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On (not) being literate enough: The literacy experiences and literacy programme needs of people experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of homelessness

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Abstract

This paper is focussed on literacy and the literacy experiences of people who are experiencing homelessness or are at risk of homelessness. Drawing on 23 in-depth interviews with people who have lived experience of homelessness in Sydney, Australia, the paper examines literacy, literacy needs and interest in literacy programmes from a social practice perspective of literacy. Amartya Sen's (1999) capability approach is drawn on to examine the multidimensional barriers that impede access to literacy. Our findings show literacy needs and how literacy is understood and valued in the lives of people with lived experience of homelessness. We show the ways that spatial and temporal conditions enable and create (im)possibilities for the realisation of literacy as a capability. We also discuss how the capability is imagined to fit into existing worlds, as both an instrumental tool, as well as for personal satisfaction and broader participation in social life. Our interviewees also point to the possibilities of literacy learning and programmes supporting the realisation of other capabilities, emphasising the prospects of achieving multiple capability realisations through program design. We show how the findings bear out the principles of a social practices pedagogy in adult literacy programmes.

KEYWORDS

capability approach, homelessness, literacy, social practice pedagogy

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1 | INTRODUCTION

The 2021 Census in Australia estimated that 122,494 people were homeless on Census night, of which 7636 were sleeping in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out (ABS, 2021). Although there are a range of reasons for a person finding themselves homeless or at risk of homelessness, common contributors include domestic violence, minimal formal education, low literacy and, linked to this, a history of poorly paid and irregular employment (Anderson & Collins, 2014; Chamberlain et al., 2014). This study is focussed on the experiences of homeless people and those at risk of homelessness with respect to literacy and literacy classes.

There is consensus that literacy is critical for social inclusion (OECD, 2013a; SCOTESE, 2012). Grotlüschen et al. (2016), for instance, undertook a comprehensive analysis of the information from the first round of The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Survey of Adult Skills, which assessed the literacy and numeracy proficiencies of adults in 24 OECD countries including Australia. Their analysis focussed on the characteristics of those adults who were assessed as having low proficiencies in literacy and numeracy. The study found correlations between low levels of literacy proficiency and poor social outcomes. In the case of Australia, the OECD reported that:

> [T]he link between higher literacy and social outcomes such as trust in others, participation in volunteer and associative activities, a belief that an individual can have an impact on the political process and better health, is stronger than in most other countries
>
> (OECD, 2013b, p. 10).

Lower literacy exacerbates social exclusion and impacts health outcomes (Dewalt et al., 2004). In this paper, we are interested in the literacy needs of people with lived experiences of homelessness, to understand the role of limited literacy in their lives. Our work explores the possibilities of a literacy programme for people in Sydney, Australia. Conceptualising literacy from a social practice perspective (Barton et al., 2000) and as a communal and informal resource (Castleton, 1998), we explore the (im)possibilities of literacy and (potential) literacy learning in everyday lives. We draw on the capability approach, developed by Amartya Sen (1999), which asks what multidimensional barriers do people face accessing resources (capabilities), and how do these barriers impact on their ability to lead lives they have reason to value. We use the capability approach to make sense of literacy as a capability and examine the multidimensional barriers (norms/structures) that impede access to literacy. We also examine the types of lives that are imaginable with better literacy. We argue that literacy development requires an orientation toward programmes that account for and attend to the experiences and practices of those experiencing homelessness or have lived experiences of homelessness. We argue, in particular, that a social practices pedagogy is needed.

2 | CONCEPTUALISING LITERACY FOR THOSE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS OR AT RISK OF HOMELESSNESS

Literacy is a contested concept. In popular discourse, it is often understood as the "basic" skills of reading and writing. However, there has been a growing recognition, particularly in the consideration of literacy in adult life, that literacy is a situated social practice (Barton et al., 2000). This is referred to as the social practices theory of literacy, where literacy is considered part of what people do in social life and the form it takes is shaped by the contexts in which this social practice takes place, which includes its purpose, the people involved, the values and assumptions they bring and the power relations involved (Street, 1984). For example,

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reading a bedtime story to a child and reading a workplace procedures manual are literacy activities embedded in social practices that differ in purpose, audience, choice of texts and the value attached to them.

The social practices perspective also implies that literacy development outside the formal school context is not about people moving up a standardised "literacy ladder" (Hamilton et al., 2012, p. 2); rather, it is about developing the skills and understanding needed to participate more effectively in those social activities that matter to them. This means that there is not one literacy, but multiple literacies that people negotiate in their lives, with varied contextual meaning and importance. The idea of multiple literacies presents a challenge to the deficit view of literacy that defines individuals in terms of what they cannot do, rather than what they can do (Barton et al., 2007). The academic literacy that people develop in school and university, for example, essay writing and reading literary texts, is but one kind of literacy practice that does not necessarily determine whether an individual would successfully negotiate other kinds of literacy practices. In adult life, people need to negotiate a range of different practices, each presenting different literacy demands such as filling out government forms, reading and responding to notes from their child's school or reading the instructions about taking their medication. The social practices theory of literacy implies supporting adults with limited literacy skills is best served by a social practices pedagogy. This means a teaching approach that acknowledges the adult learners' existing literacy practices and is centred around those literacy demands that the adult learners actually encounter and which may be presenting a barrier to participation or agency in civic life (Papen, 2005). There is limited research specifically on the literacy needs and practices of people experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of homelessness. Castleton (1998) examined accounts of people's needs to determine a role for language, literacy and numeracy training. Her research sought to understand the "apparent," "perceived" and "expressed" literacy needs of people experiencing homelessness. The *apparent* needs were determined from quantitative data sources such as population statistics and large-scale surveys; the *perceived* needs from service delivery agents, researchers, community workers and other informed stakeholders and the *expressed* needs from people experiencing homelessness themselves or people who worked directly with them. Further literacy training was established both as an apparent and perceived need; however, the findings on the expressed need were more nuanced. Castleton (1998) found that for those experiencing homelessness, while acknowledging that poor literacy was an important issue that had a number of impacts, poor literacy was not their most important issue, nor the issue to which they would attribute their homelessness. She found that those experiencing homelessness negotiated literacy demands in their lives by tapping into various networks. Within these networks were people who assumed the role of "literacy broker" and whose skills and knowledge were called on to assist.

