

Basic Skills, Literacy Practices and the 'Hidden Injuries of Class'

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Abstract

This paper draws on qualitative data from three research projects that examined the impact of poor skills on the life chances of adults living in two disadvantaged areas of England. We employed the theories of Goffman and Bourdieu to document how problems with literacy have a corrosive effect on the identities of interviewees, threatening their wellbeing. Though learning difficulties occur across all social backgrounds, the poor family resources and educational opportunities of our respondents meant they struggled to overcome their literacy problems when young, thus shaping later life course transitions. Thus the origins of the shame that our adults felt about their poor skills lie in part in the distinctive classed experiences they had when young. However, the resourcefulness of our respondents meant that many had secured employment, bought homes and become parents which obscured the ongoing psychic problems that a lifetime of poor skills had bestowed on our sample. The disjuncture between the apparent material standing of our sample and the 'hidden injuries of class' raises questions about how we understand the operation of class across the life course and the role of literacy, learning and wellbeing in the shaping of social identities.

Keywords: *Basic Skills, Social Class, Life Course, Literacy, Stigma*

Introduction

- 1.1 In this paper we draw on biographical interview data to illustrate the role that poor basic skills have in the shaping of working class identities. We developed this focus as despite a, 'crisis of poor literacy in the UK' ([Aldridge and Lavender 2003](#); [Save the Children 2014](#)) basic skills tend to be under-researched in sociology generally and in youth studies in particular. In other papers we have documented how poor literacy, numeracy and oracy can be associated with marginal transitions into adulthood ([Simpson and Cieslik 2007](#)) and how individuals can develop different ways of coping with poor skills ([Cieslik and Simpson 2009](#)). In this paper we continue our exploration of how structuring processes and agential strategies intersect but focus attention more on the ways that poor skills influence identity formation than on the detail of our respondent's life course transitions.
- 1.2 Our research shows that skills matter as our ability to communicate and interact are at the heart of how we represent ourselves to others. Judgements we make about our own worth and how others judge us are inextricably bound up with language use and differing displays of literacy competency^[1]. One aim of this paper then is to show how our respondents were stigmatised because of their difficulties with basic skills. These early experiences were powerful emotional events of lasting influence informing their identities and choices as they moved through life. Poor basic skills affect many people from different social backgrounds but our argument is that our respondents' experiences of poor literacy originated in distinctively classed encounters in the home, education and labour market. They had fewer opportunities, resources and support when compared to more affluent children and so the corrosive effects of poor literacy often went unchallenged. By examining the literacy problems of our interviewees we are able to chart some of the ways that social class is internalised – how it is transformed from iniquitous social relationship into embodied forms influencing the psychology and cultural identities of individuals.

1.3 The recent resurgence of interest in social class (Dorling 2014) belies the fact it remains a hotly contested issue and that links between basic skills and class are still under researched. Since the 1970s economic restructuring and changing patterns of employment in the West has raised questions about the utility of class analysis. Many suggest (Pahl 1989; Clark and Lipset 1991; Pakulski and Waters 1996) that people no longer make sense of their identities primarily through ideas of class or skill (such as blue or white collar) but rather through differences in consumption and lifestyles. Changing families (increasing divorce/cohabitation), communities (migration) and welfare (shifts in rights and responsibilities) have ushered in debates about individualisation, risk and inequalities working through multiple axes of gender, 'race' and sexuality rather than primarily through material relations of class (Beck 1992). Some have responded to these trends by documenting the continuing significance of material inequalities and the role of class in the framing of life course transitions (Shildrick et al. 2012). Others point to the ways in which class works through place and culture to influence the life chances and identities of citizens (Skeggs 2005). One notable development has been the emergence of a 'phenomenology of class' that charts the everyday experiences of the marginalised and how the economic and political structures of class can frame in often opaque ways, the subjectivities of individuals (Charlesworth 2000; Reay 2005). We contribute to this latter work on class by showing how problematic learning experiences can leave a lasting legacy of stigma in the adults we interviewed and reveal some of the, 'hidden injuries of class' (Sennett and Cobb 1977). Sennett and Cobb famously documented how many working class individuals, despite their material success, were still troubled by low self-esteem and stigma, which originated in the privations they experienced growing up in working class communities. The insight here is that classed experiences can have a long-term influence on wellbeing as subjectivities only slowly change despite efforts by individuals to move on in life. Our research echoes these studies as the symbolic violence that our respondents endured because of their poor literacy was internalised and hampered their efforts to get on in life. To have poor skills, working class parents and attend working class schools powerfully shaped the subjectivities of our interviewees, their position in the moral economy and their place in hierarchies of respectability.

