learners (and teachers) can claim/reclaim their own power.

Claiming and reclaiming power is a theme that runs through Duckworth's work: in her Transformative FE project with Smith, a stated aim is to situate further education as a "site for resistance" (Duckworth & Smith, 2017, p.15), against school as a "site for reproducing social inequalities" (ibid 2017, p.15). Transformative learning, according to Baumgartner (2019), "refers to a perspective transformation or change in worldview" (p.69). Participants in the study describe how telling their stories is empowering and Duckworth and Smith (2017) observe the links between empowerment and adult learners' personal agency over their own learning and lives. They describe how: "The relationship between struggling to read and/or write, and the ability to articulate one's rights can result in adult literacy learners being marginalised and silenced and a loss of agency" (*ibid*, p.15). Levy *et al* (2014) identify a similar position, declaring that being able to read and write means individuals are "more likely to be included in communities and society more widely" (p.3).

Another challenging aspect is, despite literacy being a heavily researched topic, the above exploration has shown that not only does a social practice approach fail to impact policy but, as stated, much of the work described above remains invisible to many practitioners. There is danger that practitioners are not only constrained to the Functional Skills standards teaching skills, but they are also using much resource to 'reinvent the wheel'. Recently, a new initiative has been launched, 'The FE Literacy Movement' (Haughton, 2023), to promote literacy in further education. It is clear from the exploration of the literature so far that such initiatives are a worthy cause and can possibly bring much light to literacy as social practice. However, it is unclear how much is known of the work that has gone previous to this initiative, and how much of the work has impacted current practice.

In this section, I have identified principles of good practice which support a social practice pedagogy. These include taking account of learner experience; teachers modelling literacy practices; authentic and purposeful literacy events/tasks; the importance of building good relationships with the intention of creating a supportive atmosphere; dialogic classrooms; reducing the learning load; creating the motivation and opportunities for real-life practising, including promoting reading and writing for pleasure and creativity; and contextualised tasks, for which I have identified writing from experience/personal narratives as good practice as a significant gap in the literature. It is the intention of this project that taking a 'good practice' approach to teaching literacies through a social practice lens will not only better meet learners' needs, but also enable the *mobilising* of literacy skills and abilities in different domains, to achieve learners' broader social goals. The good practice identified here could be key to such an approach in a Functional Skills English setting.

As noted, therefore there is a challenge for a literacy practitioner to choose appropriate opportunities for developing writing, and part of that challenge is in choosing suitable material, but part is in being careful with adult learners' shifting identities. Appleby (2010) identifies how adults' identities are close knitted into how they experience their learning, which may cause tension as they learn new skills. This may represent shifts in skills, but also in meaning-making. Mace and Moss' (1988) research demonstrates that it may take adults around a year of considering the course before they enrol, again linking to their shifting perceptions of self and the importance of adult learners' motivations for study. In the next section, I shall consider the importance of taking learners' own motivations and aspirations into account in adult literacy curriculum design.

2.4 Learner motivations and experience

> *'… the values that drove the pedagogical practices included, a focus on the learners' goals… The practitioners also emphasised the importance of using the individuals' wider experience and operated from the position that the learners' experiences were a positive resource…'*
>
> *Allatt and Tett, 2019, p.52.*

The idea of working from adult learners' own motivations and experience is well established in the research literature that recognises literacy as social practice, yet it is not accounted for at all in the current Functional Skills English specification. Within the current classes, there is an opportunity to find out what has motivated adult learners to join the programme, but I can find no evidence in practice of this information being used to inform pedagogy. Anecdotally, I assume some individual teachers may incorporate this in their practice, but it is difficult to find evidence of what good practice takes place in classrooms unless it is researched.

From this perspective, a recent study from Allatt and Tett (2018; 2019) is informative because they investigated literacy teachers' practice with the intention of identifying how in practice people "counter some of the negative impacts of an employment skills-focused curriculum" (Allatt & Tett, 2019, p.42). This study interviewed several literacy practitioners and people responsible for literacy programmes in both Scotland and the north of England, and included staff from many different types of organisation (local authority community courses; homeless, youth-focused and family learning NGOs; further education colleges; adult education colleges; and training providers). Focusing in on those in a further education college as the most similar setting to my own, six staff were interviewed from this setting and staff experience ranged from 1 year to twenty years. The authors note that in the Scottish sample, they targeted experienced literacy practitioners to be able to map any changes practitioners had noticed over time, but this note is absent from the north of England data where, as stated, experience is more ranging. It can be assumed from this that newer practitioners would only be exposed to the narrower view, as would have no other reference points to the changes over time other than colleagues' opinions and, if so motivated, reading older documentation. Due to the ranges of settings, the findings can be generalised to my own setting, rather than specifically applied, and much of the data seemingly focuses on practitioner concerns with referrals due to welfare provision. If learners are referred to 'up-skill' as part of their welfare provision, this obviously brings in a further focus on employability, which is different from my own setting where learners are self-referring. However, it is an extremely interesting and important study, very much investigating similar concerns regarding the narrowing of adult literacy curriculum, although from the perspective of practitioners rather than learners. They report a "more learner-focused developmental approach" (*ibid*, p.47) has been lost and yet practitioners identified that focusing on learner goals is an important aspect of adult literacy provision. The findings of the study suggest that practitioners' pedagogy is very much informed by their values, and that a focus on learner goals, in incorporating learners' experience as a valuable resource for developing learning, is key to 'everyday resistance' (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2016) to neoliberal approaches to education. These findings are very much framed through a *community of practice lens,* which is a social practice lens, finding learning stems from the "inherently socially negotiated character of meaning… in, with, and arising from the socially and culturally structured world" (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Furthermore, Allatt and Tett (2018; 2019) identify practitioners using learners' experience for learning as a *learning curriculum* (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Finally, Allatt and Tett's (2018; 2019) findings lead them to suggest that practitioners recognising learners as 'competent' is more likely to lead to "an increasing sense of identity as a master practitioner" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.111)

2.4.1 Tipping points

To truly understand learners' motivations for learning and to engage their own experiences as a valuable learning opportunity within the classroom, it is important to consider how learners come to join courses. As noted above, Mace and Moss' (1988) study found adult literacy learners consider for a year before joining. A more recent study by Kantar Public and the Learning and Work Institute (2018), which was commissioned by The Department for Education, found adults' motivations for study are complex and impacted by many factors. They describe:

> The study reveals that, for every learner, there exists a complex and unique relationship between their own perceptions of the personal benefits and personal costs of learning. The argument that underpins this report is that the trigger to participate in learning for each adult comes at a tipping point where personal benefits (or 'pros') outweigh personal costs (or 'cons')... This balance exists throughout an adult's learning journey, from before they consider learning right through to their completion (or termination) of their course, and back again to considering learning. An adult is tipped into or out of learning as the balance

between costs and benefits changes. The weights on the balance represent the degree of influence that factors have for that adult (*op cit*, p.7).

The idea of a *tipping point* captures the complexity of adult learners' motivations and has been a useful concept for my shaping understanding. The report's use of imagery to demonstrate pros outweighing cons for adults helps us to understand how many factors can influence learners' decisions and capacity to be in, or indeed out, of learning.

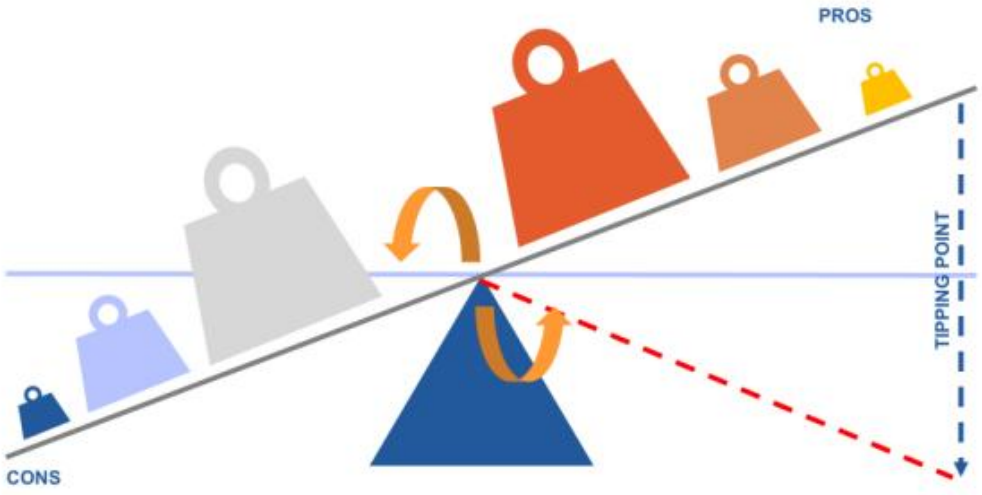

Figure 1 - From 'Decisions of adult learners', by Kantar Public and Learning and Work Institute (2018, p.20)

The findings include several factors which influence adults' decisions, which can either be motivators for or barriers to education:

- Perceptions of psychological capability and control • Social and cultural norms • Previous experiences of education • Physical capability and a diverse set of practical and circumstantial issues • A desire for personal betterment • Encouragement from influential people • Financial position • Flexibility of provision • Quality of provision • Having clear goals for learning. Each of these factors could be motivators, facilitators, or barriers, depending on the adult and their context (*ibid*, p.21).

Many of the factors mentioned here are, anecdotally, recognisable from my previous learners' experiences, and it is interesting to consider this in the context of adults' motivations for learning against a purely skills-focused model. I have often felt that hearing my learners' 'life stories', is extremely informative for my understanding of what motivates them, and the complexity of their tipping points. I believe it makes me a better teacher too, as I can be careful in my responses so not to add to any weight which might tip them out of learning. Collins (2019) notes it is in hearing learners' life stories that a "mismatch of literacy skills, 'achievement' and intelligence" (p.31) can be heard.

Furthermore, Crowther, Maclachlan and Tett (2010) suggest that *life goals* are learners' 'prime motivational drivers', rather than specific literacy goals, so it seems important to account for this in planning a curriculum to meet their needs. This is evident in the Kantar Public and LWI report (2018), which finds that "without a sense of purpose of the learning, individuals were less likely to engage with learning" (p.62). This enables learner goals to remain a central focus at the heart of any adult literacy provision (Allat & Tett, 2018), whilst recognising that a social practice approach "sees the

practices of literacy teaching as bound up with a person's social, cultural and personal purposes, which in turn influences the learners' way of working" (Telfer, 2017, p.32).

Finally, it should be noted, that COVID-19, of course, created a significant barrier to learning, affecting how many adults were able to access learning during 2020-2021 and the duration of this project. COVID-19, therefore, exasperated existing inequalities (James & Thériault, 2020).

In this section, I have explored the importance of adult learners' motivations and experience, to take account of who the learners are and how their goals and experiences can be weaved into an adult literacy curriculum in a way which meets their needs and helps them towards their goals. I am using the metaphor of weaving again here, as it resonates with the idea of adults' with rich lives who choose to add to their own learning and experiences by entering the adult literacy classroom, rather than a deficit view which might hold them lacking in some way. In the next section I shall consider the importance of women and their writing, as noted many of my learners are female which is an important social and situated consideration of this project.

2.5 Women and women's writing

> *'Acquiring social literacy is about being able to navigate the complexities of different social groups; it's about being able to move without feeling like a fish out of water between different contexts: home, the classroom, the school on parents' evening, the doctor's surgery, the police station with a sense of agency. We might call this wholeness or confidence but it comes from a deep sense of the self as subject: our sense of who we are in society.'*
>
> *Duckworth and Smith, 2018, p.169.*

2.5.1 Situating women's literacy

Understanding the importance of literacy in women's lives needs careful consideration, not least for the assumptions that can be made about women's literacy practices, but on the impact women's literacy has on others. By this, I mean that literacy, or more accurately literacies, practices of women tend to impact those around them, especially by way of women being most likely the carers of children and of other family members. Considering literacy as social and situated (Heath, 1983; Street, 1984; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Barton *et al*, 2000) demonstrates the importance of the cultural and social settings, which includes being female. Barton (2007) notes literacy is gendered, whereby it can be recognised that women undertake specific literacy roles within their lives (and particularly in their households) which impact others. An example from Heath's (1983) research is the literacy event of reading a bedtime story to a child. This is a further example of the "different literacies that are associated with different domains of life" (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p.11), which earlier were defined as between home, school/college, work and community. The literacies within the home may be very different for different people, dependent on the roles they play. A mother may be responsible for the shopping (and the shopping list), helping children with homework, reading with children, reading to family members other than children, helping other family members with literacy tasks, and so on. This is not to say all women's literacies are the same; the diversity of women's literacies needs to be recognised (Daniell & Mortensen, 2007). However, this serves to demonstrate that not only are literacy practices different in the different domains of life, but are different within those domains dependent on the roles of the individuals within those domains. According to Barton and Hamilton (2001), family is an important social institution in shaping such practices. Furthermore, Appleby (2010) notes "...many people who are learners also support the

learning of others within families, communities and at work. This learning is often intergenerational..." (p.36). Mothers are often supporting the learning of others in their families.

Adult learners' perceptions of literacy may also be shaped by their previous experiences, including a view of literacy that Crowther and Tett (2001) describe as a literacy as a 'neutral skill' (p.112), as well as imposing these views (unintentionally) on others. Whereas this could just be considered through the lens of the educational institution, individuals are also influenced by family and the home (Duckworth, 2014b). The labels adults adopt may just have well developed in their family setting as in school, causing a lack of self-belief in some adults. In recognising this, it is clear there is an opportunity to improve children's education through their parents', which is often the aim of family literacy classes (Lynch & Prins, 2022). This in turn can challenge family stories of educational failure, reframing them for successful outcomes, just as the learners in Duckworth's study (2014a; 2014b) were able to resist labels from teachers. This may not be a conscious act but caused because of absorbing new practices. Papen (2016) highlights children's school experiences are influenced by their home environment, but that deficit notions of home literacies are often born out of a too narrow definition of what literacy is. Whilst this is true in policy, as explored above, it should be considered that neither families, nor individuals within a family, are necessarily conscious of the practices at home that may support schooling and learning. Levy and Hall (2021) note that reading to young children could be considered a *family practice* and it is possible most parents would not consider this a literacy practice at all. Duncan (2021) considers such practices as core to those roles, the example given being 'Grandma', and describes such practices as part of family 'tradition' (p.87). However, considered through the lens of *communities of practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1991), children can be described as "legitimate peripheral participants in adult social worlds" (Larson & Marsh, 2005, p.107), thus are constantly learning from the family around them. Tummons (2023) notes that "Learning happens all of the time, in ways that cannot be measured easily" (p.122). The same could be said of adults in the family too. Using examples of literacy events, for example reading to a child, is an opportunity to expand the idea of literacy practices within the home, and to incorporate these into practice in the adult literacy classroom (Scattergood, 2022a).

In considering the literacy events within the institution of 'family', the meaning of literacy can therefore be expanded. Pahl and Pool (2020a) challenge the fixed notion of literacy, using the idea of 'hopeful practices' to expand the boundaries and concepts of literacy beyond merely speaking and listening, reading and writing, and describe "thinking through what literacy could be in all its potential" (p.68). This pedagogical approach to literacies opens up thinking about literacy as meaning-making, expanding and valuing the everyday whilst creating spaces for collective literacy learning, which no longer looks typical. They describe an intergenerational opportunity for learning, between young people and older anglers, discussing and learning about fishing through exploring experience through language (*ibid*, p.73). Furthermore, they note "When the literacy event is understood as a creative act, the world becomes rich in multiplicities of meanings, readings and writings" (*ibid*, p.118). Moreover, Strickland (2012) understands a women's literacy as a "way to gather information and see outside herself" (p.57). Therefore, collective and intergenerational learning opportunities, learning through experience, and the discussion of experience are important considerations for female literacy learners, as women often have roles as carers of others. Areas of family literacy practices are important and valuable to women, not only as authentic experiences but for family development (Addison, 2001).

Rejecting such simplistic views of education and of literacy enables us to envision a more equal world. According to Wilkinson and Pickett (2010), identified through their seminal work on societal inequality, inequality affects everyone and, regardless of the economic success of any country,

societies that are more socially equal are also better for everyone. Wooley (2020) declares that if we consider what cultural norms and expectations are reflecting in education, then education is an opportunity to value women's roles in society (p.14). Braidotti (2022), considering women's roles through a post-human lens, believes women's roles are undervalued as they are not perceived as what is valuable in a patriarchal, capitalist society. However, considering women's roles through a social lens, I would suggest part of the reason women's roles are considered less valuable is because they are largely in the domestic domain and therefore largely invisible. Historically, girls and women would have lived lives less in the public domain, more in the private domain, where something like education was deemed unnecessary for their roles. Their domestic roles would have not allowed time for attending education either. Levy *et al* (2014), in their investigation into *Attitudes to Reading and Writing and their Links with Social Mobility 1914-2014* for The Booktrust, are clear that in the current climate, it is boys' literacy which causes most concern in schools, and yet throughout history (and currently still in many countries in the world) it is girls' and women's literacy and learning which is most undervalued (Daniell & Mortensen, 2007). Both remain important, and a nuanced view is critical. Moreover, I wish to highlight the importance of women's literacies and learning, without declaring these are only women's practices or that they should be locked out of what are traditionally viewed as more masculine practices. Strictland (2007) describes this as 'literacy's uneven consequences', whereby the *gendered performance of literacy* is enforcing gendered norms. Wooley (2020) suggests, therefore, that educations' role is to empower girls and women "with the self-confidence and security to shape their own identities" (p.15).

2.5.2 Women's writing

Moving away from gendered performances of literacy and gendered norms, women's writing is valuable for a multitude of reasons, not least for the opportunity of women developing and sharing their voices. An exploration of the literature reveals countless examples of the importance of women's writing, both now and historically, but one example is particularly important to me so I will use it as the main example to demonstrate the importance of women's writing. Gordon's (2015) exploration of the lives of Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley, mother and daughter, inspires my thinking about women's writing. Wollstonecraft is important to me, as she is considered the 'mother of feminism', and I studied Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* at undergraduate level, through the lens of women's writing. Through exploring their lives, Gordon (2015) gives an excellent account of why women's writing matters. She explores how mother and daughter interact, interweaving mother and daughter's stories with each other, and how Wollstonecraft influences Shelley through her writing despite never meeting her (Wollstonecraft died when Shelley was born). Furthermore, Shelley's private writing, in the form of a journal shared with her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley, has been historically important, informing not only historians of the politics and culture of the nineteenth century, but informing the understanding of the impact of the 1815 volcanic eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia by the Shelleys' account of the effects on weather in Europe at that time. I cannot think of a more powerful example than Wollstonecraft and Shelley of why women's writing matters, but that is not to say that women's writing much hold such impact to matter. It is also a demonstration of why personal writing is important, not just at the time of writing and to the person writing it.

But why do women write and what is writing for? The functions of writing link to women's purposes for writing. Within the Functional Skills English standards (DfE, 2018) and the previous Adult Literacy Core Curriculum (BSA, 2001), purposes of texts are an important consideration. The Adult Literacy core curriculum (BSA, 2001) gives examples which include: to inform, explain, instruct, entertain, describe, and persuade (p.70). Returning to the findings of the LfLFE project (Ivanič *et al*, 2009) gives a more complex and nuanced framework to consider the motivations for women's writing, although

it should be noted, not all participants were female. Firstly, Ivanič *et al* (2009) identify relevant domains of everyday life: family, leisure, work, religion, and peer-group and community, declaring "people's engagement with literacy depends on the patterning of their lives" (p.29). This is an important consideration for women's lives and literacies. Furthermore, they identify the uses of reading and writing are for:

- Communication
- Organising life and getting things done
- Documenting
- Finding things out and taking part
- Learning and sense-making
- Pleasure.

In identifying these uses, the authors develop a 'conceptual framework for understanding literacy practices', which informs current practice as includes content, purposes and audience, which are as noted key concepts of in both the Adult Literacy Core Curriculum and the Functional Skills standards. These uses offer a more nuanced consideration for the reasons for writing: the Shelleys' journal could be considered as *documenting,* yet it is clear that both used their shared nature of the journal to influence each other, suggesting significant overlap of uses. Journal writing could also be described as both *finding things-out* and *sense-making.* The example of Wollstonecraft and Shelley could be considered a *family practice,* as explored above, showing how women in their roles as mothers, daughters and carers may *communicate, organise life, document, find things out, learn and sense-make,* and write for *pleasure.* An example of a mother's writing for pleasure is recorded in appendix 8: a partial draft of a poem I wrote about and for my daughter. Relating again to practice, I always ask my learners the types of writing they do in everyday life and the everyday nature of learners' literacies is informative (see appendix 7).

This is not to suggest that women's writing is only valuable if it serves a higher purpose. Cixous (1976) does not concern herself with what women's writing is for, but '*what it will do'* (p.875). She challenges us to claim writing as our own, to reject the idea that writing is either for 'great men' or is 'silly' (p.876). This links well to Duckworth's (2014) idea of claiming words as our own. In writing her self, Cixous (1976) claims women come to know themselves better, to understand themselves. Heilburn (1988) views women's writing as a way to *write a woman's life*, using writing to explore and shape ourselves. This links well to the Vygotskian (1986) idea that writing is thinking. Even everyday writing may come to mean something else all together, an opportunity to explore thoughts and feelings about our lives and circumstances, to claim/reclaim power over the words we use to explore ourselves and our lives. Hoult (2012), in her research into resilience in adult learners which she explores through a Cixousian lens, recognises the importance of mothers and their influence. She chooses to interview her own mother, understanding how she is shaped by her mother, and how the act of exploring her own life through interviewing her mother, in turn changes her academic writing. This is of significance not only to my own thinking, writing and learning, but to those of the female participants of this study. Duckworth and Smith (2018) describe the influence of women's learning on their families and communities as 'the ripple impact'.

Finally, no section exploring the importance of women's learning and writing could be complete without noting that, at the time of this study, women were being seriously disadvantaged by the effects of COVID-19, particularly as carers (Blundell, *et al,* 2020).

In this section, I have explored the idea of social situated practices in terms of being female: what it means for women's literacies to be situated within their lives, roles, and within the institution of the

family. This includes the impact women's literacies have on others, due to generally women having caring roles, and how learning can also impact their families and communities. Furthermore, I have explored the importance of women's writing, using a historical example which is a great influence on me as a reference point, then examined the idea that women can explore themselves through writing their lives. The idea of exploring ourselves links heavily to types of *storytelling*, which many of us unconsciously use to explain, examine, and explore our lives. The last section in this literature review will introduce the idea of *storytelling* and will explore the concept, as is relevant to this thesis.

2.6 Storytelling

'Is life a story?' Finnegan, 2015, p.27.

In a previous section, it was noted that research data suggests that taking account of learners' experiences is an important factor in adult learning. Telfer (2017) suggests that using narrative storytelling in a literacy classroom enables teachers to bond with learners, often "offering them sudden insight into learners' lives and motivation for learning" (p.35). Finnegan (2015) declares that narrative is a "characteristically human way of formulating and conveying experience" (p.33). Narrative and storytelling are therefore a useful device in an adult literacy classroom, to enable learners to share themselves and to develop confidence in using their voice, which I explore a little below.

Halliday (1978) notes that storytelling serves a social function. Storytelling is uniquely human and completely ubiquitous. It enables us to create our identities and inform others about who we are. Women's storytelling is part of an ancient tradition (Pinkola Estés, 2008), as is all storytelling. Heath (1985) notes that storytelling is often an oral tradition or linked to oral traditions. One category of oral story that most people are familiar with is the folktale. Blackie (2023) defines the folktale as a secular, fiction narrative that belongs to the folk or ordinary people. Zipes (2009) also notes that folktales serve a social meaning, namely to fulfil a need to share tradition, custom, important stories of a culture. Those stories that meet a need become repeatedly shared, those that cease to serve a purpose are lost (Zipes, 2009). Folktales give everyone the 'shape' of stories; a shape which is repeated throughout our storytelling history (Yorke, 2014). As a result, we are all able to share stories, or even to create our own. Blackie describes storytelling as "a universal human activity" (p.4) and Dundas (2007) suggests teachers can utilise folktales in our classrooms as a source of learning, He suggests that folktales are a 'mirror of culture', thus offering countless learning opportunities.

Finnegan (2015) suggests we construct ourselves through story. She posits narrative theory is a way of exploring personal identity and meaning. Blackie (2023) views stories as an opportunity for personal and social development, with stories serving an individual function as well as a cultural one. She suggests that stories are a mechanism to reimagine ourselves (Blackie, 2018). Collins (2019) also believes that our stories are an important part of who we are and an important factor in self-esteem when learning. Duckworth's (2014a; 2014b) inquiry, as explored above, is a good example of adult learners using narrative to challenge the 'labels' they find placed upon them, and to develop their ideas of themselves and their self-worth. These labels and stories are in danger of being repeated as 'folktales' or family traditions, to be shared with over generations, unless people change their story. Dundes (2007) believes folklore to be an "autobiographical ethnography, a people's own description of themselves" (p.55). This suggests that a lot can be learnt about identity through story. He also notes that folktales reveal "difference and similarities in ways of thinking" (ibid, p.53), which is another powerful opportunity for the literacy classroom.

Therefore, within a Functional Skills English classroom, narrative and storytelling are our own opportunity for developing folktales, can be used to explore learners' experience and identity, and can serve the purpose of developing thinking and helping learning. Telfer (2017) states:

> "The use of storytelling as a pedagogic tool in the literacy classroom can be viewed as a form of narrative learning, comparing storytelling activities to forms of narrative encounters which can enhance language and literacy skills development. Stories from the literacy learners' experiences, both social and cultural, can be used to engage interest and encourage learners to relate to each other's lives, enabling them to bring their existing knowledge, skills and creativity to the learning process, expressing their own views" (p.35).

There is no specific mention of reducing the learning burden in learning new things, a gap in the literature, but the example above of using learning has the possibility of reducing the learning burden when writing in new ways, through using learner experience. Telfer (2017) is explicit that learners enjoy this style of learning, which is a useful tool in building a purposeful pedagogy, as explored in the sections above.

In this final section, I have explored a little around storytelling. Stories are extremely important to me both personally and professionally, as a teacher. As previously mentioned, I have previously studied literature and I find great meaning in it. Whilst it has not been a large section of the literature review, I believe exploring the concepts of storytelling and relating them to an adult literacy classroom have been informative. In particular, this has enabled me to identify important ways of structuring learning around experiences, but has also informed my understanding that the stories we tell ourselves are not only powerful but can shape our identity and view of the world.

2.7 Chapter summary

The purpose of this chapter has been to complete a thorough literature review of literature that is relevant to this inquiry and identify any gaps in the research. I have described how the literature was identified and outlined some of the steps I took to ensure relevancy.

During the first part of the literature review, I have positioned Functional Skills English in current English educational policy and in particular have noted the effects of neoliberalism on a narrowing of curricula for literacy education. I have explored the idea of austerity, used to justify a skills-focused approach to 'skills' education, and the impact on adult education. I have then explored opportunities for developing a social practice focussed curriculum for Functional Skills English through an analysis of projects recommending good practice. These include:

- Taking account of learner experience
- Teachers modelling literacy practices
- Authentic and purposeful literacy events/tasks
- The importance of building good relationships, to create a supportive atmosphere
- Dialogic classrooms
- Reducing the learning load
- Creating the motivation and opportunities for real-life practising, including promoting reading and writing for pleasure and creativity
- Contextualised tasks, for which I have identified writing from experience/personal narratives as good practice.

However, there were some notable concerns, such as how to design curriculum tasks that enable adult learners to develop their literacy practices in a way which means they are able to *mobilise* their knowledge, skills and abilities through different domains.

Noting the importance of taking account of learner experience, I then explored the literature regarding accounting for learners' motivations for study, their goals, and their experience. This evidence-based approach to teaching adults is prevalent in the literature, but not noticeable in current approaches to Functional Skills English practice. Learner study from the point of *tipping points* was considered, and the importance for accounting for who learners are in their learning. This led into a consideration of the importance of women and their writing. Taking a social and situated approach to literacy invites an exploration of the importance of women's roles and the *ripple impacts* of their literacies practices on those they care for. I explored the importance of valuing women's writing, using a historical example which has been of great influence on me, and used women's writing as a way to explore purpose. An important purpose for writing for women could be to explore ourselves, which lead into a consideration of the importance of storytelling.

Exploring the available literature, based on the explanation in the introduction to this chapter, significant gaps have been identified in the literature. Although the problem of transferring learning to different domains is often posited, a solution is not identified. Using creative and authentic literacy events offer the opportunity for promoting practise opportunities, yet there is not any relevant literature in the adult sector which demonstrates its effectiveness. Furthermore, using writing from experience as good practice is under-explored. Finally, there is an opportunity to develop understanding on ways of lifting the learning burden when learning new types of texts, which there is another significant gap in the literature.

3 Spinning my own yarn: narrating my story

'Learning happens all of the time, in ways that cannot always be measured easily.'

Tummons, 2023, p.122.

3.1 Chapter introduction

Over the span of my twenty-year career delivering adult literacy in multiple settings, from offender learning to those considered not in education, employment or training (commonly described as NEET), to Family Learning to Access to HE, and through my professional learning described within the Context chapter, I have developed a social practice approach to teaching adult literacy. It is my intention here to explore some of the threads which contribute to my own tapestry of learning and how I understand and enact my practice, to fully demonstrate my own positionality and therefore influences on the project. As I have identified, an important aspect of this research is that all participants are able to tell their own stories, including using our own understanding for shaping meaning and informing self, so it is important to also consider my own story and how it enriches this research. An ethnographic project is not a neutral act and, whilst it is important for teachers to have the opportunity to explore and research their own practice (Stenhouse, 1975), it is impossible to separate myself entirely from the research (Waring, 2021).

Through this section, I will first explore my original project, then expand to other experiences that have influenced me especially during the time of this research project. These include reviewing the suitability of initial assessment and curriculum tasks whilst teaching onsite at a women's centre, to account for their own experiences; contributing as participants to a research project exploring the concept of further education being transformative; to organising #FEResearchMeets and editing a project centring further education practitioners voices; to my own experiences of writing and being published and how that has affected me.

3.2 An investigation and evaluation into the everyday writing of adult basic skills literacy learners

The aim of my first project was to develop an understanding of everyday writing and its effectiveness through a grammatical analysis of offender learners' personal writing, with the intention of informing my pedagogy and practice. I wished to investigate barriers to writing development, specifically sentence structure, as had observed some issues with learners' incomplete sentence structure in their classwork, using Halliday's (1978) approach to linguistic analysis.

The focus of the study was a class I taught at a large inner-city probation office, under the umbrella of Offender Learning. There were four participants in the study, all of whom had English as their first language. To help participants understand and engage in the study, we first brainstormed 'everyday writing', which is an activity I have maintained in my teaching practice (see appendix 7), and this gave us an opportunity to discuss and develop meaning about everyday writing and its importance. The participants discussed their everyday writing practices and completed a questionnaire about their practices, and two of the learners shared personal writing in the form of communication, a letter and a postcard, which were used for a grammatical analysis. The findings of the study were that the learners demonstrated an instinctive high-level of complex grammatical understanding, but demonstrated considerable anxiety around other aspects of writing, particularly spelling and punctuation, where they felt they might be 'judged' for any mistakes.

As previously noted, learning about the work of Purcell-Gates *et al* (2001) during my study has heavily influenced my practice. Their project explored "changes in the literacy practices of adults as a result of attending adult literacy classes" (Purcell-Gates *et al*, 2001). They found that learners who participate in classes using authentic literacy tasks "increase the frequency with which they read and write in their daily lives" (Purcell-Gates *et al*, 2001). This informed my project, as one of the participants was not engaging in any literacy practices outside of the classroom (Scattergood, 2007; 2018), and helps me consider the importance of regular practice and its impact on development (Clarke, 2017).

I became interested in the implication of this study on transferable knowledge and skills, noting in my dissertation:

> This is an area of great interest to me because, although qualification achievement may build confidence and improve employability, unless literacy skills are actually used purposefully in everyday life there is little opportunity for real development (Scattergood, 2007, p.2).

Here, my focus was still described in terms of skills, but considering whether adult literacy learners' literacy practices are influenced by study remains important and is of relevance when considering literacy as a social practice. As noted above, if learners are not able to meaningfully use the knowledge and skills learnt outside of the classroom, then the Functional Skills English qualifications are not meeting learners' needs.

3.3 Developing practice: adult literacy teaching within a women's centre

During the early stages of this research, I was teaching onsite at an inner-city women's centre . The centre was originally founded to support women engaged in prostitution in the area, recognising the personal and economic reasons that women may turn to prostitution, and seeking solutions to those problems. The centre now has a much broader remit, including supporting women who are survivors of sexual violence and domestic violence. Until they come to the centre, the women may not have experienced anyone who is willing to listen to their stories before and to hear what they have to say, especially about their own life experiences. This class ceased due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, but it would be good to explore my research rationale through the lens of this class.

Many of the women attending the class had a good level of literacy skills, but maybe did not have the relevant qualifications for their progression or may have been out of learning for a considerable time (Scattergood, 2022a). This is similar to the cohort of learners described for this research. It was as a result of the women's personal experiences that I made the decision to trial using a different approach to initial assessment for this project (Scattergood, 2022b).

The existing initial assessment task asked learners to write a letter to donate an inheritance to a charity of their choice. Without criticising this as a legitimate task, this seems to be a wholly irrelevant task to learners who may be living on the breadline and in sheltered accommodation due to their personal circumstances, such as those learners attending the women's centre (Scattergood, 2022a). It seemed more relevant if learners were asked to write a letter to introduce themselves to me, as their tutor. This still captures the initial assessment data required, in terms of functionality (for example, the ability to layout a letter correctly, use appropriate language, to check spelling, grammar and punctuation, etc), but it also can capture some crucial information about learners' motivations for attending the programme and about their long-term goals and aspirations. It has long been commonly acknowledged in adult education that it is important to start from where the learners are (see Street, 1984; Hunt, 1987; hooks, 2003; Freire, 1972; 2017).

Furthermore, some given curriculum tasks, such as a writing a narrative account of a VIP visit to a restaurant (see appendix 5), are also far removed from learners' experiences. As I have developed my understanding of literacy through the framework of literacy as a social practice (Heath, 1983; Street, 1984; Barton & Hamilton, 1998), and following introducing more authentic reading and writing tasks as a result (Purcell-Gates *et al,* 2001), this offers an opportunity towards being more creative using authentic curriculum tasks which offer opportunities of deeper learning than just 'skills' (Scattergood, 2022a). One of my main concerns for teaching Functional Skills English in a purely skills-focused way is that these skills may not be transferable (DfBIS, 2012). In that, I mean that learning how to write an email, blog, report, etc, in the classroom setting is not proven to be transferable to other domains. It also entirely excludes other types of writing, such as the everyday writing learners typically do or wish to develop (see Scattergood, 2022a; see appendix 7), or developing the academic literacies required for those who wish to progress their studies into higher education.

3.4 On developing 'voice': Further Education in England: Transforming Lives & Communities project

As part of our adult literacy class in the women's centre, we had already formed our own reading group because one the students suggested it (Scattergood, 2022a). I was aware of Duckworth and Smith's University and College Union funded project, which shared further education teachers' and students' stories and, reflecting on the impact the reading group was having, asked the group if they wished to participate. A large part of the original study was videoed, to remove literacy barriers for learners to freely share their narratives (Atkins & Duckworth, 2019, p.7), but this was unsuitable for my learners as some of them may have needed their identities protected, so I suggested they wrote 'speeches' to share, matching a curriculum task in Functional Skills English at that time.

We had been considering the impact of adult education for participants, which we agreed as the theme for framing the speeches. One of the students rejected the brief of a speech, writing and sharing a poem on adult education instead, which was so inspirational it was later shared a conference of further education leaders by Dr Janet Lord (FETL, 2019). Witnessing the impact of the project on my learners, and this additional sharing of her work for this particular learner, and feeling the impact on myself and my own work was hugely empowering for all of us. As an under-represented group, not just as adults in a further education system, but as literacy learners, often viewed as 'deficit' in some way (Barton, 2007), this act gave us all confidence to speak and be heard. To see our voices published on the website (and later in a class 'book') felt like cause for celebration.

Having shared some examples of how my developing teaching practice and learners' experiences have shaped me, I will now turn to some examples of practitioner professional development, which have influenced me during my research.

3.5 'Working and living in FE during the COVID-19 pandemic: 27 FE practitioners' voices' project and publication

Another activity which has impacted me, and how I feel about the importance of sharing our voices in further education, has been my experiences of #FEResearchMeet. Following on from a #FEResearchMeet that I organised in 2019, in 2020 I organised a series of virtual #FEResearchMeets, forced online as a result of the first COVID-19 lockdown in England (Fletcher-Saxon *et al,* 2020). The series of events ran over three mornings, which each individual event presenting a key theme.

For the last event, the theme was 'writing', with the intention of enabling further education practitioners to move past their 'imposter syndrome' (Scattergood, 2019b) and write their experience of working and teaching during the first COVID-19 lockdown. We invited all the delegates to write a 750-word narrative on their experiences, answering four key questions:

1. What has been messy (hard) about teaching during COVID-19 time?
2. What has been refreshing (or 'good') about your work as a practitioner during COVID-19 time? For example, new practices? New professional learning?
3. What's enabling/constraining your practice (including) research during COVID-19 time?
4. Upon reflection, what have you learned in terms of Teaching, Learning and Assessment and what is unnecessary?