Although the established apparent and perceived needs for literacy training were linked to employment, Castleton found that a substantial proportion of the people in her study were not jobseekers. Rather, many saw literacy "as a means of enabling them to achieve greater personal and collective responsibility over their lives" (p. 75). She argued that discourses about literacy for those experiencing homelessness needed to shift from those related to employment to helping them build bridges so that "homeless people can access mainstream services and assume some measures of choice and control in their lives" (p. 75). This resonates with what Marston and Johnson-Abdelmalik (2015) concluded in their study of a literacy programme for adults who were at risk of social exclusion. They found that their participants were also seeking to develop literacy skills in order to gain independence and control over their lives.

Castleton (1998) recommended that any literacy training for those experiencing homelessness not be in the traditional style of structured classes. Rather, it should be designed in collaboration with a range of service providers who interact with homeless people, and, as we argue in this paper, with people with lived (or living) experience of homelessness. Training needs to be cognisant of, and take into account, their everyday practices.

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3 | LEARNING AND LITERACY: ENABLING ENVIRONMENTS AND PROVISION OF LITERACY PROGRAMS

The significance of the environment for literacy development is highlighted in the report of the European Union High Level Group of Experts on Literacy (EU HLG, 2012). This report discusses how adults' skills are shaped, developed and respond to the demands and learning afforded by the environment. It emphasises the importance of non-formal learning, i.e., learning outside formal education, but often organised, and informal learning, i.e., learning outside formal education, including non-structured and experiential learning. The latter

> is particularly valuable for older groups of adults, who may not have had many opportunities for formal learning when they were younger, but have valuable skillsets that they developed through other types of learning
>
> (EU HLG, 2012, p. 81).

The value of providing learning opportunities that offer flexibility as to where learning takes place and how it is undertaken is supported by research that recognises the importance of the context and place for successful literacy programmes (Comber, 2015; Papen, 2005).

The importance of recognising the context of the lives of people in vulnerable housing situations is also borne out in Barton et al.'s (2007) UK study of adults experiencing homelessness who participated in literacy learning in three different community settings. The researchers found that the community settings whose primary purpose was to provide life skills support such as health, finance and housing also offered literacy programmes after identifying this need in programme implementation. The authors found that many of the participants receiving help from the community organisations had negative past experiences of education, and were leading complex lives with inconsistent demands from different support services and experiencing a sense of "exclusion from 'normal' culture" (p. 127). Such circumstances made it imperative that literacy provision needed to be sensitive to the learners' lives and located in places that they identified as safe, supportive and familiar. Barton and colleagues concluded their study by advocating for a social practices pedagogy of literacy that is based on researching and taking account of the learners' lives and creating safe and supported contexts for learning, that is, approaching "literacy not as a set of skills to be taught in a disembodied way in the classroom but as part of people's everyday lives" (Barton et al., 2007, p. 167). Thus, their work supports Castleton's (1998) conclusion that traditional structured classes are not appropriate for many homeless people seeking to improve their literacy and quality of their lives.

Attending to the affective needs—safety, sense of familiarity and inclusion—that were identified in Barton et al.'s (2007) study confirms the findings from the well-established research on what adult literacy learners see as "success." Charnley and Jones (1979) found that adult literacy learners ranked affective personal achievements (e.g., self-esteem, confidence) above other outcomes such as cognitive achievements (e.g., comprehension, word recognition and spelling), enactive achievements (use of reading skills *outside* the classroom), socioeconomic achievements (e.g., employment and getting a promotion) and affective social achievements (e.g., improved social relationships). Many learners identify increased confidence as a major achievement: Literacy development is inextricably linked to transformations in their personhood (Campbell, 1998).

The transformative potential of literacy learning has also been part of the emergent literature on literacy and homelessness. It was, for instance, the subject of a study by Jucniewicz (2012). This close study of five homeless adults in the United States found that although homelessness could lead to disengagement from literacy practices, for those who found personal value in improving their literacy, there were some profound benefits. Literacy was a lifeline for "rewriting" their lives, giving them time and space to think, and ways of valuing their personal stories.

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The limited literature on the literacy needs of adults experiencing homelessness suggests that despite the policy discourses that identify literacy as a critical resource for social inclusion, homeless people will not necessarily prioritise literacy development as a way to dissipate hardships in their life circumstances. Engagement in literacy learning may occur if there is a perception that it may help them gain greater control over issues that they have identified as priorities.