Basic skills as socially situated literacy practices

2.1 Many surveys in recent decades have highlighted the extent of poor basic skills amongst adults in the UK with estimates suggesting anywhere between 2 and 5 million working age people having a weakness with reading, writing or mathematics that hindered their everyday activities (Moser 1999; Jama and Dugdale 2012; OECD 2013; Rashid and Brooks 2010). The educational inequalities in the UK are reflected in data that shows that Britain has one of highest rates of working age people with tertiary level qualifications yet also has significant numbers of workers with poor skills (OECD 2014). Research drawing on data from the 1970 British Cohort Surveys also documented the effects of poor skills noting links between poor skills, unemployment and social exclusion (Ekinsmyth and Bynner 1994; Bynner and Parsons 1997) as well as poor mental health (Bynner and Parsons 1997: 69; DBIS 2012: 22-24). Surveys have also noted the scale of poor basic skills amongst children in England and Wales (some 25% are poor readers at age 11) and the association between early educational under-achievement and the development of poor skills in later life (Save the Children 2014: 26-7).

2.2 Despite research neglecting the influence of basic skills on identities and life course transitions there are nevertheless some classic studies that have been influential in shaping our own work. Bernstein (1971) famously documented the variations in vocabulary and expression of school children and the relationships between restricted codes and working class educational under-achievement. Bourdieu has also examined the differences in literacy use suggesting that modes of expression are an important feature of a person's habitus (Bourdieu and Thompson 1991). Bourdieu and Thompson suggest that language use can reflect the different class experiences of individuals and hence act as symbolic markers of an individual's place in an unequal social structure. The powerful employ a vocabulary and accent that confer authority - a right to be heard. This is one way that those with economic and cultural resources convert these capitals into other embodied practices and dispositions that can aid their social advancement. In contrast, the language use of the working classes, Bourdieu suggests, can often make them vulnerable to derision and exclusion, thus compounding their other material and social disadvantages. It is this focus on language fluency, its links to social background and how it influences social identities and social standing that is at the heart of our research.

2.3 We have also drawn on the New Literacy Studies (NLS) perspective in our research. This situates literacies (which refer to writing, reading, oracy and mathematics) within everyday activities and shows how these are grounded in social settings and the traditions of language use in families, the workplace and the wider community (Barton and Hamilton 1998; Appleby and Barton 2009). This approach employs the idea of literacy practices rather than skills as the latter are not simple isolated, measurable and neutral competencies possessed by individuals but rather are embedded in relationships and the reflexive activities of actors. The NLS are

therefore critical of perspectives that view literacies as forms of human capital as has been common in recent discussions of basic skills, employability and social inclusion (Lankshear and Knobel 2003). Though the NLS have made an important contribution to the literature, as we note elsewhere (Cieslik and Simpson 2009), their concerns have focused mostly on mapping and describing the use of literacies rather than trying as sociologists might do, to link literacy practices to wider class relations and the influence on patterns of inclusion and marginalisation.