Twenty-seven practitioners from across the United Kingdom and across a range of roles within the sector responded, and we paired them up with 'peers' to ensure everyone was well-supported when writing their individual piece. I had the opportunity to work Dr David Powell and Dr Jim Crawley to edit the pieces and towards creating a thematic analysis of the stories. The approach taken was a bricolage approach (Kincheloe, 2004), in collecting and narrating the practitioner stories. The project (Crawley, *et al*, 2021) sought to amplify practitioners' experience, to give them the opportunity "to voice their narrative and to reflect on it" (Kaur, 2019, p.244).

This was hugely empowering to all those taking part, including for myself, and enabled a reflexive account which we were able to learn and further improve practice from. Not only did it teach me more about research and about developing a thematic analysis, shaping my thinking about data analysis approaches for this project, but it motivated me to further amplify my own learners' voices, whose are quieter: to "create a voice for those farthest from the education system" (CEN, 2021). In many ways, this challenges all our perceptions, both further education teachers and students, that we are somehow 'not good enough' to voice our own stories, so we can all use research opportunities to challenge our imposter-syndrome (Scattergood, 2019b).

3.6 Blogging and being published

Finally, I consider my own progression as a result of blogging and being published, and how my own voice has been listened to and empowered as a result.

After returning from maternity to a part-time role, I felt somehow less important and less listened to than I had before. After I had my second child, a difficult critical incident around my return from maternity leave led to me feeling it was time I 'spoke up for myself'. Reflecting on myself and my practice, I realised how lonely it was at times, working out in the community, and feeling distanced from the powerhouses of further education. In need of a community of practice and reflecting my passion for practitioner research since my own experience, recognising research itself is transformative (Atkins & Duckworth, 2019), I first joined the Research and Practice in Adult Literacy (RaPAL) group and then the Society of Education and Training. In July 2018, I felt inspired to start my blog, #EverydayLiteracyProject, where I began to weave my tale, "demonstrating ways to treat literacy as a social practice and building learning experiences around that" (Scattergood, 2019a, p.25).

My blog was well received, which gave me further confidence to tell my story, and led to me having three articles published in the Times Education Supplement between March and April 2019. I documented this experience, along with some teaching approaches incorporating everyday

literacies, in the RaPAL journal (Scattergood, 2019a), and later our internal college HE research journal (Scattergood, 2019c), building my confidence and empowering me to believe in my ability to choose my threads wisely. Most importantly though, it gave me a reflexive space to truly consider my practice and the importance of empowering learners' voices, adding to my own tapestry of learning. As Atkins and Duckworth (2019) note: "Creating meaningful understandings of social and cultural phenomena is only possible when the actors involved in that phenomena are able to make their voices heard" (p.250).

3.7 Chapter conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to expand on my positionality and my influences, in light of this being a practice-focused, practice-led and practitioner-undertaken project. I have noted that it is impossible to unpick myself from an ethnographic study, which investigates my own practice, so it has felt important to share as much of that practice as possible. This then informs the Methodology chapter, in that my methodology positionality and approaches are heavily influenced by my own experiences, just as my learners' lives and stories are influenced by theirs. Storytelling is an important aspect of this project and I have asked my learners to share their stories, so it is only right that I share my own.

4 A rich tapestry - ways of being, ways of knowing: methodology and methods

'At the very heart of what it means to be human is the ability of people to symbolize their experience through language.'

Seidman, 2013, p.8.

4.1 Chapter introduction

This chapter will outline the basis of educational research approaches and consider my research aims and questions in light of my ontological and epistemological assumptions. The chapter will also outline methods of research, including participant decisions, and ethical considerations. Finally, as this study has been affected by English COVID-19 lockdowns, there is a consideration of how the project evolved as a result.

4.2 Methodological positionality

Educational research takes many forms and utilises a broad spectrum of methodological approaches. The focus of this chapter is a critical exploration of my position, exploring my epistemological and ontological assumptions, from an interpretivist approach. As identified, literacy and learning are recognised as socially situated, moving away from an assumption that literacy is something we 'do', separate from any social, cultural, or historical contexts. This study, therefore, is also socially situated: as practitioner research it considers my own work with my adult literacy learners, within a specific context (Stenhouse, 1975). Within this context, the relationship between teacher and learner, or researcher and researched, is not entirely clear cut, as adults choose to enter their literacy education and bring with them a rich tapestry of learning and experience from their own lives. Therefore, it is recognised that there are multiple realities and that realities are apprehendable and socially constructed (Waring, 2021). Recognising the complexity of human experience and interpretation of reality is, therefore, key to this approach.

This thesis builds on a previous study, which explored barriers that some probation learners had to developing their writing and used Halliday's (1978) approach to linguistic analysis, recognising that lexicogrammatical choices are not just about the language in use, but also about the social setting (Scattergood, 2007). One of the consequences of the study is my interest in everyday reading and writing practices, on bringing real texts and experiences into the classroom, and the impact of such practices on adults' literacy development. This has led to my interest in curriculum research and development, and an understanding that a dual approach of exploration with my learners can lead to a greater understanding and impact for curriculum development. This is an opposing approach to the common policy-led deficit view of adult literacy learning, which is neoliberal in design: favouring 'targets' and focussing on achieved outcomes and employability.

Further, as this study is developed, I became more and more interested in 'storytelling' and its power in enabling and empowering adult learners. This has developed particularly through an interest in narrative theory (for example, Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Recognising humans as a storied species, using language to understand and interpret the world (see, Vygotsky, 1986; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Finnegan, 2015), fits well with an interpretivist view. As Thomas (2009) states, "The main point about interpretivism is that we are interested in people and the way they

interrelate – what they think and how they form ideas about the world; how their worlds are constructed" (p.75).

Coffield (2008) notes, "our choice of metaphor is likely to have serious repercussions" (p.8), as has been explored in the Context and Literature Review chapters. Here I am taking Coffield's (2008) 'participation' metaphor, understanding learning not to be within the heads of individuals but a social process, linking learning to communities of practice, to personal development and growth, to changes of identity, etc, rather than a more skills-focussed metaphor of learning as 'acquisition': something to be gained, something entirely within one's own mind, gaining possession of skills and qualifications almost as badges. My chosen metaphor of 'weaving' is firmly placed within an interpretivist view of the world, that personal development is linked to human experience and that learning is lifelong.

However, for this reason, my own development and understanding is growing through social practice theory, and therefore that impacts my research and my work. I recognise my own bias here, such as I take a feminist stance when working within a women's centre setting, bringing literacy learning and personal development to women who have suffered domestic and sexual violence, and recognising the empowering opportunity that engaging in adult education is.

Contributing to other research projects, as discussed in the previous chapter, enabled me to recognise not only that it is empowering and lifechanging for teachers to investigate their own work (Stenhouse, 1975), but it is for learners too. It offers people an extra opportunity to consider their experience and interpret their place in the world, which is especially useful during a time of change or difficulty. It is already identified that adults return to learning through their own motivation and purpose, often at a 'tipping point' in their own lives (Kantar Public and the L&W Institute, 2018), so this offers further opportunity for curiosity and life interpretation for all participants, as well as an opportunity for the co-production of knowledge (Atkins & Duckworth, 2019).

Although this example could be considered in line with critical theory, it also aligns with the ideas of all teaching, learning and research being social practices that we undertake in the context of our world. The opportunity to further understand and develop our own interpretations of the world is empowering and taking an interpretive approach whilst being conscious of and looking for opportunities for action is not out of fitting with our understanding of a social world. A social world naturally has power imbalances which can be explored within an interpretivist framework. As Atkins and Duckworth (2019) highlight, "the relationship between struggling to read and/or write can impact on the ability to articulate one's rights" (p.161), so therefore adult literacy learning is an important critical space for considering power imbalances in the world (Freire, 1972; 2017). Furthermore, it highlights just how much, or indeed how little, power and control teachers have over their own curricula and delivery, and just how much is state-controlled. In acknowledging this, I am also acknowledging my own bias in view of state-controlled education practices, and acknowledging the value and importance of recognising learners' actual lived-experiences within those educational settings. Therefore, this approach enables us to examine not truth but many truths, plus the ultimate complexity and nuance of any educational system.

Sifting through threads to find what matched my ideology, I am purposefully gathering the threads that work for me and discarding those that do not. In doing so, I make certain assumptions about the world, including that the interpretivist position can be problematic because I must be careful how I

interpret my learners' interpretation of their reality. All human beings bring their own biases to this situation, which it is important to recognise. I also need to be careful that my learners are not led by what they perceive that I want from them. For example, in my previous study, which examined everyday writing, learners over-exaggerated their own writing habits and practices, seemingly to please me, so needed careful consideration (Scattergood, 2007). This did not affect the project overall, as the aim was to focus on specific writing tasks to study, but it did raise my awareness to the possibility. Within this study, this was mitigated by being clear there are no specific expectations of the participants.

Furthermore, through the lens of *reflexivity,* (Usher, 1996) I recognise that I am not only the researcher but the recipient of my research (Grenfell, 2019). Therefore, I am considerate of my understanding of this research, holding at the forethought of my thinking questions such as, "does what we see actually exist, or is it our own self recreating it?" (Grenfell, 2019, p.20). Language also needs careful consideration: does the language we choose describe the reality we perceive? On language, Grenfell (2019) notes, "all theories are expressed in language, which raises the whole question of the exactitude of linguistic description in description, conjecture and falsification" (p.22). Language is complex (Finnegan, 2015) and humans are wont to try to simply it, even to express complex subjects such as human experience and education, which aptly justifies the use of metaphors to explain complex concepts in language but also suggests those metaphors must be very clear to enable understanding and a clear interpretation (Barton, 1994).

Finally, I note that Waring (2021) warns us that "methodological assumptions are a reflection of the ontological and epistemological assumptions" (p.16), so I must be mindful with the research design that the methodological approach lines up with my standpoint.

Having considered my position, the next section explores the methodology chosen for this research project, how it has been formed and shaped, beginning with a consideration of ethnography, before introducing the research aim and questions.

4.3 Ethnographic inquiry

The motivation of this project is to examine a disconnect between a social practice approach to literacy teaching and learning with a functional, skills-focused approach to literacy teaching and learning. A notable restraint of teaching in this manner is being out of alignment with the purpose of the Functional Skills English qualification being delivered. Appleby and Barton (2008) note that working in this way can create tension:

> "Working flexibly, creatively and responsively with individuals in a system of targets and assessment-driven curricula can create challenges in responding to the different needs of both" (p.35).

With this in mind, the research strategy identified for this inquiry must align with the purpose (Denscombe, 2010), to further avoid any further tension within the framework of the project. Moreover, in recognising literacy as social in nature (Barton, 2007), we must recognise the research itself as social in nature, informed by the lives of those involved, and situated in a specific time and place.

An ethnographic approach is an opportunity to account for individual's understanding, rather than just a 'description' of a person (Denscombe, 2010), which is in line with understanding research as social and situated. For example, all the early explorations of social practice literacy that have been

noted within this inquiry (Heath, 1983; Street, 1984; Barton & Hamilton, 1998) are ethnographic explorations of communities' literacy practices. These studies, like earlier ethnographic studies developed for anthropology, mainly study communities outside the researchers' own, but it is now better understood that ethnography is a suitable approach for studying one's own practice and experience. Spreader (in Thomas, 2009) characterises ethnography as *learning from people (*author's italics)*,* in preference of the intention to study and describe people. However, taking a social practice approach within education means ethnography can be characterised as learning *with people.* This accounts not only for the involvement of participants, but for their own meaning-making within the experience. Barton (2007) highlights:

> "This approach sees participants not just as 'subjects' of the research but as active people, who will make sense of the research process and the results in their own way, and on whose lives the research will necessarily have an impact" (p.54).

Furthermore, Barton (2007) describes the ethnographic approach as an opportunity for researchers to "develop as complete a picture as possible of the detail of people's lives and the place of literacy practices within them" (p.53). In doing so, ethnography is an opportunity to centre the position of practitioner researcher (Scott, 1996), therefore understanding the teaching and learning practices that surround people's literacy learning. This enables a reflexive approach, considering the position of the researcher and the role of the researcher in account of the process (Barton, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2022). Moreover, this allows the researcher to "deconstruct and lay bare the processes the researcher went through to collect the data and create the researcher account" (Scott, 1996, p.153).

This reflexivity, in the sense of this inquiry, has an action-research style element to it, in that there is an intention to change practice during the research process, for example, in developing curriculum tasks in line with learners' needs or experiences. Munn-Giddings (2021) describes the purpose of action research is to "...work towards practice change during the research process, not merely to explore and describe a situation 'as it is'" (p.85). Therefore, an ethnographic approach which includes accounting for the positionality of the researcher which is action-research in nature, accounts for this: both as an inquiry which explores and seeks to understand teachers' and learners' practices, but also to invoke practice change.

4.4 Research aim and questions

This research aims to investigate how learners' experiences of college-based literacy learning, in relation to their own knowledge and experiences, can inform the development of curriculum tasks for Functional Skills English. In the Context chapter, I discussed the process of developing the research questions which inform this study. The focus of these questions is designed to draw out the data which will enable me to reach my research aims, whilst acknowledging the above discussion about interpretation of the data. This is particularly important to me, as I acknowledge that what research is recording as data is in fact the very personal stories and experiences of a group of adult literacy learners, and that therefore their words had to be treated with the utmost respect and dignity.

Therefore, the key questions identified to inform this research aim are:

1. How could using **stories of experience and learners' own aspirations** help curriculum development for adult literacy learners?
2. What do learners' **stories of experience** tell us about their **progress**, whilst recognising literacy learning as a **social practice**?
3. How does this work inform our **constructions of self**?

4.5 Research participants

Participants were recruited from both my adult literacy cohort, so therefore were my own learners within my own context, and my colleagues. The demographic of my learners and colleagues is an important consideration in this study. The majority of my learners are women. All of my colleagues who also teach English Functional Skills are women. The reason for this is not known or presumed, other than recognising that literacy is gendered (Barton, 2007). It felt prudent, therefore, to invite male participants from my cohort to possibly address the wider assumptions about why men do not routinely enrol on adult literacy programmes. However, this proved to be outside the scope of this study.

As examined below in 'ethical considerations', all learners were welcomed to contribute voluntarily. An important aspect of involving learners is for me to talk openly, honestly and regularly about my project, so all aware of it. This will also invite involvement, empower learners, and to help them feel it is as much their project as it is mine. It also puts me into a vulnerable position with them, perhaps even going so far as to create a more reciprocal relationship than the traditional teacher- learner relationship, by asking for their help and their trust. As I show myself as someone who is not just committed to lifelong learning in a teaching capacity, I am modelling learning as a learner too.

Finally, a note here on language: I have chosen the term 'participants' deliberately, to hopefully reflect my intention to create an active involvement and the equity I wish to build into the relationships (Seidman, 2013). Although I might refer to the researcher-researched binary, to highlight considerations which I must weave into my methodology, I am purposefully avoiding terms such as 'subject', which Seidman (2013) believes implies a hierarchical relationship. Barton notes that ethnography lends itself to a view of participants over subjects, as it involves 'active people', "who will make sense of the research process and the results in their own way, and on whose lives the research will necessarily have an impact" (2007, p.54). This is also an important ethical consideration.

4.6 Selection of Research Methods

In selecting appropriate methods for any research project, it is important to ensure that approach remains credible throughout. Because this study focusses on learners' experiences and narratives, Connelly and Clandinin's (1990) *Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry* has informed this study and will be key to the methodological approach and in identifying research methods. This is because stories are a fundamental part of human experience (Finnegan, 2015) and hold particular relevance to social literacy practices, both written and spoken. This is very much in line with my stated interpretive position.

An important consideration in the selection of research methods is the trustworthiness of a project. Many qualitative researchers avoid using language such as 'validity' or 'reliability' (Nowell *et al*, 2017) because these terms are more in line with quantitative approaches, not where approaches were the main data are words (Denscombe, 2010). The language we choose is important (see Vygotsky, 1986). Nowell *et al* (2017) posit that qualitative research must, therefore, be trustworthy. The criteria for being trustworthy, they suggest, is the research must be conducted in a credible, transferable, and dependable manner (Nowell *et al*, 2017). If this is achieved, then confirmability is established: "that the researcher's interpretations and findings are clearly derived from the data" (Nowell, et al, 2017, p.3). Part of the process of achieving this is a clear audit trial of the decisions a

researcher takes, in which reflexivity is key (Nowell *et al*, 2017). Taking such an approach allows for an interpretation of data, where subjectivity can be valued (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) recognise that we live storied lives. In telling stories, humans are choosing to share experiences from their own perspectives and consciousness (Seidman, 2013). McAlpine (2016) suggests narrative is a genre that we all instinctively know, as we are all telling stories in our everyday lives to "construct a coherent plot about (our) lives" (p.33). All teaching, learning and even researching is to be engaged in a story (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In this, the participants are asked to share their stories, whereas the researcher takes up the narrative, as we make take up a thread, to further inquire upon the story. However, we are using a different terminology than is often used in telling stories: we are not investigating life-histories, or autobiographies, as much as they be interesting to us, but recognising the difference in asking for stories. McAlpine (2016) notes the close associations between stories and life-histories or biographies, notably that recounting the events of their lives, as agents of them. Stories relate well, then, to human experience. There is power in this, but also drawbacks, which will be explored further later.

In using stories as methodology, words are data. Words are qualitative data, which sits well in an interpretivist framework, focussed on interpreting people's lives and experiences. Connelly and Clandinin's (1990) participants are teachers, whereas mine are mostly learners, so it is important that additional care must be taken with their stories. An ideal is an equal partnership between researched and researcher, to best serve both needs. This, however, needs an ethical consideration, especially within the teacher-student relationship. Moreover, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) note, this parity is not often achieved. It is also important to recognise that there is as much left out as included, as we story our lives for particular purposes (McAlpine, 2016). The narrative is to serve a purpose then, not just a stream of consciousness or an autobiographical account, but a story to serve a purpose in time and space. An autobiographical account, for example, might simply tell a story, without any significance or purpose (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The narrative gives access, then, to deeply nuanced and complicated social and educational issues (Seidman, 2013), based on lived experience. By lived experience, I mean experiences that shape a person's developing self, as opposed to more fleeting experiences which may not affect our sense of identity. Finnegan (2015) suggests we use language for "narrating the deep story of our identities" (preface), based on how we interact with the world.

Time is important too (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative writers may move back and forth through time, recognising events as lived, *storied time,* or events as told, *discourse time*. Just as I mentioned a story needs a clear beginning, middle and end (McAlpine, 2016), Connelly and Clandinin (1990) suggest the structure is based on time: past, present and future. They relate this to Carr's (1986) structure of *three critical dimensions of human experience*: mapping the past to significance; present to value; and future to intention. In asking for a chronology over an autobiography, they are not only recognising the difficulty in understanding and portraying the complexity of lived experience, but they are aware that narratives are a "continual unfolding" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p.9), so we can grow and change our stories as we, ourselves, are becoming. As suggested by McAlpine (2016), narrative "provides a robust way of integrating past experience into meaningful learning, locating oneself and others in the account, and foreshadowing the future" (p.33). This links directly to our becoming, then, as we can shape and reshape our

stories, “form and reform who they have been, are presently and hope to become” (McAlpine, 2016, p.33). The use of the pronoun ‘we’ is carefully chosen, as an ethnographic approach, as we have seen, immerses the researcher in the research, and the lines between researcher and researched become blurred. I am researching my own practice and my own story, as much as anyone else’s, and Connelly and Clandinin (1990) prompt me to be aware of the multiple identities in narrative inquiry: the multiple ‘Is’. A consideration, then, to allowing space for the voice of each participant is important. Connelly and Clandinin remind us that in “collaboration, trust, and relationship we live, story, and restory our collaborative research life” (1990, p.10) and yet, remind me that the research itself is a story: “in the process of writing the research story, the thread of the research inquiry becomes the researcher’s purpose” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p.10). Finally, in recognising the research itself is a story, one must avoid any ‘smoothing’ of the story, as it is not a Hollywood plot (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), nor does the story solely belong to me.

Furthermore, just as the researcher must avoid the trap of ‘smoothing’ the data, so must one avoid the trap of using positivist statements when dealing with narrative inquiry. Terms such as ‘valid’ or ‘reliable’ are not suitable for qualitative methods, as are more suited to more quantitative types of research, so other language must be considered. Furthermore, there are other risks, dangers and abuses to be mindful of. I must consider the danger of appropriating people’s stories and the risks of ‘othering’ people. This study is about giving voice, not about taking stories for my own purposes, and, in itself, this is a social justice issue (Atkins & Duckworth, 2019), for the subjects of a social inquiry have their own agency (Seidman, 2013). The work of Hoult (2012) investigates transformational adult learning and resilience through a series of student interviews/biographies. Her narrative inquiry differs from the approach posited here as it is literary by design, so has not necessarily shaped my methodology but it has informed it. It has also reinforced the power of telling individual stories and how that relates to agency and identity. As noted, social literacies are inherent in identity, but they are in agency too, especially where individuals “through their actions, exercise agency in ways that include efforts to avoid, challenge or resist perceived practices and policies” (McAlpine, 2016, p.38).

As noted, the primary aim of ethnography is to study and understand culture from within. It is an approach that works well within education as it lends itself well to an exploration of education practices and cultures. Choosing an approach which allows me to explore narratives and experiences is a good fit for an ethnography. Therefore, I shall now use this to inform the methods for collecting the data.

4.7 Methods

Having considered an appropriate methodology in line with my research position, I was then able to identify appropriate methods for capturing data. It is worth noting that Connelly and Clandinin (1990) share several suitable methods for collective teacher narratives within their study. Using this as a starting point, I was able to select the most suitable methods, based on my research aim and questions, to elicit the data effectively. Due to the purpose of the research, it was immediately obvious that the initial assessment task and any written curriculum tasks which dealt with experience would be appropriate methods for collecting data. However, I was also mindful of capturing any other classroom tasks and dialogue about learners’ experience too, so chose to both photograph tasks and also to keep a field journal capturing relevant snippets of conversations and dialogue from class activities. I identified interviews as a suitable method, which worked well talking

to colleagues both in the pilot year and in the study year, but the pandemic lockdowns have a significant impact on learners and it became more appropriate to offer them the opportunity of focus groups, especially as we had moved online due to lockdowns. Finally, late in the study the opportunity to capture further learners' experiences became evident through the speaking and listening summative assessment, collecting data on learners' learning experiences, changing perceptions, and aspirations for the future at the end of their course. Here I explore each in turn, to further unpick and understand each method.

4.7.1 Class and curriculum activities, including assessment

Adult literacy curriculum lends itself to many opportunities for capturing learners' experiences. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) describe letter writing as one such approach. For the initial assessment task, I have identified writing a letter to me, as their tutor, for initial assessment purposes as a suitable starting point. It is important to ascertain that this task serves its intended purpose and does not cause any detrimental effect on the learners, as a result of it being used for this study. It is also important to only use this method if it yields the appropriate data which will inform the research. As the first research question identified is 'how could using stories of experience and learners' own aspirations help curriculum development for adult literacy learners?', the initial assessment letter is a credible research tool for achieving this aim. Denscombe (2010) notes to ensure credibility, it is important that qualitative researchers demonstrate the data is appropriate for the task considered. I have identified that the initial assessment letter is appropriate as its purpose is to ascertain learners' motivations for study and future aspirations. However, it also still serves as a suitable tool for assessment, as it enables the practitioner to ascertain learners' level for the Functional Skills English qualification; to identify key areas for development; and to contribute to the learners' targets, so there is no detrimental effect for learners. Therefore, this method was adopted early on in the study to enable me to capture learners' early narratives.

There are many other classroom activities within an adult literacy classroom which also lend themselves to storytelling as collection of data. Sometimes these may be writing tasks; sometimes it may be class discussions and brainstorming. Brainstormed tasks can be recorded through the use of photographs (see appendix 7), although unless specifically recorded individual participant's' contributions may not be collected. As part of the course, learners produce written work in response to curriculum tasks. These include different types of writing required, such as blogs, articles, letter, emails, reports, speeches, narratives, or it may include writing in the form of reflective diaries. Which would create the most credible and dependable data (Denscombe, 2010) would depend on the learners themselves, as the course and the curriculum developed. During the pilot year, the most suitable task was writing a personal blog on their experiences of adult education (see appendix 6 for some examples of these blogs; see appendix 3 for an example of a learner's blog used as data for the project). In the final year, this evolved into a more nuanced approach to the classroom tasks, as a direct result of the research as I identified that more than just the blog task was suitable. For all writing tasks which lent themselves to writing from experience, I offered the learners the choice. For example, learners were able to choose to write the awarding body's suggested VIP narrative account (see appendix 5) or to write a narrative from their own experience (see appendix 6). I note that the narrative task and the blog task were the easiest to adapt to personal experience, what Connelly and Clandinin (1990) describe as 'lived stories' (p.6), due to the more personal nature of the style of writing. It would not have been appropriate, nor credible (Denscombe, 2010), to try to adapt a

business report or formal business email to for this method, due to different purpose and style of writing which does not align with personal writing.

It is worth noting, that one of my aims for class writing is to include an activity which includes a 'real' piece of writing, something that does not just end up in draft form or as a marked piece of work, but something that is shared, published, etc. This entails a careful, thorough drafting and redrafting process, which is common in real-life literacies, and also brings a sense of pride to participants, again recognising the power of agency in writing. This aspect is also be worthy of inclusion as a different method of capturing people's work and stories. Due to the restrictions of the pandemic lockdown, as discussed in the research evolution section, this was not as effective through online teaching as it had been in the classroom, but it did work well during the pilot year for the blogs, which are stored online within a real blog (see appendix 6).

Late into the study, some of the participants were able to develop a curriculum task which was not only suitable for their learning, but also helped further inform the project especially in consideration of the final research question, considering our developing sense of self. As part of the speaking and listening summative assessment for the Functional Skills English qualification, candidates are expected to present to peers on a topic of their choice, and they chose to present about their experiences of learning. I helped them to develop this task to mirror the original initial assessment letter, this time considering what they had learnt and revisiting what their future aspirations were. This became an opportunity to capture a changing sense of self, as a result of their experiences within the learning programme, and informed an idea of being able to construct themselves through their stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Gregory, 2009; van Manen, 2016). Van Manen (2016) suggests we are able to interpret our own existence and the world around us through how language can create and describe our subjective realities, thus enabling us to construct and interpret our situatedness as humans through experience. This summative assessment task is spoken and then captured by the assessor as written text, which means it is available data and was easy to include into the study. Candidates have to sign to agree the accuracy of the transcript for assessment purposes, so were able to edit or adjust the text if they felt it was in any way inaccurate. This was a useful way to verify accuracy and ensure data did not become corrupted in collection, as was confirmed a s a direct transcript.

After identifying curriculum tasks as a suitable method for data collection, and reminding myself what it is that I wish to 'find out' (Hillier & Jameson, 2003, p.61), I returned to the research questions to ensure these methods were suitable. At first I assumed that the initial assessment letters would only inform the first question, but over time I began to understand the different written contributions as part of a bigger 'whole', which could be interpreted holistically to understand the pattern of a participant's experience on the learning programme. Each method aided this, feeding in to the opportunities to understand learner progress (forming part of question 2) and generating evidence which supported understanding for answering the third question, in terms on understanding constructions of the self.

4.7.2 Field journal

In the section above, exploring using curriculum tasks as data, I noted a problem whereby it is not possible to identify individual participants' contributions during classroom discussion by merely photographing classroom artifacts (see appendix 7). One way to overcome this problem is to record individual contributions in a field journal. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) term this field notes, but I

have favoured language that aligns better with storytelling, in naming it a field journal. The journal was an opportunity to capture more impromptu individual contributions within the classroom setting, in an effort to supplement more formal written data which is described elsewhere in this section. A record of critical moments or comments, captured in real-time, captures experience without the possibility teacher-pleasing aspects discussed below within interviews or focus groups. This is because the researcher is identifying comments in real-time, is able to capture them and also to instantly verify them and reconfirm consent at the moment of capture. However, there can be some shortfalls of such a method, which I needed to be aware of. Firstly, my own bias could affect what data was collected, for example cherry picking only data that seems to answer the research questions in a favoured manner. It is important there to identify specifically the types of comments which would be useful to the questions, to avoid such cherry-picking. In this sample, I identified any comments which directly related to the participants' experiences or to their feeling about writing from experience. Another issue with this method is capturing the data in real-time, as this was a real classroom setting not a laboratory for studying the participants. Capturing data could not become a barrier to the primary purpose of the classroom, the learners' own learning experiences, as well as not becoming a tool for monitoring learners' contributions to classroom discussions. A way to mitigate this later point was to have continuous ongoing conversations with the participants about my project, what it entailed, how it was developing and that, importantly, research itself is a form of writing (van Manen, 2016). This worked to involve the participants further, rather to create a distance between what they were learning and what I was learning.

4.7.3 Interviews and focus groups

Whilst the data collection methods described above would elicit some useful data in answering the research questions as highlighted, they would not serve to offer the whole picture of experience from the participants. One of the reasons for this is the data collected through the methods above would generally relate more directly to learners' lives, rather than their narratives about the experience of learning and their developing self. It would also be unlikely to always capture the depth of people's narratives through short writing tasks. For this reason, further methods are needed to elicit enough data to answer the research questions, for example interviews and focus groups.

Interviews are viewed as a credible and dependable method for capturing qualitative data. Mears (2021) describes interviews as an opportunity to "…discover and record what that person has experienced, what they think and feel about it, and what significance or meaning it might have" (p.33). Furthermore, interviews are ubiquitous, not only in research, but throughout our everyday lives. However, interviews can have negative connotations. They are described by Hillier and Jameson (2003) as 'pervasive' (p.101). That pervasiveness, although meaning commonplace, could be interpreted as a negative, for example interviews can be associated with other practices such as employment practices (Hillier & Jameson, 2003), which could be a reason for avoiding more formal interviews with learners. Interviews do not always need to take a formal structure, however, such as in the case of structured or semi-structured interviews, and Connelly and Clandinin (1990) identify the unstructured interview as the most appropriate method for collecting stories of experience. This is due to the more conversational nature of an unstructured interview, allowing participants to lead the conversation if they wish, and to share aspects of their story without being led by pre-prepared questions. Stories are a way of knowing (Seidman, 2013), so removing formality and structure could

free the opportunity for participants to construct themselves in their stories. As Vygotsky (1986) highlights, people telling their personal stories of experience is a reflection of their consciousness.

Focus groups are another opportunity for capturing conversation, but this time as much between participants as much as they are directed at me, as researcher. Gibbs (2021) describes focus groups as a collective discussion about a particular topic to gain insight into participants' views. Like interviews, focus groups offer participants to explore what they think and feel about their experiences. A benefit of focus groups for learners, over one to one interviews, is that the collective nature of a focus group may give participants the opportunity to think through their own ideas in ways they may not have been able to do so alone, for example, in responding to others' ideas (Hillier & Jameson, 2003). I felt, in observing the participants over time, that as the classes progressed, and learners' lives became interweaved, they felt emboldened to discuss their experiences together. This was an opportunity for a dialogical conversation that may prompt thoughts and utterances that might not happen in isolation. It encourages a gathering of the collective stories too, from the community of the group. Gibbs (2021) cites such examples as the benefits of focus groups, including participant enjoyment in discussing the topic with others; enjoying the group dynamic for debate; and being able to talk about topics in a way they are unable to in an individual interview setting (p.241). For this reason, Hillier and Jameson (2003) also note that focus groups are unlikely to work in large numbers, meaning I kept the learner focus groups small to enable rich discussion for all participants, not just the loudest voices. Hillier and Jameson (2003) also highlight that there is a lot of skill needed to direct a focus group effectively, using techniques to keep the discussion on topic, and to ensure all participants do get a fair opportunity to speak.

In choosing interviews, or conversations, and focus groups, I was unable to foresee the impact of the pandemic, which I will explore further below when considering the evolution of the research. For this reason, I chose to conduct one-to-one conversations with my colleagues, in both the pilot year and the final, and focus groups with learners, identifying those learners who would be least impacted by attending an online focus group session. One participant was unable to attend her session, so met with me individually as a result.

As explored, both interviews and focus groups offer unique opportunities to explore stories of experience and learners' narratives, as well as colleagues' narratives (Seidman, 2013), in-line with answering the research questions posited. Both interviews and focus groups are unique occurrences (Tummons & Duckworth, 2013) and each conversation captures a moment in time. These conversations cannot be repeated, as even if the same people in the same circumstances meet, the conversations would naturally be different, such is the situatedness of our human experience.

Because it was important to me to have developed relationships with the participants but also because it was important learners had had the opportunity for participating in the curriculum, these learner interviews and focus groups could not happen early in the research study, which spanned one academic year. However, I was able to have conversations with colleagues in both the pilot and final year wherever during the process, as their knowledge of their own delivery would already be present and we have already formed trusting relationships with each other.

Due to the effects of the pandemic lockdowns, we were by then using Microsoft Teams as our teaching and learning tool, so it became familiar to both colleagues and learners before the research conversations took place. This is explored further in the research evolution section below, to show

this changed from the original project plan. Microsoft Teams has a recording function and, during the early stages of lockdown, also added a transcribe function. This enabled me to record each research conversation, which participants would also have available to them to view and check for accuracy. Participants were able to remove their participation up until the point of anonymisation, so this meant they could check the video and make sure they were satisfied with it, and also could check the transcript with Teams made freely available. An exception to this was the first colleague interview, as this was recorded before the transcribe feature was added, so I had to transcribe it by hand. All recordings were stored in the student share drive, behind passwords, so all participants had access. Using the Teams transcription avoided human bias in the transcription, but it did cause some problems due accent in the translation. It was necessary for me to rewatch each of the conversations while going back through the transcription, to edit it appropriately, so that the transcription was as accurate as it could be. If there was any unclear dialogue, I removed the inaccurate description and marked it so that I knew the dialogue could not be heard at that point in the transcript. Again, all transcripts were available to all participants, if they wished to check them for accuracy, to ensure a fair and accurate representation of each conversation was recorded. None of the participants asked for any transcripts to be altered, nor did they request to remove any of the data within the transcripts.

4.8 Ethical considerations

Sometimes the decisions we make in our classrooms can have profound consequences. The importance of making ethical decisions throughout the research project was therefore paramount. My first intention was to do no harm (see Mill, 2011). I suggest that it is an expressed intention of the research to, in fact, do good: to be empowering, as described in the early projects I have engaged myself and learners in. Recognising my project as social and situated, based in experience, it is unavoidable that the research will affect the participants in some way (Barton, 2007). They will interpret it in their own way, may find it has given them their own space for reflexivity, and may have even given them the chance to 'restory' their experiences to a more confident future (see, Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Furthermore, ideas within research dialogue are co-constructed between the researcher and participants (Husband, 2020). It is, therefore, my intention that in a full curriculum, and in recognition of the busy lives many of us live, that this project will give opportunities for learning, as opposed to taking from the participants' learning. The British Educational Research Association describes this as an *ethic of respect* (2018).

To achieve this, I will use Seidman's (2013) principles of informed consent to shape this study. His principles are:

- What, how long, how, to what end, and for whom?
- Risks, discomforts and vulnerability
- Rights of the participant
- Possible benefits
- Confidentially of records
- Dissemination.

In consideration of what, how long, how, to what end, and for whom. It must be noted that all research must be completed to the highest of ethical standards. To achieve this, it must be clear from the beginning what is asked of the participants, avoiding any jargon (Seidman, 2013). Language is important, especially accuracy of language, which is a significant ethical consideration, so language

used so be clear and concise. To that end, it became essential that verbal consent was sought. It was of deep concern to me that participants fully understood what they were consenting to, which needed to go far further than simply completing the consent form (see appendix 1). Because the study was year-long, there was a potential for learners to consent at the beginning of the academic year but they would not fully understand or anticipate (and nor would I, as it happened) until they had completed the full year. This was not only down to language, but was due to the nature of shaping understanding through meaning-making, especially through double-hermeneutic tasks. As a result, I removed two participants from the study, as they dropped out of the course due to personal circumstances, and I understood they were unable to meaningfully consent as had not seen the project, or their learning, fully enacted. Furthermore, past seeking consent for compliance reasons, for ethical reasons I found that consent became a continuous conversation between myself and participants at every stage of the process (Husband, 2020). With the focus group participants, shared the language of the consent form on the interactive whiteboard and, on the whiteboard alongside, used this as an opportunity for exploring meaning in language. Thus, even a consent form can become a valuable learning opportunity. We discussed the language and interpreted the meaning, and I invited learners to take a photo for their own records, so they could unpick over time the meaning of their participation. This would enable them, at any time, to return to their own involvement and question it, if they wished to, and therefore remove their consent. If I was capturing data through curriculum tasks, I verbally renewed my request for consent; if I was capturing moments and dialogue in my research journal, I again requested consent. The research journal moments offered several enriching conversations on why I had sought out a particular comment, which aided not only my own understanding but our mutual meaning-making. Everything about the study was carefully being crafted to be welcoming, safe and involving, with the intention of providing what Kaur describes as, “a safe space for participants to voice their narrative and reflect on it.” (2019, p.243). It was my intention from early on that my project, in exploring my teaching practice, would be as much my learners’, in exploring their learning and literacy practices (Barton, 2007).

Further, the purpose of any research project must be made clear to the participants. As it was an on-going project, investigating my own context over the course of an academic year, there was ample opportunities to repeat this, as noted above, not just in the formal data gathering stages, but as a free and open conversation between equals about my intentions. All participants were well known to me and, over the course of the academic year and, over the course of the project, those relationships developed and deepened.