4 | ANALYTICAL FRAMING—LITERACY AND CAPABILITIES

The capability approach developed by Amartya Sen (1999) directs our attention towards the capabilities an individual needs to live lives they have reason to value. The approach is focussed on expanding individuals' substantive freedoms and removing the "various types of unfreedoms that leave people with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency" (Sen, 1999, p. xii). Sen (1999) refers to these substantive freedoms as "capabilities," which may be enhanced through, for example, receiving an education or removing an "unfreedom" like stigma. The aim of enhancing capabilities is so that individuals can engage in "states of affairs that they value and have reason to value" (Alkire, 2010, p. 193) that Sen (1999, p. 75) refers to as "functionings." Functionings can be defined as the person's "beings" and "doings", the things someone values doing in their everyday lives. In this sense, the capability approach is concerned with an individual's "ability to achieve *combinations* of valued functionings" (Sen, 2009, p. 233). If an individual has enhanced capabilities, they are able to exercise a greater amount of choice and control over their lives. In turn, having access to one capability can enable other capabilities. For instance, realising literacy capability might enable access to job markets.

Similar to Robeyns (2005), we can think of the capability approach as a framework that draws attention to certain types of *conversions* (Figure 1). That is, capability inputs (resources) must be converted into capabilities, which individuals can in turn convert into functionings ("doings" and "beings") that are constitutive of their values and life projects. The conversion of inputs into capability sets is important, however their realisation is often impeded by the contexts in which individuals are situated—the personal, social and environmental factors that impede their realisation (Conradie & Robeyns, 2014; Hart, 2012; Robeyns, 2005).

This model of the capability approach is useful in the way it articulates the entangled role of structure and agency within the social milieu in which the individual or group is situated. In particular, at the beginning of the model on the left-hand side, there is a recognition that the realisation of capabilities is impeded by the "social contexts" in which individuals are situated (Hart, 2012; Robeyns, 2005). A literacy programme can be considered in this model as a capability input. However, engagement with a literacy programme can be impeded by structural barriers which might both undermine engagement with it and limit the range of capabilities an individual already possesses and/or has access to.

In the second part of the diagram, on the right-hand side, the focus is on individual "choice" to incorporate the capabilities they have access to into their lives. This is a choice that is made within the social context in which one is situated. Robeyns (2005, p. 102) suggests that we might think about a "constrained choice" that exists, that impacts the ability to choose capabilities, which are "interwoven with a person's own history and personality, values, and preferences." Consider for instance, how someone's access to books (capability) would be of limited help to enable the functioning of knowledge acquisition if they have limited literacy. Or consider the inverse, access to literacy (capability) and the choices of what to read are impeded if access to books and reading material is limited and/or devalued within the contexts they reside.

Drawing on the work of Bourdieu (1984), we might also extend this point and argue that the choices an individual makes are fundamentally related to their position in the social

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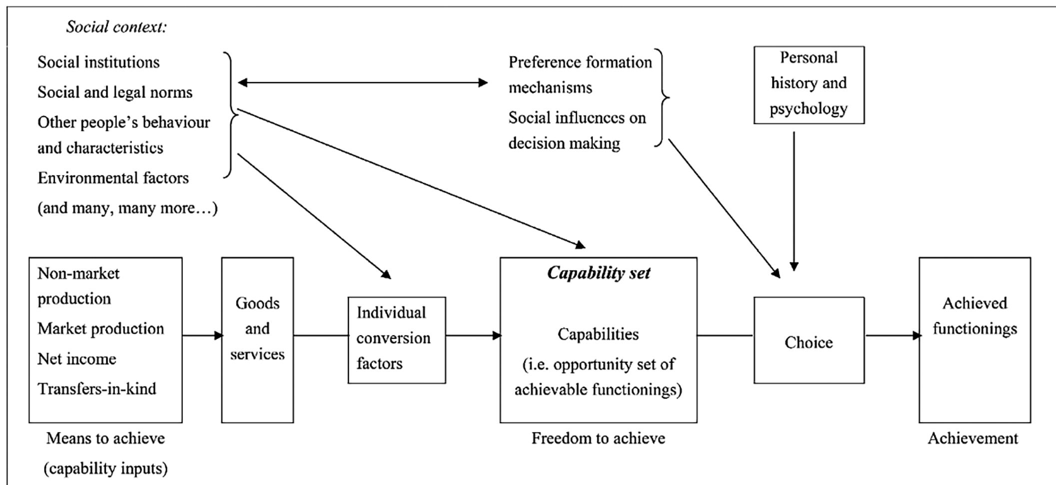

FIGURE 1 "A stylised non-dynamic representation of a person's capability set and their social and personal context" Replicated from Robeyns (2005).

system, which impacts their tastes and expectations. Bourdieu argues that class and taste are entangled. Taste, he argues, is embedded in systems of power relations, and distinctions of taste are the basis for social judgement. Taste for this reason is varied and linked to social norms and structures, and choices to use capabilities are in this framework linked to overall well-being. This is important, as it not only moves us beyond solely focussing on instrumental reasons for decision-making but also offers opportunities to consider the ways individuals draw on or include capabilities in their lives to enable pleasure and joy, positive emotions that are linked to a life one values living. What is important for the capability approach, and at stake, is an emphasis on ensuring individuals are able to "genuinely access … all the capabilities in their capability set" (Robeyns, 2005, p. 102) to be able to choose outcomes that will allow them to lead lives *they* value. This requires acknowledging peoples' current needs, and also recognising that choice(s) can change as individuals and norms change and they accrue different resources over time.