Changing approaches to class analysis

- 3.1** For much of the twentieth century British sociologists depicted the relationship between class background, transitions and life chances as unproblematic and predictable. There were structured, classed patterns of educational achievement and labour market transitions with limited social mobility for the few. These objective material processes were associated with cultural and subjective features of class membership. Interests in sport, shopping, leisure and politics were related to social class backgrounds. The last 50 years however, have seen changing employment and cultural activities that have challenged the significance of social class to objective relations of inequality and subjective process of identity formation. Theorists of late modernity (Beck 1992; Giddens 1990; 1991) suggest instead multiple axes of inequality and patterns of identity formation running through gender, 'race', sexualities, ethnicity as well as economics – a 'polycentric approach'. The restructuring of institutions (families, communities, work, welfare and education) – so-called 'detraditionalisation' have added to insecurities forcing individuals to take increasing responsibility for managing their lives. This individualisation can take on the appearance of greater choice for citizens yet underlying such reflexive strategies are shifting social structures that compel individuals to cope with the risks of getting on in life. Our interviewees illustrate this pressure to make difficult choices – to reflexively manage their lives, coping with insecure work and uncertain futures. More recently however there has been a resurgence of interest in social class, as recession and austerity policies have helped to cast a spotlight on the nature of social inequalities (Savage et al. 2013; Picketty 2014). When viewing our respondents' biographies we can see that their ways of coping with insecurity were often shaped by their classed experiences of poor literacy and their identities that emerged with such problems. Our data therefore points to evidence that supports aspects of theories of late modernity but also earlier class-based analyses of education and life course transitions rather than favouring one approach over the other as has been the case in some recent commentary on class analysis (Woodman 2009; Roberts 2010.).
- 3.2** The contribution we make to these debates on class identities focuses on what some have referred to as the, 'psychic landscapes of class' (Reay 2005). Where some have reasserted the continuing significance of material aspects of class to transitions (Shildrick et al. 2012) we also suggest, following the work of Reay and others (Bottero 2004; Skeggs 1997), that social divisions can be internalised and negatively influence the subjectivities of individuals. This approach offers insights into mundane, everyday practices at home, work and with friends that reveal the longer-term psychological costs of growing up with poor literacy in working class communities. These aspects of identity are often over-looked by the more traditional materialist and policy-focused research into class inequalities. The biographical, narrative research we conducted allowed us to reveal some of the processes by which shaming or stigmatisation occurs. Traditionally, attention focuses on the shame of experiencing poverty and unemployment but we suggest that educational failure and poor literacy also contribute to the stigma experienced by our respondents. Behind the apparent successes of some of our interviewees (they secured employment, some bought their homes, others got married) there were many disappointments, regrets and anguish stemming from earlier problems with literacy. Our interviewee's spoke of their desires for self-improvement, better lives for themselves and their children yet felt constrained by their educational backgrounds and poor skills. Time and again, our interviewees had to struggle for recognition and respect. The significance of these accounts lie in how they show us a world behind the usual, apparent indicators of success such as employment and residence that are commonly used by researchers and policy-makers. If, as my interviewees suggest, they were weighed down psychologically by their past experiences despite the appearance of a 'successful' life this poses questions about how we research, document and ameliorate class inequalities.
- 3.3** We also use work by Goffman on Stigma (1963) and the Presentation of Self (1990) to explore the emotions and psychology of class subjectivities. Efforts to cope with labelling and its influence on identities we understand in relation to the different resources as noted by Bourdieu (1986) (material, social, cultural, symbolic) that individuals mobilise and how these work through classed and gendered power relationships^[2]. We combined this mode of analysis with insights from Andrew Sayer (2005a; 2005b) on the ways that moral sentiments and norms of behaviour frame the relations and identities of working class individuals. There are codes of respectability in communities and to transgress these boundaries renders individuals vulnerable to shaming and

'othering' as we see with constructions of 'rough' and 'respectable', the underclass and contemporary images of 'hardworking families' versus 'welfare scroungers'. In particular we focus on how our respondent's difficulties with literacy created problems for their social identities and life chances as they struggled to conform to lay norms and manage processes of stigmatisation.

Research Methodology

4.1 This article draws on data from three qualitative research projects into adult learners attending basic skills classes, the first during 1998-9, the second, 2003-4 and finally between 2010-11. All respondents had weaknesses in literacy or numeracy – defined as attaining entry level competency. The original pilot involved men and women between the ages of 30 and 70 who attended an evening basic skills class at a small secondary school in the West Midlands. One of the authors worked as a volunteer tutor delivering some of the sessions. The second project included 55 respondents (31 females and 24 males) undertaking basic skills learning in community centres as part of a probation or New Deal programme. Fourteen of this 55 were then re-interviewed in 2010 in a follow-up study (11 females and 3 males). These samples were almost exclusively white and working class and this reflected the ethnic make-up of the neighbourhoods where they lived across the North East of England and West Midlands – locales that had witnessed economic decline and shared similar problems of high unemployment, poor housing and schooling. The research employed qualitative, life-history interviews (Bertaux and Thompson 1997) using biographical 'life grids' (Webster et al. 2004) to chart the life course transitions and identities of individuals.