It was made clear throughout the process how data would be used within the study, including in writing a thesis and sharing through other mechanisms, such as conferences presentations and published articles. As noted, participants had access to any recordings and any printed transcripts. Finally, it was important that participants are aware that I was participating as part of a funded programme, as my initial fees were paid for by the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) as part of the Practitioner Research Programme. However, unlike other forms of sponsorship and funding, the ETF holds no rights to this project.

In contemplation of risks, discomforts and vulnerability, there were no additional considerations that needed to be sought when applying for ethical approval for the undertaking of this project (see, ethical approval, in appendix 1). However, as noted, there are some considerations in terms of risks, discomforts and vulnerabilities. Firstly, it was possible, in sharing personal experiences, individuals could feel discomfort or vulnerable. Seidman (2013) highlights the need to work to minimise this.

Further, Kaur (2013) reminds us: “the sharing of a story can be a deeply vulnerable and sensitive experience. To receive this as a researcher is a privilege.” (p.243). This reminder of privilege remained important throughout, to avoid the exploitation (Seidman, 2013) of participants through appropriating their stories. Also, once the data was collected, I still needed to be mindful how the data sets are to be used, to avoid potential identification or embarrassment to the participants, especially in the sharing of personal experiences (Seidman, 2013).

In building relationships with participants, the ethical implications of this were also considered. This can become an increasingly complex and nuanced area of ethics. Barton (2007) expresses this well:

> “When you are spending time getting to know people, building up relationships of mutual obligation, and stepping into normally private areas of their lives with them, ethical obligations become increasingly complex and need a lot of thought. The ethnographic researcher of literacy must constantly be aware of the potential effects, positive and negative, that the research may have.” (p.54).

Over the time of the project, I became particularly close to many of the participants of the research. It has been important to remember the nature of our relationship, and to behave appropriately as a result. At the end of the academic year, I invited all participants to stay in touch with me. The purpose of this gesture was not only so that they would have the opportunity of continuing to observe the project as I analysed the data or continued to share the work, but so they could maintain our relationship if they wished to. The choice for this has remained the participants, not me. Some have stayed in touch; some have been in touch for further support, and some have chosen not to, all of which is appropriate. I have been able to maintain a supportive, yet professional, relationship with the participants as a result.

In consideration of the rights of the participant, as noted, all participation should be formed on the principle of voluntary, informed consent. Anyone who was invited to participate was able to do so on a purely voluntary basis. If they chose not to participate, there were no consequences as a result of their choice. This includes their right to participate in all curriculum tasks. Further, all participants had the right to withdraw, up until the point of anonymising the data. They had access to their own transcripts and videos, so had the right to restrict any aspects they wish to, with the right to review their contributions before publishing. Finally, any personal details which might serve to reveal the identity of any of the participants was removed. Although I did not foresee this, it became a very important aspect of data collection, as at least two of the participants shared information which would make them identifiable. Seidman (2013) notes, “Because a considerable part (of a participant’s experience) may be shared in the research report, a reader who might know the participant may recognize him or her” (p.69).

I have threaded several possible benefits throughout this chapter, for both myself and for participants, but I wish to add two points I have not yet explicitly covered. Firstly, for participants, just being listened to is a possible benefit (Seidman, 2013). Secondly, as a practitioner researcher, I hoped to better understand the experiences of my colleagues and learners, in the hope of improving my practice, and I hoped my learners had a better understanding of their own learning from participating. It is possible that the impact of participating the study itself has some unforeseen implications (Husband, 2020). Moreover, it is intended that this study will make a contribution to the field.

As noted, all participants have the right to privacy, in that their identities remain confidential. This was protected by using an alternative name for each learner, or number for colleagues, rather than using their real names. It felt important that the alternative names are chosen carefully, to reflect their ethnic background. Under current Data Protection law in England (Westminster Government, 2018), all data may only be kept for the timeframe it is valid for, so suitable boundaries were put in place. For example, the initial data was stored in a password-protected computer, including a reference to which participant was which, but at the point that it was reasonable then data was completely anonymised.

Finally, the principle of dissemination. At the time of recording, any videos or audio recordings are jointly owned by the researcher and participant (Seidman, 2013). I was considerate of this, as explored above. Classwork and assessment tasks belonged to the participants, so this is another reason that full, informed consent was sought. As there are many possible opportunities for disseminating any research, such as conference presentations, journal articles, etc, as well as the more formal process of writing a thesis, I "cast the widest net possible" (Seidman, 2013, p.75) in seeking consent for use of data.

It cannot be reiterated enough that I undertook a project which explored and sought to understand the lives and experiences of my adult literacy learners. Therefore, there always remained a strong ethical consideration of fairness and social justice (Atkins & Duckworth, 2019). This has been an opportunity to represent my learner communities.

4.9 Data collection

Just as words are increasingly being recognised as valuable data, in social science settings - such as education - humans use words to express their *lived experience* by telling their stories. As laid out in the Context chapter, this thesis is concerned with considering the stories of a group of adult literacy learners, and thus identifies their stories as data.

An interpretative approach to social science has a long history, with the origin of the term *hermeneutics* (Gadamar, 1979) describing early understanding of interpreting meaning from reading Bible stories (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Just as we still explore meaning through interpreting various types of stories today, qualitative approaches to education research offer opportunities to collect such data, often in the form of learners' experiences, enabling educators to interpret and develop understanding for improving curriculum (Stenhouse, 1975; Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Therefore, qualitative research, in the form of practitioner research, is a valuable opportunity for educators to interpret stories of lived experience into meaningful lessons to improve their own practice. It is also a valuable opportunity to allow the voice of learners to be included in education research (Atkins & Duckworth, 2019).

However, for such research to be deemed valuable, it must be recognisably trustworthy to avoid being considered lesser than other forms of educational research. Schoen (1984) notes a distinction between theory and practice with his topography metaphor: practitioner research sits in the *swampy lowlands* (p.42), in reference to research taking place from 'ground up'. The swampy lowland metaphor accounts for the *messiness* of practice and the importance of its complexity in helping us understanding our practice, so is not to consider practitioner research less in any way to the *high, hard ground* (*ibid*). One way to ensure practitioner research is well-recognised is to ensure it is conducted in a *rigorous and methodological manner* (Nowell *et al*, 2017, p.1). Therefore, it is imperative, to protect the voice of my colleagues and learners, that this study maintains a rigorous

and systematic approach to data collection and analysis, as appropriate to that method, which I outline in this chapter.

The focus of this chapter is a consideration of data analysis for data gathered for this project. This includes: initial assessment letters written by learners to explain their motivations for joining the programme; conversations transcribed from two learner focus groups and one one-to-one about the impact of being on the programme and their learning; two conversations with a colleague; some learner written work detailing their personal experiences; a field journal capturing snippets of conversations as data; and transcribed quotations of learners' intentions at the end of the programme (recorded for summative assessment purposes). I explore how these stories of experience will be analysed through either narrative analysis or thematic analysis to ensure that the findings are credible, transferable, dependable, confirmable, auditable, and reflexive (Nowell *et al*, 2017).

4.9.1 Credibility

The idea of credibility is that the research findings are recognisable and authentic. An important aspect was ensuring that my colleagues' and learners' stories are well-representative of them, and that I do not do them a misjustice in using their stories to meet my own ends, thereby *objectifying* them. Useful ways in which I ensured this included *prolonged engagement* and *persistent observation* (Nowell *et al*, 2017, p1), whereby my theories were repeatedly tested through the on-going and prolonged relationships I held with my colleagues and learners. This became a process of 'sharing stories', rather than a one-way process between *researched* and *researcher,* which I chose to avoid and was discussed in further depth in the Methodology chapter.

Furthermore, credibility can be addressed further through *triangulation* and through *peer debriefing* (Nowell *et al*, 2017, p1). As I had an on-going and prolonged relationship, I could return to those participating and share my findings as themes with them, to triangulate my findings. Moreover, I was able use my peers within the Practitioner Research Programme as an external check, to further triangulate the themes and to ensure a credible and dependable (Denscombe, 2010) process had taken place.

4.9.2 Transferability

Just by the nature of practitioner research, it cannot be assumed that the research will be automatically transferable, as it is so context driven. This is a specific inquiry, considering the realities of colleagues and learners, and is taking place within a specific time and place. However, that is not to say that it could not be taken and either applied or repeated elsewhere. From the experiences of sharing the study with other adult literacy peers and colleagues so far, I believe that someone within another setting would be able to take the same methodology and conduct it elsewhere. For this reason, it adds significance for the need for clarity within this thesis, to enable the possibilities of transferability.

4.9.3 Dependability

The next step in ensuring a systematic analysis is taking place is to ensure dependability. To ensure this, the research needed to be clearly documented. The research will be proven dependable if it is coherent and it is accountable. Therefore, I have had to ensure that if someone else examined my data, they would be able to trace the steps I have taken to ensure the findings are dependable (Nowell *et al*, 2017). They do not necessarily need to agree entirely with my interpretation but they need to be able to clearly understand how I reached my interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

4.9.4 Confirmability

Through the literature, I explored key themes and ideas that I believed key to this study. In the early stages of the study, I conducted a practice interview with a colleague, and was struck by the possibility of themes I had not previously considered. Therefore, an open mind was paramount and the commitment to remain trustworthy and to honesty in telling others' stories also remained paramount. This then ensures the research has authenticity and credibility. A key point here is the focus on confirmability rather than assuming another research would draw the same conclusions. Braun and Clarke (2022) are clear that the researcher's position should not be seen as problematic, but that subjectivity is actually a strength.

4.9.5 Audit trails

An audit trail ensures that if someone chooses to 'look where I looked', they would be able to follow the logical steps and would be able to understand the conclusions I have drawn (Nowell *et al*, 2017, p.1). It was imperative to keep clear and accessible records of the raw data: verbatim transcripts from focus groups and conversations, accurate notes and quotes from observations, learners' writing, etc.

4.9.6 Reflexivity

To ensure a credible and dependable audit trail, keeping reflexive notes ensured that I recorded my developing research, in thoughts, ideas, and themes, as the threads start to become known. This enabled me to record *methodological decisions and rationales* (*ibid*) throughout the process, to bring some order to the design and fabric of the piece, and it was important to be reflexive to demonstrate where decisions changed through the experience of the process. It also enabled me to be self-critical (*ibid*). Furthermore, this record enabled me to keep an accurate record of my research approach to enable me to accurately describe it.

4.10 Choosing a suitable data analysis method

It was imperative to consider how my possible data analysis methods allowed me to meet the above criteria. Moreover, as explored in the previous Methodology chapter, it was fundamental to this project that my methodology and methods aligned with my philosophical position. This must also be true of the method I chose for data analysis. Due to my rising interest in storytelling and narrative inquiry, and from my previous experience, both narrative analysis and thematic analysis seemed like a good fit, so I explore the different approaches and consider which is most suitable below.

4.10.1 What is narrative analysis and is it right for this project?

The data collection of this research project took place over one academic year (2020-21) and involved adult learners enrolled on a Functional Skills English course studying level 1 or level 2. This offered an opportunity to develop and understand learners' stories of experience over a reasonably significant period of time. Having explored data collection methods through a framework of narrative inquiry in the previous chapter, it became clear there is also an opportunity for participants to develop, or *restory,* themselves through the process of the project. This appealed to me as a practitioner researcher, as I believe agency was important during the process, and therefore the learners remain the main *agents*, or protagonists, in their stories, not just recounting experiences which have happened to them. Because this process would be concerned with the storied nature of people's lives, narrative analysis initially seemed like it could be a good fit for this project.

Narrative analysis is an opportunity to interpret the meaning of people's stories (Riley & Hawe, 2005). Riley and Hawe (2005) suggest it enables us to attempt to "understand how people think through events and what they value" (p.229). As my adult learners may have previously had difficult

educational experiences, this initially appealed. However, the analysis technique needed to help me answer my research questions and, whilst interesting, my questions are not focussed on student attitudes to previous learning. The steps Riley and Hawe (*ibid*) took in their own narrative analysis included: considering why the story is being the presented the way it was; a focus on the occasion and location of the stories; and exploring meaning with other social or cultural norms. Whilst this approach interested me, these were not steps which I felt would help me answer my research questions effectively, so it became evident that narrative inquiry was not going to be the best fit for my purpose.

Further, McAlpine (2016) states the goal of using narrative analysis is to understand the *chronological arc* of meaning in the learners' story. Whilst I have noted an understanding of beginning, middle and end is important in learner stories, again it is not a necessary focus for answering my research questions. It may be a too rigid way of considering learner stories, especially given my rising interest in *restorying*, which could give learners the opportunity to reframe or retell their experience, but also to reconsider their present learning and future aspirations.

As this study developed and my own interest and learning developed, I started to become much more interested in data that reflected this and therefore how I could collect data began to change shape. Much of the current entry and exit data commonly collected in basic skills education is quantitative by its nature. Initial assessment indicates a learners' *level*, e.g., entry level, level 1 or level 2, whereas diagnostic assessment often comprises of a piece of writing from which a basic skills teacher assesses which literacy *skills* an adult learner possesses. Summative assessment generates a new level of *achievement*, as an adult exits the programme. Whilst there may be some qualitative data collected in the form of learner evaluation, there currently is not generally any qualitative data collected on what motivates adults to join adult literacy programmes, on opportunities for shaping their learning experience to achieve their purposes, nor on if they feel they have worked towards that aim by the end of the programme. As identified previously, there are some opportunities within the programme to develop *double hermeneutic* opportunities for tasks, bringing the learners' experiences and stories into both curriculum tasks and research data. These data would be interesting to explore through a narrative analysis approach, possibly in selecting literary themes such as the *hero* or *tragedy* themes, but a possible problem would be that I would tie myself to assumptions about learners' experiences before I even studied the data. This was another reason why I rejected narrative analysis, and I will now consider the possibility of a thematic analysis.

4.10.2 What is thematic analysis and is it right for this project?

Thematic analysis is a method of data analysis that enables the researcher to identify themes that are important to them to find patterns of meaning. There are three main schools of thematic analysis: coding-reliability; codebook thematic analysis; and reflexive thematic analysis. To ensure I chose the best method for my inquiry, especially in consideration of my philosophy and methodology, I consider each of them.

4.10.3 Coding-reliability

Coding-reliability is a usually highly structured approach to data analysis, seeking to find "unbiased, objective truth" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.237) from qualitative data. Therefore, the main emphasis is 'reliable coding'. It is described by Braun and Clarke (2022) as a 'small q' method because it is a qualitative approach but is underpinned by a positivist philosophy. Within this approach is the assumption there is an objective truth that all researchers would be able to identify, a 'right' way, not allowing for or recognising researcher bias. Often the data collected to be analysed by this approach will be very structured and controlled, such as very structured questions within an

interview for example. Braun and Clarke (2022) note there is nothing inherently wrong with this approach if the approach aligns with the purpose of the project (p.238). However, due to the nature of this study, as outlined previously, an approach that does not account for subjectivity is not appropriate.

4.10.4 Codebook thematic analysis

Codebook thematic analysis falls somewhere between coding-reliability and reflexive thematic analysis. Like coding-reliability, codebook thematic analysis approaches use frameworks or templates to code data, but the approach is less focussed on reliable coding (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.242). Whilst recognising codebook thematic analysis as a useful approach for data analysis, Braun and Clarke (2022) note that it can potentially lead to shallow interpretations of data, due to the nature of the frameworks. Although this is a more open approach, it could be too constrained to enable a more complex and deeper discussion of sense making from the data to be collected for this study. It could possibly become just a series of observations from the data, rather than an interpretation of the data, and therefore does not appear to be the most suitable approach for this project.

4.10.5 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), in this context the method developed and championed by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2022), is an approach to data analysis that allows for a much more open and exploratory investigation of data. Braun and Clarke (2022) note it is a flexible method that can be adopted from a wide range of theoretic positions, so can be adapted to suit the researcher's needs and philosophy. It allows for depth of engagement and for capturing the implicit within the data: the threads that weave throughout different datasets and link themes. Due to the flexibility of Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2022) approach to Reflexive Thematic Analysis, nothing is fixed and codes can be renamed, changed, developed throughout the analysis. Codes that might be viewed as problematic in other approaches, are not viewed as problematic in RTA because it recognises the subjective nature of interpretations. *Reflexive* keeps the researcher at the heart of the analysis, recognising the subjective nature of the analysis and celebrating it. Braun and Clarke (2022) call RTA a 'big Q' approach, as it is within the qualitative paradigm where the philosophy and methodology are aligned. Due to the flexible nature of RTA, to the recognition of the subjective nature of the researchers, and the opportunity for deeper interpretation, to tell the story of the data, RTA seemed a good fit as an approach to data analysis.

Further, I have previously explored the idea of *giving voice* to learners. I described my intention to centre learners in their stories, recognising what they have to say matters and is important. Thinking about 'giving voice' influences my choice of method when approaching data analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested it is a naïve position to simply try to give voice to participants without any depth or complexity. Therefore, I require a method of data analysis that allows me to go deeper into the data to look for and tell stories about it. Clarke (2017) raises the important point that how we choose to approach data analysis through thematic analysis allows for a social justice agenda.

Returning to the consideration of credibility, transferability, etc, RTA appeals as it is a patchwork approach which will enable me to adapt to ensure I meet these criteria. For example, in the confirmability section, I noted my concern that I identified a possibility of themes from my early data which were unexpected to me. RTA is a good fit here because, using this method of analysis, coding happens first, and the researcher finds the themes after from the codes, as Braun and Clarke (2020) explain: "reflexive approaches allow later theme development, with themes developed from codes, and conceptualised as patterns of shared meaning underpinned by a central organising concept"

(p.39). In the following chapter, I will explore the six phases of RTA and how I completed each stage during this project.

4.11 Research evolution

This study took place during the academic years 2019-20 and 2020-21. Both academic years were affected by English COVID-19 lockdowns, which affected both the scope and the approach of the project, which is important to explore further.

4.11.1 Pilot

The year 2019-20 was intended as a pilot year to test research methods to ensure I had selected appropriate methods which would help me achieve my aims to answer my questions. I am satisfied that my data collection methods were robust enough from the opportunities I had/work I had done prior to the first COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020. I have noted earlier in this chapter where I was influenced to make changes as a result.

4.11.2 Limitations

There were, however, significant impacts to my project in the academic year 2020-21.

4.11.2.1 Learners

The first and most significant was the community classes were not able to run due to access to locations and, for the first time in my 20-year career in education, all my classes took place on college campuses, instead of the usual community venues such as libraries and the women's centre. At the time of writing, classes have not returned to the women's centre and we now have no educational provision there.

This change in delivery could possibly have, in fact it was likely, affected who had access to the provision. I am not claiming this as either a positive or negative effect, but is worthy of note. It is also noteworthy that some of my learners were returning learners, who had studied Level 1 offsite in 2019-20, and who came to join my classes on campus so as not to interrupt their progression to Level 2. This included one of the learners from the women's centre.

4.11.2.2 Colleagues

I had originally intended to interview more colleagues, but was restricted in this intention both by the lockdowns and by access to colleagues involved in similar delivery. Regarding lockdowns, I felt there was an ethical issue to demand of their time and, furthermore, as we worked from home, I was concerned not to intrude on colleagues' family settings. Most people were doing enough and adapting enough without having another demand on their time and energy. Some of my colleagues also decide to retire at this time, which was a significant loss of expertise – both for our institution and for my project. However, this did cause me to use my field journal in more creative ways, capturing, with permission, colleagues' thinking during professional development training, and during impromptu staffroom conversations.

4.11.2.3 Gender

As stated earlier in this chapter, the majority of my learners are female. It was my expectation that the majority of research participants would be female, but there would be some male participants. This was not the case. With regard to some data collection methods, such as the initial assessment task, it was based on who volunteered to share, but later data collection was affected by ethical decisions I made during lockdown with regard to who I invited to join the focus groups, or 'research conversations' (Duckworth & Smith, 2017), as discussed below.

4.11.3 Research conversations: interviews and focus groups

At the scheduled time of intended data collection via interviews/focus groups, we were in a COVID-19 lockdown. This significantly affected my decisions around data collection, for the reasons described above. Many of my learners, as women, were carrying the extra burdens of their roles, could possibly be living in vulnerable situations, responsible for home schooling their children, technical issues, as well as learning alongside their children, etc (Institute of Learning, 2020). I was concerned not to add to their burden by asking more of them at that time.

Of my four classes, two of the classes were mixed level classes of Level 1 and Level 2 learners, one class was mainly Level 1 learners, and one class was all Level 2 learners. This Level 2 class was all female, as was one other. Over time, I shifted my focus onto the level 2 class, mainly due ethical considerations around lockdown learning. The Level 2 group was a strong collective and took flexible approaches to learning, even during online learning in lockdown, whereas I felt it would be unethical to ask more of less stable learners, especially where learners felt unstable in their new position learning at home. This decision did not affect other forms of data collection, such as completed classroom tasks.

For these reasons, I made the decision to run two focus groups, to invite the Level 2 group learners to. This was entirely voluntary, and was arranged in a way not to impact their class time. In the first focus group, three learners were invited and attended, and in the second group two out of three learners attended. The third learner invited to that focus group was unable to attend, so we arranged a separate one-to-one discussion.

This could have added a significant limitation in that all the participants knew each other, which might possibly cause them to be more agreeable with each other. However, in observation, it should be noted that in reality, as a result of their strong bonds, it was a very safe space to discuss issues so, on the whole, they were able to disagree and challenge each other. I had felt that I would be able to mitigate to avoid teacher pleasing by not stating any expectations, but had been concerned I would not be able to mitigate against this social factor, other than using small focus groups of a maximum of three people per group. As it was, the strength of learners' relationships, possibly coupled with the small size of the groups, was enough to prevent 'group think'.

As a result, I do not feel this affected my data in any significant ways. In fact, being in a focus group of strangers may have had a stronger social pull towards being agreeable, as there would not be any prior relationship between participants which lends itself to being agreeable to fit in, especially for women.

4.11.4 Transcription (limitation or benefit?)

As described, one effect of completing the research conversations during lockdown was they were all completed online, using Microsoft Teams.

This could have caused significant barriers for literacy learners, who may not be entirely confident with using technology. However, this was the mechanism for our online lessons, and I ensured everyone had reasonable experience of using the software for classes before running the focus groups. This, again, was a significant reason for my decision to choose one class to invite, due to their strong bond and prior use of the software.

One benefit of using Teams was the transcribe feature and that participants had access to their videos and transcripts, so could check for accuracy. This is a free feature, removing a significant financial cost for me, as the researcher.

4.11.5 Summative assessment task

As noted, the open nature of developing curriculum throughout the programme meant a late opportunity presented itself, in the form of speaking and listening summative assessment. The idea for revisiting their initial assessment letter and sharing where they felt they were at the end of the programme was developed by the class.

Unlike the focus groups/research conversations, I chose not to record the speaking and listening summative assessment, as I felt this could negatively affect their assessment opportunity. As I already would be recording accurate, direct quotes by hand for the purposes of assessment, which were transcribed by me but checked and accuracy confirmed and signed by each learner, this would be adequate for the purpose of data capture too. This enabled me to remove particularly sensitive data, such as personal trauma and identifiable features as noted, but keep relevant data to the task and question of aspiration. I recognise in this decision I have made a choice as both an assessor and as a researcher as to what data was included.

4.12 Chapter summary

To recap, it was my intention here to examine my epistemological position, based on my understanding of ontology or 'what we can know'. Further, I have ensured, having identified my philosophical position, that my choices in methodology and methods align with that philosophy. Within this chapter, having considered my position, I have explored the methodology chosen for this research project, how it has been formed and shaped, and considered the research aim and questions; the theory informing my methodology; my chosen methods; data analysis method; and ethics. Furthermore, I detail how I selected the data analysis method, showing how this project explores adult literacy learners' stories of lived experience through thematic analysis, justifying the decision for the RTA approach over a narrative analysis, how I ensure the findings are credible, transferable, dependable, confirmable, auditable, and reflexive (Nowell *et al*, 2017), and I also explore my approach and method to data analysis to ensure it also aligns. Due to the impact of English COVID-19 lockdowns, I have also considered the resulting evolution of my research project.

The choices of methods were based on my understanding of my own project but also, ultimately, I have selected my methods which allow me to focus on what I want to learn (Hillier & Jameson, 2003; Seidman, 2013). Moreover, in choosing a method of data analysis that allows for flexibility and evolution, I have ensured my approach remains aligned in a qualitative paradigm matching my philosophy and methodology, which I will explore in the next chapter. Revisiting my research aim and questions, I have also ensured that they align with my intentions for this project, to help guide me in what I wish to learn.

5 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

'A reflexive researcher is someone who is thoughtful and (self)questioning, identifying and the interrogating their positions, values, choices and practices within the research process....'

Authors' brackets, Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.15.

5.1 Chapter introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to I describe, having selected Reflexive Thematic Analysis, how I approached the process, as is appropriate, specifically using Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2022) six phase model. In doing so, the voice and tone of my thesis shifts, as I seek to centre myself in the decisions I take for the analysis stage of the project. Because I am taking a Reflective Thematic Analysis approach, the decisions I make must be kept at the forefront: making it clear that this process has not spontaneously happened. I am active in this research process and I am active in identifying the themes, as opposed to claiming they have 'emerged', which is a key part of Reflexive Thematic Analysis, as designed by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2022).

5.2 Research questions

To help with the context of this chapter, a reminder of my research questions will inform my consideration of the phases of analysis:

1. How could using **stories of experience and learners' own aspirations** help curriculum development for adult literacy learners?
2. Whilst recognising literacy learning as a **social practice**, what do learners' **stories of experience** tell us about their **progress**?
3. How does this work inform our **constructions of self**?

5.3 Phases of analysis

Having identified RTA as a suitable approach to data analysis, the rest of this chapter will outline the approach I have taken to explore my research data and to construct research themes, with the aim of answering my questions. Because it is Braun and Clarke's RTA used here, I have taken the decision to focus solely on their approach to RTA. RTA, as developed by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2022), is usually split into six phases:

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Figure 2 - Phases of thematic analysis, (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.87).

Note: Braun and Clarke have developed the names and descriptions of these phases over time, as their own approach has developed. As this does not affect my own understanding or approach to the process, I have chosen to label them as described above, for clarity.

5.3.1 Phase one: familiarise yourself with the data

The first step was to ensure that all the data was in the same, accessible format, which was especially important due to the different approaches I had taken to data collection. Some of the data was handwritten by learners; some was transcribed data from Teams recordings; and some I had transcribed. However, it remained important to ensure accuracy in this process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The table below shows the approach I took to ensure all data was in the same accessible format.

	Data	**Original format**	**Final format**
1	Initial assessment task (letter to my tutor)	Handwritten by learners	Typed up in Microsoft Word accurately (i.e. no SPaG corrections)
2	Learner focus groups and learner one-to-one data	Transcribed in Teams	Corrected transcript in Word, through editing whilst reviewing
3	Colleague conversation one & two	Conversation one: personally transcribed by me; Conversation two transcribed in Teams	Conversation one: typed up in Word; Conversation two: Corrected transcript in Word, through editing whilst reviewing
4	Field journal	Line handwritten notes by me, capturing relevant snippets of conversations	Typed up in Word
5	Curriculum tasks	Handwritten by learners	Typed up in Microsoft Word accurately (i.e. no SPaG corrections)
6	Summative assessment	Handwritten by me, as part of their summative assessment. Accuracy checked by learners.	Typed up in Word.

Table 1 - Explaining data formatting

At this stage, I was momentarily concerned about the variety of data I had collected, in case it seemed eclectic, but was reassured that RTA allows for such detail in data. Braun and Clarke (2006) note there is no 'one way' to data collection and analysis, which I found reassuring.

In standardising the data, as show in the table above, I took the opportunity to refamiliarise myself with the data as much as possible. I rewatched recordings and re-read learners' work. In doing so, I could not only ensure the data remained 'true' to the original data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), but this was also an opportunity for me to start to think about how the data could potentially answer my research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As part of this process, I did reject some data that I had intended to use, in the form of personal communications from learners. Whilst some of it was very

pleasant to read, including the successful experiences learners have had since leaving the programme, I made the decision I was including this data for sentimental reasons, rather than it being useful for answering the research questions.

Due to the length of the project, and due to the amount of data collected over the course of one academic year, it seemed important to have allowed the passing of time before re-familiarising myself with the data. I found that the passing of time had a surprising effect on my engagement with the data, as I was able to think about it in different ways. This enabled me to start to think about initial ideas and provided a connection to the coding process. I described this experience when writing up my initial ideas:

> "Reflexive practice also then gave me the privilege of distance, as once the data collection was over, I could create time between my last engagement with it in practice, so that I could distance myself as much as possible from it, and therefore be as critical as possible in such a personal project." (Scattergood, 2022b).

5.3.2 Phase two: generating initial codes

When generating initial codes, I wanted to ensure I was as close to the data as possible, without becoming overwhelmed, so wished to take a systematic approach to the initial coding. With some ideas in mind, I approached the initial coding manually, using highlighters and annotating the data, next creating tables for each data set showing coding on each data item, and later collating codes together (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I coded as much data as was possible, to ensure that I had a rich potential for later identifying themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I then revisited this process to see if different ideas occurred to me with fresh eyes, which was a useful approach and also gave me further confidence as verified some codes for me. The codes were influenced by research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006): for example, the initial assessment task relates well to the first question, so I was mindful of capturing data about learners' motivations for joining the course and aspirations for the future. As this thesis uses a narrative inquiry approach, in the tradition of Connelly and Clandinin (1990), I was also particularly watchful for learners' stories of experience or examples of *restorying* (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Some of the initial ideas for codes were linked to my earlier exploration of the literature: reading and writing for pleasure; experiences of women/mothers; relating learning and literacies to everyday life. Some codes seems to contradict each other, but I felt reassure that was an acceptable, if not interesting, aspect of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

5.3.3 Phase three: searching for themes

In the early stage of this phase, I considered the codes I had collated together, which were collected in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. I gave each grouped dataset a short name, trying to initially encapsulate what the data represented to me, in preparation for identifying themes that could affectively answer the research questions. A snapshot of the spreadsheet is below, showing my initial ideas as: ***meaning making; moving knowledge; safe space; women; real; restorying.***

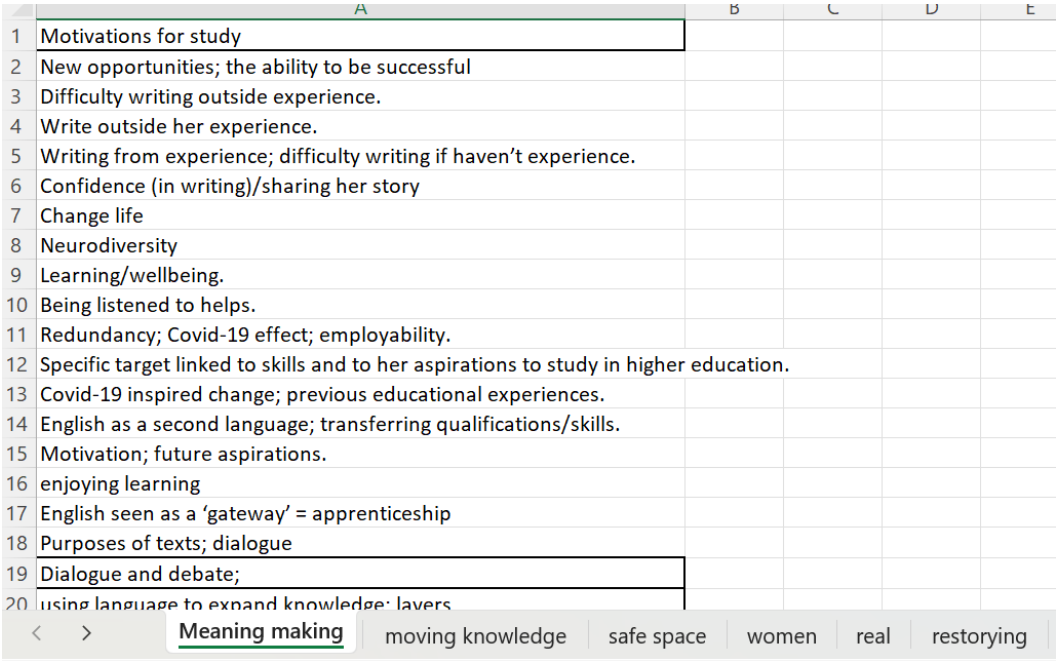

Figure 3 - Initial coding datasets

This process was more helpful to me initially developing my understanding rather than creating a thematic map, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), as I felt able to include the large amounts of codes generated from across the dataset.

At this stage, I began to feel I was getting 'stuck in a rut' with the coding process, concerned at a micro level, unable to start to think at the broader level of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I felt it would be a useful opportunity to test my ideas with my peers (as suggested above), and so I submitted an article for peer review with Research and Practice in Adult Literacies (RaPAL). This enabled me to test out my early ideas about adult learners' aspirations and their motivations for joining the programme. Sharing early findings collated from the initial assessment letters was a useful process and enabled me to start to identify specific codes that related to a possible theme of *aspirations and motivations.* I initially identified one *motivation* from each quote from the data, but began to understand and acknowledge there was far more nuance and overlap than I initially thought. These included: gaining the qualification as an opportunity, or *gateway*, to further study; children growing up or redundancy as life-changing *tipping points*; previously missed educational opportunities; COVID-19 as a time of self-reflection; and some broader *aspirations* such as 'to engage my brain' or 'to better myself'.

Some of the examples helped me further identify some of the ways that the learners viewed themselves and linked back to the idea of us being to *story* and *restory* ourselves, to help developing constructions of self. I noted:

> "The (…) examples (…) demonstrate how people view themselves, not just in terms of employment opportunities, but in terms of *identity.* Developing literacy could, therefore, be a tool towards developing a new identity or purpose, to developing a new sense of self" (Scattergood, 2022b, p.41).

The experience of holding myself accountable to peers helped me build my confidence and move out of that 'rut'. Furthermore, it is a good example of *writing as thinking* (Vygotsky, 1987), as to make meaning out of the data and to be able to describe the stories well enough to others, I had to

articulate myself clearly and effectively. I was eager to further develop on a potential theme that I had identified in the article, *meaning-making,* so I took the opportunity to present at the biannual Association of Research in Post-Compulsory Education (ARPCE) conference. In the early days, when I felt too close to the data, I had struggled to recognise the significance of part of the focus group data. Part of the discussion had been about mental health and wellbeing support in the class, which seemed very relevant, but one participant kept being drawn back to talking about men's mental health. With the passage of time and the benefit of holding myself accountable to my peers at the ARPCE conference, I was able to recognise the meaning this participant was able to create for herself through the opportunity of dialogue, especially as the mother of a teenage boy. Considering literacy as a social practice helps my understanding the meaning-making opportunities that literacies offer, not just in a sense of making meaning through research, but in a wider sense of understanding and engaging in the world around us (see the Literature Review chapter).

At this stage, developing a number of working themes which informed me and helped me to identify stories from the dataset was also useful (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This reflexive approach, accepting both initial ideas and more developed ideas through my own sharing and writing (see Vygotsky, 1986), was meaning-making for me in its own sense. Throughout the process, I was drawn back time and again to recognising not only literacy as a social practice, but teaching and researching as social practices too (van Manen, 2016). This golden thread running throughout my project gave me the confidence to get out of the rut and start to think about possible themes.