The next section outlines the methodology underpinning this study, followed by an overview of our findings where, drawing on the capability approach, we show both the multidimensional barriers to literacy and the potential value of literacy for the everyday lives of the participants.

5 | METHODOLOGY

This study is based on 18 semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted in different parts of Sydney between January 2017 and April 2017.[1] Five interviews involved two participants; thus, a total of 23 people were interviewed. All interviewees had English as their first language; 11 were female and 12 were male. Participants included people who had recently found housing and/or were living in a shelter, as well as people who were homeless, living on the street and/or in hostels. Most interviewees cited experiences of sleeping rough for periods of time either currently or previously.

The interviews took place at the University of Technology Sydney, as well as at food services offered near an inner-city station, Ashfield (8 km from the CBD) and Parramatta (24 km from the CBD). Five interviews were conducted at a residential facility for homeless women in Sydney's inner ring. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

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Study participants were recruited in two ways: First, through a flyer handout which requested that potential participants call one of the researchers to arrange an interview if they were interested in being interviewed. Second, the researchers attended food services and community centre spaces where potential interviewees gathered. Recruiting interviewees using flyers was unsuccessful. Only two interviewees responded to that method. The face-to-face recruitment method was much more effective. Interviewees were given the option to volunteer to participate after being given an overview of the study and, if they agreed, were given a $20 shopping voucher for their time.[2] Interviewees were informed about the voucher after they requested more information about the study. The interview transcripts were transcribed, organised and thematically coded using the NVivo software.[3] We used in vivo (verbatim coding of interviewees' language) and process (coding actions and practices), before code landscaping and organising how interviewees spoke about their literacy experiences, practices and literacy needs (Saldaña, 2015). Themes centred around literacy limitations in everyday life, literacy needs for the future and future literacy programme (im)possibilities. All names used are pseudonyms to protect the identity of interviewees.

6 | THE LITERACY PROFILE OF THE INTERVIEWEES

Interviewees had varying levels of literacy, judged by "conventional" educational literacy levels. We identified three main groups. Those who said they could not read (three interviewees), those who said they had basic literacy skills but struggled with complex words and texts (nine interviewees) and those who said they had adequate literacy skills to meet their own needs (11 interviewees). Beyond the skills levels, the interviews revealed negative past educational experiences, poor health and vulnerable housing status, which shaped their future "imagined identities" (Norton, 2010) with perceived greater literacy practices and investment in literacy learning.

Luke, a respondent who struggled with basic literacy spoke about the capabilities literacy could deliver:

> To help with reading newspapers, stuff like that … Yeah, filling out forms would probably come in handy … Yeah, understanding the [job] ads and all that. Dealing with legal problems.

The comment from Luke illustrates how adults with limited literacy skills cope in everyday social interactions: "I can't even read the newspaper. I pretend to people … I can read…but I just look at the pictures."

Like many of the interviewees, Holly had struggled with homelessness early in life and intermittent housing instability which impacted on her schooling:

> I dropped out of school in Year 7 so I haven't had much schooling and things like that and then going to being on the streets and going from house to house you don't learn very much, just what sort of you learn from other people.

Interviewees also spoke about learning dis/abilities such as dyslexia, as well as institutional impediments to learning, such as racism, which impacted on their ability to acquire literacy. Rick, an older Indigenous man, experienced intense institutional racism: "I didn't have much schooling because of discrimination back in the 60s, 70s and that, and didn't get much to school and that."

The nine interviewees who indicated that they could read and write wanted to improve their literacy skills for their own personal enrichment and to enhance their study and job prospects. Leanne's comment captures these sentiments:

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> I wasn't very good at school I left halfway through Year 10 … [and] didn't complete my certificate so I found it really hard to get into work … I'm looking to get work and to do literacy and numeracy like skills …[It] would be really good to get my background up-to-date.

7 | MOTIVATIONS FOR JOINING A LITERACY CLASS

All of the interviewees saw the potential for a literacy programme and considered literacy crucial for improving the quality of their lives. That is, they considered it a "capability need," a capability that is wanted, but is not yet realised (Hanckel, 2023). There was an awareness that acquiring literacy could potentially enhance or even change their lives and a number of possible gains were mentioned:

> I've heard of adult literacy courses before and I actually lived with a guy that did one. …He was completely illiterate, and after doing it [literacy classes] for, I think, a couple of months and he read a book to me and it was only a simple book…but the smile on his face was, you know what I mean, it was unbelievable cos he'd gone from nothing to being able to at least read a book at a five or six year-old level in the space of two or three months, so that was massive. Like I could just see how good he felt
>
> (Sam).

The more specific perceived gains from attending a literacy class were related to assistance in undertaking everyday activities and for furthering their education and employment prospects.

7.1 | Increased capacity for undertaking important everyday tasks

For eight of the interviewees, attending a literacy class was perceived as crucial for completing everyday activities and tasks. Key activities such as filling in forms, shopping, reading and sending e-mails and text messages, writing letters, as well as being able to read the newspaper were mentioned. Jane expressed frustration at not being able to complete the documents required to request the services she needed:

> I can read, but I don't know how to fill the forms out. I don't know how to put the words you know what I mean. Like I can read, but some words I don't know what they mean.