4.2 We apply the concepts of literacy practice, subjectivity, lay normativity and moral career to understand how poor skills shape the social identities of our respondents. These concepts are also incorporated within a broad critical realist framework which allows us to theorise relations between structures and agency as well as the complex ways that inequality and identity are shaped (Archer 2003; 2012). 'Intersectionality' was important to explaining how the moral careers, shame responses and spoiled identities (subjectivities) of interviewees connected with wider socio-cultural factors such as working class normativity and gender relations. This helps to avoid the temptation of reductionism either to the micro level of agency or to the macro level of structure; allowing both their place in the analysis' (Walby et al. 2012: 228).

Research Findings

5.1 A significant number of young working class people have difficulties with literacy and we use our data to illustrate how classed experiences at school and home mean that few have adequate support to overcome their problems with their learning. As they mature these problematic learning identities have become a fixture of our respondents' sense of self, acting as a barrier to their efforts to get on in life and impinging on their wellbeing. We show economic, social and cultural class processes working through families, communities and education and their influence on the identities of individuals. Our interviewees therefore carry through life the embodied traces of these earlier problematic encounters they had at school and at home which condition later life events. It is important to make explicit these connections between learning and later identities as researchers often focus on more apparent 'objective' features of individuals such as poor work and unemployment rather than stigma, shame and respectability (Toynbee 2003). There can also be the tendency for lay accounts to individualise problems of poverty and poor work whose origins may lie in systemic structures of inequality – the so-called 'epistemological fallacy' (Furlong and Cartmel 1997:114). We illustrate then how poor skills and associated stigmas contribute to a complex classed, subjectification process as they influence not only the objective transitions and careers of our interviewees but also their subjective identities and ways of accounting for their difficulties in life.

Schooling, literacy practices and the experience of stigma

5.2 We are fortunate in having access to qualitative data from three different projects in two areas of England over a period of 20 years. This allows us to explore the experiences of different aged cohorts during a time of educational and social change. Interviewees from the pilot project were schooled during the 1970s and 1980s and those from later projects were in compulsory education during the 1990s. What is remarkable is how consistently our interviewees, irrespective of their age at interview, were able to recall the details of their schooling and their problems with literacy. This illustrates how such emotionally charged events have become woven into our interviewee's personal narratives. For Jackie and Robin who were interviewed for the pilot project they offer some typical memories of their schooling.

At school I was quiet and just plodded along really – not going anywhere – a shame really...I always had problems putting things down on paper...But I was trying my hardest and couldn't do any better. (Jackie)

In lessons just couldn't take it on board. Teacher was writing on the board and then it was gone – turned it over. I was still on the first few lines. Couldn't keep up with it...I was the dumbbo of the family, couldn't read or write. (Robin)□

- 5.3 We discuss elsewhere (Simpson and Cieslik 2007), how school was a challenging time for those with poor literacy. The expectation from teachers and students alike was that children should have mastered the basic aspects of reading and writing in primary school yet our interviewees made slow progress so that by secondary school they repeatedly failed literacy tests and struggled with routine classroom activities. Without the additional literacy support they needed our interviewees became very emotional about their learning – they were confused, frustrated and angry about their inability to be like other children who could read and write fluently. At the very□ time they wished to be treated as emerging adults they found their poor literacy led them to being infantilised because of their inability to perform everyday tasks. Over the years our interviewee's negative learning identities (labels such as 'slow' 'thick' or 'stupid') were repeatedly reaffirmed rather than challenged at school. Even though□ our respondents wished to succeed and were encouraged by their parents they spoke of becoming demotivated and disillusioned with school.