As I progressed through the process of identifying initial themes, a more visual approach than the spreadsheet became useful. The first step was to remove all the repetition of codes, which were cluttering up not only my spreadsheet but my understanding. Braun and Clarke (2022) describe using visual mapping for *theme generation, development and review* (2022, p.85), which helped me start identifying possible subthemes and themes, building to a bigger picture across the dataset. Looking back through the generated codes, I started to think about which codes specifically answered which question. At this stage I realised that my earlier standardisation of the data was a key step because it enabled me to reduce repetition across the data set and cut out any chances of just allocating one set of data to each question. I was able to cut and paste codes into one place, under each question:

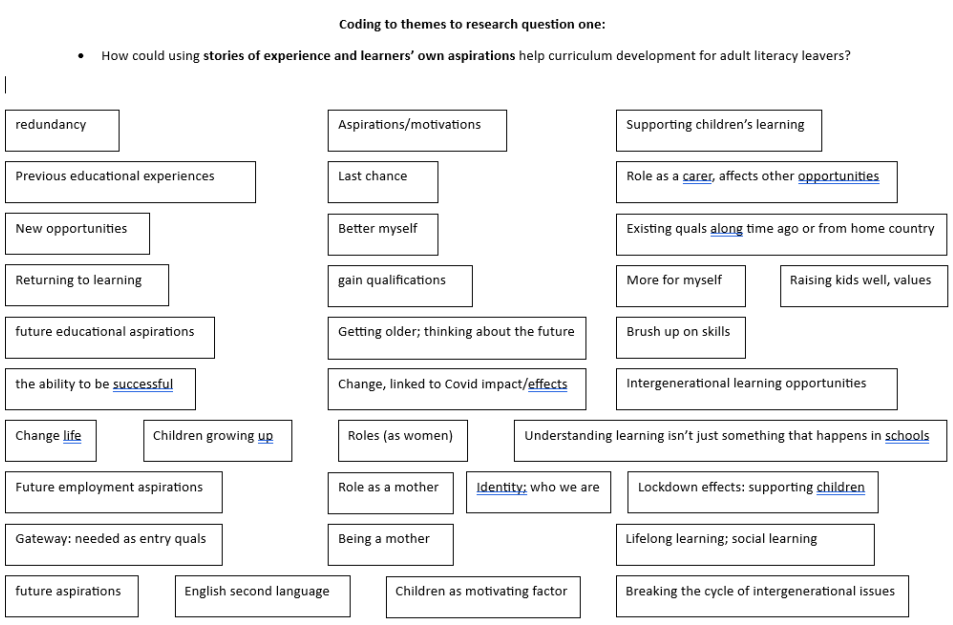

Figure 4 - Coding themes to research question one

Using that 'map' I was able to create a mind map testing out my early ideas of themes:

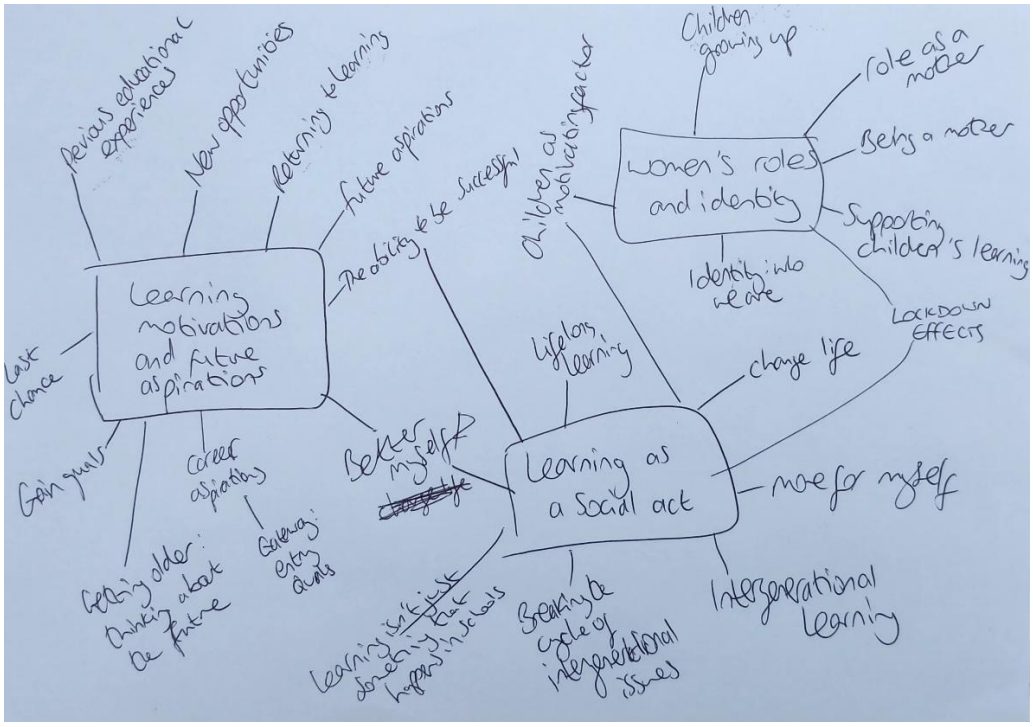

Figure 5 - Early mind map identifying possible themes answering question one

I felt most confident when considering the codes for data I had worked with for my RaPAL article, which started to highlight to me how important the next phase would be. The codes I initially labelled 'women' seemed to span something bigger than such a short one word answer, and I developed the theme name *learning as a social act.* This seemed to work effectively alongside a theme considering *learning motivations and future aspirations,* which encapsulated women's roles and identity as a possible subtheme, with some overlap. This could enable to me to think deeper about how learners' own aspirations affect different pedagogical approaches in an adult literacy classroom.

I repeated this process for question two and question three (see appendix 4). I found it much easier to follow this process for question three. The reasons for this are probably as it is a much narrower question, so naturally encompasses less data, but also because it has become such an important question to me over time and I had already been developing my ideas about it by discussing it with my supervisor and peers. Question two is a much broader question and, as a result, encompasses more of the data and took me longer to work through. This extra time was not wasted, however, as I was starting to pick out some interesting themes.

Considering, question two:

> Whilst recognising literacy learning as a social practice, what do learners' stories of experience tell us about their progress?

The themes I identified were:

> Learning that is real, relatable, and writing from experience
>
> Pleasure in learning
>
> Feeling part of a safe community

Confidence.

Again, there were some codes that seemed contradictory and some codes that did not fit, but that is part of the process of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This may have been an added reason why these codes took me longer to group than others.

I noted at this stage that *confidence* was a short pithy title, which did not fit the description of themes described by Braun and Clarke (2022), but at the time it encapsulated the many different types of confidence that learners' had described, including: confidence in speech (from both a learner with a deaf family and for those with English as a second language); personal confidence; challenging imposter syndrome; confidence in writing ability; confidence in sharing personal stories; and confidence in using technology such as Teams and Zoom. I started to think not only about how learners grow in confidence in different ways, but how progress in confidence as actually extremely personal and subjective therefore extremely difficult for teachers to measure.

In considering, question three:

How does this work inform our constructions of self?

The themes I identified were:

Learning as an opportunity to restory ourselves (changing the narrative we have about our abilities and who we are/what we are capable of)

Learning as a route to self-determination.

As noted, I found this an easier and more straightforward process than for question three, as described above, and perhaps now I was building my own confidence in my analysis further. There did feel like some considerable overlap between these themes, and I pondered is the second is actually a subtheme of the first. This would become clearer through the next phase of the process.

5.3.4 Phase four: reviewing themes

Having identified potential themes, the next stage of the process was to review these to refine them (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2022). To do this, I returned to the coded data to: "consider whether they appear to form a coherent pattern" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p91). I then repeated this process at the level of the whole dataset. Braun and Clarke (2006) highlight the importance of this step: "you consider the validity of individual themes in relation to the data set, but also whether your candidate thematic map 'accurately' reflects the meanings evident in the data as a whole" (p.91).

Now thinking at the level of themes, I was able to see the data with fresh eyes, to see if it felt like a good fit and if the coding was effective. In some places I felt I had called similar types of data different things in the codes, so I refined this. For example, for the data answering question one (see figure 4 above), I refined the coded categories into: previous educational experiences/barriers; personal motivations; future educational/career aspirations; English being seen as a 'gateway' qualification; gaining qualifications; and finalised including the subtheme *women's roles and identities*. This was because reading back through the whole of the dataset reminded me just how linked many women's motivations were linked to their roles and identities as mothers, not always in a positive way. In other places I felt there were some outliers such as individuals talking about things that were specific to them (for example, autism) which I revisited to ensure had been encapsulated well. Therefore, thinking about the dataset as a whole helped me consider if the themes fit or if there were any areas that were proving problematic and, if so, if themes could be further developed or coded data moved elsewhere (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

I felt I spent a long time in this part of the process and had a tendency to visit and revisit to see if the themes still made sense to me. I felt this helped me develop my ideas further and deepen my understanding of how the data could be used in answering the questions, but ultimately had to move on. Braun and Clarke (2006) state "coding data and generating themes can go on *ad infinitum*" (p.92), which served as a useful warning to help me move past this stage.

5.3.5 Phase five: defining and naming themes

During phase five, I began to define what the *essence* (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of each theme was about and to think about what data each theme encapsulates. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe this as organising "collated data extracts into a coherent and internally consistent narrative" (p.91). Therefore, I started by describing each theme to see if it works effectively, and starting to capture specific extracts from the data to aid this process.

In doing so, some of the themes could no longer standalone as independent themes, which Braun and Clarke (2022) describe as themes collapsing in on themselves. I had loosely named a theme *pleasure in learning*, but this sat better within the theme describing *learning as a social act.* I has also perceived of a theme about *learning as a route to self-determination*, but the data from this theme fit into many of the other categories, such as the impact of learning in *confidence* and bettering ourselves within *learning as a social act*. The concept of women's roles and identities was so prolific throughout all of the data, it made no sense to separate it out from the data into its own theme. It was far more effective to consider women's roles through each theme, as the golden thread running through. To do anything else feels like a disservice to the women and their stories, and would dehumanise such an important aspect of their being.

The final six themes, discussed in chapter five, and in answer to my three research questions, are:

Theme one: learner's motivations and aspirations

Theme two: learning as a social act

Theme three: learning that is real and relatable, and writing from experience

Theme four: feeling part of a safe community

Theme five: the importance of confidence, and the myriad of ways confidence is articulated

Theme six: restorying ourselves.

5.3.6 Phase six: producing the report

The final phase of the process is to produce a report to present the research. Having identified and developed relevant themes, this the opportunity for the story being told to be discussed in response to the research questions. Braun and Clarke (2006) state this is an opportunity to "tell the complicated story of your data in a way which convinces the reader of the merit and validity of your analysis" (p.93). During this stage of the process, I continued to refine the themes, as is appropriate with a reflexive analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The final phase of the process forms the discussion chapter.

5.4 Chapter summary

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how I approached the data analysis through the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2023) highlight the importance of being thorough and transparent in the analysis approach to ensure to produce a "methodically coherent"

(p.1) thematic analysis, which I have attempted here. In the data analysis chapter, I shall explore the themes identified in greater detail, using extracts from the data.

6 Reshaping the fabric of our being: learner vignettes

'We are whoever we want to be and not how other people define us.'

June

6.1 Chapter introduction

During the coding process described in previous chapter, it felt like, during the process of bringing together collective voices, that the individual women who shared their story were becoming lost. In a decision to centre the women in this research and ensure the whole person is recognised, I wrote a series of vignettes, introducing individual women and sharing their back-stories.

6.2 Learner vignettes:

Creating a vignette of some of the learners is an opportunity to demonstrate there are human beings behind these stories, that they are not just data. Throughout this chapter, the participants demonstrate through their stories that they have been fundamentally shaped by their experiences and this is an important part of the project but also, because this study took place over a significant amount of time, separating out the data into themes does not necessarily capture that humanity. It is also about giving honour to their voices and valuing what they have to say, and how it has shaped them.

As Barton (2007) highlights, adult learners are ordinary people, not deficit in anyway, but in many ways my learners are extraordinary people who are so motivated in their aspirations that they are overcoming difficult circumstances and overcoming the stories that they tell themselves about their worth. They are also extraordinary in what they achieve and that is why it is so important not only to analyse their data but to tell their stories, to stay in touch with the human beings and the lives that have been generously shared for this project.

Each single piece of data is a moment in time. What the person sharing it reveals is as interesting as what is hidden, which is another motivation for vignettes. As people gain confidence, they are able to feel more comfortable in the environment, feeling they can trust the people around them, to reveal more about their lives. It is worth bearing in mind that in the initial assessment letters, I asked them to introduce themselves, so they are going to show themselves in a positive light to make a good impression on their teacher. They may share their motivations for study and their long-term aspirations, but not reveal so much of themselves personally or reveal only implicitly. As our relationship develops, the ability to have a greater understanding of women's backgrounds and motivation may be clearer. However, as the participants progress through the programme, this can affect their perceptions of themselves, as explored below, which in turn affects their identity.

6.2.1 Kelly

Initial assessment letter:

> *My name is XXX. I am 19 years old. I have been at [name of college] since I left Year 11. The courses I have done prior to this are Painting and Decorating and also Health and Social Care.*
>
> *My experiences in English include 4 failed GCSE attempts between 2017 and most recently in 2020. My experiences in English at (college) have been poor. I have learning difficulties that haven't been taken seriously here. This is my last chance at gaining a qualification in English because I'm hoping to start an Access Course next year so my life doesn't come to a complete standstill again. I am hoping to achieve Level 2 functional skills.*

As stated, Kelly was 19 years old at the start of the study, which made her the youngest participant. She was in a mixed group of level one and level two learners, and she was the youngest in the class by a number of years.

When she started the programme, she was angry and frustrated that her lack of an English qualification was holding her back from progress onto an Access course. She felt she had been unsupported by the college previously and that her learning difficulty had been ineffectively supported.

Her initial assessment letter was short and functional, but held a huge amount of information, not just about her circumstances but how she felt. There is as much that is implicit in her letter, as explicit, and what she does not reveal about herself within her letter is equally telling.

Kelly's father is deaf and, at home, the whole family communicate through British Sign Language, which is effectively Kelly's first language. I am experienced teaching Functional Skills English to deaf learners and often find their writing reflects the language. British Sign Language does not include some small words and phrases that are common in English, such as prepositions, and this can affect writing. Whilst Kelly is not deaf, her writing reflects someone who is used to being concise in language to make the message clear. I felt that, for this reason, Functional Skills English was a suitable qualification for her because it is about writing in a more clear and concise way. However, Kelly would need to develop her writing to be able to write academically for a future Access course. The first step of that process was for Kelly to believe she was capable of it.

At the end of the programme, Kelly reported that her confidence in speaking and listening had improved. Although confidence was such a collective experience for the learners that it became a theme, that her confidence was improved when speaking was a unique experience for Kelly. She described how she got little chance to speak to others in her personal life, due to living in a home with a deaf parent, so the opportunity to discuss her ideas and interact with group dialogue really affected her. This was then reflected in her self-talk: she was not just successful because she achieved the qualification, but she was successful because she believed in herself now. That feeling of 'I can do it' was extremely empowering, not just for Kelly, but for the whole class who shared her experience and was able to listen to her describe it. Her anger had become hope.

Kelly's participation in the project included the initial assessment letter, and comments and observations captured in my field journal.

6.2.2 June

Initial assessment letter:

> *It is so good to return to college onto your English course. I studied with you from September 2018 – June 2019 where I completed the level 1 in Functional Skills. The reason for applying this year is to enhance my studies, engage my brain and, hopefully, return to education to learn sociology and psychology (?); maybe attend an Open University course even for combined sciences. I have completed a few on-line courses ie Cognitive Behaviour Therapy and a Drug and Alcohol Awareness course to help people deal with their addictions. There are so many people unable to cope, especially in these unprecedented and challenging times.*
>
> *I volunteer at a homeless charity run by the Muslim community and, over the past 6 months, the numbers for those in need have vastly increased. What started as 75 people a night has now extended to 120 people per night. The charity is unable to help those who are in dire need and many who have mental health issues are now turning to alternative means ie*

synthetic drugs, even self harm. Which is why I have enrolled on certain courses to offer help and to also gain an understanding of people's plight.

The reason I also enrolled on this course was to help with my grammar and punctuation but to also be part of a group of like-minded people. I look forward to this year's learning.

June was a returning learner, who has previously achieved level one with me in the academic year 2018-19, but she has been unable to continue due to mental health reasons. It was a great achievement for June to return to the classroom, especially after a year off.

June had a history of serious trauma that had shaped her view of herself and her understanding of the world, and when she had first entered adult learning she had been unsure of her place. As the programme progressed she spoke openly about how she'd told herself she wasn't good enough, and that her previous partner had called her stupid, and how that had affected her view of herself.

In her initial assessment letter, she clearly identifies her motivations for learning, not just linking her motivations to her own aspirations but to the wider social situation too. June loves learning and she came to view education as an opportunity not only to change herself but the world around her. The time on the course helped June to start to really believe in herself and in her abilities. The quote that opens this section came from June in the summative assessment task:

"We are whoever we want to be and not how other people define us". (June)

June participated in the initial assessment letter; comments and observations captured in my field journal; focus group participation; and the summative assessment task.

6.2.3 Dominique

Initial assessment letter:

My name is XXX. I live in XXX with my 2 children, XXX and XXX, aged 12 and 5. In my spare time, I enjoy spending time with my children, going to the gym, cooking and going to the cinema. My friends will say that I am outgoing, down to earth and caring. My favourite place I have been to is Orlando, Florida where I attended with my family. We had the best time.

Before lockdown, I did not enjoy reading much; I found too much literature put me off. Since, I have really enjoyed reading and found it to be a new favourite hobby, even though I am a little slow at reading through a book, but I challenge myself to finish it.

After being made redundant last year in July, I wanted to take time out and spend more time with my family and try to learn different career options. Since my redundancy, I undertook a basic prison course which I really enjoyed and found interesting. This is when I decided I wanted a career working in the police or prisons. I feel undertaking this English course will help me to get on the right track as most courses relating to police work require Maths and English GCSE. I am very keen to learn and to take on a challenge.

Hope you will enjoy having me as much as I know I will enjoy having you as my teacher.

In Dominique's initial assessment letter, she describes herself as outgoing. Later she explained this was a front: she was full of self-doubt and lacked confidence in her own ability, not seeing herself as worthy. This was a result of a significant trauma that had happened in her youth, which had been compounded by her own self-image due to a skin condition and by being bullied at school. She

recognised that her 'outgoing' traits were also a part of who she was, but usually when she was in her own comfort zone. This demonstrates the complexity of human experiences.

During the programme, Dominique started to blog and vlog about skin care and to challenge society's perceptions of beauty, and her work was picked up by a well-known beauty publication. This moment of recognition in her voice and her work had been slowly built through lots of little steps towards self-belief. She had developed her love of reading, which she describes the beginnings of in her initial assessment letter, and she had built her confidence in writing during the class, especially when sharing her writing and through dialogue.

Not only did this change her perception of herself, but of education. In the summative assessment, she cried (as did I) as she described the change she perceived in herself, describing what had happened to her and how the course had changed her view of herself and of education:

> *"I have changed my perspective about education and why I think it is important. Depending on what you want out of life, education helps you to reach goals and achieve what I want on my own path". (Dominique)*

Dominique's aspirations changed too. She had originally wished to study criminology and to work in the police force, but she now wished to document her experiences further:

> *"English gave me the confidence to start writing my own book and talking more confidently in front of a class. I have struggled with my confidence due to my skin condition and my self-love journey, which will be incorporated in my book". (Dominique)*

Dominique contributed the initial assessment letter; class writing task; comments and observation captured in my field journal; focus group participation; and the summative assessment task.

6.2.4 Daisy

Focus group conversation (one to one):

> *Because I still gotta write about stuff that I, I have no idea of like. To me, that's a world away from my world and I struggle to write what I can't. I don't experience or have ever experienced, so to me that's a totally alien concept. For me, I don't know whether that's an autism thing or just a me thing, but if I can't, I can't do that.*

Daisy had received a diagnosis of autism as an adult, which helped her understand herself better. She described always feeling like an 'alien' and, until then, never fitting in. She is the single mother of two young children and, due to her relationship ending, she had wished to take an opportunity to improve her life. In the summative speaking and listening task, she described how she thought she would try to apply for two things at once, to increase her likelihood of getting something, so she applied for a job in a local school and applied for the course. She was really surprised at getting the job and on the course, which fed her confidence and self-belief further.

For Daisy, the group she was in was important, especially the respect the women showed each other. She really benefited from the opportunity of dialogue with people different from her and she expressed how, even if they did not agree with each other's opinions, they were able to listen respectfully. However, Daisy found writing about the unfamiliar particularly challenging, which she thought might be due to her autism. She was unable to imagine scenarios that were 'alien' to her life, so created a barrier for her, but writing from her own experience not only made it possible but empowered her voice.

She felt this opportunity and lockdown helped her reflect on her purpose. One day, in class, she announced: “I have filed for divorce”. She shared how her experiences had not only given her the confidence but purpose to do so, which she was able to relate back to her role as a mother.

Previously Daisy struggled with adapting to varying situations, needing a lot of resilience to cope with unexpected situations due to her autism. Being on the course has helped her recognise these situations in advance of them, enabling her to be better able to manage herself. It also gave her confidence to speak out when she encountered issues, being honest how it affected her (and her feedback meant I was able to plan our online Teams lessons following the same format each week, which was helpful in its predictability for all my autistic learners).

Daisy’s participation includes comments and observations captured in my field journal; focus group participation (one to one); and the summative assessment task.

6.3 Chapter summary

Through this chapter, it is my intention to bring the reader closer to the human. During the data analysis process, I wrestled with what felt like a loss of the whole person, in the process of identifying codes and themes. It felt disloyal the incredible women who leant their voices to this project, and also felt as though the distance in carved up data meant the whole process became less visible. After a discussion with my supervisor, who suggested vignettes, I was able to bring some of the women to the fore and share the shaping of their story, in their own words.

7 The threads running through: data analysis and identifying themes

'In the social sciences, qualitative research has focused predominantly on collecting data in the form of words.'

Denscombe, 2010, p.305.

7.1 Chapter introduction

The focus of this chapter is to analyse the data and identify themes, which were identified through using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Due to the large amount of data sampled, across many different types of data, I explain from which data set each is collected from. Theme one mainly uses data collected through the initial assessment task and theme two uses data from across the dataset, and both seek to answer my first research question:

> How could using **stories of experience and learners' own aspirations** help curriculum development for adult literacy learners?

The majority of data informing theme three comes from the focus groups, with some from my field journal, data for theme four comes from focus group one and the data for theme five comes from the curriculum task (writing blogs), from the focus groups conversations, and from the summative assessment task. Themes three, four and five all seek to answer my second research question, which is far broader, so it is not surprising it has generated the most themes:

> Whilst recognising literacy learning as a **social practice**, what do learners' **stories of experience** tell us about their **progress**?

Finally, theme six uses data collected through the summative assessment task and from the curriculum blog writing task, and seek to answer my final research question:

> How does this work inform our **constructions of self**?

7.2 Theme one: Learners' motivations and aspirations

One of the primary aims of this study is the opportunity to develop curriculum tasks in negotiation with my learners to better meet their needs, by allowing learners to write from their own experience. To achieve this, a clear understanding of who my learners are and why they have chosen to join the programme is key. As described in the methodology chapter, I started this process by changing the initial assessment task with the intention of capturing learners' motivations for attending the course. I view initial assessment as not only a chance for me to see their writing for the first time, but a chance for them to start to tell me their story, to share their own tapestries of life and experience. The data captured below is mainly from the initial assessment task, which has created a start point for which later data, in the form of the summative assessment, is the end point. The other source of data that has been useful for this theme is learner blogs, where participants write about 'the value of education'.

Whilst considering the initial assessment data, it is important to remember that what learners choose to conceal about themselves at this stage as important as what they choose to reveal (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Also, the implicit is as important as the explicit (Braun & Clarke, 2022). They have been asked to introduce themselves and it is in our nature to present an appealing picture to integrate ourselves into a group. This does not mean this data is less honest than later explorations of self, but it may be more edited: either intentionally or unintentionally; consciously or unconsciously.

Although initially I tried to allocate one code to each quote, it became clear that the reasons offered are far more nuanced and there is a lot of overlap. This demonstrates the complexity of people's aspirations and motivations, and also links to the idea of a *tipping point* (see chapter two, literature review) when adults enter adult education. The motivations need to be large enough and the circumstances of their lives need to be right to enable them to engage and to stay engaged. It also links to the complexity of the narratives people tell themselves: someone telling themselves they are an educational failure their whole lives (or being told that story by family members: see the vignette of June) would need very powerful motivations to *tip* them into education. It is worth noting that all these stories link to the later themes and findings, as some learners were able to change this story as a result of their experiences on the programme (see the *restorying* theme below).

7.2.1 Future educational/career aspirations

To many of the research participants, joining the Functional Skills programme was viewed as an opportunity, almost a *gateway*, to accessing other opportunities, such as joining another course to achieve a particular, long-term career aim. It is worth noting that I have treated these aspirations differently to the concept of *employability* because these longer-term aims were linked to learners' perceptions of themselves, their identities, which is explored later. Employability is viewed more as an opportunity to get a job, rather than invest in one's own self in preparation for a meaningful career. Therefore, I am considering employability of more a *skills-focussed* concept, as discussed in the literature review chapter.

Fourteen of the twenty participants completed the initial assessment task (writing to their tutor to introduce themselves and their motivations for study) and, of those fourteen, nine explicitly identified a wish to study do gain entry to other courses or career-paths as their primary motivation. Of the remaining five, two reference gaining qualifications as their motivation, which could possibly be attributed to the same reasoning by warrant of the assumption that they were not planning on taking qualifications for qualifications' sake. Two referenced improving their skills in relation to their perception of being at-home mothers, so presumably also saw this as an opportunity to re-enter the workplace as well as support their children, and only one specifically referenced being sent by their employer to improve skills. She also expressed a hope it would improve her career progression so, rather than create a new career-path which was implied by the other participants, presumably this was to improve her current position and employability. As noted above, these motivations were complicated and nuanced, so it is worth exploring each in turn.

Li Xiu shared her motivation: this was based on an aspiration to study a teaching assistant course, presumably motivated by along term aim to become a teaching assistant. As she is a migrant to England, she did have qualifications but they weren't recognised within the English qualification system as suitable entry qualifications for the course she wanted to attend:

> *My motivation in joining the English Functional Skills is because I want to apply for a Teaching Assistant course. I have other qualifications too but they are not from the UK and every country has a different standard when it comes to education. I find it hard to get a job or have a good career without any UK's qualifications.* (Li Xiu)

Tori had completed her degree as a 2+2 degree within the college but when she wished to apply for a Master's degree to further her study, she found the entry requirements included at least level two qualifications in English and maths:

> *I then began looking into studying for a MA in Education. However, I would need a Level 2 in English and Maths to pursue this, which is why I enrolled onto this course. Taking baby steps towards my end goal to hopefully be a SENCO in a Primary School. (Tori)*

Her aspiration to become a SENCo was her primary motivation for doing the Master's, as well as joining the Functional Skills course.

Whilst Josie was not explicit in what courses she was interested in studying, her motivation for joining was also based on the idea of achieving English and maths to gain access to further study opportunities:

> *I applied to do Maths and English to hopefully progress to other courses. (Josie)*

Kelly describes the opportunity to study Functional Skills as a *last chance,* as she wished to study on an Access course:

> *This is my last chance at gaining a qualification in English because I'm hoping to start an Access Course next year so my life doesn't come to a complete standstill again. (Kelly)*

Here Kelly uses a metaphor linked to the idea of *learning as a journey* (discussed in the context chapter), as she describes her life coming to a *standstill.* Other learners use similar metaphors, such as Sofia suggesting having qualifications gets you *much further in life* and Dominique states:

> *I feel undertaking this English course will help me to get on the right track as most courses relating to police work require maths and English GCSE.*

Colleague one also presented a very interesting view of the metaphor of *learning as a journey*, suggesting that perhaps in times gone by the *destination* would be the important aspect of learning, for example, achieving qualifications to gain a specific job-role, whereas now the *journey* itself is more important because we no longer are able to assume there are jobs that are sustainable throughout someone's working life:

> *But with a journey you have a destination and I think it I think that's why it's, it's. It's not as appropriate anymore or feels outdated because we don't any. We don't all get to an endpoint anymore, we used to and our parents probably did and they got to an end career and so their learning in their education was to get them to that point. And in fact we were constantly redefining ourselves and there is no final destination and it could even appear to be a circular route that we're doing. And that's OK.* (Colleague one).

These are good examples of Functional Skills English being viewed as a *gateway* to other courses or opportunities. A note from my field journal captured a comment from another Functional Skills colleague (colleague two) at the time:

> *They* [Functional Skills learners] *sometimes come for the piece of paper and don't realise it's the education they need* [for progression onto an Access course or higher education]. (Colleague two).

This was a regular conversation with this colleague, often linked to the Access to Higher Education programme which we had both previously taught on. My colleague has a deep understanding of the knowledge and skills needed to be successful in progressing to the Access course and into higher education, and was expressing her frustration when learners perceive Functional Skills almost as a tick-box exercise, or a product to gain in the form of the qualification (represented here by the "piece of paper" comment). It should be noted this comment was not specifically directed at any of

the participants in this project, but was a general observation that my colleague perceived as created by some of the educational issues discussed in the literature review chapter, such as a neo-liberal, skills-focused, learning as acquisition view of education (Coffield, 2008; Orr, 2020).

7.2.2 Previous educational experiences/barriers

Some of the learners' early perceptions of themselves often linked to previous educational or personal issues that the learners' perceived as affecting their learning and, therefore, educational success so far. These stories varied in nature but had an underlying narrative, whether assumed as in the learners' control or out of it, relating to a form of educational failure.

Kelly felt as though her learning difficulties had not been well supported and felt angry as a result (explored further in the vignette, Kelly). She describes her experience of previous English study as *4 failed GCSE attempts,* highlighting her frustration at her repeated attempts:

> *My experiences of English include 4 failed GCSE attempts… I have learning difficulties that haven't been taken seriously here.* (Kelly).

She removes herself from the experience of failure, to focus on a lack of support. This feeling may or may not be accurate, but is valid to Kelly and has created a barrier for her future success. Her frustration is blocking her ability to be self-reflective or to see a higher value in education past achieving the qualification.

Tori also describes difficulties that have marred her previous educational experiences, but she is more introspective. She recognises a difficult time in her life affected her schooling experiences, but shares this without judgement:

> *I left school aged 16 with a Grade D in English GCSE. I went to [name of special school] as, at the time, I had mental health issues and was under a lot of specialist care.* (Tori).

However, Tori has had the benefit of successful education as an adult since her school experiences, unlike Kelly. Tori's experience on the 2+2 degree has helped her to believe in herself and that she is capable of success.

Whilst Josie does not explicitly allocate blame for her incomplete school education, it is implied in the way she writes, underlining DID NOT to add emphasis:

> *I think lockdown got me like everyone else; to think about what I want to do and, with reduced hours at work, now is an opportunity to look into some sort of education as I DID NOT finish school.* (Josie).

This is presumably as key part of her educational experience for Josie, and she had reviewed her own purpose considering that experience. To capitalise in such away, Josie is revealing some very strong feelings about her school experience, implying that a lack of success at school has remained problematic for her.

Data collected through the class writing task, blogs, was also revealing around educational experiences, not least because it was written further into the programme when relationships and trust were better established and therefore learners may have been more open to sharing their experiences.

Alexis is explicit that she did not think education was important when she was at school:

> *I left school when I was 15 with no qualifications, when my family moved and I went straight into work. Me at 15 didn't think education was at all important; it wasn't until I had my children and realised how much I had missed and how much they enjoyed and gained from learning, not only knowledge but confidence.* (Alexis).

What is notable about Alexis' account is that she feels that she has missed out on the enjoyment of learning itself, rather than some perceived idea of being left behind without qualifications. It is her role as a mother that has changed her opinion about education (discussed below), which demonstrates the overlap between themes described above. This really represents the complexity of human experience, and that what we may attribute to our narrative is only part of the picture (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

Samara describes the length of time passed since she studied at school, and whilst this is not specifically a negative educational experience, it has left her feeling ill-equipped in her current life and in need of having her memory *refreshed:*

> *I choose to take this English class, to refresh my memory, with the basics of reading and writing, as it's been a very long time since I was at school.* (Samara).

This, again, relates to her role as a mother. Being a full-time mother means she has been using reading and writing in different ways to those that may be perceived as valuable outside the home (see literature review).

Sarah is writing in third-person for her blog and, as a persuasive piece of writing, puts herself in the shoes of her perceived audience, so we can not assume this is exactly how she felt about her school experience. However, she did make it clear she was writing from experience when I asked her, so it is fair to assume it captures some of her feelings of school. She describes not liking a subject or school itself:

> *Adult education is available for all adults and gives opportunity to gain qualifications that may not of been gained earlier in life due to not liking subject or even school itself, or it may be that the qualifications need updating (Sarah).*

The implication is that it is hard to remain motivated to learn if you do not enjoy a subject or you are unhappy at school.

7.2.3 Women's roles and identities

As we saw above, there is some significant overlap in what drives these women to return to education. Many of the women are mothers or have other roles as carers, and, as discussed in the literature review, each person has reached a personal *tipping point* which has enabled them to engage. For Alexis, her children are a little bit older so she perceives she has more time for learning and she has identified how important education is for her children, and wishes to engage for the purpose of gaining *knowledge (*and) *confidence.* She describes being a *mom to 4 children* and states:

> *My personal reasons for returning to education are something I have always wanted to do but never really had the confidence and time for until now. (Alexis)*

I experienced my own *tipping point* as a mother when applying for the Practitioner Research Programme. From my field journal:

> *I chose to do this programme at a certain time in my life too – at my own tipping point! Built on my previous project and what I had learnt; I was gaining confidence in*

blogging/writing/being published; and by getting involved in the #FEResearchMeet movement. My youngest had just started school and I could apply for a funded programme – so the time felt right.

There are several factors that influenced me but most important was my role as a mother. I no longer had a young child at home with me and her starting school represented a new opportunity to decide whether I had time for study. I mention the programme being funded, which also was an important factor. To revisit the earlier diagram of an example *tipping point*, my own would include factors such as time, funding, and confidence. None of the other women explicitly mentioned joining the programme because it was free, although this was mentioned in the blogs as a persuasive point, but it can be presumed this was helpful to them, as there was no cost especially for those not working.

In the summative assessment task Tori described how having a daughter changed her, presumably in relation to her decisions about her own life and aspirations:

Having my daughter changed and challenged my view on life. (Tori)

But she also discusses the challenge that studying creates; almost a tension of vying demands on her time and the toll that takes. She feels guilty about her time studying and how that affects her daughter:

You have to treat studying as a job. Just like a job, you need clock in and clock out times. Balance is keep in studying and family time. I did feel guilty not always being there for my daughter. However I never wanted to let my past define my future. (Tori)

She highlights the need for balance but implicitly acknowledges herself and her role in her own development here, commenting on her future, which she is also implying is a benefit for her daughter. When taking their own studies seriously, the role-modelling mothers demonstrate is an important aspect of intergenerational learning: in taking themselves and their learning seriously, they demonstrate the value of education to their children. Role modelling is explored further within the *learning as a social act* theme.

Many of the women introduce themselves through their role of mother, as it is an important part of their identity. Dominique begins her letter:

My name is XXX. I live in XXX with my 2 children, XXX and XXX, aged 12 and 5. In my spare time, I enjoy spending time with my children… (Dominique)

Alexis' letter begins:

Hello – my name is XXX. I am married with 4 children; 3 of them are now adults and one is still at school.

In her letter Tori tells her story, including pausing her studies to focus on her daughter:

I decided after graduating to take a year off to settle my 3 year old daughter into nursery. (Tori)

For Josie, parenting was a route back into education:

I went onto a parenting course, as I was a young Mom and I carried on to a Childcare course. (Josie)

In Samara's introduction, she describes putting her own learning and personal life aside to be able to care for her mother:

> *The reason why I have decided to join the Maths and English course is because I would like to brush up on my skills. I gained my qualifications a long time ago and, as I was a carer for my mother, I had to leave my personal life aside and my priority was to look after my single parent. (Samara)*

Sarai introduces herself as a 'housewife' and explicitly states feeling she needs to be able to support her children's learning. Several of the women allude to this throughout the project, although none so explicitly at the beginning as Sarai, again demonstrating the complexity of women's motivations:

> *Hello. I am XXX and I am a housewife. I have lots of free time at home because I am not working at the moment. So I decided to improve my English language skills. This is one of the main reasons for doing this functional course. It will also help me in searching for a job in the future. I would like to improve my English for using computers. Also, when I have to contact my children's teachers via e-mail or Zoom etc, I would like to be very confident in speaking and writing properly, with proper words. (Sarai)*

In Eve's introduction, she again introduces herself as a mother:

> *I live in central XXX with my husband, XXX, and my two daughters, XXX who is 14 and XXX who just turned 11 on Friday...*
>
> *When my daughter, XXX, was born, I decided to become a full time Mum and have been ever since.*
>
> *Now that my girls are of an age where they do not need me as much, I feel I can now start doing a little more for myself, which brings me here to* [name of college] *where I hope to brush up on much forgotten English and Maths skills. (Eve)*

Her perspective reflects other participants about her role as a mother, but in some ways is more explicit. She clearly states that her daughters are older and so are less reliant on her, and she links this idea of being able to do *something for herself.* This is a particularly complex idea, deeply linked to mother's identities, as many women find themselves solely focused on raising their children and maybe feeling they miss out on other aspects of life. This is a socially and culturally-bound syndrome, as in our current culture many women are encouraged back into the workplace, as demonstrated by the rise in childcare hours, and motherhood is not something valued by the state in the same way as economic work (for example, it is not judged in a country's Gross Domestic Product, also known as GDP). This is problematic, partly because it can damage women's perceptions of themselves in promoting the idea being a mother is not enough, but partly because these women are literally raising the next generation. Personally, I cannot think of something much more important than that.

Women's roles as mothers and carers, and their associated identities, are threads running throughout the project, repeated over and over through all the datasets. It is clear that women's roles and identities are fundamental in their views of themselves, and there are several instances that link these roles to our identities as learners, as demonstrated above.

7.2.4 Learners' aspirations and motivations: theme conclusion

The above examples all knit together ideas of adults' motivations to learn in light of both their future aspirations and their previous educational experiences. It must be remembered that these learners

had chosen to study, rather than being referred, and were all successful on the Functional Skills course, as I have removed the data from those that did not finish the programme for ethical reasons. Their shared stories highlight a change in value of education and speak of purpose in learning. The importance of encompassing these experiences into the programme, to help prepare learners for further study, for developing themselves and their confidence, is key. It must also be remembered that sometimes learners' aspirations change, so I feel they would be ill-equipped if only being prepared to be a police officer, SENCO, teaching assistant, etc, through their educational experiences, rather than a broader remit of approaching literacy as an opportunity to engage in society.

This theme demonstrates just how powerful the stories we tell ourselves are. The realities of human being's lives are extremely complicated and all of us create stories that allow us to rationalise the complexity. The stories we tell ourselves help us to justify or understand our experiences. As Kaur notes, "Story telling is a powerful tool in giving permission and validating personal experience" (2019, p.244). And studying them can help me, as a practitioner, better understand the motivations and aspirations of my learners, especially if those stories are creating barriers to learning. Learning itself can become an opportunity to change the story.

7.3 Theme two: Learning as a social act

I turn now to the second theme identified through my analysis: learning as a social act. This theme encompasses participants' understanding of themselves and their learning as a tool to betterment. It also encompasses ideas about learning and literacies, such as reading and writing, as sources of pleasure. Furthermore, it again incorporates many ideas around women's roles and identities, as these are themselves social acts. The participants express this theme in many different ways and throughout the data.