Aaron, who said his literacy was "pretty basic," spoke about the difficulties of sending a text message:

> And then you get on the phone and you're trying to send a message and …write something to someone and you go, 'How do you spell that bloody word?' … You can't put the … letters to the word.

Interviewees wanted help building on their limited literacy skills. Jim, for instance, wanted to know, "Where to put the commas so I can actually [write] the letter without it actually just being one big sentence …." He commented that he "Get[s] mixed up on where to put full stops and… apostrophe[s] and I want to sort of learn what's that for." Similarly, Connor noted:

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> Like I only write in capitals. You know I'd love to learn how to write joined up writing you know or write normally, but like I can't write. I can only write in capitals.

These interviewees' views of the benefits of literacy development ranged from improved skills (grammatical accuracy, punctuation and letter formation) as well as increased independence in a range of everyday practices, reflecting both the traditional "basic skills" conception *and* the social practices conception of literacy.

7.2 | Help with achieving education and employment goals

Nine interviewees commented that literacy classes could enhance the possibility of them finding employment. For these interviewees, they saw benefits if the classes could contribute to their overall skillset (capabilities), be used to enhance their employability and be something they could include on their resume. To this extent, they felt the classes were a good idea if they would, as Drew suggested "better my job prospects." Leanne saw value in having some formalised recognition in the form of a certificate:

> I mean if it puts me back into the workforce that'd be great even if it was just like … a certificate of attainment or whatever that'd be even better. It … would be something.

Connor similarly said:

> I mean anything that would help me improve my literacy would help me in the future if ever I would return to work you know.

Even where it is hard to envisage its direct importance for work, greater literacy was still seen as a potentially productive pursuit for the additional capabilities it may enable. For instance, when we asked Sam whether it would be useful, he spoke about work:

> It's a bit of a double-edged sword really cos the work that I've always done hasn't required a higher level of [literacy], … so generally speaking probably not, but you can never know too much anyway, … [so] it wouldn't be a waste of time.

Some interviewees saw the literacy classes as a stepping stone to perhaps (re)engaging with educational institutions. When Holly was asked how a literacy programme would fit into her future, she indicated that it would assist her by helping her do "Year 10 and my HSC, no matter how much it takes." For Mary, she imagined it as supporting a pathway into higher education and saw it as an opportunity to learn to "clean up like vocab and grammar … typing and writing, but like writing in essays if you go back to uni."

7.3 | Enhancing capacity to read books

While these immediate needs were often the first to be discussed in interviews, seven interviewees also discussed the importance of being able to read books. In reflecting on her interest in reading books, Chloe commented on how individuals engage with the books that The Footpath Library already make available:

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> Some of them actually get the books even though they can't read. They love just being able to say I've been to The Footpath Library and then they bring the book back the next week and get another one. [...] Some of them you'll see flicking through cos they might recognise one or two words so they're trying themselves but they just love the feeling of having a book.

These interviewees wanted to read books for pleasure, as part of a normal process in everyday activities and having something to value.

However, some, like Gregory, needed assistance with reading because he will pick up a book and "pretend to read it. I don't even know what it says." Some interviewees said they needed assistance with comprehension and also some direction in choosing the right book for their needs: "I'd expect a tutor to say, 'Pick up a book, I've got one here that I suggest if you're struggling'. For some interviewees the ability to read books was viewed as important for their everyday wellbeing, as Sandra noted, "Books have helped me through my mental health issues" and "books are very useful in times of need."

Three of the interviewees mentioned how a literacy class could assist them with writing projects that they would like to pursue. Lyle commented, "I want to write a book on human behaviour so I thought it would help me." Mary had similar aspirations: "I think about writing a book maybe down the line, maybe not now, so [a literacy class could] help me just improve my own like skills." Anna shared this aspiration and indicated that they would like to pursue book writing "…in the future if things get a little bit more settled." Such aspirations point to the ways that learning is not necessarily about enhancing literacy only for instrumental or neoliberal reasons and gains, but also for interests and as part of a life they valued living. Literacy classes could provide important skills and motivation to assist with such projects.

A few interviewees felt that their current literacy was adequate, and as a result they had no desire to attend classes. When asked whether he would attend a class, Andrew responded,

> Not really. My literacy standards are reasonably high … I can read and write fairly well … Unless I changed what type of work I was going to look for … No, cos the type of work I'm going to be getting back into, it's adequate for what I do - warehousing or driving trucks. Stuff like that.

Three interviewees considered their writing skills to be quite strong and felt that they did not need to partake in a literacy programme. However, they did note the potential role they could play as expert peers in such settings as an assistant, co-facilitator and/or teaching aide:

> I probably would like [to attend the class] but I've done TAFE courses so I don't need like help with vocabulary … but I'd be happy to help or assist … but I just don't need [literacy classes] yeah
>
> (Drew).

Chloe, similarly, spoke about providing assistance. She thought literacy classes were an excellent idea and was keen to be involved:

C: Well for myself I've just finished TAFE and I'm actually finishing off university as well …
I: So you don't really need literacy classes?
C: No, but I'd like to be able to help others, to be able to build on their skills.

Commitments to peer-based roles indicate the communal nature of literacy as a resource that not only relies on peers as "brokers" but could (if given the infrastructure) be a critical space for peers as educators (Castleton, 1998).