Poor literacy, class and schooling

- 5.4 Our interview data and other research suggests several ways of understanding why the learning needs of our respondents were not addressed by the schools they attended. Some surveys point to the incidence of social disadvantage and the structure of learning opportunities in English schools during the 1970s and 1980s which may account for why so many of our interviewees failed to be assessed for learning difficulties such as□ dyslexia (BSA 1996; Alexander-Passe 2010). A wealth of research (Lacey 1970; Ball 1981) has documented how schools serving working class communities operated forms of selection (such as setting and streaming) to distinguish the more 'academic' 20 per cent of students from their peers. The latter were offered more restricted curricula and vocational pathways through school where learning opportunities were framed by more modest conceptions of their 'educability' (Halsey 1980). These forms of class-based segregation took an institutional form for some who attended former secondary modern schools that were often seen as the local 'sink' school in their area.

Never made much effort at school...went to a secondary modern school... little encouragement and poor facilities. Had no qualifications at the end of school just reports (Wendy)□

Went to a local primary school that didn't have a good reputation. No one seemed to care (Jackie)

- 5.5 Our interviewees were often perceived by teachers as 'less able' and assigned like many of their working class peers to vocational routes. As Robin noted, 'If you showed promise at school you got help, if not just pushed to one side, I don't think it was intentional, it just happened'. It seems that the specific learning needs of□ our interviewees went unmet as they were hidden by the class based 'sifting and sorting processes' that operated in the schools they attended. When confronted with pupils who were slow to complete their work and made simple spelling mistakes teachers tended to see these students as less able or disaffected rather than students with dyslexia or other learning difficulties.□

- 5.6 By the 1990s there was greater awareness of special needs so we expected our interviewees from later projects to have had greater support for their literacy problems than our older respondents (British Dyslexia Association 2012: 6). Yet data suggested these younger interviewees also felt that their special needs largely went unnoticed at school and that selection processes worked against their efforts to achieve academically. Anne's experiences are similar to many in our sample who were in secondary school during the 1990s. She grew up in a disadvantaged community in the North East of England and her parents were long-term unemployed.

I had dyslexia but it wasn't diagnosed at school. All I could write was simple words like cat and dog...The teachers said that I came from a 'no-good' family and would never amount to anything – I just cried... So I left school at 14, the psychologist advised that I get a home tutor but that was delayed and delayed... I did go to college and then had a dyslexia test and that was positive – 'very severe' – but college didn't really help me. I was pleased (with finally□ getting the test) but didn't make much difference at the time. It would have at school. (Anne)

- 5.7 One way of interpreting these accounts is to suggest that market policies introduced by Conservative governments tended to amplify the existing class based selection processes within schools. Competition between schools encourages a focus on pupils who are visible and help to meet attainment targets (so-called, 'A-C pupils') so schools monitor and ration the way learning opportunities are distributed amongst pupils – creating a classed structure or 'economy of pupil worth' (Gillborn and Youdell 2001). Hence the poor literacy and special needs of some working class students remain hidden by the ways that some schools make judgements about the abilities of students (Dyslexia Action 2012: 15-17).

Families, poor literacy and stigma

- 5.8** Existing research shows that many middle class parents use a range of cultural, material and social resources to support their children's learning such as helping with homework, paying for private tutors, computers and cultural activities (Powers et al. 2003). Yet our interviewees in contrast had access to fewer opportunities and less parental resources.

My mum is an awful speller, my dad was quite clever but he died. So just my mum and me and she was no help whatsoever... I didn't have a dad to encourage me it was just me and my mum and she was brought up in a children's home and she's the world's worst speller – she never went to school. Never had any help at home. If I had help at home perhaps I wouldn't be in the situation I am now? (Jackie)

- 5.9** Reflecting on her schooling Jackie spoke of how she simply lacked the family support that would have helped improve her literacy. This was a common pattern amongst our different samples - of family life marked by parents who were often poorly educated, had little money and had poor literacy themselves and hence struggled, despite their ambitions to support their children's learning (see also Parsons and Bynner 1998; Jama and Dugdale 2012: 6).