7.3.1 To better myself and change my life

As discussed in the literature review chapter, Functional Skills qualifications are often just viewed as a mechanism for developing a person's skills, rather than as viewed in a broader sense of what education can be. I am careful not to entirely eradicate the idea of skills in advocating for a social practice view of literacy because it is also important to know how to write in a way that allows individuals access to certain opportunities in society. However, I believe that it is possible to do both through a social practice approach to education, but not solely through as skills-focused one. For this reason, I am particularly interested in how learners and colleagues may view the idea of learning as something social, that can help develop a person's sense of self and self-development.

These ideas were expressed in different ways throughout the data, even from the very beginning in the initial assessment letter. I think it could be fair to assume learners might come for skills-focussed reasons, for example, employability, but develop a broader understanding through their experience of the programme. However, in reality, some participants clearly demonstrated this understanding in their motivations for study. In their initial assessment letters, June and Alexis see learning as more than just something preparing us for work or a career, but a way to develop and grow personally. June explains part of the reason for joining the course is to *engage my brain* and Alexis states *I want to better myself.*

This idea of *to better myself* is commonly expressed. During focus group one, Tori states:

> *We are adults and we are here to learn… choosing to learn for whatever reason… whether it's to better ourselves… (Tori)*

Sofia expresses this in slightly different terms: she says *I now know that you can get a lot further in life with these qualifications behind you*, implying that the study of such qualifications offers broader opportunities. She is also describing how maturity has given her a different perspective on her life, linking back to Tori's comment about adult learners, as well as the experience afforded by COVID-19:

> *I have had lots of time to think about my future as I have got older. This is now the right time to change my life, especially with Covid-19 going on.* (Sofia).

Education is described in a similar way in the literature; the idea that adult education is *life-changing* or *transformative* (see literature review). Several similar comments were captured in my field journal throughout the course, which express this idea. June sees learning as an opportunity to *find your passion; find your purpose.* June's own experiences have seriously shaped her view of herself prior to the course (see vignette, June), but she saw learning as something that gives her purpose:

> *I was always told I couldn't do it by my partner, that I was thick,* (I have been) *fighting imposter syndrome as I love learning. I have found purpose in learning* (June).

She also expressed how important learning is to self-worth: *Studying is good for wellbeing…* and she saw this as an aspect of us continuously developing and growing:

> *I love learning… I struggled with my mental health… learning gives me purpose. I think we are never done; we can keep growing; even though there's a voice saying I am not good enough, I am ignoring that as I want to. (June).*

I responded to her thinking, as I was reminded of Michelle Obama's *Becoming*, a concept considered in the Context chapter. Towards the end of the programme, June bought me a gift of Michelle Obama's *Becoming* journal; a gift that I will always treasure. This shared meaning-making and shared understanding of who we are, that can develop through our learning, is something I also treasure. It creates an enriched environment where individuals are open to learning and developing themselves, not just learners but teachers too.

Developing on the idea of learning giving individuals purpose, it must be remembered that learning is not the only social reason for adult classes, and this was particularly poignant during COVID-19 lockdowns where we were able to meet as a class at times when we could not even meet with our own family. Several times I commented that our classes were my social life at that time, which Sarah echoes in her blog writing about the value of adult education:

> *A chance to make friends and have a laugh, as well as just learning. (Sarah)*

7.3.2 Women's roles and identities

When considering women's social roles, it is important to consider this again from their perspectives as women and carers and how this affects their learning choices.

Captured in my field journal, Meera related the idea of *changing her life* specifically to her role as a mother:

> *I want to change my life. I don't just want to be a mother.* (Meera).

That word 'just' relates well to the earlier discussion about how motherhood and women's roles are perceived in society and by women themselves. None of the women sharing their stories for this project expressed any regret about being mothers, but many expressed (both explicitly like Meera here, but also more implicitly) the idea that being a mother is not all that is important or should be important about them.

My colleague found her learners felt similarly, which she shared in the conversation with me:

> *But I have a lot of mothers and so they're either coming in saying I want to help the kids, or saying all the kids are grown up, and now I want to do something for me and that's really embedded in this sort of idea of pausing your life. Put your life on hold to care for others. (Colleague one)*

Here she also introduces an idea of mothers supporting their children's learning. Although it can be a motivation for mothers to develop their own basic skills to support their children's learning, this was not a particular theme I identified through this project. However, there were times when supporting children's learning was explicitly expressed in relation to the experiences caused by COVID-19, such as supporting children home schooling or sharing technology.

Isabelle apologised for having her camera switched off during a lesson on Teams in lockdown:

> *I am so sorry I'm camera off and on mute – my daughter is working next to me. (Isabelle)*

For Eve, this meant sharing devices so that everyone got the chance at their online learning:

> *We're struggling with devices as the kids need to do their work. (Eve)*

and for Maya, this meant her attention was split between supporting her daughter and her own needs when learning:

> *…we're sat at the table together, so I might need to help her. (Maya)*

This links back to the idea of role-modelling too, as some of the women expressed feelings about intergenerational learning issues. When these mothers describe the challenges of sitting together learning, what they are not recognising is the incredible role-models they are to their children, as they learn side by side and demonstrate their own commitment to learning, despite hard times.

Whilst not directed at COVID-19 times specifically, June discusses the role-models women are to our children in focus group one, in line with ideas of self-development:

> *If we just stay still and we just accept who we are, we can't pass anything on to our girls. We can't pass anything on to our boys. We can't pass and we can't break the cycle of conditioning. (June)*

She clearly shows an understanding of how adults' own learning is supporting children's learning and how it can affect future generations, and how it links to a family's values. Furthermore, June recognises that learning is lifelong, intergenerational, and not something that just occurs in classrooms:

> *We're recognising ourselves that we are learning all the time… but we are part of that future generation as well, because if we just stay still and accept, this is who we are. (June)*

She repeats both these ideas in different ways. She expands on the idea of learning being outside of school also being on the outside of her, relating to how she learns through her own life experiences, as well as classroom experiences:

> *I'm looking now at the school outside of me. (June)*

And relates this again to intergenerational issues of learning:

> *I look at kids and I think you know are we doing enough? As parents… (June).*

This idea of intergenerational learning is expressed differently by Maya, as she relates her own chance to come to college to her daughter's:

> *I am a Mom of four children, three girls and a boy. My eldest has just started college herself so we are both starting our journey together. I have been married for 17 years to a very supportive husband, who is pushing me to achieve my goals each time I start a new journey. (Maya)*

There is a repeat of the *learning as a journey* metaphor: the idea of a path journeyed together is a familiar one that echoes throughout our lives and stories. Maya is also explicit about her husband's support. She describes her *new journey* and her husband *pushing* her to achieve her goals in a very positive way. This shows how her family is part of her experience.

In our second conversation, my colleague is quite clear that the majority of her learners are also women:

> *I don't know about you; I don't get men; don't get so many males students anyway. (Colleague one)*

And that this matters in relation to learners' needs in the classroom:

> *We need to be realistic about what our learners need… a woman told me it was her 3 year-old's birthday <u>that</u> day* [her emphasis]*… and we're working on spellings or something, you know? And she's worrying about it, because she can't buy any ingredients, she can't afford them, and she's telling me about it, and I'm like, here we are doing spellings but… shouldn't we all put it down and we could all make cards for her child or something… (Colleague one).*

This example is of particular interest to me. I had wondered whether any of my colleagues felt the same as me or if they had a more skills-focussed view of the programme, viewing our courses as a means to help specific skills, such as punctuation and spelling. Due to the restrictions caused by COVID-19, which are outlined in the Methodology chapter, this was not an area I had the opportunity to pursue, but this quote does suggest others feel the same. This resonates with Allatt and Tett's (2019) research exploring adult literacy practitioner attitudes, which was explored in the Literature Review chapter. In this instance, colleague one is particularly focussed on the role of women and the importance and purpose of women's lives.

Another area my colleague particularly expressed, which fits in with understanding learning as a social act, is the idea of empowering women. In our first conversation she mentioned the idea of *becoming* and she understands learning this way is important:

> *Especially for women; empowering women. We need to be published, see ourselves, share it with others.* (We) *write to empower and share voice… (Colleague one).*

For me, this links clearly to reading and writing for the joy of it; for our own pleasure and power, and the process of it, not just for some conceived idea of the product of qualifications.

Furthermore, the idea of empowering women links back to the idea of mothers, and what we are role-modelling to our children. As noted, mothers can be key in upholding or changing intergenerational habits around learning and around home literacies, such as reading and writing. My colleague considers her own mother when thinking about the importance of women writing, including her mother keeping family letters which tell a significant story:

She has these letters, these letters, she's Irish and she has these letters and they are beautiful – letters from Irish migrants moving to the US and they write back, these beautiful letters and… you know, they are so incredible and all those years ago and we can hear them and know what happened, a bit like you were saying they speak over the centuries – I want that, I want to help to write and everything we write like that matters… (Colleague one).

This demonstrates how much writing matters, and how writing can connect us with our relatives across generations. She also demonstrates how this is true within our own lives, when considering the journals she kept as a younger woman and how this helps her:

I found a journal I had written when I was like, in my 20s, and it was like… I didn't recognise it was me, it was like a friend I found – I thought, she is really cool!.... and it helped you know? (Colleague one)

This connection with our past selves and with other family members may not be the reason for writing at the time, but can become significant over time. Sometimes such writing can feel too personal to share with others, such as my own teenage diaries written in code and sadly long destroyed. My own mother has kept diaries her whole life, yet shares a similar sentiment when I asked what I should do with them when she is no longer with us:

Destroy them! (My mother, captured in my field journal).

Like the work of Chapman Hoult explored in the Literature Review chapter, I recognise the significant influence my own mother has been on me, not only role-modelling her own commitment to adult learning, but also through her previous career as a further education teacher. I capture in my field journal her comments as I describe my project to her:

It sounds like our 'Women's Returners'. It was courses we ran for mothers who wanted to 'upskill' in typing. (It was) *specifically designed for them. (My mother)*

This shows the idea of developing programmes for women is not a new idea. However, it is employment focussed, whereas the broader remit of a literacy programme seems to allow for a more holistic opportunity in education. Not just employability but, as noted above, writing and learning for learning's sake, for the joy of it, and not solely for qualifications.

7.3.3 Learning for pleasure

As expressed above, it would be fair to assume that this is a developing idea as the programme progressed, where learners may arrive with quite a skills-focussed view of education which changed over the course of the programme. One aspect that this could be noticed through was an expressed pleasure gained from learning, which is of social importance and cannot be ascribed as an early motivation. Only one participant expressed pleasure in literacy in the initial assessment task, whereas for other learners this is an idea that developed over time:

Before lockdown, I did not enjoy reading much; I found too much literature put me off. Since, I have really enjoyed reading and found it to be a new favourite hobby, even though I am a little slow at reading through a book, but I challenge myself to finish it. (Dominique)

Others expressed a developing love of learning, usually through the curriculum task, writing a blog about the value of education.

Samara expressed this through the metaphor of opening doors:

…studying as an adult opens up doors that previously had not been known to us. (Samara)

This is an interesting metaphor to compare with the metaphor of a *gateway.* These ideas are very similar in tone and I could just have easily described Functional Skills as creating opportunities for further study as a *doorway.* However, Samara here is expressing something much deeper than the simple idea of studying one thing to get entry qualifications to another. She is reflecting the idea that many *doorways* can be opened to someone through the act of study itself.

Alexis expresses this idea a little differently, as 'running back to me', which seems to grasp the speed in which her pleasure in learning has returned:

> *I can say since I started at college my love for English and maths has definitely come running back to me. (Alexis)*

She also articulated this during class discussion, captured in my field journal:

> *My confidence has grown; my love of English and maths has come back. (Alexis).*

This is particularly interesting contrasted against her stated motivations discussed above, where she declared she wishes *to better myself.* Whereas betterment could be considered improving skills, here I am suggesting a much broader understanding not only linked to self-development but to pleasure in learning too. Linking these ideas within the theme articulates the importance of more social aspects of learning, something that will develop further through the themes of *learning that is real and relatable, and writing from experience* and *learning as a route to self-determination.*

7.3.4 Learning as a social act: theme conclusion

Learning as a social act is a broad concept which relates well to the idea of literacy as a social practice. Although there was significant overlap, especially around the concept of women's roles and identities, it felt important to make a distinction between *learning motivations and future aspirations*, which could be career-focussed, and learners recognising *learning as a social act.* It could be argued that some of the ideas around joining education *to better myself* could be labelled equally well as a motivation to learn, but the distinction between expressed aspirations for learning based on career aspirations do present differently to more social reasons for learning. This is unpicked further through the later themes of *learning that is real and relatable, and writing from experience* and *learning as a route to self-determination*, as these themes are interlinked, just as *learning motivations and future aspirations* and *restorying ourselves* are.

7.4 Theme three: learning that is real and relatable, and writing from experience

As noted in the methodology chapter, this project has been influenced by a previous project I undertook for undergraduate study. For that study, I was particularly influenced by a paper which demonstrated that using authentic reading materials not only aids adult literacy learning, but expands literacy outside of the classroom too. This is further explored in the literature review chapter, but it is worth noting some key points here, which relate to this theme. Mainly, the study found that learning through real-world texts for real-world purposes assisted participants to apply their literacy abilities in their lives outside of the classroom (Purcell-Gates *et al,* 2001). However, it also found this impacts children, as homes become places where more reading and writing takes place, which is an important consideration for intergenerational implications (Purcell-Gates *et al,* 2001).

Constrained by the Functional Skills qualification, I am unable to write a curriculum solely focussed on learners' perceived needs, due to the need to pass a literacy test in speaking and listening, reading and writing at the end of each level. Furthermore, as has been noted, learners' needs may chance, affecting the different types of learning required. Another point for consideration is the

study found lower-level learners benefitted most favourably. However, as discussed in the literature review, I have found working with level one and level two learners that Functional Skills learning tasks can be adapted effectively to incorporate authenticity through writing from our own experiences. I have fully explored how I implement this in my classroom and this study is an opportunity to test this, which is my intention through exploring this theme.

As I introduced each type of writing, including less familiar types of writing such as blogs, narratives and persuasive articles, I offered the classes the opportunity to use a set awarding body task or for us to adapt by writing from our own experience (see appendix 5 & 6). Some were easier to adapt than others, such as writing a blog article about the value of education. For the narrative, the learners could chose between a VIP restaurant task (see appendix 5) or writing a narrative of something that may be more familiar, such as witnessing a car accident. Most classes opted for the opportunity to write from experience but the class which formed the focus group was fixed. This has offered a particular opportunity from a data perspective of exploring their reactions to a less familiar task. It is worth noting that they were a significant way through the course at this point, and had several previous opportunities to write from experience. Also, the VIP restaurant task discussed below is Functional Skills example narrative task from the awarding body (see appendix 5). It is discussed here as one of the more challenging tasks, as it was something very few women had experience of. The library task mentioned below was also a suggested curriculum task (see appendix 5).

7.4.1 Authentic, real-world literacies

During all focus groups and conversations, I raised the question about writing from experience. Sita describes how much easier she finds writing from personal experience:

> *When it comes to writing anything really, personal experiences makes it so much easier. (Sita)*

And Tori responds in agreement to Sita's comment:

> *Yeah, it makes it so much simpler. (Tori)*

Having found confidence in writing so far, June felt that, although she did not have her own VIP personal experience, she could relate to it because her daughter works in a restaurant in a local shopping centre. June describes being able to adapt that to write the piece, using her own creativity to imagine it:

> *…done our pieces of writing, has it helped then 'cause it's relatable. I recalled my experience of XXX. What I wrote about was nothing like XXX, but I use the, I used that particular restaurant and then expanded from that one particular experience that I had, but expanded it into my own creativity. (June)*

This is of particular interest, as June demonstrates how some experience or knowledge can be adapted to different situations and used to aid writing. She uses the word *creativity,* to represent how she takes her real-life experience to build an imagined one, for the purposes of the curriculum task. This is echoed elsewhere, as within the other focus group Dominique describes:

> *…a lot of it was based on… real life and, not just, adapt it into my own creativity. If you know what I mean. So I found it quite. I found it quite easy. (Dominique)*

This was not the same experience for Daisy, however, who found she struggled to write outside her own experiences:

I struggle to write what I can't, I don't experience or have ever experienced, so to me it is a totally alien concept... I can't do that. (Daisy)

Daisy, as noted in the vignette, is autistic, and she thinks that being unable to write outside her experience could be as a result of this:

For me, I don't know that is an autism thing or just a me thing. (Daisy)

Whilst this is only one person's account within this study, this could have serious implications for autistic adult literacy learners and should be accounted for. Teachers are often told that autistic learners are very literal so we should be careful in our language, but this would demonstrate an example where literal interpretations of the world affect a learners' writing.

Daisy does note that developing her ideas can be difficult for her anyway, so articulating experiences outside her own are difficult:

I struggled getting words out anyway, but I just can't articulate some of that. I have zero idea. (Daisy)

Daisy is an articulate and intelligent woman, as noted in her vignette, and the barrier this represented to her learning frustrated her.

However, in contrast, when she had the opportunity to write about something she had knowledge and experience of, she felt more able to do so:

Libraries are just brilliant. I am very passionate on that. So I can write about that, so things I am passionate things I have experience on. I can write quite easily, or attempt to anyway, but it's this stuff that I have absolutely zero idea on. I really struggle with that. (Daisy)

Tamika states she did not know about VIP restaurants, as had no experience of them, so felt she had to research about them to be able to write about them. However, she recognises that she would not be able to do this in an exam situation, without the opportunity to research, so therefore would not have been able to write so much. English is Tamika's second language, and her culture is not an English one, which may have also affect her knowledge and experience for this task:

…when I know this stuff, I know I get more points to write on that. Because I know it, maybe I've experienced it, but where I'm new to the subject, it becomes a bit difficult for me to give more points unless maybe I get more insight about the whole story. VIP restaurant. I didn't know what to be expected of. In VIP restaurant, in honesty, I had to read about a lot of VIP restaurants. So, I got the fact before I was able to put down something. If it were, it were an exam, I mean, I couldn't have written much. (Tamika)

Being interested in a subject is also helpful in engaging learners and helping them to write. From my field journal, I noted two separate occasions when Meera articulates this:

If it's something that interests you, it's so much easier. (Meera)

It's so much easier to write when it interests you. (Meera)

There were also times when learners were clear in how their learning had affected their real-world literacies. As a second language speaker, Tamika now reads a lot more in English, such as news articles. This is significant because the more practice she has, the more she improves her English:

Also, I now read a lot in English. I read articles, you know, the news… (Tamika)

This relates back to the idea of *reading the world* noted in the literature review and methodology chapters. Language is our interpretation and understanding of the world, and how we interact with language within our culture affects how we perceive the world. Samara echoes this idea:

> *We're interacting when we read. (Samara)*

For Dominique, she has been able to relate what she has learnt to other situations, such as communicating through Zoom within other organisations:

> *Like, I mentioned before, I feel like it's helped me to communicate with the other organisations that I, you know work with and stuff like that. And also we use, you know doing that online learning when I do my other zooms, it just kind of just getting used to that confident and just being. Do you get what you mean? (Dominique)*

Here Dominique mentions her confidence, but there is more than just confidence at play here. Her knowledge, skills and abilities in her literacy learning are crossing into real-life situations and benefiting her.

7.4.2 Speaking and writing as thinking

Several learners speak about how talking through their ideas and thoughts, or writing about them, aid their own thinking and understanding.

Tori states the importance of dialogue for generating understanding:

> *…because we talk a lot about, you know, purposes of texts and things that you read… (Tori)*

For June, the importance of being able to articulate our thinking to help us think things through:

> *…it's putting everyday life, articulating everyday life… Using language, we can extend our knowledge, if we want to. (June)*

Dominique also felt it was important to be able to discuss ideas to develop them:

> *And I like to, sort of like, explore a question, if you know what I mean? So, I like to explore it and discuss it… (Dominique)*

Colleague one also identifies verbalising as an opportunity to think through ideas too, and articulates that participating in the conversations with me for this project enabled her to do so:

> *I appreciate it, and it's good for me to actually. Yeah, verbalize some ideas too. (Colleague one)*

For Tamika, as English is her second language, being in an English class has given her more confidence in speaking. She does not find it as easy as others to use dialogue as a technique to develop her thinking because she finds she is translating in her head. She finds it easier to develop her thinking through writing, as this enables her to have more time to think:

> *When it comes to writing, I think I get more time to think and concentrate on what I'm writing. And I do some kind of exploring… but when it comes to conversation sometimes I become stuck… because I speak three languages, Italian. My own vernacular. And then learning English at the same time sometimes, when I am constructing sentences, sometimes I will be thinking of putting in Italian ways or something of that sort so. With, with me coming to learn English in a new place. It has given me some confidence in speaking English and then developing my language too. (Tamika)*

Dominique also recognises the spontaneity of spoken language does not always help her to understand or articulate things in a way that writing can help her:

> *So, I think when I write in it, I'm a bit more articulate than when I speak about, time to see, yeah, time to think about what I am writing. I feel like I'm not making sense when I'm saying, but when it comes to writing, thinking about it and having that time to concentrate on it, I find it easier to write. (Dominique).*

Speaking and writing are very different processes, one spontaneous, repetitive and impermanent, the other more considered, more structured and more permanent, but both have their place in helping us develop to our thinking, as Tamika and Dominique describe. This is an important aspect of real-life tasks, as it bases learners' knowledge and understanding in the real world, rather than a theoretical, textbook version of the world.

7.4.3 Practitioner understanding

For my colleague, reflecting on her own studies, this authenticity in writing is about finding voice. Starting with the familiar and working towards the unfamiliar comes with time, practice and confidence in our writing voice, which Dominique notes above. It should be noted that she has put herself in the learners' experience here, by also learning different types and styles of writing. My colleague reflects:

> *All the, to do all of the different types of writing… I kept saying I feel and I have felt that I have something I want. There's something I want to write and I don't know what it is that's the whole reason I'm here is because I don't know. I don't know where my voice is. I haven't heard my voice yet. I know it's in there and so I want to try all of these different types of writing to discover my own personal voice and and now I'm coming is a two year course. I'm coming to the end of it and I feel like I'm only just beginning to recognize my voice. (Colleague one)*

She shares an example of where she helped a learner to write a blog, as the learner felt they lacked experience doing so, but as she identified a blog as a personal piece of writing they could write from their own experience:

> *She said, I just find it really hard to know what ideas I should write. And I said, well, what about when you, you know you want to motivate these, 'cause she's been an advocate for young moms, I said, well, what about if you were to write to them? So that's how she started doing her narrative and her blog writing. So from the functional skills bit, we skipped all the assignment questions and I just had her write About what she would want to say to another young woman hurt that situation and she produced some amazing work.*
>
> *And she said, I thought all these ideas. She just hadn't framed it in that way* (before). *And so that just we had lots of conversations about writing her story and help. She'd never read a blog before till we covered in class. Now she's thinking, actually, I could do a blog and I could share all these things and that could be part of her way to reach out to people. (Colleague one)*

Further, my colleague recognises the importance of being able to shape our own stories for our wellbeing too, saying of her own writing:

> *And I found it so therapeutic being able to put these ideas on paper. (Colleague one)*

And the importance of writing for writing's own sake:

And it served a purpose in the act of writing it itself, even if no one ever reads it. (Colleague one)

7.5 Theme four: Feeling part of a safe community

The majority of data around feeling part of a safe community was generated in the focus group conversations. Three of the participants attended focus group one: Tori, June and Sita. They started the conversation focussed on a conversation they had been having in a group dialogue in class (online, in a 'breakout room'). The majority of discussion that generates this theme comes from focus group one, as it was a large part of the conversation they had and was clearly important to them. However, it was something that was also touched upon in focus group two, showing these experiences are common. Two of the participants attended focus group two: Tamika and Dominique. Daisy was the third member of focus group two, but she was unable to make it at that time so joined me for a one-to-one conversation. This theme did not come up in her conversation, as she was more focussed on her learning experiences, and this suggests it is a theme that is more likely to present in discussion with other classmates as they are able to identify with each other's feelings.

Tori talks about the struggle it has been for people feeling isolated, due to the COVID -19 lockdown in place at the time, and how the class has been a supportive environment:

the difficulty that we have been… feeling isolated, on our own… the classes are a supportive space as a group of women coming together, sharing their experiences. (Tori)

June also recognises this also, talking about *juggling things around* and *feeling anxious*. For June, knowing that she is not alone in how she feels is important. There is an implication that it makes her feel better:

…juggle things around as well. About feeling anxious about, yes, you're not only feeling that by yourself (June)

Tori agrees with her, responding that she feels she is in a *comfortable place of non-judgement* but also notes she feels safe in small groups with women she has bonded with:

…more comfortable sharing with some women… That comfortable space of non-judgment, really, um, not being judged… I think I feel more safer sharing it on teams when we're in my little bubble. (Tori)

There is a specific reference here to the Teams' breakout rooms and feeling more secure talking and working in small groups. This is something that Sita feels has been helped by being on Teams:

Yeah, I was just gonna say it's really helped us open up as well… Then I think it was probably built up more with Teams to be honest. (Sita)

Sita is a quiet individual and this was her only contribution during the focus group, suggesting that this is an area she feels is important enough to speak about. She was often quiet in class too, seeming content to listen to others' contributions. However, one day in class we were discussing listening to others, as part of our speaking and listening practice, captured in my field journal. I suggested:

Listening, giving space to people's voices is such a small action in effort, but so empowering and life-changing for individuals. (Kerry)

Sita implies that she is not listened to at home:

You're lucky they're trying to do that! (Sita)

She then states she feels she is not listened to at home and she talks about needing women, as they know how to listen to one another. She says:

Sometimes you just need "it'll be ok" – those three little words mean so much. (Sita)

I reply, *because they mean I am here for you, I am listening to you? (Kerry)*

And Sita states, *yes absolutely (Sita).*

This demonstrates the importance for women to have spaces away from their homes and families for learning. It has been noted the importance to women on the roles they play, but at all times the women are part of families, but we cannot assume these are always positive experiences (or negative ones). Spaces of learning in safety away from the family can be a benefit for women, for a variety of reasons, including the reason Sita expresses here.

Furthermore, it also demonstrates again the importance of being listened to. As noted, Sita was a quiet member of the group, and I do not wish to make assumptions about her based on her family situation, but it was an important enough point for her to wish to raise it. I am grateful she felt she could and hope she felt listened to in that moment.

Tori sent a thank you message in Teams to her group, acknowledging the importance of being listened to and heard in this way:

Thank you so much for your support and understanding yesterday. You have no idea how it feels to be heard and understood about overwhelming things like yesterday. (Tori)

Social and cultural issues are important in creating and maintaining safe learning environments, as well as developing personal bonds. June demonstrates this, as she identifies with a specific individual, who she has developed these safe bonds with:

I know that I can share safely with XXXXXX… those personal experiences, but I don't know if I would be able to share an as honestly as. (June)

Daisy also identifies that group dynamics and respect and trust in a group matter:

It's about the group you're in; I wouldn't have made it through the course if it wasn't for the group…. I think we respect each other. (Daisy)

This demonstrates the importance of how bonds and trusting relationships need to be developed and maintained through mutual respect. It cannot be assumed all the women felt comfortable sharing personal experiences, or made these connections, which was also why choice was an important ethical decision in this project. The learners need to feel comfortable to discuss their experiences together, which relates to the next theme, confidence:

I've been comfortable (in) openly speaking. (June)

For Dominque, this feeling of safety is affected by the approach staff can take in making learners feel comfortable being themselves:

But, I mean, like, for me to be able to do that, I can just be myself and be comfortable and not feel like I have to, you know? I feel we can just be ourselves and that's down to you Kerry as well, 'cause you make us feel comfortable. Well, you make me feel comfortable (Dominique)

Tori relates the importance of being able to be themselves, in relation to who they are and their identities as mothers:

> *And not just identify as mothers as our job role as what we have in the house, we have to identify also as human beings with emotions and outside interests as well, like XXXXX said and our classroom is very much become that. Hasn't it? Even virtually, but it's our space to be us. (Tori)*

I noted in the previous two themes that the idea of women's roles and identities runs throughout the themes in many nuanced ways. Here it is used to express the idea that it is okay to be who we are, and that we are more complicated than a 2D character represented by one role, such as motherhood. Space to explore ourselves and feel safe to do so; to challenge our pre-set ideas about ourselves and develop belief in our own ability is an important aspect of a safe classroom space, as is demonstrated here. It is not a safe space where no one challenges us nor where we should be fearful to share our ideas in case we are challenged (which appears fashionable on some university campuses these days, such as The University of Wales Trinity Saint David allowing students to walk out of lectures on Shakespeare's plays if they feel their wellbeing is affected – Hastings, 2023), but a space where it is safe to be challenged, to change our minds, to make mistakes, to be ourselves. The safety discussed here is about being able to do all these things without being judged.

7.6 Theme five: the importance of confidence, and the myriad of ways confidence is articulated

Confidence is a theme running through the data, which presents in a myriad of ways and overlaps with other themes, such as feeling part of a safe community. The women discuss their own confidence and how it affects them through writing blogs in the curriculum task, through discussions in the focus group, and through sharing their experiences at the end of the programme in the summative assessment task. Sometimes confidence is expressed in broad terms, and in other instances specific examples of improved confidence is shared, in relation to the women's lives and experiences. Many of the participants share their feelings about confidence multiple times, demonstrating how important self-belief is to academic success. This links to the theme of *restorying,* where the women are able to reimagine themselves and their stories in light of newly found confidence.

7.6.1 Confidence discussed in broad terms

Alexis shares her feelings about confidence in broad terms, both in class discussion and in writing her blog. In my field journal I note:

> *My confidence has grown. (Alexis)*

Here she uses a different type of *geographical metaphor* than before, rather than learning as a journey, she describes herself as having *grown*, linking to the theme of *learning as self-determination.* In her curriculum task writing, the blog, she explicitly relates how her change in confidence links to her self-esteem:

> *My confidence and self esteem have grown. (Alexis)*

Sita is honest about her struggle with COVID-19 lockdowns, but the course has helped her confidence in supporting her child's learning in lockdown:

> *Lockdown hasn't helped me but this course helped me with (supporting) my son's learning; I didn't know how they were taught at school and I felt bad for that, when he was asking me for help. (Sita)*

For Sarah, also describing confidence in broad terms, it is the overall opportunity and experience of adult education which she believes has given her the confidence to be successful in other aspects of her life, such as in employment:

> *Going back to college myself has given me the confidence to apply or successfully achieve any dream jobs... (Sarah)*

Samara also suggests increased confidence will help confidence in employability, relating to other aspects of life:

> *It has become a way of building your confidence in the working world. (Samara)*

It is worth noting that both are writing persuasive blogs here so, while they are writing from experience, they do wish to write to persuade, and so include aspects they believe to be persuasive to others.

7.6.2 Confidence in literacy abilities

The participants also share more specific instances of improved confidence, in line with their confidence in improved literacy abilities. Captured in my field journal, Dominique says:

> *I just find I'm more confident in talking and writing and reading now. (Dominique)*

Her increased confidence in her own literacy abilities has enabled her to find her voice, as she describes her decision to write her own person story:

> *I'm now writing my book… (Dominique)*

In the summative assessment task, Dominique expands on this idea:

> *English gave me the confidence to start writing my own book and talking more confidently in front of a class. I have struggled with my confidence due to my skin condition and my self-love journey, which will be incorporated in my book. (Dominique)*

She is also linking her increased confidence to self-esteem. She is able to take her own perceptions of herself and build confidence through finding her voice, and then has the confidence to share her story with others, in the hope of inspiring them too.

For Tamika, her lack of confidence in speaking English has held her back in the past, and she has not felt confident speaking in a health care setting. However, being in a class with native speakers helps her own confidence in speaking and listening, which gives her confidence to continue her studies:

> *… not confident speaking English working in health care. I want to go on to do a degree. Being with native speakers helped, gave me confidence to speak too. (Tamika)*

She reiterated this in the summative assessment task, describing the class as a chance to *polish* her speaking and listening skills and improve her writing:

> *The class has been good for being able to polish my English, gaining confidence to speak and being able to write good English now. (Tamika)*

Kelly also benefitted from being in a class where she could develop her speaking and listening skills through dialogue with others. As discussed in her vignette, Kelly's father is deaf, which means all her family communicate using British Sign Language at home. Kelly came to recognise this had restricted her opportunities for developing her own confidence in speaking and listening, and she notes how her confidence in speaking and listening has improved as a result of being in the class:

> *My dad is deaf, so I don't talk much at home. It's given me confidence talking to others. (Kelly)*

For Daisy, her confidence in her own literacy abilities gives her confidence in her exam abilities:

> *As long as I don't overthink it I'll be ok, as I have the capability I believe. (Daisy)*

She notes she should not *overthink it,* linking back to her comments about feeling her autism affects her learning, discussed in theme three, *learning that is real, relatable, and writing from experience.*

Relating again to the idea of *voice,* my colleague links how women's confidence in their own voice, their ability to say what they think and to articulate themselves well, challenges stereotypes in the workplace, helping women in employment:

> *Just focusing on the little, um. Skills of writing and not on well and in our recent meetings, you know, we've learned that we're being measured by employability, that all the funding is determined by outcomes and employability. But I don't think I said but, um. But I think and, again I know I'm using gender stereotypes. I don't really want to do that, but I guess I see it more obviously. You know, a woman who's empowered enough to to put her opinion down in using language you know. So, let's say in the written form is more likely to then say it, whether that's to appear or to an employer, and if she's more likely to say it, she's more likely to stand up and be counted, and that's what the voice is about, isn't it? (Colleague one)*

This is such an important idea: that women who have the confidence in themselves and what they have to say are much more able to speak up in male-dominated spaces. It suggests too that confidence begets confidence, feeding a positive cycle and linking to personal confidence, our confidence in ourselves and our abilities.

7.6.3 Personal confidence

Examples of increased personal confidence manifest in many ways. During the focus group conversation, Dominique shared a specific example of how her confidence helped her personally. She describes herself as previously shy, which the group was extremely surprised at (see Dominique's vignette), as she is perceived by the group as a confident person. She attributes this to the opportunity to attend the class:

> *I'm finding myself more talkative and I used to be quite shy and not like to, you know? And now I'm so much more confident in talking and I did a live on (International) Women's Day. (Dominique)*

During the focus group, Dominique also talked about the confidence she has in having her camera on during class time, so she can see and connect with other members of the class:

> *Everyone just keeps their cameras off* (in other settings) *and I'm just like I've done that before. But sometimes I feel like I can't keep that same communication, if you know what I mean, without person see me. (Dominique)*

She links this to the idea of being able to be herself, possibly as a result of the safety of the group discussed in theme four:

> *But, I mean, like, for me to be able to do that, I can just be myself and be comfortable and not feel like I have to, you know? (Dominique)*

For June, her increased personal confidence in her ability to learn gives her the confidence to start the Open University degree she aspired to. She feels proud to share her achievement with others in the group during the summative assessment task, those who knew her start point and how she had struggled with *imposter syndrome* (see June's vignette):

> *I'm studying a degree at the moment. (June)*

For Tamika, her personal confidence has increased through her ability to learn too. As noted above, Tamika has shared how her confidence in speaking and listening has developed her language skills, as a non-native speaker, but it also is a chance for her to have confidence in herself personally, living in a new country:

> *With, with me coming to learn English in a new place. It has given me some confidence in speaking English and then developing my language too. (Tamika)*

Finally, for Daisy, her new-found confidence gives her the opportunity to break free of past relationships and move forward with her life. She was already separated and a single-parent when she joined the course, but being on the course gave her the confidence in herself to be able to start divorce proceedings:

> *I have filed for divorce. (Daisy)*

It is such a tiny quote, captured in my field journal, but carries so much weight and purpose. When she told us in class, I was moved to tears. To witness someone's self-belief not only to be able to make this change for themselves, but to feel confident and safe enough to share it is an incredible experience.

7.7 Theme six: restorying ourselves

The concept of *restorying* is understood to mean that we are able to change our own narratives. Many of the participants joined the course telling themselves a story of their previous educational success or failure. We all use language to understand our world, shape our world, and to understand the experiences we have within the world. These stories can shape the fabric of who we are. As well as gaining confidence for the stories we tell ourselves about our success and abilities, we are able to harm ourselves through stories of failure. This theme is about exploring how the participants perceived themselves, and how they were able to reimagine their aspirations, which I describe as *restorying.* An important aspect of *restorying* is a person's ability to take agency in their own narrative. It was earlier stated this is a thematic analysis, not a narrative one, but it feels necessary for participants, who are the protagonists in their own stories, to have the opportunity to imagine themselves a *hero's journey.* Not to be entirely outdone by the *journey metaphor,* nor to mix metaphors, it could be understood that learners have added to the rich tapestry of their existing lives and experiences through an opportunity to reimagine and *restory* themselves.

By the nature of this theme, most of the data comes from later in the programme, as learners began to develop their own ideas based on their learning experiences through the programme. The data mainly comes from the curriculum tasks and from the summative assessment task, which specifically sought to capture any changed perceptions learners may have of themselves.

7.7.1 Curriculum task: blogging on the value of adult education

Here I am taking the decision to include Alexis's blog in full because it encapsulates so much of what has been explored about motivations for learning, confidence in ourselves and our abilities, and changing our view of ourselves in light of our educational experiences. Alexis describes how she did not think education was important when she was at school:

> ***My Great Return to Education***
>
> *My personal reasons for returning to education are something I have always wanted to do but never really had the confidence and the time for until now.*
>
> *I am a Mom to four children, one having a disability and other issues that go along with it, so time and energy wasn't always on my side until now. I left school when I was 15 with no*

qualifications, when my family moved and I went straight into work. Me at 15 didn't think education was at all important; it wasn't until I had my children and realised how much I had missed and how much they enjoyed and gained from learning, not only knowledge but confidence.