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8 | FACTORS ENHANCING THE POSSIBILITY OF LITERACY CLASSES BEING SUCCESSFUL

Interviewees mentioned several aspects that they felt would encourage regular attendance and increase the chances of the programme being successful. They discussed the preferred times of the day for classes, as well as the preferred group size. Clear indications of progress and the giving out of certificates were viewed as important. There was also broad agreement that providing food either before or after a class would encourage attendance.

8.1 | Preferred frequency and times

Interviewees were asked how often they could see themselves attending a class and what time would suit them. They all felt that a weekly face-to-face class was optimal. When the discussion turned to what was the best time, it was evident that classes in the afternoon rather than the morning were considered a better option. Mornings were viewed as difficult because people were often engaged in routines around showering, getting to breakfast services and accessing healthcare. As Anna commented:

> It would have to work around the structure [in the shelter where I live] because we've got pretty much a week planner and it would just have to fit into that which is probably doable.

Responses such as this reflected the limited control many of the interviewees had over their time due to the routines set up by the services from which they were already receiving a range of support.

8.2 | Class size and length of lesson

Only two of the 23 respondents indicated that they would prefer a one-on-one situation rather than a group situation. Interviewees believed that group classes would enhance their learning outcomes. Anna commented, "if you're all there for the same reason it wouldn't be a bad thing as a group…all learning together." Lisa had an interesting analysis of the potential problems that could emerge with one-on-one tuition:

> One-on-one feels like a counselling session about your own life. Just some people don't like that confrontation about things. […] They'd feel more comfortable to do it in a group. I would, yeah.

Holly felt that a group situation would motivate her and her fellow learners:

> It's more motivation. … It's a lot easier to understand without having to interact on your own. Like having support there and knowing that they're there for the same reasons.

Holly and Lisa's comments capture how groups can be supportive and allow people to come together over shared difficulties with reading/writing and address problems from different perspectives. Indeed, such comments speak to the ways that a capability (literacy) might be enabled through group interactions and relatable spaces and that literacy learning itself is a social practice.

The interviewees felt the classes would be a good opportunity to get together with others in similar circumstances and as a way to foster and extend their social networks.

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Interviewees were keen that they had friends in the class. Drew indicated it would be good to sit in a class where "our mates sit next to us." Chloe commented it would be good if classes could be with "friends that they've already made on the streets," talking to the value and enabling possibilities of friendship and existing informal networks. They saw the groups as inclusive of their existing contacts as well as an opportunity to meet similar others who they might not know. Lyle referred to this engagement as generating opportunities for "more social interacting."

In terms of the size of the group, only two interviewees said that would like more than 10 people in a class. As Luke indicated,

> Five to ten people, that's still [a] small enough group that you know to be able to do stuff without getting bogged down and that if you have it too big a class that could bog things down a little bit.

When asked about the length of the classes, the majority of the interviewees said one and half to two hours. They envisaged that this length would give everyone time to speak and have a break midway. On this latter point, each class, as Chloe put it, should "…allow for the smokers so they can go out and have a quick puff." Smoking could be read here as either an extension of socialisation of the group and/or enabling space for a break and comfort (see for instance Graham, 1993).

8.3 | Provision of resources

It was assumed by the interviewees that they would be provided with writing materials. Interestingly, eight interviewees said that reading glasses would be useful to have available in the literacy classes. Those who had engaged with *The Footpath Library* indicated that the glasses that the coordinators had made available at their mobile service were extremely useful and should be available at every literacy class:

> They [the coordinators] also provide …glasses. … They're only the ones like you go to a chemist or whatever and try on and see what fits, but some of them [people experiencing homelessness] … don't know how to read and write because of issues with being able to see
>
> (Chloe).

A couple of interviewees suggested that learners could be linked to optometrists if people wanted further assistance.

There was consensus that providing light refreshments would encourage attendance. As Drew indicated "Sort of stuff like that, coffee and biscuits. Don't have to put on a full spread." Full meals were suggested as an incentive, but there was some concern that this might encourage people to "…just com[e] along for a free meal and disrupt the class. It wouldn't be helpful" (Connor).

8.4 | Geographic space/preferred venue for classes: Creating the right atmosphere

The venue for the classes and its accessibility were viewed as critical in determining whether interviewees would attend a literacy class. The preferred location (urban/suburban) was usually dependent on where interviewees spent most of their time.

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> City is always good cos I [am from] … around here and around Kings Cross … [where] there tends to be a higher concentration of people living on the streets … struggling with the day-to-day sort of thing
>
> (Jim).

> You gotta keep [it here] if that's where your target is. […]. You're going to have to probably bring your teacher to a place like this [lunch service venue] or use one of the local universities or something like that
>
> (Andrew).

There was a strong sense that to minimise dropout, learners had to feel totally relaxed in the class. In discussing a space near a major city train station, Sam noted its appeal: "It's not overwhelming or anything like that … It doesn't feel like you're forced to do anything so somewhere like here actually is quite good." Sam mentioned the importance of the comforting aspects of a service, including knowing that someone will greet "you at the door," and the possibility of being able to "wander in yourself and then…find your own place." Sam also observed that the space that the interview took place in, which offered meals and support already, was appealing because it conjured up a feeling of being "relaxed." Anna made a similar point that "You don't want people coming in and just being you know [in] unknown territory."