- 5.10** Many of our respondents regretted how their home life when young had contributed to their literacy problems – Jackie spoke of how her mother was simply unaware of the extent of her special needs. For Robin, who was a teenager in the mid-1970s, his parents were unaware of his literacy problems for different reasons.

My brother did a five year apprenticeship in carpentry and joinery and I did three years... Practical things were always easy but struggled with the theory... We always had trades in our family so it was assumed that I'd just go into a job – good with my hands... I used to go out with my dad, eight or nine I was, helping him with the brick-laying. (Robin)

- 5.11** These parental attitudes echo the interpretation of working class cultures seen in some classic studies of secondary schooling where there were traditions of entry into craft labour rather than pursuit of credentials (Willis 1977; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Though working in slightly different ways for our respondents the operation of working class habitus and associated values meant that the learning problems of our participants were often hidden from view just as class processes at school had obscured the learning needs of our interviewees. Taken together the school and family processes meant that as they grew up our interviewees had fewer opportunities to improve their literacy than their more affluent middle class peers.

Transitions into work: poor literacy, poor work and the struggle for respectability

- 5.12** Our interviewees provided insights into their subjective identities that echo findings from other studies on social class and the moral economy (Bourdieu et al. 1999). We see the struggle for respectability and recognition – the desire to be valued by others for the work they do, the families they raise and the homes they manage. Yet the experience of poor pay, little control at work and unemployment are all threats to respectability. As Jackie and Faith discuss after several years of undertaking poorly paid, unskilled work there comes a time when one despairs of the same old jobs and their routines.

I've always got by but I don't want to just get by. I'm really bored with what I am doing. I want to do something more interesting and better... My friends are varied, one works in a bank, other is a solicitor... but I'm totally bored now. Just plodding along, been like it for years, stuck in a rut. (Jackie)

I ended up in gent's hairdressing, it was just easy... I could have been accepted in a beauty salon...but I didn't have to write appointments, they just arrived so I wasn't under pressure with any spellings...I would have loved to have come back to college and retrained and done something completely different... I don't want to be afraid anymore, I want to be able to sit down and write things. (Faith)

- 5.13** Yet our respondent's accounts differ from other work on social class, identity and the moral economy by also stressing the significance of troubled learning experiences and poor literacy. Where other research tends to focus on unemployment and poor work as the primary sources of working class shame (Jones 2012) our interviews also account for their situation by reference to their problems with literacy.

I never felt that I was not as good as others but my spelling is holding me back at the moment. I'm fed up with the job and if a tenancy (at a pub) is there I would take it. But if I had to sit down and do the exam (for landlords) the way it is now I would be snookered. I can read the questions and know the answers but can't just write it down. There's nothing more frustrating than being able to answer something and not being able to put it down on paper. People who can spell just don't know what it's like not to be able to put it down on paper. (Robin)

- 5.14** Robin, Faith and Jackie feel a sense of injustice – they compare their own lives with their more

successful former schoolmates yet feel they are no less able or hard working than their old friends. The interviews we conducted were punctuated with talk of regrets and disappointments and how life could have been so different, so much better than it has turned out. The narratives produced by our research show these regrets originated in failures at school and the struggle with poor literacy throughout life. Significantly these difficulties with reading and writing are still a daily occurrence – a regular reminder of their younger selves and so our interviewees are unable to move on, psychologically from their earlier selves. Their difficulties with literacy at school meant they achieved few qualifications that then led to low-level employment. Few undertook work-based learning and so they find themselves as adults with poor literacy and an inability to improve their job prospects and wider lives^[3]. The frustrations and vulnerabilities they experience in their jobs are a daily reminder of how they lack the literacy (and confidence) to get on in life. Here we see how adolescent experiences of class and educational failure become embodied and relived by our interviewees – the ongoing psychic injuries of class.

The wider impact of poor literacy on social identities

- 5.15** Undoubtedly occupational identity powerfully shaped our interviewee's sense of self but they also spoke about the wider and longer-term effects of poor literacy on their identities. There were aspects of their selves that they valued greatly which were regularly threatened by their problems with literacy. Despite many having secured jobs, partners and homes many were anxious about their literacy and its effect on the quality of their lives.