Now my children are at university, college and nearly finished school, I decided to take the big step and go back to college and do my English and Maths, and hopefully pass. I can say since I started at college my love for English and Maths has definitely come running back to me; my confidence and self esteem have grown, for me personally returning to education was definitely the right decision for me and I can see me continuing and maybe even taking it further and going to university. (Alexis)

Alexis describes how she has gained confidence through her children's educational experiences, and how that has given her the confidence to come to college. Her role as a mother is clearly very important to her and the intergenerational nature of learning and attitudes to literacy are apparent. Her perception of having time and energy for her own learning is something that has happened as her children are older and less dependent on her. She has returned to learning, which she describes as a *big step* and through the programme she has gained enough confidence in herself and her abilities to consider continuing in education, possibly even higher education. Her view of herself and her ability to study and learn has completely changed from a 15-year-old uninterested in school, to a mother who sees herself as a learner.

This demonstrates the importance of adult education opportunities throughout people's lives, to give people other chances at education. In Sarah's blog, she writes:

Adult education is available for all adults and gives opportunity to gain qualifications that may not have been gained earlier in life due to not liking subjects or even school itself. (Sarah)

Which she notes enables adults to access new job or career opportunities:

…could lead to new job or career opportunities. (Sarah)

Samara describes this in broader terms, although she possibly means career opportunities too; this does link to the idea that improved literacy abilities can improve other aspects of life:

…studying as an adult opens up doors that previously had not been known to us. (Samara)

She describes this as:

… for limitless possibilities. (Samara)

Which suggests the opportunity to be successful.

Maya writes her blog using direct address, to persuade the reader of her viewpoint, and she also links adult learning to new opportunities, such as new qualifications and a new career:

Time to start again, a new career, with qualifications you never thought possible. (Maya)

She describes adult education as a chance to *start again*, suggesting the ability for people to reimagine themselves and change their lives towards a positive future. She reiterates this, writing in the style of an advertisement, through the idea of *many paths,* another *geographical metaphor,* highlighting again this is for over 19s, an adult opportunity at education:

Loads of different courses to suit many paths, for any ages from 19 upwards. You really are never too old to learn something new! (Maya)

7.7.2 Summative assessment task: dialogue about learners' future aims and aspirations

For the final summative assessment task, seven women who all attended the level two class participated. As discussed within the methodology chapter, I made this decision based on the experience of COVID-19 lockdowns and in organising focus groups. This data directly responds to the initial assessment task, where participants were asked to write about their motivations to join the programme, by now explaining what they felt they had learnt from being on the programme and what they intended to do next. This task was designed in response to what the class wished to do for their summative assessment and was initially suggested by Dominique.

Due to the nature of the summative assessment, each participant was also being assessed for their Functional Skills qualification, so some data was naturally captured through the assessment process. Each individual spoke far more than was captured on the summative assessment task but what was captured was perfectly adequate to serve the purpose described here. For this reason, the data for each individual is shared in turn, and contrasted with each other, rather than carving up the data. Other than capturing a more whole response for the theme, this also is effective in sharing a 'whole' person response, keeping the person close to their data, as it is their personal story.

Changes her plans

I came on the course for a different career direction after working in the NHS for 14 years.

I then went on a prison course and wanted to do criminology, where I needed maths and English before I start university.

Since wanting to do criminology, I have changed my mind and wanted to put more time into finishing my book.

English gave me the confidence to start writing my own book and talking more confidently in front of a class.

I have struggled with my confidence due to my skin condition and my self-love journey, which will be incorporated in my book.

I have changed my perspective about education and why I think it is important. Depending on what you want out of life, education helps you to reach goals and achieve what I want on my own path. (Dominique)

Dominique (see Dominique vignette) has suffered considerable personal trauma in her life, coupled with struggling with a skin condition which led to her being bullied at school. When she shared during the summative assessment, I was moved to tears by her testimony of her life and her changing view of herself. She has moved beyond a narrative that held her back, where she perceived of herself as shy and struggling with confidence, to a narrative where she understands the value of her own voice, and in sharing her story with others.

Changes her view of herself

Why did I choose to do the Functional Skills level 2 course? After graduating university in 2019, I was told I needed maths and English to continue studying.

My plan was to study a MA in Social Work and to work in children's Mental Health Services.

Joining the course changed me and I learnt from others to relax and take baby steps. You don't always have to jump in deep.

After searching for master's courses, none seemed to suit me anymore. I had changed.

Coming across a L3 SEN TA course at [name of college], I felt drawn to it, like this is where I am now suited to be. (Tori)

In the early tasks, Tori had explained that she completed her degree as a 2 + 2 degree, but felt embarrassed and held back when she could not enrol onto a Master's degree without English and maths. She had described how she took a year out from her studies when she had her daughter, and that her aspiration is to become a SENCo within a primary school. She implies that this opportunity of adult education has had an impact on her and states *I had changed.* She is able to imagine a different future, still linked to supporting children with special educational needs, something close to her heart after her own educational experiences, but she writes here how she felt drawn to a course to become a teaching assistant. The implication that she is no longer following an ideal she has created, being more in-tune with herself and trusting her initiation almost to choose what is best for her, links to the idea of her own change. When she describes herself as changed, it is her own view of herself and her aspirations that has changed.

Plans go askew

I ended up on the course a bit by accident; I was either going to get a job in school or come to college but I ended up doing both!

I had a clear pathway on what I want to do but, as things have progressed, my path has gone slightly askew.

With things in life, they can go askew.

I am happy to be on the course and I feel I am where I need to be at the moment. (Daisy)

Daisy (see vignette) had previously struggled to find her place in the world, describing how she felt at receiving a diagnosis of autism during class discussions:

When I got my autism diagnosis, I thought, oh, so I'm not an alien. (Daisy)

The feeling of being an alien suggests not belonging, and Daisy had described how she struggled in her life when there was a lack of structure or change. For this reason, I had kept the format of each online lesson the same, during the COVID -19 lockdown, so that learners with autism had the stability of knowing the format of the lesson. Therefore it is implied here, that for her to accept she feels her plans have *gone askew* is a big change for Daisy. She expresses surprise at being accepted both for the job she applied for and her college place, which has added to her sense of self-worth and her belief that she can achieve. She expresses feeling happy on the course, she is progressing even if it was not the way she expected, and she is able to manage change successfully. Her expression of change is different from the previous two examples, rather than seeing herself as changed, it is her ability to cope with change, but this is just as important to her.

Other people do not define us

I just love learning.

I don't let my mental health diagnosis define me; I won't own that.

I'm studying a degree at the moment.

Adult learning allows me to have focus and structure.

My aim is to write a book.

We are whoever we want to be and not who other people define us. (June)

June (see vignette) was a returning learner, having taken a year out between her level one and level two due to struggles with her mental health. She is a survivor of domestic violence, and described struggling with *imposter syndrome* as her partner had told her she was not intelligent enough for education. For her to embrace her love of learning and her self-belief that she is capable of learning, and to acknowledge the joy learning brings her is incredible. She describes the stability learning brings her and, as mentioned in the previous theme, she is taking her learning further having enrolled on an Open University degree. Her aspirations have also changed, in light of her experiences, but maybe even more importantly she is able to recognise that other people's opinions do not define her, as she states to the class: *We are whoever we want to be.*

Following her goal and believing in herself

My goal in life was to train myself as a professional but circumstances beyond my control didn't allow me.

My setbacks were migrating to a different country to join my husband in Italy, a place where the language was a barrier for me to progress in education.

I also lost my husband just after two and a half years of being together and was left with two kids to bring up. I had to work and care for these children, which made me unable to pursue education at that time.

Upon arriving in England with my children now grown, I took the opportunity to retrain myself and to gain a career for myself to any level that I can. However, I had to start by getting my certificates in English and maths level 2.

My aim is to go ahead with a degree after here. (Tamika)

As discussed within the theme on *confidence,* Tamika is not a native English speaker. She moved to the UK after suffering previous hardship in her life, with the intention of studying to gain a new career. Where Tamika is not expressing herself through the idea of change, she is clearly working on her goal and is committed to retraining towards that aim. Her understanding in the value of her education is the thread running throughout her words, an understanding that education can offer her the opportunity to achieve her goal. She is explicit in how her role as a mother has defined her, and how it is only as the children are growing up that she perceives she will have time to continue towards her goal.

Career aspirations; perceptions of being held back in her career

The main reason for joining this course was to get the certificate.

To be honest, I joined this course because I want to apply for university, as I have a degree from another country. I needed either GCSE or Functional Skills certificate.

I want to change my life and complete what I've stopped doing years ago.

One day my daughter asked 'mom, why haven't you got a job?' (Meera)

Since coming to the UK, Meera wishes to continue her previous career but is aware she needs to re-enter education to meet English qualification standards. She views this programme as the first opportunity towards achieving this. Throughout the programme she expressed how she felt her life had been paused due to this and while she has been raising children. Meera spoke openly about the effect being a mother has had on her, her perceptions of herself, and on her career elsewhere in the data (see, *just a mother).* Whilst I am making no judgement on her, especially in her role as a mother, it is important to understand this aspect of her thinking remained the same throughout the programme. This is also implied through her sharing her daughter's question: *One day my daughter asked 'mom, why haven't you got a job?'.* This represents the tension between being at home, as a mother, and the view that our job-status is what gives us worth (see literature review).

It is also worth noting that, due to her parenting responsibilities, her attendance was patchy throughout. She was unable to attend many of the classes, and was unable to attend the focus group sessions. This maybe echoes back in the difference between other women's changing views on themselves and Meera's main focus set on gaining the qualification. She achieved her aim and was able to progress, so this is still a successful opportunity for her. It is just worth highlighting, against the other women's experiences.

Doing something for myself

> *Being a full-time mom for 6 years, it was time I did something for myself.*
>
> *I thought I can't get a job without qualifications so I thought I should go to college to do maths and English.*
>
> *Once I've passed; when I've passed, I'll think about what I want to do and where I want to go. (Sita)*

Finally, considering Sita's story, again the roles of mothers is a thread running through. She describes a need to do *something for myself* after being a full-time mom for 6 years. Linking back to Sita's comments discussed in the *confidence* section, there is a suggestion here that Sita does not feel valued in her home, after commenting she is not listened to, and it is possible she feels that gaining employment for herself will raise her status within the home. This echoes a comment a retired colleague made to me, noted in my field journal. She was commenting on how she feels she is perceived by her grown-up children:

> *Their view of me definitely changed since I no longer work and am at home… (Colleague three)*

The perception of women's worth in relation to their roles within and without the home is interesting here, and it does appear to shape both Meera's and Sita's views of themselves. However, for Meera she has a specific goal in mind, continuing her previous career, but Sita is unsure what she wishes to do. However, her self-perception changing is demonstrated as she corrects herself, initially in suggesting that she may pass, but then reinforcing that she will pass: *Once I've passed; when I've passed.* Again, there is a *geographical metaphor* used in *where I want to go*, suggesting she perceives a path in front of her which she can journey down as she chooses. That she is able to frame this as what she wants, rather than what her husband or family want for her, is significant, against her previous comments, and is representative of her changing self-perception.

For each of them, their belief in themselves represents their belief in their ability to be successful, whatever their chosen goal may be. This echoes in my own experience, studying on the Practitioner research Programme alongside their studies. What we have achieved for ourselves has been weaved

into our existing perceptions of self, and changes the very fabric of our being, informing our constructions of self.

7.8 Developing themes into findings

Drawing on the data captured and explored in the previous chapter, I began to develop ideas on the themes, to inform the findings of the inquiry. Here I explore those developing ideas, which are then further developed to answer the research questions in the Discussion chapter.

7.8.1 Idea one – the benefits of teaching literacy: using a social practice approach

As described, much of the Functional Skills English qualification is built on an assumption that it will aid adult learners' employability (Dhillion *et al*, 2011), which is a skills-focussed concept of upskilling to get a job. As identified through the data analysis in the previous chapter, many of my learners' motivations for study did not align with this assumption, as the majority of them chose to attend to further their own knowledge and enrich their learning towards further study, especially towards higher education, to fulfil an aspiration. Many perceived this as far more complex than 'employability', but a deeper and more meaningful educational opportunity linked to identity. Some examples of this from the data included aspirations to become a teaching assistant, a SENCo or a police officer. Whilst not the only aspirations, it is worth considering the high majority of caring-type professions considered, especially against a consideration of women's roles and identities, which became a thread running throughout the identified themes.

Women's roles and identities affected not only the women's views of themselves, but their *tipping points* of entry into the programme. Some of these views encompassed an idea of having the time and space for their own focus and study, but others showed much deeper perceptions of self, such as changing views of self and identities. Having children, or taking caring roles, was shown to have affected how women perceived themselves, sometimes through the lens of putting their own aspirations aside to raise their children, but sometimes through the understanding that having children has changed them and was shaping who they are becoming.

The women brought with them stories of previous educational experience, some of which shaped their views of themselves and their ability to achieve in education. The myriad of explanations why their previous education had not met their needs, from failed GCSE attempts, to unsupported learning difficulties, to not taking school seriously, or even not enjoying school, had created barriers to learning which new and successful learning could help to unpick.

The motivations overlaid these stories, however, with aspirations motivating enough to create a tipping point powerful enough for each individual to choose to enter the classroom at this time in their lives. Recognising the importance of learning, not just as developing skills, but as a rich social experience was important. This was also expressed in different ways, such as being seen as a chance at 'bettering myself', as linked to self-worth, as an opportunity to 'get further' in life, as a chance to find purpose and meaning, and as a chance to being more than 'just a mother'. Learning was seen as something more than classroom-based, but all around us all the time, as a chance to learn through meaningful consideration of our own experiences.

Geographical metaphors about learning reoccurred: the metaphor of learning as a journey was employed to express ideas about self-development, but also a need for space for women away from the home and their caring roles. Adult learning was viewed as a new phase as motherhood/caring roles develop, for example as children are growing up, and mothers felt they were able to focus on themselves more. Mothers also expressed a need to feel confident supporting their children's learning, and mothers' learning affects the whole family, with mothers as role-models, and

intergenerational implications. This also enhanced an understanding of families' learning. Writing is important: in one example, writing was a process which connected families across generations, and in another example was a chance to empower others through storytelling. Reading and writing had become opportunities for pleasure, not something to be feared or avoided, or even just declared boring.

Recognising such rich tapestries of experience and respecting adults' motivations for learning, enabled me to plan learning to aid independence and progression, for example, now they know how to use good models to improve their writing, learners can scaffold their thinking and writing in moving on to access programmes.

7.8.2 Idea two - the opportunity to write from experience when learning new types of writing

The approach I am advocating is one where skills are taught through more real and authentic literacy opportunities, and one which scaffolds writing by using learners' own experiences to remove some of the learning burden when learning new types of writing. Through this approach, learners can also engage with literacy in ways which meet their social purpose, as discussed above.

The writing styles examined through the Functional Skills qualification include some professional writing, such as letters and reports, but no examples of academic writing. Therefore, knowing my learners' motivations enabled me to effectively plan curriculum tasks which enable them to achieve their goals, as well as achieving the qualification. Choosing unrelated writing tasks would not have served their needs due to the proficiency test, which uses these set types of writing.

All of the women who attended the focus groups, which was my opportunity to explicitly ask a question about writing from experience, expressed they found it easier to write based on their own experiences than about a given scenario, such as those suggested by the awarding body (see appendix 5 for the awarding body's example tasks and appendix 6 for sample learner responses). Whilst only one voice, there was also an implication that writing from experience could be a helpful approach for autistic learners, who may see the world quite literally.

To have to also write about an unfamiliar situation, especially if it is far removed from their own personal experiences, can add a considerable learning burden. This is true of learners in all sorts of settings: there is a significant learning burden when thinking not only about what to write but how to write it. By removing the burden of the content, by asking learners to write about familiar things when learning unfamiliar writing styles, then the learning burden can be reduced, enabling learners to focus solely on how to write in that particular format.

This was something I was already exploring (see, Scattergood, 2022a; 2023), but until now was untested. It expands on my previous project, where the literature influenced my practice, using authentic texts in adult literacy classrooms (Purcell-Gates *et al*, 2001), to develop an idea about using real-life events to model literacy practices can create a safe environment where thinking can be challenged, and real-life experiences could be a learning opportunity (Scattergood, 2022a). As was explored in the Literature Review chapter, there is a significant gap in the literature how to enable adult literacy learners to *mobilise* their practices by transferring learning to different domains. Whilst learners' future experiences were outside the scope of this study (see recommendations for future study), identifying writing from experience as good practice and using authentic and meaningful tasks to create motivating practising opportunities reduced the learning burden for this cohort of learners, all of which were gaps identified within the literature.

Furthermore, it is well-known that developing ideas through dialogue and writing is a powerful tool of not only literacy learning, but of critical thinking (Vygotsky, 1986) but this idea is expanded here to recognise, in suitable learning environments, such thinking also develops ones' sense of self.

7.8.3 Idea three - the importance of confidence and trust in adult learning

Confidence and trust are notable aspects of learning environments where learners are able to share, to challenge their thinking, and develop their sense of self. The theme *feeling part of a safe community* was generated out of a specific conversation in one of the focus groups, but it resonates with much of the other data and stories of experience, so remains important to summarise. The participants reported feeling able to be ourselves, to be in a place of non-judgement, and not feeling isolated. Much of this resonates with a strong supportive learning environment where it is possible to use dialogue and writing to develop critical thinking (Vygotsky, 1987). It speaks to a deep, almost tribal need, for human beings to connect with others in ways which aid not only our wellbeing and learning, but our own sense of self. An authentic learning environment allowed the women to be their authentic selves, yet to explore their possibilities through their learning experiences. It became clear that the act of 'being heard' was an important aspect of this experience: participants describe how this helped them to feel understood, but it also demonstrates the importance of feeling valued. Having our stories listened to and respected is a validating act, as the women realise that their stories matter, and they have an audience who want to hear them. There is an impact worth seriously examining here, about getting women to think about themselves in ways that enable them to externalise their experiences and to gain value from themselves too. An important aspect of this was the success of small-group work on literacy tasks. Being able to work together to investigate different texts built aspects of trust towards working together and sharing experience.

Confidence was expressed in a myriad of different ways throughout the data, as explored in the previous chapter. It was considered in broad terms, relating to the whole-self, as was articulated through the idea of confidence growing. It was directly related to employability prospects, such as a 'dream job' or for confidence in the 'working world'. Confidence was important for supporting children's learning, helping mothers to understand the learning their children are participating in at school, and feel more able to help and support that.

Confidence was also expressed specifically relating to literacy abilities, from speaking and listening for the learning with a deaf father, learning English as a second language, to confidence in reading and writing. Confidence in writing is often expressed as *voice* throughout the literature and the world, and this was also expressed here. Finding your voice related to finding confidence in yourself and feeling empowered to write and express yourself in powerful ways. Personal confidence was important too: no longer feeling so shy, having confidence in participating in social events, to even have the confidence to break away from previous patterns of behaviour or living that were harmful to the women, expressed by Daisy's confidence in filing for divorce.

Therefore, the importance of different types of confidence expressed depend on the women's own circumstances, and are socially situated experiences, relevant at a specific time in women's lives.

7.8.4 Idea four - restorying ourselves

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) appear to express the idea of *restorying* in several different ways, but here it is understood to mean that, because our experiences are social and situated, we are able to change our own narratives. Using data from both the initial and the summative assessment was particularly informative to exploring this idea. There was a significant change in narrative from the initial assessment task to the summative assessment. Most learners identified aspirations which lead to their decision to enrol, but some were more in line with functional thinking than others, for

example, to gain a qualification. By the summative assessment task, this had significantly shifted towards a more social practice view of adult educational experiences, as explored above, for example, developing second language skills, changing self-belief, developing confidence, and the importance of a community of learners.

Learners expressed these changes in different ways, but encapsulate the idea that, just as negative stories of previous educational experience can prevent our success, being able to change the narrative about education into stories of success can enable us.

7.9 Findings

Here I have started to develop the themes into ideas for findings. I have found it is possible to take a social practice approach to teaching adult literacy in a Functional Skills classroom and this can account for particular benefits. Therefore, the findings of this research are:

1. A social practice approach to teaching Functional Skills English accounts for who the learners are and, importantly, takes account of their motivations for learning. This incorporates learners' identities, here in particular women's identities as mothers and carers, and also enables literacy learning to be meaning-making.
2. A social practice approach to Functional Skills English learning offers a broader approach to literacy learning than a skills-focused approach, which allows for the *mobilisation* of skills, knowledge and abilities and helps to reduce the burden of learning when learning new writing styles through opportunities to write from experience.
3. Classroom environments (and the relationships within the classroom) affect learning and contribute to learner' confidence and self-belief. The opportunity to write from experience enables learners to build confidence and further contribute to meaning-making, understanding that learning is social, and that authenticity in literacy learning is a key aspect. Therefore, it is recognised that learning is also a broader concept, not solely focused on assessment criteria.
4. Social practice literacy learning (specifically in this context taking account of learners' motivations and identities, meaning-making, writing from experience, building self-belief and confidence) enables learners to use literacy to explore and re/construct themselves, changing their understanding of themselves and enabling them adopt the identities of learner, reader, and/or writer. This reinforces self-belief and capability in learners' literacies and inspires developing personal goals and motivations.

These findings shall be fully explored, synthesising the data with the literature, in the Discussion chapter, with the aim of answering the research questions.

7.10 Chapter summary

During this chapter, I explore the six themes I have identified to answer my research questions:

Theme one: learner's motivations and aspirations

Theme two: learning as a social act

Theme three: learning that is real and relatable, and writing from experience

Theme four: feeling part of a safe community

Theme five: the importance of confidence, and the myriad of ways confidence is articulated

Theme six: restorying ourselves.

These themes are complex and nuanced, with significant overlap identified throughout. Running throughout the themes is the importance of recognising the roles and identities of women, including as mothers and carers, and the impact this has. It is recognised the significance the programme has, and in sharing and writing about their own experiences, has had on the participants, including myself, and how this has impacted our perceptions of self. It has also highlighted the importance of pleasure in writing and learning, and in learning for learning's own sake. Although these themes represent collective voices of women who contributed to the project, it has remained important not to homogenise their stories, at risk of losing their humanity.

Then I have started to demonstrate how I began to develop these themes into ideas for findings. I have explored these ideas in turn, developing the ideas into specific findings for the research. In the next chapter, I unpick these findings further to explore and answer the research questions posited.

8 Unpicking narratives: discussion

*'I shall speak about women's writing: about **what it will do**. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing… Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement.'*
Helene Cixous, 1976, p.875.

8.1 Chapter introduction

The intention of this inquiry has been to explore the possibility of taking a social practice approach to teaching adult literacy whilst meeting the requirements of a Functional Skills English qualification for Level 1 and Level 2. Appleby and Barton (2008) highlight the significant tension in this approach: how it is possible to take account of a social practice pedagogy whilst working within a framework of targets and assessment-driven standards. Furthermore, Appleby and Barton (*ibid*) also note the significant tension between such an inquiry and classroom teaching, thus this inquiry sought to mitigate this effect by incorporating research as an opportunity for exploring changing practice and creating new curriculum opportunities as a result. During the Literature Review chapter, several examples of 'good practice' were explored, which are no longer accounted for through a skills-focused approach to teaching and learning and it was posited that, regardless of the tension, it could be possible to incorporate social practice approaches into the Functional Skills English classroom and curriculum successfully, to meet learners' needs and help them to fulfil their aspirations whilst simultaneously meeting the assessment criteria.

It is the intention of this chapter to synthesise the data analysis with the literature, to explore and answer the research questions. To recap, for clarity, the research questions are: how could using stories of experience and learners' own aspirations help curriculum development for adult literacy learners; whilst recognising literacy learning as a social practice, what do learners' stories of experience tell us about their progress; and, finally, how does this work inform our constructions of self? Each question was designed with specific data collection in mind to elicit data collection which aids the answering of each question individually but, as themes were identified as part of the data analysis stage, it became clear that the importance of *women's roles and identities* was a thread that ran throughout the questions and the dataset. Therefore, this is given significance across the discussion in the myriad of ways it affects learning.

8.2 How could using stories of experience and learners' own aspirations help curriculum development for adult literacy learners? (RQ1)

Throughout the review of the literature, it was identified that literacy is a broad concept which incorporates identity (Barton, 2007), and therefore it is important to account for who the learners are and what their motivations for learning are. However, the current employability focus of Functional Skills does not account for this (DfE, 2028). Allatt (2017) identifies a significant narrowing of the understanding of literacy and language, reduced to simplistic concepts in policy which favour employability skills. For the purpose of developing a curriculum which accounts for learners' experiences, motivations and aspirations, and for collecting data which seeks to answer this question, the initial assessment task was redesigned. Each task within a Functional Skills English classroom can be considered a literacy event (see, Heath, 1983), such as writing a letter or blog. Each literacy event is a learning opportunity, both for teacher and learner, as are meaning-making opportunities which shape our mutual understanding. In this sense, the aim of redesigning the initial assessment task was to not only to elicit information for assessment purposes, but to also elicit learners' motivations in the hope of influencing curriculum design. For clarity, this means that

understanding learner motivations helps account for planning in ways for them to achieve their aims, to support their longer term goals, and to enable the *mobilisation* of literacies across domains. This is in recognition that learners' goals and aspirations are their prime motivators, rather than literacy goals (Crowther, Maclachlan & Tett, 2010).

Allatt and Tett's (2018) research inquiry found that practitioners use learners' experiences as a *learning curriculum.* In developing a learner-centred curriculum, a key aspect was to understand learners' motivations for joining the course in order to achieve this. Exploring the data collected through the initial assessment task, it was clear that learners' circumstances were an important aspect of their returning to learning, which aligns with the concept of a *tipping point* (Katar Public and L&WI, 2018), whereby a learners' circumstances and motivations are strong enough to tip learners into learning. Out of the twenty student participants, fourteen of them contributed by completing and consenting to share their initial assessment task. As identified in the data analysis, nine of those participants perceived achieving a Functional Skills English qualification as a *gateway* into other learning opportunities, usually linked to a longer-term aspiration.

Understanding that adults have enrolled onto a Functional Skills course in preparation for further study, usually access to higher education, is extremely useful in planning curriculum tasks. As has been noted, there are no examples of academic writing tasks within the current specification which leaves little opportunity for developing academic writing within the course. However, understanding this is an important motivation of a reasonable number of learners on the programme meant that this could be taken account of and discussed during lessons. This work builds opportunities for learners to begin to understand how to *mobilise* practices across domains, in preparation for future study. Barton and Hamilton (2000) identify that learners' *literacy lives* relate directly to learner identities. It was clear in the data analysis that learners' understanding of their aspirations linked to larger concepts of careers and roles as identities, rather than as employability concepts. For example, in wishing to train as a teaching assistant or SENCo, due to aspirations to support children with special needs, adults were realising their concepts of themselves through the possibilities of developing their identities. This is a concept far larger than just skills, and can be accounted for in a social practice approach to learning.

In other areas for consideration, some learners identified and explored their perceptions of learning through previous experiences. Some of these experiences were perceived in a positive way, but often they were perceived in a negative way. Sometimes these were presented as something outside of the learner's control, where they lacked agency, but other learners were able to identify their changing self through their experiences. For example, one learner felt a lack of support was a barrier to her learning, as she felt her learning difficulty had not been recognised previously. This appeared to reflect negatively on her experience of learning and therefore, now it was known, it could be accounted for within the learning programme, to ensure she felt better supported and did not become tipped out of learning again. For those who recognised a change in themselves, they identified a changing view of education in light of being older, becoming a mother, etc, which they were able to frame in a more positive light. Understanding this aided curriculum development, thus taking into consideration in the roles women play, as is explored below.

Learners' aspirations were often complex, with a reference to upskilling or qualifications often written alongside an intention to improve or 'better' oneself; to better understand oneself; join a community; or even to change lives. Learning was referenced in terms of pleasure, such as loving learning or specific aspects of literacy such as a love of reading. Cremin *et al* (2014) have made links between the pleasure of learning and its motivating impact on practice, and Clarke (2017) cites the need for adults' pleasure in learning as a motivating factor. By being aware of adults' motivations in

this manner, and in recognising learning as a social act as well as a cognitive one, the curriculum was designed to incorporate or allow for particular passions to flourish. Therefore, learners were able to incorporate their literacy practices from outside the classroom into their learning, which links to the next research question exploring how learners make progress through their experience

The golden thread running throughout the themes is the importance of women's roles and identities. Here this is considered in line with question one: how women's roles and experiences inform curriculum within the Functional Skills classroom. Through the initial assessment task, nine of the participants referenced their roles as women, in terms of being mothers, carers and/or homemakers. Two of the learners explicitly referenced improving their literacies in relation to being stay-at-home mothers because they had been at home full-time since having their children. One felt she was needed less as her children were growing up, giving her more time for herself, and the other felt she could improve her English to support her children's learning but, longer term, to help her gain employment. The majority of the other women were referencing their roles as women in terms of their identity; some framing having children as influencing or even changing them. One participant did not 'just' want to be a mother.

These introductions, considered through the lens of women, especially in their roles as mothers, resonate with the perceptions of education explored above. People's perceptions of literacy are often shaped by their own experiences. As explored in the Literature Review chapter, this can have repercussions on learning, for example, women being influenced by their own mothers (Hoult, 2012); being influenced by school and/or home experiences (Duckworth, 2014a; 2014b); children's school experiences being shaped by their home environment (Papen, 2016). It is recognised that women often engage in learning to improve their own education to support their children (Lynch & Prins, 2022). Duckworth and Smith (2018) describe the *ripple impact* of women's learning on their families and communities, and, through the data analysis, it has become clear there is also a ripple impact received by mothers too. It is almost impossible to unpick the influence of women's role and identities on their motivations, as they are mentioned alongside other factors such as understanding learning as a social act ('to better myself'), a willingness to learn and a requirement to progress towards a perceived aspiration.

In exploring this research question, I have identified the importance of accounting for who the learners are and what their motivations for learning are, as this was key to being able to design a social practice curriculum. As explored in the Literature Review chapter, this is a well-established concept, but is not accounted for at all in the current approaches to the delivery of Functional Skills English. In practice, this has the effect of enabling learners' own experiences to be incorporated into the programme but it also has the effect of enabling learners' to construct their own meaning-making, as explored in the next question, and further construct their own developing understanding of self, as explored in the final research question.

8.3 Whilst recognising literacy learning as a social practice, what do learners' stories of experience tell us about their progress? (RQ2)

This is a broad question in terms of the concepts, but also in terms of the data collected across this study. To unpick the question, it is important to understand what is meant here as progress. Progress is being considered as a broad and open concept, rather than a narrow concept of progress towards meeting assessment criteria. Progress could be considered here from the perspective of the teacher or from the perspective of learner: both are equally important. However, in terms of the gaps identified within the review of literature, this question is an opportunity to consider how taking a social practice approach enables progress through *mobilisation* of learning through the domains;

of how to reduce the *burden of learning* different types of writing; how confidence and pleasure impact learner progress; and how personal writing contributes to meaning-making, both for practitioners and for learners. Having taken account of who the learners are through the exploration of the first question and finding, this question explores how to understand learning as social, which enabled the creation of safe spaces for authenticity and for supporting developing confidence.

A significant issue identified through the exploration of the literature is the importance of learners learning in a way that enabled their learning to be transferred into different settings, specifically for literacy skills, knowledge and abilities to be *mobilised* into different domains, as identified by Smith (2005), such as the home, workplace, college or university. This again is an opportunity for developing social practice approaches to teaching and learning, as was explored in the earlier unpacking of ideas for findings. Some aspects of the Functional Skills English specification lend themselves to development to allow for learners' stories of experience, and this opportunity was utilised for this study. It was important that the curriculum was co-constructed with learners, to prevent disadvantage in moving away from set awarding body tasks. Learners were given the choice of whether they wished to write from their own experience, or to write the set task. This recognised that personal writing is an approach to understanding and constructing experiences (Basic Skills Agency, 2001). Furthermore, this approach challenges the idea that there is only one correct way to approach literacy tasks (Cridland-Hughes & Schreuder, 2022). Moreover, it also challenges the idea that there is only one approach to teaching and learning Functional Skills English, particularly considering a skills-focused approach. Many newer practitioners may not have any access or appreciation of the previous Adult Literacy Core Curriculum (BSA, 2001), particularly due to the invisibility of the curriculum under the Functional Skills standards. However, the data analysis showed the myriad of opportunities once authentic literacy events are embraced: anything became a learning opportunity. Learners also identified the opportunities this offered them, and the progress they recognised, in personal achievements, such as second language acquisition and enabling speech practice for someone used to living in a deaf household.

Learners generally made their choices based on what felt most accessible to them. Where learners chose to try the awarding body tasks, they could clearly articulate their approach which was often based in their own perceptions of their experiences. Where they chose to write from their own experience, learners were able to clearly articulate the benefits to both their writing and their learning. Writing in such a way lifted a considerable *learning burden*, allowing learners to focus entirely on the new style without worrying about the content. This process acted as scaffolding for learning new writing styles and enabled the development of what I describe as *writing between the realms.* Like the metaphor of *border crossing*, to understand the mobilisation of skills, knowledge and abilities, the metaphor of *realms of writing* represents the different styles of writing people may choose. In modelling ways of understanding writing for audience and purpose, practitioners can then model choosing tone and formality of language, choosing to write in different ways for different types of writing. My colleague articulated this idea as *developing voice*, whereby learners begin to gain better control over their writing ability and can develop their own style. Learners found writing from their own experience *relatable,* which contributed to their confidence as is explored next.

Throughout the data, it was clear that learners thrived in supportive and respectful learning environments, and this is also a well-represented idea within the literature (Appleby & Barton, 2008). However, there was very little evidence of how such environments were created and how confidence and pleasure in learning contribute to learning. Grief and Chatterton (2007) highlighted the importance of a supportive atmosphere, but the learners articulated something deeper and

more meaningful that just being supported, as was explored during the data analysis. There was a need, as identified in the last section joining courses for community, for connection between individuals, creating a collective (Freire, 1972; 2017), even if that did not mean creating agreement. In fact, as time passed and the groups strengthened, disagreement was easier, as the group was a safe place for dialogue and exploration. Some learners expressed the need for community during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially the importance of feeling part of something, and others felt women-only spaces away from the home environment to be important. This linked to the importance of being listened to, which resonates with Freire's (1972; 2017) concept of dialogic learning but also, deeper than that, to a real human need to know what you think, and what you have to say, matters. This was built out of group dynamics of community and respect, which it was recognised takes the skill of an experienced practitioner to create.

Just as confidence was expressed in a myriad of ways through the data, different motivating factors were expressed in different ways too. As Clarke (2017) identifies, there is a serious lack of learning for pleasure in a skills-focused classroom, yet pleasure is a strong motivating force. Writing for writing's sake was expressed as an important aspect of not only enjoyment but learning too. Many learners felt that being interested in a subject helped them to engage well with it and was motivating for writing too. Moreover, when participants felt successful in their progress, this boosted their confidence and, in turn, boosted their motivation for study and likelihood of further progress and feeling of success. Furthermore, participants used their learning community as an opportunity to develop understanding and meaning-making. Dialogue was one opportunity for meaning-making, but writing was too: one participant expressed how much deeper her learning and understanding was when she had to articulate it through writing it down.

In exploring this research question, I have identified the importance of recognising progress as a broad concept and understanding social aspects of learning, in terms of how to create safe spaces for authenticity, and for developing confidence and supporting motivations for learning with the intention of finding real ways in practice to create opportunities to enable the development of writing voice and to write different writing styles.

8.4 How does this work inform our constructions of self? (RQ3)

In the Literature Review chapter, I explored not only the importance of story in our lives (Halliday, 1973), but the importance of story in how we interpret our worlds and how we construct our identities (Finnegan, 2015). Lave and Wenger (1991) illustrated that we live in a socially constructed world, and this has implications on how we learn. Collins (2019) notes that stories are an important part of our self-esteem when learning and, in answering this question, I will explore how being able to recreate ourselves through learning improves self-belief. Those who felt they were no good at learning were able to become learners; those who felt they could not write were able to frame themselves as writers. The thread of women and their roles and identities is again important. Women's storytelling is a powerful and ancient tradition (Pinkola Estés, 2008), which allows women not only to recreate and reimagine themselves but to deeply understand their roles as women (Blackie, 2018).

The data collection for this final question came from the blog task, where learners described the value of adult education, and from the summative assessment task, which was a speaking and listening task designed to echo the initial assessment task. In the initial assessment task, I had asked learners to introduce themselves, to explain why they had joined the course, and what they wished to do next. As explored above, the responses were broad, often covered both skills-type goals and broader, social aspirations, and linked to identity. However, these tasks were as telling at what they

concealed as what they revealed. Not only was my relationship with the learners new and unformed, the learners themselves knew their motivations but did not yet know how their experience of learning would also become part of their story. Therefore, in comparison to the initial assessment task, the summative assessment elicited a much more detailed consideration of learners' stories. As a spoken task, learners were able to quickly and spontaneously describe their aspirations and any new goals clearly, but also the trust was such that learners really opened up in their experiences and what they felt they had achieved and learnt. The summative assessment was designed to build on the initial assessment, asking learners to reflect on their learning across the course and to ask what they intended to do next/what their future aspirations were.