Feeling comfortable and not stigmatised in a space was repeatedly viewed as vital. When asked whether the university would be a good place to hold classes, Connor responded,

> Yes, but no, because you've got all the students and you don't know how the students are going to react to homeless [people] coming through you know. There's always going to be a bit of tension there … I think you might find that a few people might be too intimidated to walk into a university.

Chloe echoed these sentiments:

> A venue that would be central but also not so public as well [so] that they could easily get to [it] and not feel judged when they're walking through to get to it as well.

8.5 | Empathetic and relatable educator(s)

When asked about what the interviewees expected from a teacher, the overwhelming response was that they wanted someone who would understand them and not be judgemental:

> Obviously not judgemental or that sort of stuff. I guess just to maybe try and understand that people are at different levels as well and people want different things out of the course
>
> (Andrea).

The importance of being non-judgemental and respectful was also highlighted by Leanne. When asked what a tutor would need to be able to do she responded, "Just be really genuine. … People that don't judge you for what you're going through or what you've been through."

As the interviewees pointed out capability realisation can be impeded by environments which sustain felt stigmas, and they indicated the importance of being treated respectfully. There was consensus that it was essential that the tutor be relatable to and somebody who understands the needs and experiences of homeless people, or those at risk of homelessness. This was powerfully highlighted by Lisa:

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> I'd expect them to think that they're not better than us and to relate to where we come from and what we've done in our life to get…to where we are. Just to be pretty much on the same level as the people and don't be like too teachery.

When asked what she meant by 'teachery', she responded,

> Teachery is like smarter than … Some people get a bit offended by that and intimidated by that. You know, I do. Makes you feel dumb you know.

She also felt that the tutor should be "street-wise":

> Living out there and being in the other person's shoes and I think people will stick more to the group if they find a person like that they can relate to.

Lisa's observations suggest that it is worth considering the role that people who have experienced homelessness, but have more advanced literacy skills, could potentially play as co-facilitators or teaching aides, given their commitment to providing such support as already indicated. They could also support teaching staff and contribute to making the space feel relaxed and comfortable.

Interviewees also discussed the importance of classes having a clear direction, and a tutor who could keep each class on track. They noted that the tutor needs to be inclusive, but also needs to be able to deal with people who are disruptive. Leanne was emphatic that anybody who was disruptive needs to be asked to leave:

> Yeah, obviously if they're being rude and disrespectful yeah, they'd have to ask them to leave cos it just disrupts the whole class and we're trying to make it a more positive class cos people actually want to be here.

Interviewees were worried about the possibility of difficult students in the class and expected a tutor to be able to deal with disruptions and provide an atmosphere of learning and support.

A few interviewees were concerned about the possibility of being embarrassed about being seen to be learning things they perceived to be for children; for example, Andrew commented, "Nobody wants to be learning how to spell again cos that's for kids. That's how people think." Conor added:

> Yeah, and then there's the embarrassment thing as well you know. Do you want to own up to being that stupid or do you want to own [up] to… not able to read a full sentence and stuff? … The last thing you want is for them to know your weaknesses. Cos you do end up arguing with people and your weaknesses will come out in the argument or they'll use it against you in that and that's why [it] may deter people from coming to the program.

Conor's concerns speak to the ways that existing social relationships and stigma would enter into class spaces. "Embarrassment" and displays of "weaknesses" are important here, for the ways it could potentially impact capability realisation, which must be considered in the design and attendance of classes. Capability realisation is clearly a site of vulnerability with an already marginalised population.

There was agreement that if a tutor was able to clearly indicate progress, this would encourage ongoing participation:

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> If people feel like they're achieving, they're going to continue doing it and continue to come back … So [if] you've got some sort of indicator of where you're at … you've got the incentive to keep coming back
>
> (Sam).

Some interviewees mentioned the possibilities of gaining a "certificate of attainment" or "some sort of official accreditation," which would act as a further incentive to keep progressing, and encourage their ongoing participation. Such forms of accreditation serve as cultural capital potentially enabling other capabilities to possibly be realised in future, as it can be used, for instance, in job applications.

8.6 | Gender considerations: Creating a comfortable space

When asked about gender considerations, most echoed Leanne's sentiments: "I don't mind it being mixed. It doesn't worry me." We note that all interviewees were cisgender; however, determination of gendered classes was based on feeling comfortable when attending classes. Chloe felt that there had to be choice, implicitly acknowledging here the experiences some people have had with gender-based violence, and its ongoing effects that could disrupt learning and participation:

> There's definitely some (women) … that would not want to be in the same room as males or vice versa … There's also a few transgender as well, so that would have to be taken into consideration as well.

Drew suggested that there was a danger that men may feel sheepish in a mixed group, "Some blokes would feel a bit reticent … They'd feel more comfortable in a group of their mates." Mateship as it is used here points toward learning as occurring *with* friends, perhaps where he could be more vulnerable and his masculinity, when showing vulnerability, would not be in question. For Drew, an older male participant, mateship or friendship was imagined as men. However, more broadly, it was about the importance of feeling comfortable during learning. Indeed, when asked for more detail, Drew emphasised that it would depend on the particular group, and also the facilitator's ability to ensure everyone is heard and included, pointing to the importance of multiple factors involved in the creation of a comfortable space for enabling the realisation of other capabilities.