It's not just about getting another job - when you can spell you have more confidence. People like me who can't spell have missed chances because they can't spell...Most people who don't get on in life do so because they don't have the confidence to do anything. If you can't spell, write and read it's wicked...I got fed up and depressed because I couldn't do something when I should be able to spell. (Robin)

- 5.16** For Robin there had been many 'missed chances' in his life, which he attributed to his poor literacy - promotions at work, the failed entrance examinations for the Police Force, problems with training courses - had all been painful disappointments. Robin's story, like so many we interviewed illustrates trends in the survey data that highlight the incidence of depression amongst those with poor literacy (Ekinsmyth and Bynner 1994, 57; DBIS 2012: 22).

- 5.17** Robin spoke about wishing to have more 'confidence with words', a greater ability to use language and confidence to socialise with people. Meeting a wider range of people, developing new hobbies and interests were all part of his reason for attending literacy classes – his effort to 'make more of life and be a better person'. For Robin even though he had worked for many years, bought a home and raised a family these markers of success did not compensate for his regrets about his poor skills and their impact on his life.

The family thought I just would get a job, work hard, stay in the village, and rent a house. But when I left, got my own house and 2 cars they couldn't believe it. They think I have money – but got fuck all really. If I go back 30 years and think if I could read and write I would have done other things. (Robin)

- 5.18** In contrast to the men such as Robin, our female interviewees also spoke of disappointments in relation to their domestic roles. This illustrates one of the ways that gender influences the operation of literacy practices – women have to deal with the double disadvantage of poor literacy operating through labour markets as well as the domestic sphere (Parsons and Bynner 2007: 54). All of the women in our sample who were mothers spoke of the practical problems that poor literacy had created for them – reading to their children, helping with schoolwork, and managing household bills.

Telling kids a story, I might get a bit more confident and help with telling stories and with their spellings and homework... Chelsea loves school. I have to keep encouraging her so that she doesn't fall by the wayside like me. (Jackie)

I do the course as I'm not a very good speller, so I thought that would help with me spelling as well, for when she (my daughter) starts at school...its just in case she comes up to us and says, 'Mam can you help us do this', and saying, 'No I cannot', that would be awful saying that to her. (Maggie)

- 5.19** As Jackie reveals however, the problems with literacy at home have a deeper, symbolic resonance for she wants her children to have better lives than her own. The thought that their children may not be receiving the help they need was a great source of anxiety for the women we interviewed. The potency of these worries may reflect cultural shifts in Britain in recent decades for studies have documented the way that young working class women have invested much of their energies in being 'good mothers' when so many struggled to secure good quality jobs (Phoenix 1991; MacDonald and Marsh 2005). Yet these shifts create new risks as recent decades have seen the emergence of moral discourses over the performance of working class 'motherhood' with many

demonised for failing to conform to middle class standards of 'good parenting' (Skeggs 1997: 156). And so it was with many of our female interviewees, who were juggling part-time work and poverty it brings with the demands of raising a family.

Oh I know people think I'm a bad mother, I know they do... 'Don't criticise me and how to look after my child when you don't have to do it'... People try to criticise us and put us down and what I've done... Nobody really understands unless you're in a situation yourself. Nobody understands. (Vicky)

5.20 Just as with some of our other interviewees who felt trapped in dead end jobs because of their literacy, many of our young mothers such as Vicky felt powerless and trapped at home with children because they lacked the skills and qualifications to secure waged work. Although the young mothers felt stigmatised through 'discourses of derision' they also accounted for their shaming by reference to their earlier problems with learning as we see with Vicky. When first interviewed in 2006 she was an 18 years old single mother whose spells of poor work had meant that she looked forward to being a good mother to her daughter. Four years later in 2010 however, a complex of difficulties had led to increasing mental health problems as she struggled with the effort to conform to the demands of being a 'good mother'. Her efforts to secure good employment had been thwarted by the lack of qualifications and poor job opportunities and her daughter's difficult behaviour required visits to the doctors, school and health visitor, which she found difficult with her poor literacy. Vicky's case echoes findings from others that have documented the impact of poor literacy on the wellbeing of young women (Bynner and Parsons 1997). Women like Vicky come to see themselves neither as good workers or good mothers and so they struggle to be valued and accepted in the adult world (MacDonald and Marsh 2005; Webster et al. 2004).