However, although these tasks were a reflection of each other, it was not designed with the intention of comparing the data from the two tasks from a research perspective; it was designed so that the learners themselves could make the comparison and to have the opportunity not only to see if their aspirations were the same, but if they themselves had changed as a result of their learning. Seven learners participated in the summative assessment. These learners were specifically chosen, as they had been the focus group participants, and I deemed their learning not to be at risk through contributing. This is an important point, as it demonstrates the intention was never to 'follow up' on the initial assessment, which fourteen participants contributed to.

Adult education is often described in the literature as a 'second-chance', but the participants articulated something much more nuanced. They all viewed it as an opportunity, but in a myriad of ways. For some, they felt they did well at school but were returning to education, due to their circumstances after looking after young children. For others, this was an opportunity to work towards a future aspiration, for others a necessity as a lack of qualifications was perceived as holding them back. Kelly's anger at being unsupported previously altered over time as she articulated the change in herself through being involved in adult conversations, an experience she had not had before living in a home with deaf adults. Dominique had changed not only her plans, but her entire perception of herself. During the summative assessment task, she shared serious trauma she had suffered as a child and the effect it had on her confidence growing up and she talked about how shy she was. The group did not recognise the Dominique they knew in her story, articulating she was a confident and central figure in the class, which was reflected in how Dominique had come to see herself. Her aspirations and self-belief in what she could achieve had changed as a result. She was already on this journey of becoming when she joined the class; she wrote about how she had reframed reading in lockdown, becoming someone who was a reader, but now she had reframed writing too and understood herself to be a writer. She was starting to write her autobiography. June had also changed her aspirations and perceptions, often relating her learning to a sense of fulfilment and wellbeing. In her initial assessment task, she had tentatively dreamed about doing a higher education course, and yet she had already enrolled and started with the Open University. Again, the reaction of the class celebrating her progress was an important part of her story for her.

For Sita, the class offered a different type of opportunity and progress: she did not feel valued at home and articulated she felt profoundly affected by being in a female space where she was listened to and valued. She described the course as doing something for herself, implying her roles as mother and homemaker (or housewife, as she self-described), served others' needs, rather than her own. This is a serious tension in motherhood, and could be based both on our immediate social circumstances, for example, the family unit attitudes, or could be more cultural attitudes, for example, the expectations of women's roles in specific cultures. This tension was also demonstrated by Meera, describing herself as 'just' a mother and reflecting a view that unpaid roles of being at home are not as valued in society as paid employment, or having a career, is. It should be noted that

Meera's role as a mother of young children seriously affected her attendance, but her attendance is possibly the reason she felt least changed by her learning experience. Her values were reflected by her children too, with her daughter asking her why she did not have a job. As someone who was very qualified previously, and had been an engineer in her country of origin, Meera articulated this wishing to return to what she stopped doing years ago. Linking to the idea of perceived roles within a family or society, this links to Strictland's (2007) concept of *gendered performances of literacy.* Literacy can, therefore, be a reinforcing factor in women's stereotypical roles: reflected in their practices through caring for children, or household responsibilities, but it can also be women's opportunity to articulate themselves effectively and to stand up to gendered stereotypes.

Others perceived their interlinked roles as mothers as an important part of their progress: Alexis articulated it was her children's education which inspired her to want her own opportunities; becoming a mother had challenged and changed Tori's view of life and her opportunity to study as an adult enabled her to grow and change herself too. The ripple impact (Duckworth and Smith, 2018) of the participants' learning on their families was clear, as was the impact of children's learning too, demonstrating that intergenerational family learning was an integral influence in the women's roles and identities.

Revisiting Heilburn (1988), who suggested there are four ways a woman can write her life: autobiography, fiction, biography, and in advance of living it; here I am offering a fifth way. Instead of writing her life in advance of living it, I suggest a woman may rewrite her life, reinterpret her experiences, to restory herself, to construct and reconstruct herself through her writing. This was articulated through the data as the women expressed ideas about changing aspirations, about changing views of themselves, and about considering different possibilities of progress. It was expressed that other people do not get to define us, but only we have the power to decide ourselves what we can achieve and are capable of. It was identified that, as women, sometimes we feel held back by our roles and responsibilities, but we are able to do things by ourselves and for ourselves that enable our sense of identity. This is the ultimate opportunity to shape our understanding of our worlds through our understanding of ourselves. Adult literacy learning can be perceived as this opportunity: a deeply interwoven tapestry of learning whereby women can challenge their perceptions of themselves, reimagine what they are capable of, and to reclaim the power of their own voice. Returning to Cixous (1976), the important factor in this finding is not what women's writing is *for*, but what women's writing can *do.*

8.5 Chapter summary

This chapter has explored the findings of the study in relation to each research question. Research question one explored the importance of taking account of who the learners are and their aspirations, in terms of creating authentic and social learning opportunities and considering possibilities for mobilising literacies, incorporating the themes of learning motivations and future aspirations and learning as a social act. Research question two explored findings relating to understanding social aspects of learning in terms of perceptions of progress. This demonstrates how to create safe spaces for authenticity and for developing confidence, incorporating the themes of learning that is real and relatable and writing from experience, feeling part of a safe community, and the importance of confidence in progression and motivation. Research question three explored learners' constructions of self, and how these were articulated through the learning and stories of experience. This incorporated the theme of restorying oneself, but especially related to the thread running throughout the data, the theme of women's roles and identities as mothers and/or carers. All of these findings related to the noted disconnection between a social practice approach to teaching adult literacy and a functional, skills-focused approach and sought to resolve that

disconnect through an approach which removed the tension between such approaches through double hermeneutic tasks. A final note: all participants were successful in their Functional Skills English assessment, all passing all three elements of speaking and listening, reading and writing, so have not been adversely affected as a result of this inquiry.

9 Pulling threads together: conclusion and recommendations

'…it brings theoretical ideas about the nature of human life as lived to bear on educational experience as lived'

Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p.2.

9.1 Chapter introduction

This chapter explores the conclusion and recommendations, followed by limitations and suggestions for further study. I revisit the research aim and questions to consider the main findings.

9.2 Conclusion

This study has been motivated by a disconnect between a functional view of adult literacy learning and a consideration of literacy as a social practice. Changes to qualification delivery in and around 2010 with the introduction of Functional Skills (Department for Education, 2018), have moved teaching to a more reductive narrow delivery of 'standards' instead of a curriculum, which encourages what Coffield (2008) terms 'learning as acquisition'. The result is fewer links are made in reference to adults' own motivations for study, and to incorporate their own experiences.

This research aimed to investigate how adult learners' experiences of college-based literacy learning, in relation to their own knowledge and experiences, can inform the development of curriculum tasks for Functional Skills English, taking a social practice approach.

The research questions identified were:

1. How could using **stories of experience and learners' own aspirations** help curriculum development for adult literacy learners?
2. Whilst recognising literacy learning as a **social practice**, what do learners' **stories of experience** tell us about their progress?
3. How does this work inform our **constructions of self**?

To answer these questions, the approach to this thesis has been qualitative, using an interpretative approach to an ethnographic inquiry, exploring my own practice. I also described it as action research in nature, as it sought to identify solutions to a specified problem: how can curriculum tasks be adapted, considering the problem of disconnect. To achieve this, narrative inquiry has been employed to draw on learners' and colleagues' stories of experience, which creates a double hermeneutic because it not only seeks to answer the research questions but to also create suitable curriculum tasks, which shape learners' meaning-making.

This was achieved through collecting data from curriculum tasks, including the initial assessment task, written curriculum tasks, and the speaking and listening summative assessment. Data has also been collected through focus group conversations, through my own field journal documenting classroom discussions and staff discussions, and through conversations with a colleague. To analyse the data generated, I chose Reflexive Thematic Analysis, in the style of Braun and Clarke (2006; 2022), to ensure a reflexive approach, which was important to allow opportunities for action and change (Usher, 1996).

Largely speaking, the initial assessment task sought to answer question one. Question two is broader in scope and incorporates a larger dataset as a result, mainly the 'blog' curriculum task, field journal quotes, focus groups and summative assessment. Finally, question three is specifically focussed on

the end-data, captured through the summative assessment task at the end of the programme, which asked participants to reconsider their motivations for learning, what they felt they learnt, and if their aspirations were the same or changed since the beginning of the course.

I now address each question in turn, demonstrating how the findings (out-lined in the previous section chapter) inform the research questions framed here.

1. How could using **stories of experience and learners' own aspirations** help curriculum development for adult literacy learners?

During the Literature Review chapter, I identified significant gaps between an understanding of literacy as a social practice and the current Functional Skills English view in policy and practice, and identified a disconnect between these two models of literacy.

Taking a social practice approach to an adult literacy curriculum, rather using a purely functional skills model, allowed me to take account of adult literacy learners' motivations for study and future aspirations, put simply, their reasons for joining the programme. This enabled curriculum design which accounted for both their needs and their experience, as tasks could be delivered to support learning through a social practice approach, incorporating authentic and creative tasks.

Broadly speaking, the first finding exploring the impact of a *social practice approach* and in particular the importance of female learners' roles as mothers and carers, incorporating themes of *learning motivations and future aspirations* and *learning as a social act,* served to answer this question.

2. Whilst recognising literacy learning as a **social practice**, what do learners' **stories of experience** tell us about their progress?

Another significant gap in the literature that was identified was how writing from experience could be incorporated into a Functional Skills English curriculum and if this enabled learning, lifted some of the burden of learning new styles of writing; and whether learners are then able to mobilise their knowledge, skills and abilities into different the domains of home, study and work.

The study finds that *writing from experience* enables scaffolded learning which helps learners to learn new styles of writing, such as narratives and blogs, whilst removing a significant learning burden. This is because the learners only needed to focus on learning the new style of writing, with writing from experience removing barriers to writing about unrelatable scenarios.

Findings that serve to answer this question consider *writing from experience* and *confidence.* These findings incorporate the following themes: *learning that is real and relatable, and writing from experience; feeling safe and part of a community;* and *the importance of confidence and the myriad ways that confidence is articulated.*

3. How does this work inform our **constructions of self**?

Although much of the literature into adult learning generally, and adult literacy learning more specifically, highlights the importance of an adult's identity and sense of self, there was no recent evidence within the literature of this knowledge being incorporated in the Functional Skills English classroom. Therefore it is a significant gap in the literature into how adult's sense of self and constructions of self can be acknowledged and understood, through a social practice approach to literacy.

The study finds that successful literacy learning builds learners' confidence in themselves and their abilities, thereby increasing the likelihood of further engagement in literacy learning, both inside and

outside the classroom, and thereby increasing the likelihood of learners' perceptions of their success. Furthermore, this offered learners the opportunity to *restory* themselves, therefore changing our developing perceptions of 'self' and capabilities.

In exploring and answering this question, it was identified that the roles of women as mothers and/or carers is an important thread running throughout the inquiry. It is important that women's writing is valued, in and for itself, without feeling that it has to serve a larger purpose. The women were able to articulate that the experience of exploring their experiences through dialogue and through writing were profound, and the impact of such shows the power of literacies embedded in experience.

9.3 Recommendations

As a project focussed in and on my own practice, and as many other studies as explored in the Literature Review chapter have not impacted policy, I cannot assume I will affect change in national policy or influence how awarding bodies write curriculum tasks, nor can I assume the advocating of such education for adults will lead to a much-needed boost in government funding, so my recommendations mainly focus on how I can improve my own practice, and how it can be adopted by any other interested teachers who wish to emulate this in their practice.

However, if I was able to influence awarding bodies, it would be to ensure there are opportunities to write from experience written into awarding body curriculum tasks. For example, for the narrative task learners could write about an incident in their own life; for the letter they could write to their local member of parliament about local issues; and for the email they could write to a college course leader to inquire about a course of interest to them, as just a few examples.

9.3.1 Changing my view of myself and my practice

Just as I recognise that the programme of learning affected the participants and enabled them to change their view of themselves, this study has fundamentally changed not only my practice, but has challenged and shaped me and my pedagogy as a teacher.

9.3.2 Testing a theory

Having identified a problem from my practice, the importance of good modelling and scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1987) have been part of the solution. As noted, learners are expected to learn how to write in several different styles, any of which they may have been tested on, and several of which were new to them. To also have to write about an unfamiliar situation, especially if it is far removed from their own experiences, can add a considerable learning burden. This is true of learners in all sorts of settings: there is a significant learning burden when thinking about not only what to write but how to write it. By removing the burden of the content, by asking learners to write about familiar things when learning unfamiliar writing styles, then the learning burden can be reduced, enabling learners to focus solely on how to write in that particular format.

As adults enter education at a significant tipping point, whereby their motivations outweigh any adverse factors, it became important to collect data on adults' motivations for study. It served to ensure that I knew their motivations for study well enough, that the programme did not inadvertently tip them out of study also. This also served to develop suitable curriculum tasks, by which learners were able to develop their literacy practices in line with their personal motivations, without it becoming a 'personalised' course. As noted, collecting such data through the initial assessment task became a double hermeneutic, creating meaning both for the purpose it served, for the purpose of the research, as well as shaping the thinking of the learners.

When considering the data relevant to this exploration, it was my intention to build on this beginning, to use curriculum tasks within the classroom not only to meet learning needs but to generate narrative opportunities for the project. Due to the restrictions of the COVID-19 lockdowns through the course of the academic year of the project, these curriculum tasks were also restricted due to online learning. Previous classroom-based approaches, including real-life writing such as writing poems and stories, or writing letters to MPs or applying for jobs (an approach described in Scattergood, 2022a), also became more restricted. However, using a straightforward choice of either the awarding body given task (see appendix 6) or to write the same task from experience gave a clear model to test. Starting from an assumption that adults entering education after a significant gap have a larger learning burden in learning how to learn, does writing from experience relieve that burden enabling learners to learn how to write new types and styles of writing more effectively?

Within my analysis of the data, I found that learners were able to write in unfamiliar styles more effectively if the subject was familiar. This scaffolding approach also enabled learners to develop an approach that they should be able to replicate moving into new spheres of study, such as writing academically in higher education. For each new style of writing we explored a model example of the text type, such as a narrative or business report, and then defined the text type and identified its features. Learners were then able to write in that style, using their own experiences as the subject to lighten the learning burden. As the unfamiliar styles became more familiar, they were able to write unfamiliar texts suggested by the awarding body, for the purpose of passing the literacy writing test.

Literacy learning is a key part of education: we need to be literate to access subject matter across curricula. Resisting a narrow skills-based curriculum enabled developing voices and critical thinking, not only through writing but through creating safe dialogic spaces for enabling thought and meaning-making. Using real and authentic literacy practices in the classroom can aid creating an environment that reacts to current situations and individual learner needs, without being a bespoke or individualistic programme. Using authentic literacies model real-world practices, and enable real and authentic reading and writing. This can be used from first to final draft: although the COVID-19 lockdown prevented us from publishing class writing, as we had achieved during the pilot, emulating this means learners experience a real piece of writing from first to final draft, rather than a one-off piece of work which is marked and placed out-of-sight in their folder. Meaningful, authentic writing practices can emulate real-world publishing and real blogs, real classroom books, real letters which are sent, would all achieve this aim.

9.3.3 Changing the initial assessment task to capture learner motivations

Having said this will not influence policy, it can influence my local environment through sharing my learning. In my own setting, the initial assessment task used here has been incorporated into the initial assessment tools used for English courses. It should be noted, this initial assessment task was designed for adult learners, so it is not necessarily suitable for all learners, especially for younger learners, and may not always elicit the same level of information. However, the fact it has been adopted is positive for gathering information about learners' motivations for study and therefore understanding learning cohorts and for designing suitable curriculum tasks.

9.3.4 Women's writing matters

> *'There are four ways to write a women's life; the woman herself may tell it, in what she chooses to call an autobiography; she may tell it in what she chooses to call fiction; a biographer, woman or man, may write the woman's life in what is called a biography; or the woman may write the woman's life in advance of living it, unconsciously, and without recognising or naming the process.'*

Heilbrun, 1988, p.11.

As has been explored, taking a social practice approach, as opposed to a literacy-as-skills approach, offers opportunities for developing literacies beyond just skills, which offers both teachers and learners opportunities for meaning-making. How we tell our stories, weave in our experiences, and make our own meanings, is important. Our meaning-making has been shown to affect purpose, making us purposeful in our practice, as well as making our relationships meaningful and purposeful. Such an approach encourages literacies for pleasure, develops critical thinking, and a myriad of other reasons (see appendix 7, for 'why we should read' and 'types of writing in everyday life').

How we tell our stories, weave our experiences in, make our own meanings, has been a fundamental principle of this project. Through being able to explore the nature of human life through our own experiences, this informs our understanding and shapes our educational experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Giving the participants the chance to *restory* themselves has proved to be empowering, and I have suggested creates a fifth way to Heilburn's (1988) four reasons for writing a women's life. Learners are able to rewrite themselves: taking their previous stories of educational experiences and rewriting them as *stories of educational success.* This is not only key to learner progression, but to her understanding of herself and her ability to craft herself through narrative. After all, the stories we tell ourselves have the power to shape us in both positive and negative ways, and taking control of that narrative is key to taking agency over our own stories and own lives.

The reason agency has been so key in this experience is because they have done this work on themselves: they are not subjects under a microscope being looked at, they have been examining themselves and their practice, just as I have been examining myself and my own practice. As joint participants in making meaning from the experience, each of us is empowered to step forward into our future aspirations and claim new stories for ourselves. Women's voice have historically been further from power, and welcoming a diversity of voices can not only empower but educate us in ways we could not perceive through a skills-focussed curriculum. Women's writing challenges stereotypes, invites empathy and understanding, challenges traditional gender roles, and provides role-models for future generations. If we value our voices, then we can enable our children to value their voices too. Heilburn (1988) suggests the hero's journey is just for men, yet this project has demonstrated how women can write their own heroes' journeys too. If learning is a journey, then questing forth and learning through sharing our experiences has deepened our learning in ways, again, that a skills-focussed curriculum cannot. We can reject the roles suggested by Heilburn (1988) of cook, of housekeeper, of child watcher, and name ourselves as mothers, as carers, but also as readers, as writers, as learners and as educated too.

9.3.5 Teachers should have the opportunity to research their own practice

Whilst I am unable to affect change at a policy level, due to my role within my college as an advanced practitioner for research and externally due to my roles in further education research spaces, I do have capacity to share my learning and to influence other practitioners. Through opportunities such as our annual ResearchMeet, through internal research-focussed CPD, and through supporting other practitioner researchers, I am able to promote the importance of teachers researching their own practice (Stenhouse, 1975).

Writing authentically and from experience was something I was already exploring (see, Scattergood, 2022a and b, and 2023), but until now had been untested. Many teachers in further and adult education do not have the time, opportunity or inclination (Scattergood, 2022c) to explore or read educational research outside their domains, but the opportunity to investigate our own practice to test and aid curriculum design is an important one. Levin (2006) argues that educational research

does not 'travel well', which is borne out by the perception of invisibility of research in further education (Solvason & Elliott, 2013), which is good justification for teacher inquiry. I have previously suggested that further education practitioners suffer from imposter syndrome when considering themselves as teachers (Scattergood, 2019b): vocational teachers are plumbers, hairdressers, engineers, graphic designers, etc, first and foremost. Therefore, an opportunity to investigate our own practice is an empowering opportunity to shape us as teachers (Scattergood, 2022c). Stenhouse (1975) notes, "It's not enough that teachers' work should be studied: they need to study it themselves", but I suggest in studying it themselves, further education practitioners can claim their expertise as teachers. There is an important difference between teachers being able to say I have changed my practice and being able to explain how and why (McNiff, 2017), and teachers acting on hunches that they feel might be right.

Finally, further education is considered by many to be transformative (Duckworth and Smith, 2019). It offers new opportunities: not only second but sometimes third or fourth chances. By embracing this opportunity within our research, practitioners can emulate the approach outlined above, to enable their learners to explore themselves through practitioner-inquiry, as well as the researcher, blurring the lines between researched and researcher. As Levin (2006) notes, the teacher researcher is an insider, "with a participant role in the research" (p.19), whereas here the learners are also identified as participants in research, not merely as objects of the research. After all, it is well recognised that in social sciences such as educational research, both the researcher and the researched are interpreters and creating meaning through the work (Usher, 1996).

9.4 Limitations of study

One limitation was the use of focus groups, as I had favoured conversations rather than structured or semi-structured interviews. A benefit of not asking fixed questions was that the conversation flowed more naturally than it would have in an interview, generating some interesting themes that may not have been generated otherwise. There was a risk that the data would not be sufficient to meet the needs of the project, so I had to be careful that I did ask learners about their experiences with writing from experience. I did not want to control the conversation, which put it at risk of going off topic or being highjacked by more outspoken learners. However, this is where I realised the meaning making taking place for learners too. Using reflexive thematic analysis enabled me to see past my own bias and to see everything as potential data. Within one of the focus groups, I had originally felt a learner had side-lined the conversation to focus on a topic of conversation of her own: men's mental health. Through using reflexive thematic analysis, I was able to identify that, just because it did not answer my research questions, that it was not an important and meaningful conversation to have. As a mother of a boy, it was an area that was of deep concern to my learner and the conversation gave her the opportunity to explore it. I have developed an understanding how allowing learners their own space for discussing their experiences enabled their meaning-making, not just my own.

Another possible limitation is there may be some issues with tone when writing for learners, as they move on to new learning experiences. Writing from experience was a scaffolded task to ease the burden of learning when learning new writing styles. These usually took the form of a first-person account, which would usually be inappropriate to use in access to higher education studies. Whilst it was my intention that learners are finding out ways to scaffold their writing towards writing in new ways, once they have left my classroom I no longer can influence their development of writing through this method. Whilst I remain hopeful (and anecdotally sure) that most learners know enough of the process to be able to replicate this, by accessing suitable models of writing to emulate, to practise writing through different styles, I am by no means certain this is the case without further study. In the Literature Review chapter, I noted the literature shows there is a

significant gap on understanding how learners *mobilise* their literacy learning into other domains. Due to the scope of this project, I have been unable to test forward to see if this learning cohort were able to mobilise their learning affectively, but this could be suggested for further study.

9.5 Suggestions for future study

9.5.1 Learning this way, does it help learners to write academically for HE study?

Part of the intention of this study was to explore ways to help adult literacy learners learn in ways that stay with them, which they can build on, and therefore hopefully help with further studies and career paths. Many of the learners were interested in progressing into higher education studies, usually through a college-based Access to Higher Education programme. It was my intention to shape the curriculum in a way which develops knowledge and skills which learners are able to use in different domains. Although this is a large educational issue, explored by much greater thinkers than me (see Lave and Wenger, 1991), it is particularly interesting to consider how knowledge and skills move into different areas of education and/or work. I am specifically interested in how learners might adapt their writing in new domains.

Some of the participants in this study have gone on to higher education, so a follow-up study would have been really interesting to ascertain how learners feel their learning has served them since, especially as academic writing is different to the types of writing included in the Functional Skills qualification. Unfortunately, this exploration is beyond the scope of this project. Anecdotally, from recent conversations and communications, it certainly seems to have aided these learners' progression but without a rigorous follow-up study it is impossible to say. One way of testing this could be to explore how learners are able to use good models of academic writing to aid their own, and how they are able to further improve their writing independently, without the support of a trained literacy teacher.

9.5.2 Writing from experience for autistic learners

There was one piece of data that really stood out for me but, as it was not part of a larger collective voice, I felt unable to make any assumptions based on it. This was the suggestion from an autistic learner that it was her autism that made writing imagined scenarios difficult, presumably due to a literal view of the world, and therefore writing from experience made this style of learning possible for her. This could be significantly interesting to inform adult literacy education and would warrant further study, as a result.

9.5.3 What about the men?

As has been noted, the majority of my adult literacy learners are female and, anecdotally, it appears this is common to adult literacy classes generally. Barton (2007) even describes literacy itself as gendered. Although it was not intentional, this became a thesis about women and about women's writing, due to who participated in the project. However, this raises several new questions, not least, did the men actively choose not to participate or was it chance? If they chose actively not to participate, it is possible that the approach of embracing stories of experience is also gendered, something that may suit women's temperaments more than men's.

Furthermore, if it was not an active choice but something based in circumstance, would engaging men in such a project draw similar conclusions? It is impossible to know, without carrying out such a project, but it would be very interesting to know what barriers there may be to men's participation, such as their employment commitments, as these may also relate to why less men attend the courses overall.

On that note, a larger-scale study into who attends adult literacy (and adult numeracy) classes and why would be a very interesting study, and could possibly aid future curriculum design to better meet the needs of a whole population.

9.5.4 COVID-19 influences

Finally, it should be noted that this study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and, as a result, the classes were delivered in a different manner from usual, for example, all classes took place on campus rather than out in the community. It must be recognised that this will have affected who attended these classes at that time and who is present tells as much as a story as who is absent. Therefore, it should be possible to repeat the study, using the same approach, when class delivery is not impacted by COVID-19 and it would be interesting to see if the same conclusions could be drawn.

9.6 Chapter summary

This chapter has revisited the research aim and questions and explored the main findings, summarising themes in line with the questions considered. Whilst I have recognised it is a focussed practitioner project, with a purpose of developing my own practice, I have explored possible recommendations arising from the study, for my own practice and hopefully in the influence of other practitioners, mainly: testing a theory of teaching literacy through a social practice lens, the importance of women's writing, and the importance of practitioner research in further education. I have explored some limitations of the study and made some suggestions, arising from this inquiry, for future study.

The key purpose of most of my writing over the past four years is to influence other further and adult education practitioners to either say: that is interesting and informs my practice, or, that is interesting and therefore I can investigate my own practice, which I hope this thesis also serves.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1. CONSENT FORM / PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET AND ETHICS APPROVAL

Consent Form & Participant Information Sheet

University of Sunderland

Consent Form

Study title:

The thread running through: weaving everyday literacy into curriculum design

Participant code: _____

I am over the age of 18	
I have read and understood the attached study information and, by signing below, I consent to participate in this study	
I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study without giving a reason at any time during the study itself.	
I understand that I also have the right to change my mind about participating in the study for a period of 2 weeks after participating in the questionnaire, focus group or interview.	

University of Sunderland

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Study Title:

The thread running through: weaving everyday literacy into curriculum design

What is the purpose of the study?

This study seeks to explore a consideration of everyday literacy practice in curriculum design. There is a disconnect between 'college-based' adult literacy and the reality of learners' everyday literacy practices (Appleby, 2010). As a result of a change in qualification delivery to Functional Skills in 2010, teaching has moved to a more reductive narrow delivery of 'standards' instead of curriculum, which encourages what Freire (1972) would term a 'banking system of education'. The result is fewer links are made in reference to adults' own everyday lives and literacies.

Who can take part in the study?

Any interested basic skill staff/colleagues and my past and current students.

Do I have to take part?
No, this is completely voluntary.

Participation is entirely voluntary. If you change your mind about taking part in the study, **you can withdraw from all or part of the study without giving a reason and without penalty**. Once you have participated in an interview, focus group or questionnaire, you can still change your mind. If you notify me within two weeks your answers and data will be removed from the study. After this, it will no longer be able to extract your data because the data will have been analysed and anonymised.

What will happen to me if I take part?
I will ask to conduct a semi-structured interview with you. Due to current national restrictions due to Covid-19, this will be either in Zoom or Microsoft teams, whichever is preferable to you, and the interview will be recorded to enable me to transcribe your data. This video will be saved in a password access only secure way and will be deleted as soon as the transcript is completed. If you request to, you will have the opportunity to view the transcript to check for accuracy.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
None that I am aware of.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?
I hope you will gain a different perspective on what happens in your classes, and those of your peers, and be able to discuss what happens in the classroom based on fact rather than memory.

What if something goes wrong?
You can speak to me or you can withdraw from the project.

If you change your mind about participation, please contact me by email to cancel your participation. If you feel unhappy about the conduct of the study, please contact me immediately or the Chairperson of the University of Sunderland Research Ethics Group, whose contact details are given below.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?
Any information about you which is collected will be strictly confidential. Data will be anonymised before being used. It will comply with GDPR and BERA ethical research guidelines and principles.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The data will used for my research thesis. If suitable, the results may also be presented at academic conferences and/or written up for publication in peer reviewed academic journals.

Who is organising and funding the research?
This is an independent project which I am undertaking as part of a research MPhil (possibly PhD) programme.

Who has reviewed the study?

The University of Sunderland Research Ethics Group has reviewed and approved the study.

Contact for further information

Kerry Scattergood (conducting this MPhil/PhD research)
Email: Kerry.Scattergood@research.sunderland.ac.uk

Professor Trish Spedding (Supervisor)
Email: trish.spedding@sunderland.ac.uk

Doctor John Fulton (Chair of the University of Sunderland Research Ethics Group, University of Sunderland)
Email: john.fulton@sunderland.ac.uk
Phone: 0191 515 2529

University of Sunderland

Downloaded: 06/04/2022
Approved: 07/04/2020

Kerry Scattergood
School of Education
Programme: MPhil

Dear Kerry

PROJECT TITLE: Bridging the gap: investigating everyday literacy in curriculum design
APPLICATION: Reference Number 006711

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 07/04/2020 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

- University research ethics application form 006711 (form submission date: 06/04/2020); (expected project end date: N\A).

If during the course of the project you need to deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation please email ethics.review@sunderland.ac.uk

For more information please visit: https://www.sunderland.ac.uk/research/governance/researchethics/

Yours sincerely

APPENDIX 2. RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS

	Participants	IA	emails	class task	Summ	field journal	focus groups
1	Isabelle		y				
2	Eve	y	y	y			
3	Samara	y	y	y		y	
4	Sarai	y				y	
5	Maya	y		y			
6	Kelly	y				y	
7	Josie	y					
8	Alexis	y		y		y	
9	Li Xiu	y				y	
10	Sarah			y			
11	Lailah	y					
12	Taliyah	y					
13	Sofia	y					
14	Tamika		y		y	y	y
15	Sita				y	y	y
16	Daisy				y	y	y
17	Meera				y	y	
18	June	y			y	y	y
19	Dominique	y		y	y	y	y
20	Tori	y			y	y	y

Table 2 - Learners and their contributions, colour-coded by class

Participants	Field journal	Conversation one	Conversation two
Colleague one		y	y
Colleague two	y		
Colleague three	y		
My mother	y		

Table 3 - Other contributors

APPENDIX 3. SAMPLES OF DATA

Yeah I.
I think so, personally, I don't
know what you guys think.
XXXXX, XXXXX, Um, but I think once
we can actually have a focus point,
and with regards to.
Just putting yourself in, like, I
said about, like, you know I recalled.
I recalled my experience of (name of place).
What I wrote about was nothing
like (name of place),
but I use the,
I used that particular restaurant and
then expanded from that one
particular experience that I had,
but expanded it into my own creativity.

Excellent, anyone else want to add to that?
XXXXX, yeah?

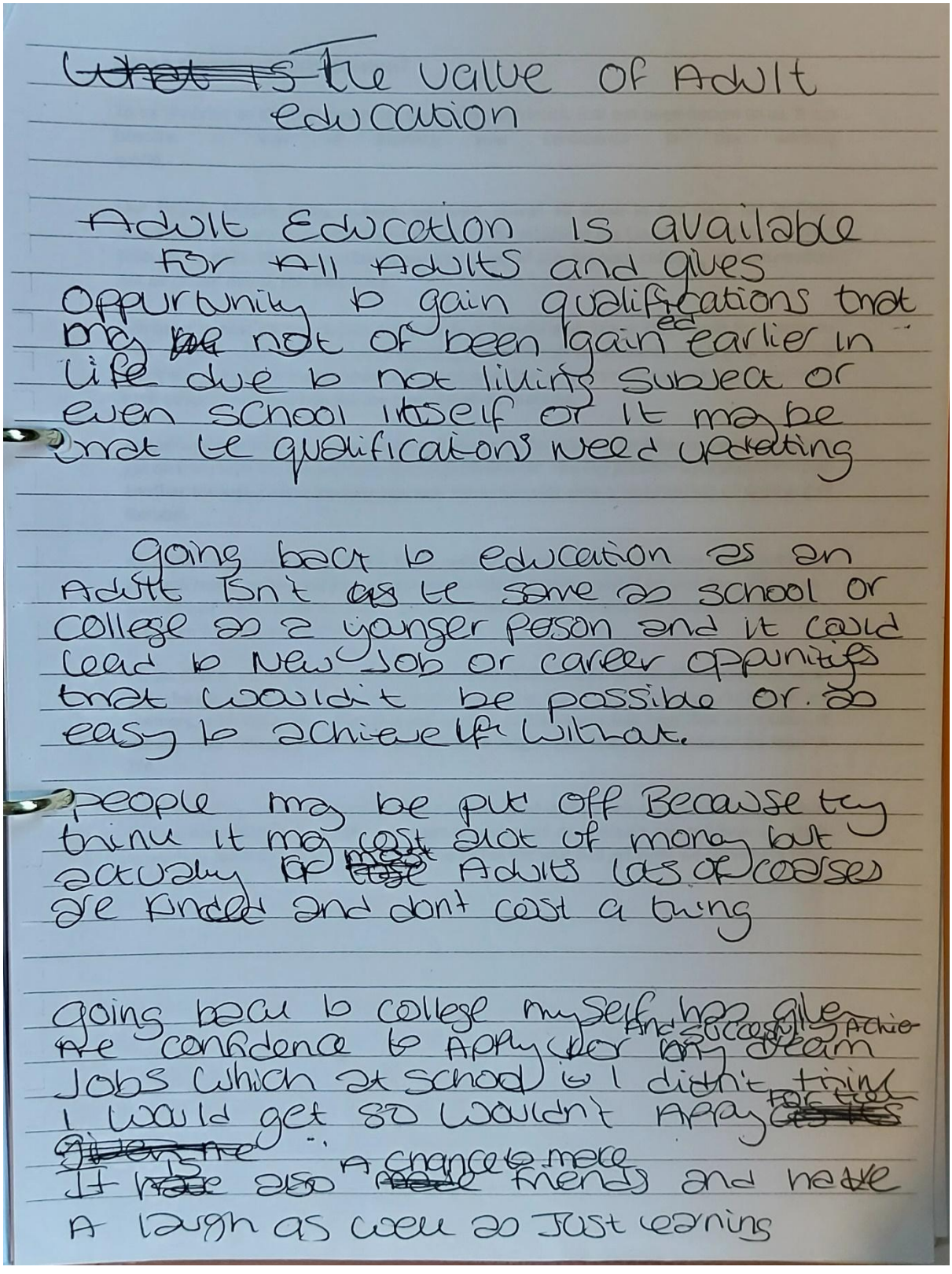
When it comes to writing anything really,
personal experiences makes it so much easier.
Making it more personal but
not too detailed, period.

To me. Yeah, definitely think.
Yeah, it makes it so much simpler.

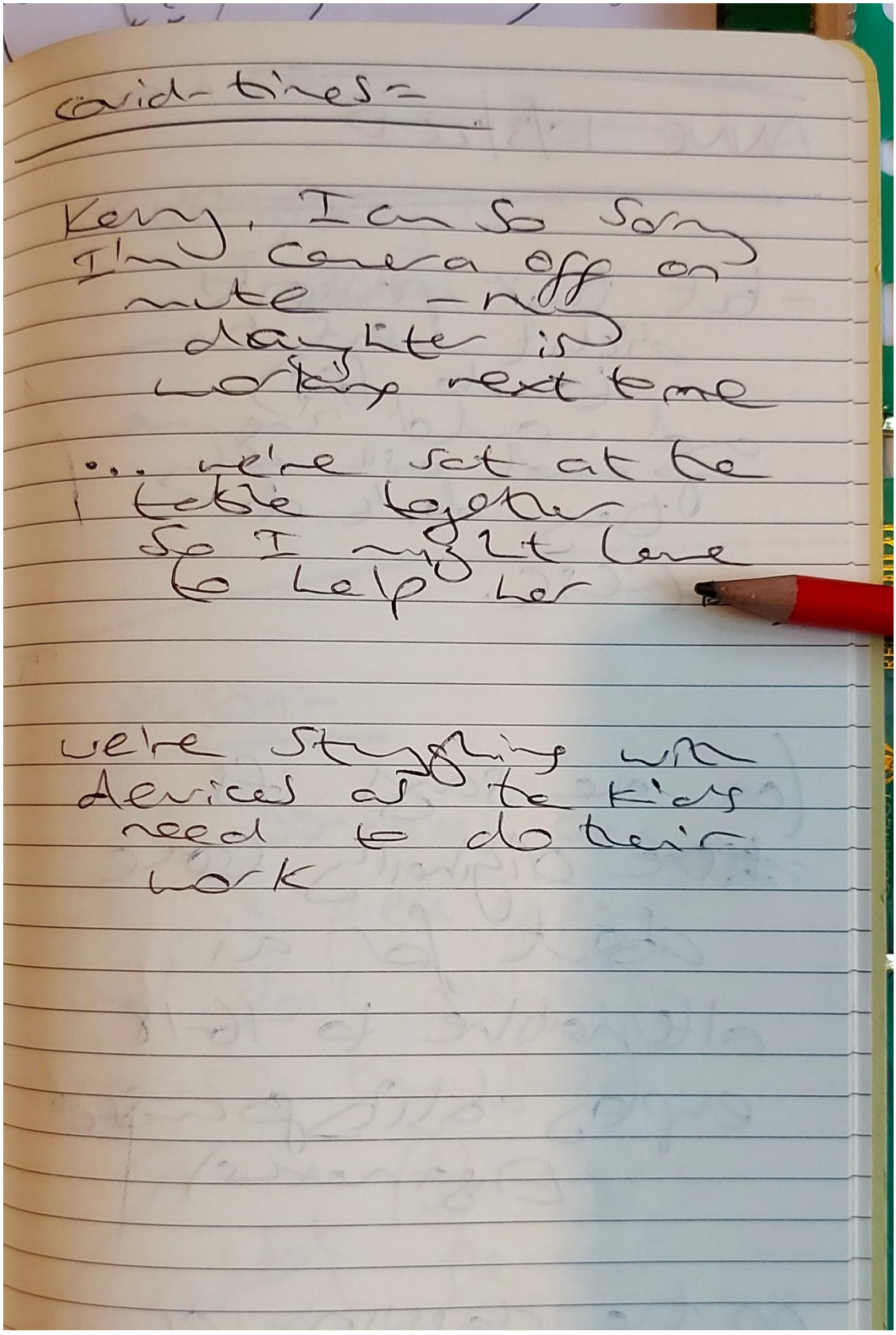
even though they may not seem relatable.
We've all had a terrible holiday.
And complain about it,
and we've all had a great experience.
And not raved about it.
And I think the conversation kind
of flows from there, doesn't it?