8.7 | Packaging the literacy classes with other areas of learning and services

Several interviewees suggested that class attendance would be enhanced by extending the services offered, or extending the possible capabilities that could be realised through such a program. Incorporating computer technology and computer literacy learning into the classroom was one idea:

> If you link the literacy part up with a computer program, computer course in some way you're probably going to get more bites [interest] because a lot of guys would be able to put that on a resume…
>
> (Andrew)

This is perhaps unsurprising given the increasing use/s of technology for communication with government agencies and forms, including job applications, rental applications and digital health use/s (Hanckel & Collin, 2024; Humphry, 2014).

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Another recommendation was to incorporate information about nutrition into the classroom material:

> Actually nutrition would be great especially on the streets cos there's a lot of [ignorance] you know what foods to eat and what foods not to eat … Some of them don't even know what's even good for you and what's not
>
> (Mary)

Liam proposed that "a cooking class would be quite useful when they get their place, learn a bit of cooking skills." Andrew suggested "an arts and crafts or a music type" event. These point to the ways that "literacy classes," which are conceived as enhancing literacy as a sole capability, might instead be a site for the realisation of multiple capabilities and the multiple "capability needs" that are articulated toward the well-being goals of interviewees. Further, such suggestions also point to the ways that the realisation of multiple capabilities is imagined often as outcomes of collective and communal engagements.

9 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Literacy classes were imagined as being useful by all the interviewees in this study. If literacy was considered a capability, there were differing reasons for its use in the lives of the interviewees (functionings) directed toward enhancing well-being. It was perceived as useful for its instrumental value (e.g., services and support, job seeking) indicating its role in accessing capabilities required to participate in markets and services. To this end, interviewees emphasised the potential role of certificates, which provide important cultural capital. Literacy was also noted as important for accessing information, feeling able to participate in social life *as well as* gaining pleasure from reading. The feelings and affective sensations of pleasure and joy sit in contrast perhaps to the shame of not being able to read or participate fully in social life because of literacy limitations. Literacy is only often seen as a risk factor for not accessing bureaucratic and neoliberal objectives; however, for interviewees, it was broader than this, which included the realisation of a capability (i.e., literacy) for the pursuit of personal enrichment, enjoyment/pleasure, as well as social connection (functionings).

It is notable that all interviewees found benefit in classes dedicated to increasing literacy. Interviewees expressed a range of imagined identities if they were more literate—from being more confident and independent in their everyday life to being writers of books. They also shared what they imagined as learning environments in which they could invest in literacy learning. Classes are imagined as something that is undertaken (in most cases) with others. Additionally, for those who did not see benefit in literacy classes for themselves, they discussed wanting to take on peer support roles in future imagined classes. This not only speaks to the points of social connection that such resources potentially offer but also the ways that literacy is imagined as a communally shared and created resource.

The interviewees were firm that classes had to take place in venues where learners would feel safe and comfortable and that the programme should address their individual needs and be cognisant of varied skill levels. However, participating in a (future) class is also situated within existing spatial and temporal practices of people experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness, as well as the power relationships embedded in the social spaces of such classes. Specific concerns raised here include the timing and location of events, noting the importance of conducting classes in familiar spaces and with respect to timing, fitting into existing schedules. Interviewees also talked about power embedded in spaces, a point made in Massey's (1994) seminal work on space and power, which argues that physical location and embedded power relations in places potentially impact on individuals' lives.

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Beyond the impact on attendance, the interviewees signalled two sources of risks—the stigma attached to poor literacy and the stigma attached to homelessness. Participating in literacy learning was perceived as potentially exposing themselves to judgement on these two fronts. These are barriers that must be considered in the realisation of such capabilities.

More broadly, "literacy classes" were conceptualised as not being only about literacy, but also about opportunities to connect to other capabilities and "capability needs" of interviewees. That is, it was not only about creating possibilities for other capabilities, such as around job seeking, and further education, but also such programmes offer the possibility of other knowledge exchange, which might include knowledge related to technology use(s), about food and health, as well as eye checks. Interviewees also mentioned the benefits of having food and space for relaxing and feeling comfortable in the class. We argue creating comfortable and safe(r) spaces creates critical contexts for capability realisation and is important for people with lived experience of homelessness, a point that has been argued elsewhere in relation to creating spaces or sites of interventions that support people experiencing marginality (see for instance: Hanckel, 2023). Also important is the recognition that spaces might offer opportunities for multiple capability realisations that extend the scope of what it means to offer a "literacy program" as an isolated programme or intervention. Such features are well-recognised in a social practices pedagogy affording a breadth of learning outcomes, encompassing not only skills acquisition, but also transformative, broad and lifelong outcomes that are contextualised to the practices of participants (Taylor & Trumpower, 2021). Crucially, such possibilities are enabled by listening to and responding to participants' needs, practices and values.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Benjamin Hanckel: Conceptualization; investigation; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; methodology; formal analysis. **Alan Morris:** Conceptualization; investigation; funding acquisition; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; methodology; formal analysis. **Keiko Yasukawa:** Conceptualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; formal analysis; investigation.

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The authors have no other conflicts of interest to declare.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The study was funded by The Footpath Library, which offered at the time of the interviews a mobile library service that provided people who were experiencing homelessness with books for borrowing. The Footpath Library was interested in exploring the interest in literacy programmmes in Sydney for people experiencing homelessness or who were at risk of homelessness.

[2] Paying interviewees for their time is now accepted practice (Morris, 2015). It certainly helped with recruitment, but we do not feel that the modest renumeration coerced people to participate.

[3] Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the University of Technology research office, ethics approval number ETH16-1061.

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