The hidden injuries of class and the return to formal learning

5.21 Thus far we have suggested that poor literacy had a powerful influence on the identities of our working class respondents. Yet if this stigmatisation is so potent one would not expect these individuals to return to education – as many surveys suggest (Ekinsmyth and Bynner 1994: 61; Parsons and Bynner 2007: 43). But our sample of working class adults did eventually overcome their anxieties and return to education. How our respondents challenged their negative views of learning illustrates how structural processes (such as class and gender) and the creativity and reflexivity of interviewees are interwoven in what some have referred to as, 'structured individualisation' (Roberts 2003). Poor literacy and problematic learning identities left our interviewees ill-equipped to deal with the demands of employers who increasingly expected flexibility and lifelong learning from their staff.

The job is changing – had three different jobs at the university and we are moving again and have to re-apply for our jobs so might get made redundant... went to the course as wanted to improve my English and improve my prospects and get a better job at the end of the day... maybe an estate agents or a travel agents. (Jackie)

Been at the council 19 years... my wife she said it was a job for life. Just fed up with it now...they are moving people around... I can see the place closing down... and for someone like myself who is not educated? That is why I am at back at school... English gives you options. You just can't go from one job to another these days. (Robin)

5.22 Our interviewee's talk reflects the cultural shifts documented by Beck and Giddens and their concepts of individualisation and de-traditionalisation – the normative and moral expectation that individuals are compelled to adapt to these structural changes to employment, families and communities. In recent years both Jackie (at a university) and Robin (at a local authority) have had to cope with new administrative systems and management processes at work yet their poor literacy created significant difficulties for them coping with these changes. They both spoke of how their working class colleagues with more credentials and better skills had coped much better with this organisational change and had been promoted into new positions. Our interviewees spoke of feeling that they were 'being left behind' at work. These frustrations and insecurities at work were very real threats to our respondent's wellbeing. It was this sense of risk about their jobs and their livelihoods and a desire to have some choice over their employment careers that framed the decision to return to formal learning. One that was a personal choice but which was structured by their circumstances – the legacy of poor literacy coupled to the shifting demands of risky societies.

Conclusions

6.1 The recent report by Save the Children (2014), drawing on data from the Millennium Cohort Study suggests that 25% of 11 year olds do not read well – this figure rises to 40% of those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The report notes as many others have in the past that this combination of poor literacy and social disadvantage can limit the life chances of these young people, contributing to the pattern of poverty and inequality that characterises the UK today. Our research offers some insight into the stories behind these

statistics. Sociologists however neglect the place of literacy in people's lives focusing more on the traditional concerns of employment, poverty and social exclusion. Instead we have illustrated how problems with literacy can profoundly shape the identities of young people and have a lasting effect on their sense of self and wellbeing. Despite many of our respondents making 'successful' transitions to adulthood their case studies illustrated the 'hidden injuries of class' – how their lives might have been different without poor literacy and the stigma that went with it. Our data suggest that social class processes in the home and school help create troubled identities for those with poor literacy. Our interviewee's special needs were not met as their parents were often unable to support them and they also attended schools that failed to identify their needs. These early classed experiences weighed heavily on our interviewee's lives limiting their ability to respond to insecurities associated with individualisation and de-traditionalisation. Nevertheless, most had responded positively to their predicament as their return to education marked an effort to leave behind their old anxieties about learning and to forge better lives for themselves.

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Notes

- 1 We use the terms, 'literacy' and 'literacy practices' to encompass reading, writing, numeracy and oracy and we talk generally here in relation to weaknesses/strengths with these.
 - 2 Here we just flag the issue of variations in strategies used to cope with poor literacy – we examine this in more detail elsewhere (Cieslik and Simpson 2009).
 - 3 We have noted elsewhere (Cieslik and Simpson 2009) how many employers offered very few opportunities for our interviewees to improve their literacy. Even where some work-based training was available this was often not taken up due to the stigma associated with poor literacy.
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