I think with English, why it's,
it's putting everyday life,
articulating everyday life.
Um I think it's articulating from
what's going on in the news.
You know,
having those debates on the
news but able to articulate it in and
into the English language as well to
bring it into everyday life as opposed to
Staying silent and not having those debates,
I think that's where the
debates actually come in.
As well,
we are able to actually extend
our language and extend our,
Um, extend our knowledge
Like the layers of an onion?
Using language, we can extend our
Knowledge, if we want to.
If we want study or look at it.

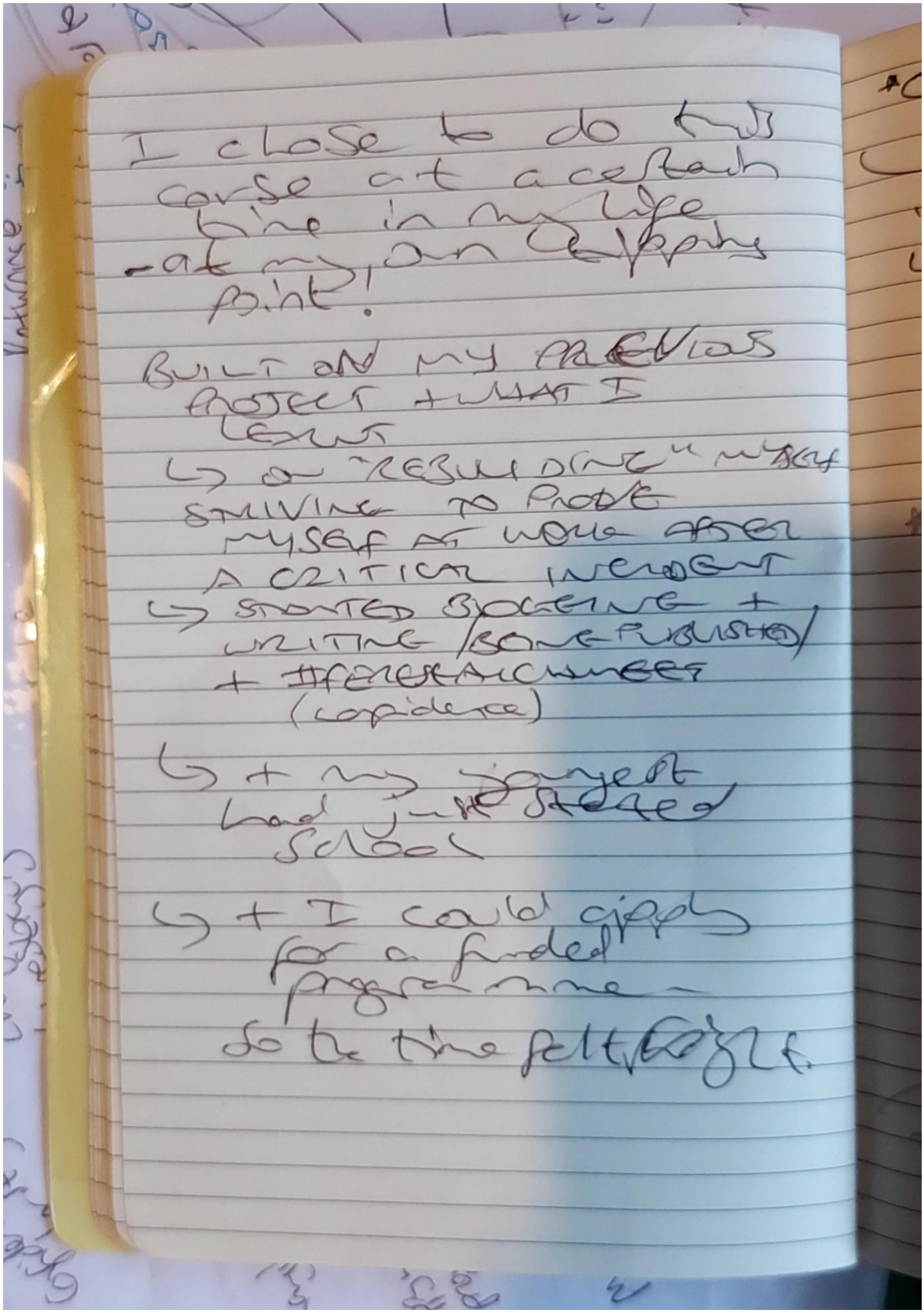
Screenshots of a sample of transcript from focus group one (discussing writing from experience)



Photograph of learners' writing (blog on the value of adult education)



Photograph of field journal (sample of capturing learners' comments)



Photograph of field journal (sample of capturing my own thoughts)

APPENDIX 4. DEVELOPMENT OF THEMES – CODING TO THEMES FOR RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND MIND MAPS OF THEMES

Coding to themes to research question one:

- How could using **stories of experience and learners' own aspirations** help curriculum development for adult literacy leavers?

redundancy	Aspirations/motivations	Supporting children's learning
Previous educational experiences	Last chance	Role as a carer, affects other opportunities
New opportunities	Better myself	Existing quals along time ago or from home country
Returning to learning	gain qualifications	More for myself / Raising kids well, values
future educational aspirations	Getting older; thinking about the future	Brush up on skills
the ability to be successful	Change, linked to Covid impact/effects	Intergenerational learning opportunities
Change life / Children growing up	Roles (as women)	Understanding learning isn't just something that happens in schools
Future employment aspirations	Role as a mother / Identity: who we are	Lockdown effects: supporting children
Gateway: needed as entry quals	Being a mother	Lifelong learning; social learning
future aspirations / English second language	Children as motivating factor	Breaking the cycle of intergenerational issues

Figure 6 - Coding grouped, aiming to answer research question one

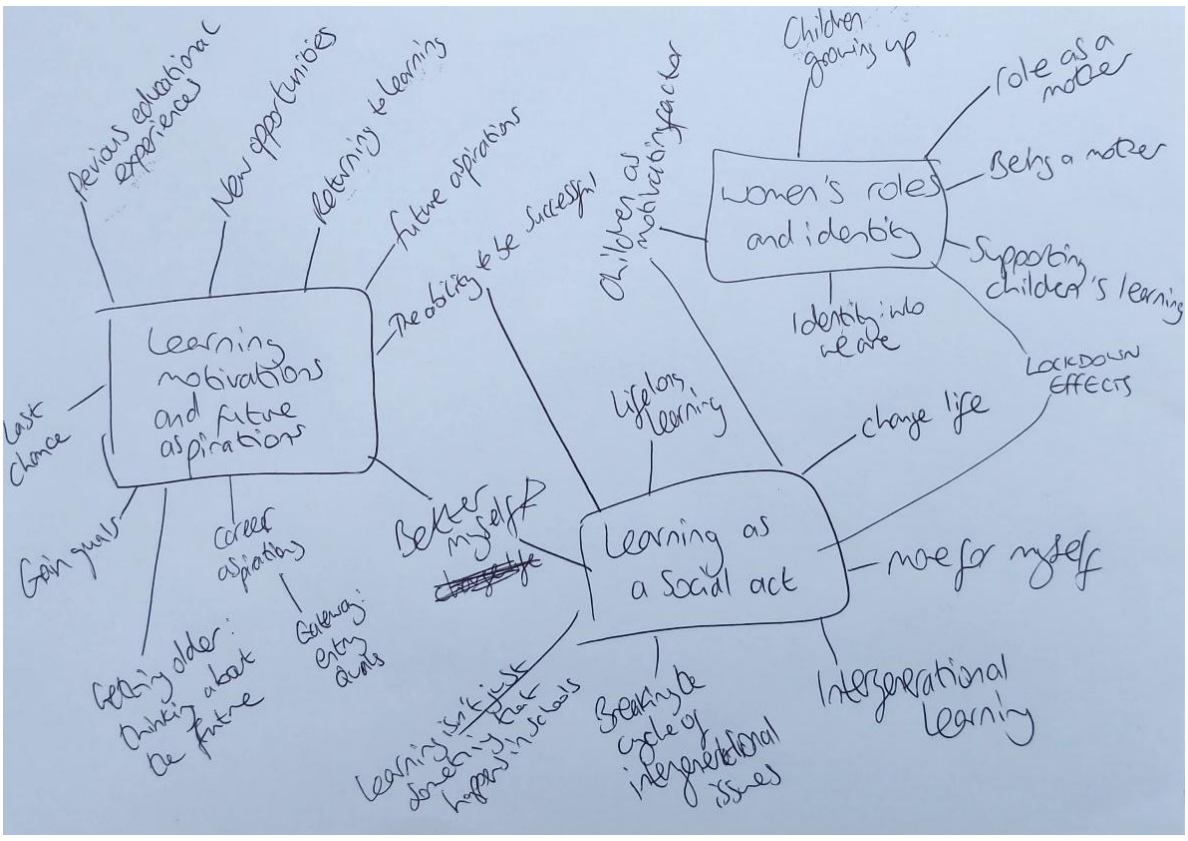


Figure 7 - Early mind map identifying possible themes, aiming to answer research question one

Coding to themes to research question two:

- Whilst recognising literacy learning as a **social practice,** what do learners' **stories of experience** tell us about their **progress**?

Helps other learning	trust	Reading for pleasure	Being interested helps learning	Pleasure in learning
Confidence (in writing)/sharing her story	Confidence	Personal confidence	Difficulty writing outside experience	
Group dynamics	Easier to write what we know	Group respect	Confidence using Teams/Zoom/technology, ability to learn online	
Brush up on skills	More comfortable with certain women, finding common culture	safe space	relationships	
Confidence (in speech)	Personal aim of being with others	Writing from our own perspective	Writing for pleasure	
value in learning	Impact of learning	difficulty writing if haven't experience	English as second language, confidence	
Not alone	Collective energy	Not being judged	Autism: possible barrier due to literal interpretations of the world	
Isolated (lockdown)	Feeling comfortable sharing/speaking up	Share safely	imposter syndrome	
Supportive space; women	Safer in small groups	Creativity	Confidence/lack of confidence	
Able to be ourselves	Writing is thinking	Supporting MH	Examples of unhealthy habits that form to help support mental health; how relationships support instead of the unhealthy habits	

Figure 8 - Coding grouped, aiming to answer research question two

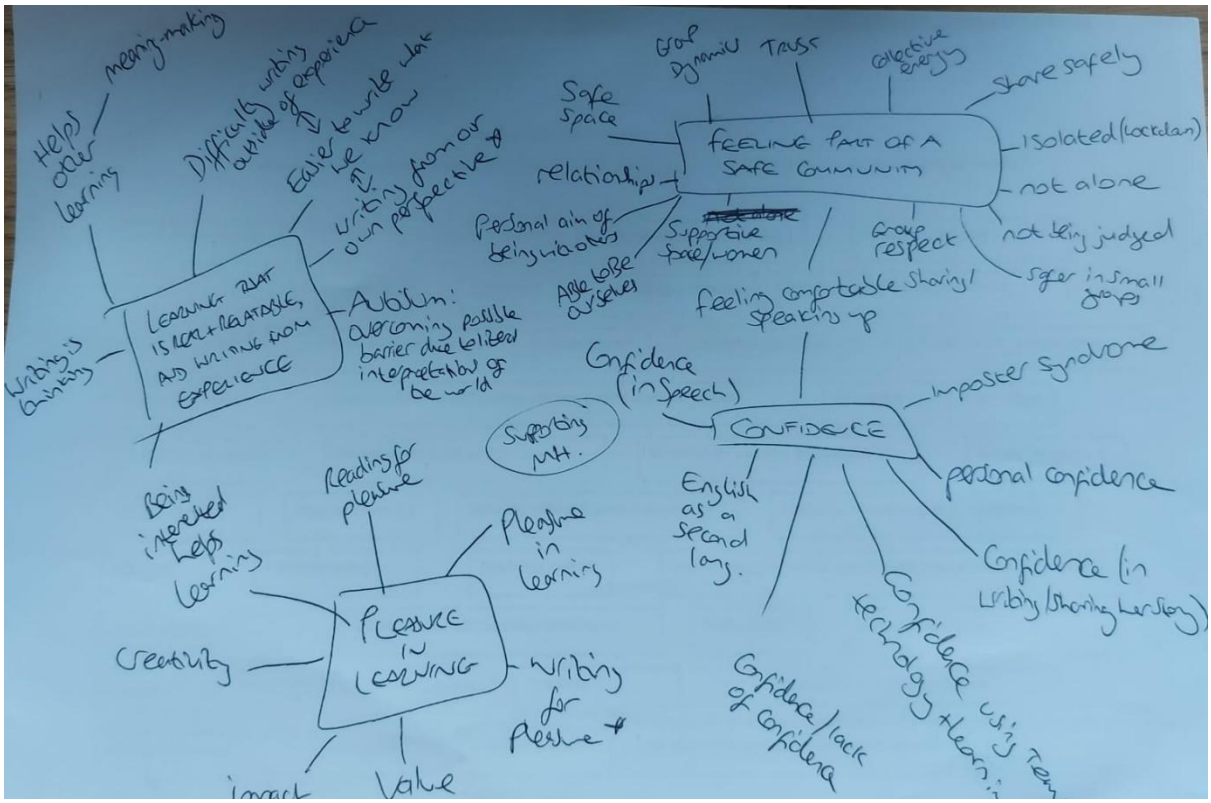


Figure 9 - Early mind map identifying possible themes, aiming to answer research question two

Coding to themes to research question three:

- How does this work inform our **constructions of self**?

Previous educational experiences; changing story/restorying self.	New opportunities	the ability to be successful	
Returning to learning	Change life	Aspires to more; not 'just'	Guilt as a mother
New opportunities	joy in learning coming back	Purpose; pleasure	Confidence (in writing)/sharing her story
Impact of learning	Needed as entry quals; change of aspirations	Future employment aspirations	
English as second language; confidence; future aspirations	love learning; purpose	Better myself; gain qualifications	
Aspirations/motivations	Returning learner; motivated learner	Lockdown effect; reflecting on purpose	
identity	Employability	New opportunities	English as a second language; transferring qualifications/skills
Changing goals	Adult education; learning to better ourselves	achieving	value of education
Learning from others	relaxing	changing	happy with progress	Confidence in exam ability
moving on	retraining	role as a mother	future educational plans	Self-love

Figure 10 - Coding grouped, aiming to answer research question three

Figure 11 - Early mind map identifying possible themes, aiming to answer research question three

3.3 Narrative

This is essentially a story of a day or an event, most likely to be most effectively written in a chronological order.

Centres should be aware that the question brief may refer directly to a narrative but may also ask candidates to write *'the story of their day'* or the *'sequence of events'* or something similar.

For example:

You have started a work placement for a company that sells VIP tickets to the most exclusive restaurant and nightclub in the UK. One of your tasks is to go on the VIP experience and then write a description for the company website, to persuade people to book the experience.

Write approximately 300 words telling the story of your experience.

You should cover:

- *how you were treated in the restaurant*
- *what the food and service were like*
- *what made the nightclub so special*
- *which celebrity guests were there*
- *the highlight of the day*
- *why people should book the experience.*

Figure 12 - Awarding body suggested narrative writing task: VIP restaurant

3.7 Blog

A blog is a web page that aims to inform the reader about a particular topic, often written in an informal or conversational style.

A blog is typically characterised by less formal language than is contained in an article, but it has much of the same format and structure requirements: a title, an introductory paragraph and a conclusion, and it may or may not contain additional elements such as subheadings or bullet points.

A typical example of a question is as follows:

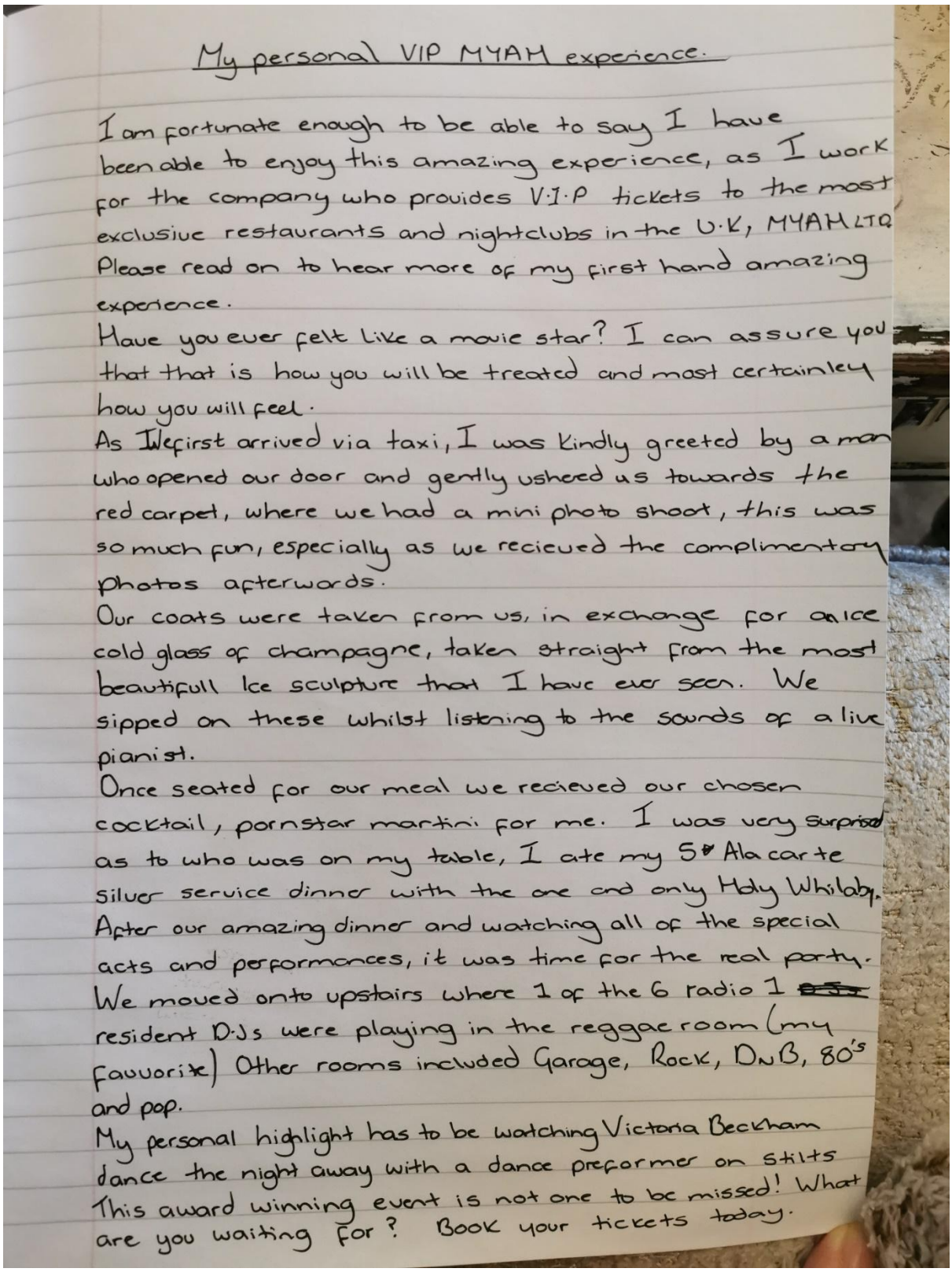
Write a blog aimed at people between the ages of 18 and 25 discussing the role and usefulness of libraries in today's society.

Your blog should cover:

Services they offer (free lending of books, computer and internet access, classes etc)
Who makes use of them
Should they be free to access?
Are they a waste of council money?
Would people suffer if they no longer existed?

You should aim to write approximately 300 words.

Figure 13 - Awarding body suggested blog writing task: library task



My personal VIP MYAH experience.

I am fortunate enough to be able to say I have been able to enjoy this amazing experience, as I work for the company who provides V.I.P tickets to the most exclusive restaurants and nightclubs in the U.K, MYAH LTD Please read on to hear more of my first hand amazing experience.

Have you ever felt like a movie star? I can assure you that that is how you will be treated and most certainley how you will feel.

As We first arrived via taxi, I was kindly greeted by a man who opened our door and gently ushered us towards the red carpet, where we had a mini photo shoot, this was so much fun, especially as we recieved the complimentary photos afterwards.

Our coats were taken from us, in exchange for a ice cold glass of champagne, taken straight from the most beautifull Ice sculpture that I have ever seen. We sipped on these whilst listening to the sounds of a live pianist.

Once seated for our meal we recieved our chosen cocktail, pornstar martini for me. I was very surprised as to who was on my table, I ate my 5* Ala carte silver service dinner with the one and only Holy Whilaby. After our amazing dinner and watching all of the special acts and performances, it was time for the real party. We moved onto upstairs where 1 of the 6 radio 1 ~~BBC~~ resident D.Js were playing in the reggae room (my favuorite) Other rooms included Garage, Rock, DnB, 80's and pop.

My personal highlight has to be watching Victoria Beckham dance the night away with a dance preformer on stilts This award winning event is not one to be missed! What are you waiting for? Book your tickets today.

Figure 14 - An example of the narrative task: written from experience by Dominique, based on the awarding body curriculum task

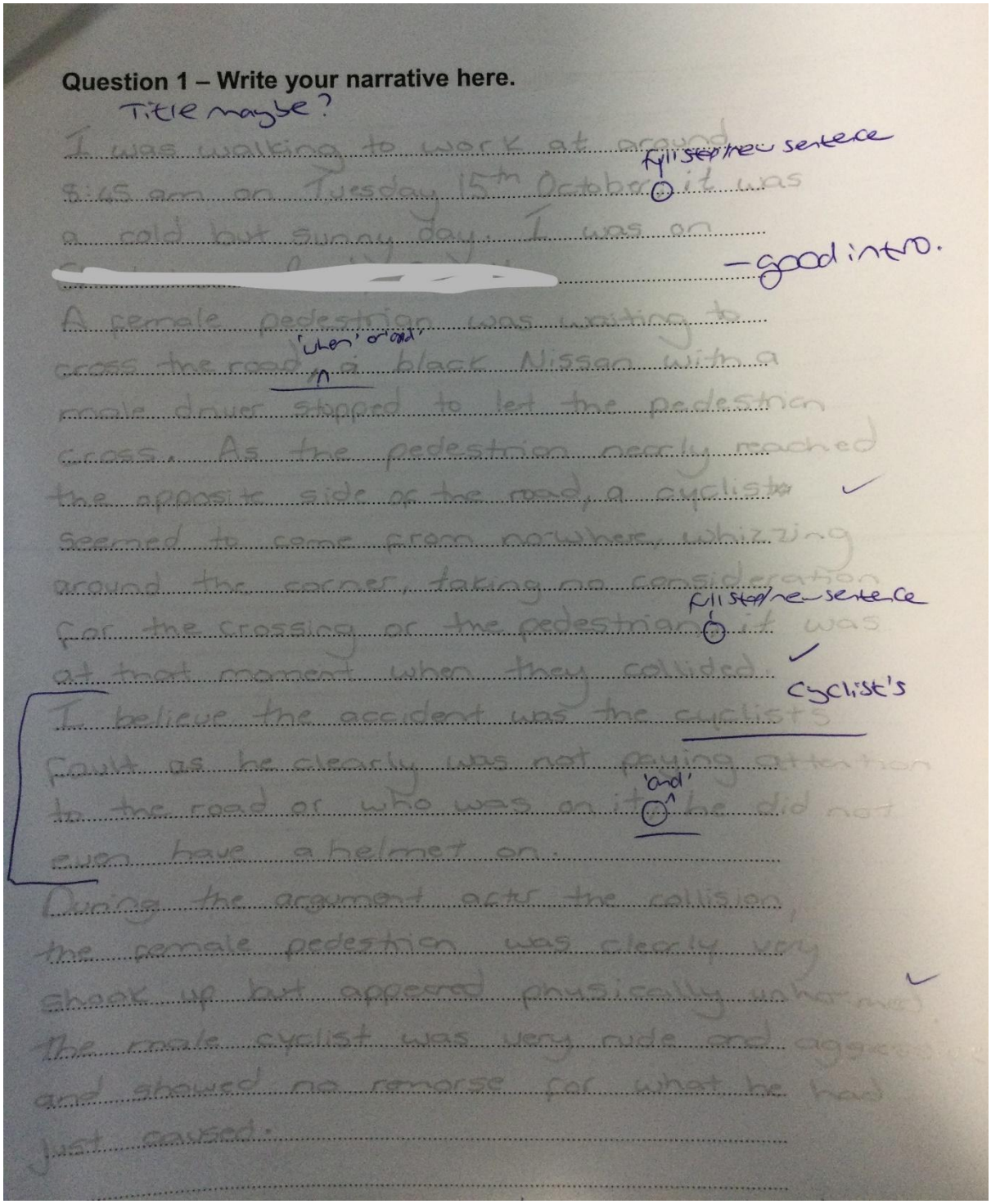


Figure 15 - A variation on the narrative task: written from experience by another participant

What's the value of education?

Education is very important. It helps you to grow, develop new skills and improve your chances of getting better job in future. Studying is not just important for educational development, but also builds personal skills, confidence, competence and self-esteem. Education helps to shape who you are, where you are and what can you become.

I have always wanted to study at university. I was a very good student while I was in school and college. All my education was done abroad, so being a female I wasn't allowed to travel very far in different cities to study in university.

There is no age limit to study and it's never too late to start studying again. Going to college again in later life is a scary thought. But as soon as you take first step, things will start becoming easier. There is a lot of courses available at the college part time, evening classes and weekends. Adult education courses have opened a hope of my dream coming true to become a graduate.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO START AGAIN, IT'S OUR TIME TO SHINE!

Figure 16 - A screenshot of a 'blog' on the value of adult education (sample of learner writing). Available at:

Kerry's Adult English Class – A place to practise and share our writing (wordpress.com)

What is the value of adult education?

Education opens up the mind to possibilities. Without it, we can't grow or develop ourselves. It's a great opportunity to progress later on in life.

I take an English class that I really enjoy. I didn't do very well in school. I struggled to learn and take information in large groups. Now I'm an adult and a mother of one, I see how education is important.

I feel like I have been given a second chance. For whatever reason, many people don't finish school or college like they may have wished. We all have busy lives with family and work, which can often get in the way of our educational goals. I'm so happy I had the option to go back to college and learn.

It gives me great pleasure, confidence and self esteem to be in college and learning.

Now it's my time to shine!

Figure 17 - A screenshot of a 'blog' on the value of adult education (sample of learner writing). Available at:

Kerry's Adult English Class – A place to practise and share our writing (wordpress.com)

APPENDIX 7. EXAMPLES OF CLASSROOM TASKS, EXPLORING A SOCIAL PRACTICE APPROACH TO LITERACY

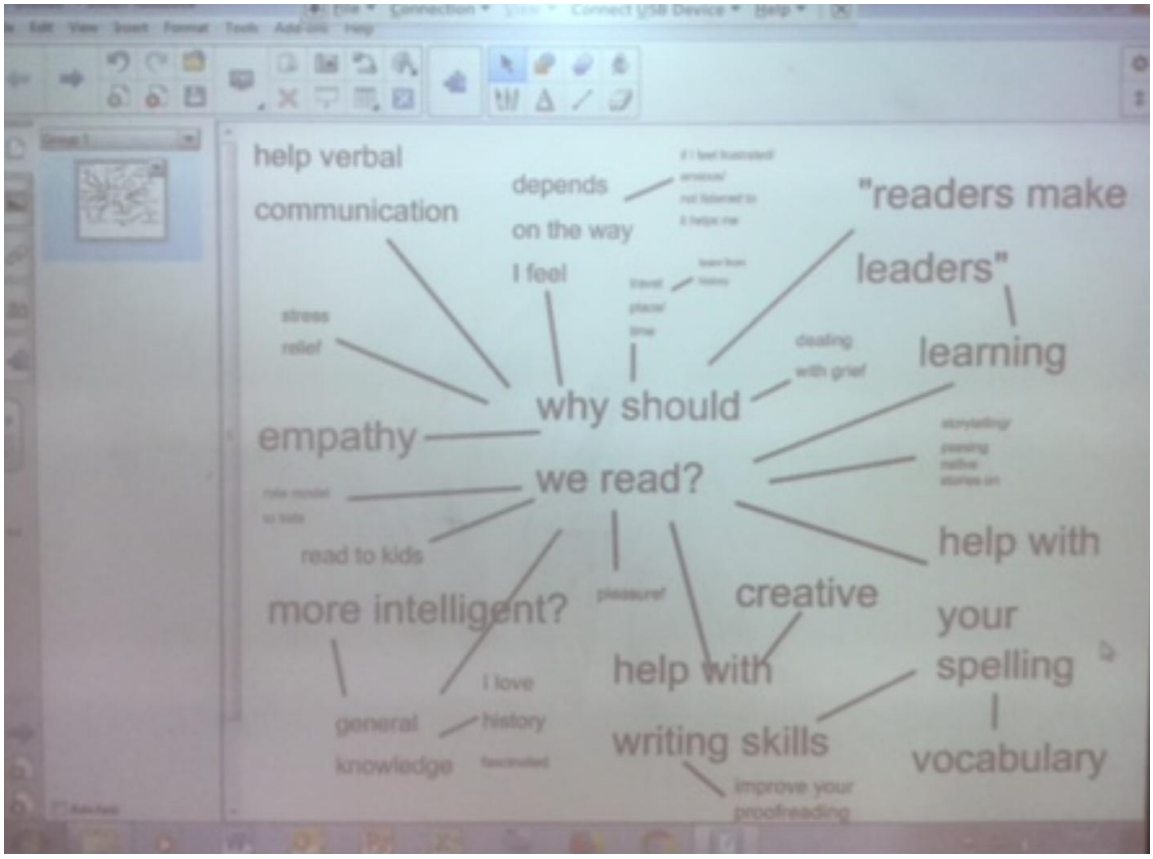


Figure 18 - Photograph of a class brainstorm of 'why we read', inspired by 'seventeen reasons for children's books'

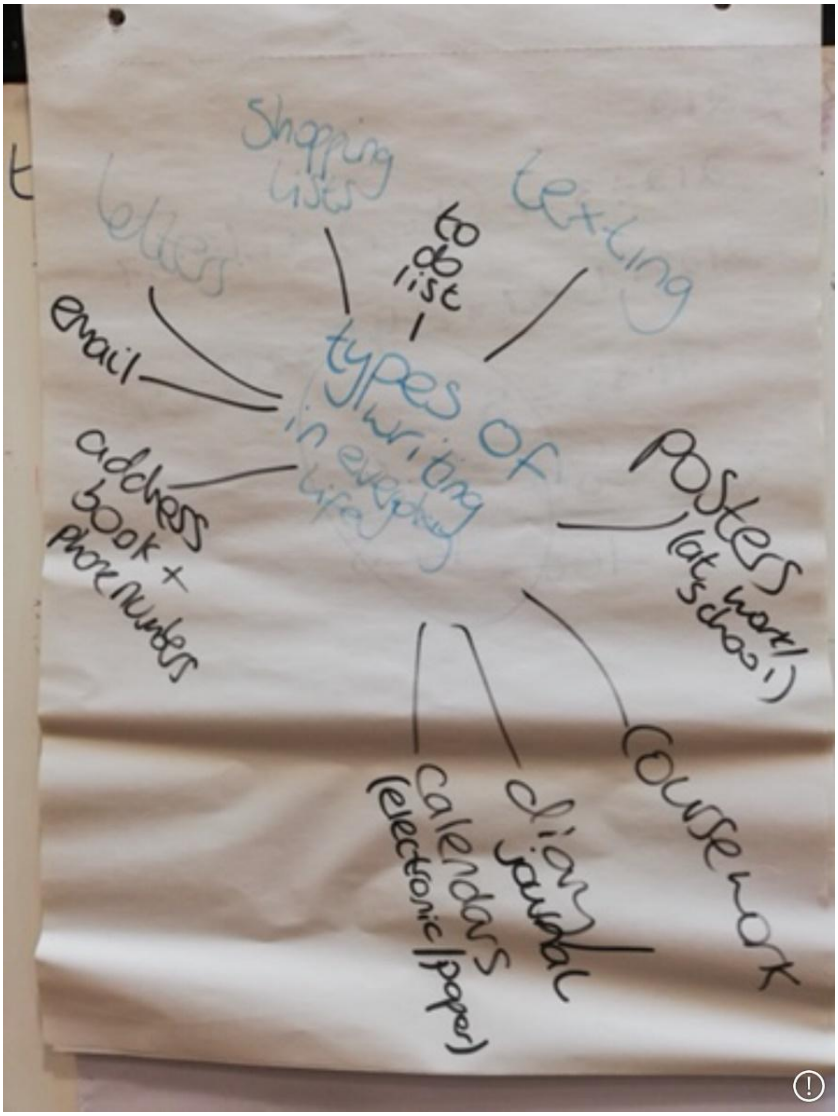


Figure 19 - Photograph of class brainstorm of real writing types from everyday life

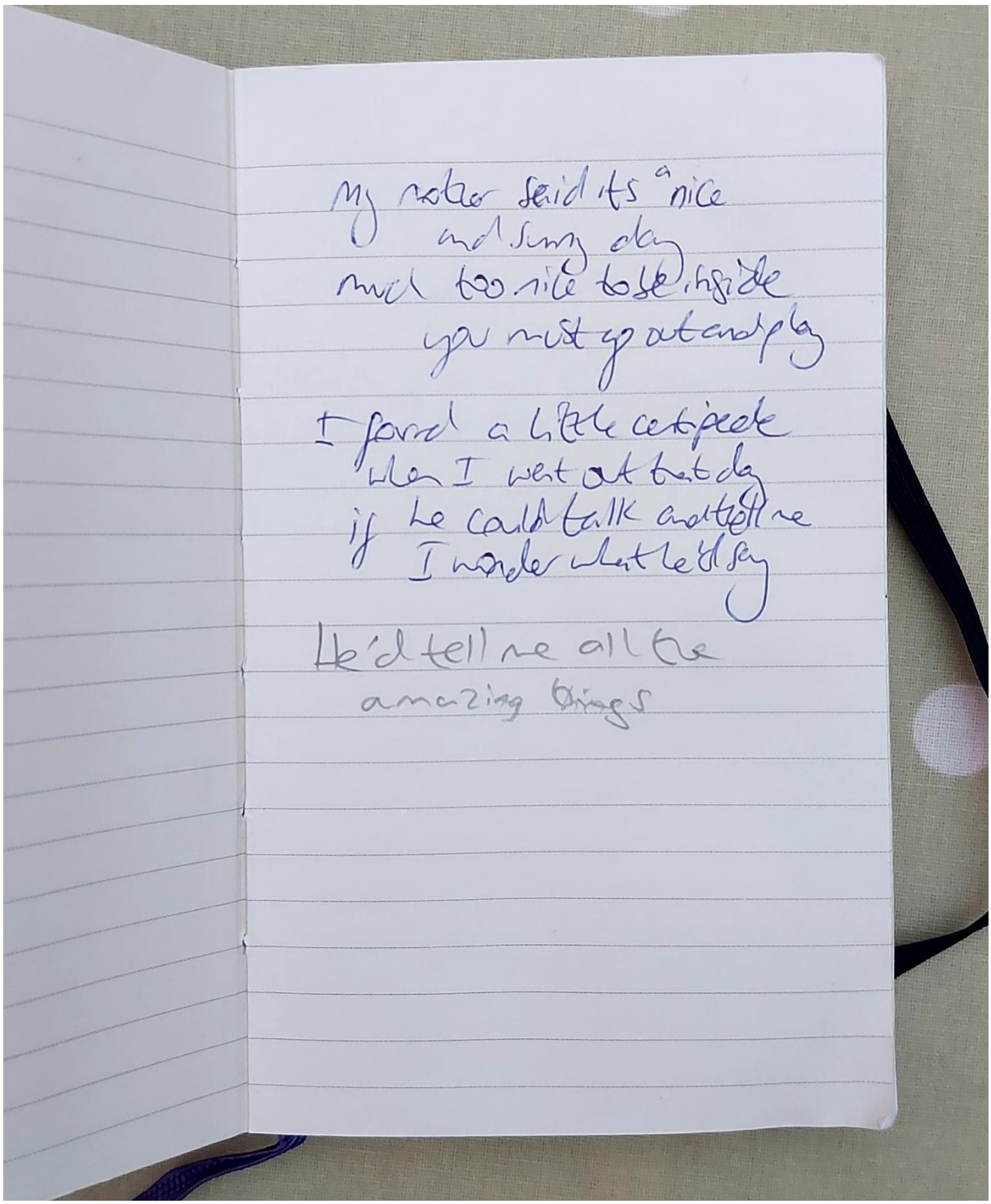


Figure 20 - Photograph of an example of a mother's creative writing (partial of author's poem for her daughter)