



The Perceptions that Homeless People  
and those at Risk of Homelessness  
have of Literacy Classes



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# Homelessness, housing and literacy

Low levels of literacy and homelessness / social exclusion often go hand-hand.

A study by the OECD suggested correlations between lower levels of literacy proficiency and poorer social outcomes (OECD, 2013a). In the case of Australian, the OECD concluded that “the 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” (2013b, p. 10).

# Homelessness, housing and literacy

Castleton (1998) found that homeless people, while acknowledging literacy as an important issue in the range of different factors impacting on their lives, felt it was not the most important issue, nor the issue to which they would attribute their homelessness. She found that the homeless people in the study negotiated literacy demands in their lives by tapping into various networks in which they belonged. Within these networks were people who assumed the role of “literacy broker” (p. 74) and whose skills and knowledge were called on to assist.

## Homelessness, housing and literacy

Many saw literacy “as a means of enabling them to achieve greater personal and collective responsibility over their lives” (p. 75). From this, she suggests that discourses about literacy for homeless people needed to shift from that 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 program for adults who were at risk of social exclusion. They found that participants were seeking to develop literacy skills in order to gain independence and control over their lives.

# Homelessness, housing and literacy

The limited literature available on the literacy needs of adults experiencing homelessness suggests that despite literacy being a critical resource for social inclusion, homeless people will not necessarily prioritise literacy development as a way to negotiate hardships in their life circumstances.

Engagement in different kinds of literacy learning may occur if opportunities are afforded to help them gain greater control over other issues that they have identified as priorities because usually literacy is needed to negotiate these goals.

# Methodology

Based on research commissioned by the Footpath library.

18 semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted in various parts of Sydney. Five interviews were conducted with 2 people, thus a total of 23 people were interviewed. 11 were female and 12 were male. All of the interviewees had English as their first language. The aims of the study were to establish

- The level of interest of this group in literacy classes.
- The perceived gains from attending a literacy class.
- Perceptions of what would encourage / discourage regular attendance.
- Views on how the classes should be structured and run.
- Optimal recruitment strategies.

# The literacy profile of interviewees

We identified three main groups. Those who said they could not read, those who said they had basic literacy skills but struggled with more complex words and sentences and those who said they had adequate literacy skills to meet their own needs.

Three interviewees had very weak reading and writing skills and struggled with basic text. Gregory commented, *“I can't even read the newspaper. I pretend to people...I can read...but I just look at the pictures”*.

## The literacy profile of interviewees

The next group (9 interviewees) had very basic literacy and struggled with complex words and grammar. A number of interviewees in this group had struggled with early homelessness and or housing instability which impacted on their schooling. When asked if she would be interested in attending a literacy program Holly responded,

*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.*

# The literacy profile of interviewees

They also spoke about learning disabilities such as dyslexia, as well as institutional impediments to learning, such as racism, which impacted on their ability to acquire literacy. Rick commented,

*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 literacy profile of interviewees

Eight interviewees said that they could read and write but they wanted to improve their literacy skills for their own personal development and to enhance their study and job prospects. Leanne's comment captures this desire:

*Well I mean it has been a long time since I've been out of school so I really need to update and I wasn't very good at school. I left halfway through Year 10. I didn't even finish my Year 10 exams. I did the half yearly but 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.*

These interviewees said they were able to read newspapers and basic books.

## Motivations for Attending – negotiating everyday demands

For many 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 emails and text messages, writing letters, as well as being able to read the newspaper were mentioned. When asked why he would be interested in attending a class, Luke outlined some of the difficulties he faced engaging in everyday activities because of limited literacy:

*L: To help with reading newspapers stuff like that ... Filling out forms would probably come in handy cos I always have trouble with forms.*

*I: Any particular forms?*

*L: You name it. Everything you've got to do nowadays is filling out forms.*

## Motivations for Attending – negotiating everyday demands

There was an awareness that acquiring literacy could potentially change their lives:

*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 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)*

## Motivations for Attending – negotiating everyday demands

Jane also expressed her 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 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 spoke about the difficulties of sending a text message:

*I've got pretty basic literacy. Like since you left school, you forget a lot of words which you don't use most of them. 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.*

## Motivations for Attending – negotiating everyday demands

A similar challenge was expressed by Holly:

*[I can read] small words and that but ... I don't understand the big words. Obviously going only as far as ... Year 7 you don't learn very much. The bigger words until older in life so just knowing little words and everyday words that you need to know, but a lot of spelling mistakes and things that friends help you with, with a dictionary.*

Jim spoke about how he needs help forming sentences and using grammar correctly. He wanted to know, *“Where to put the commas so I can actually read the letter without it actually just being one big sentence ...”* and how 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”*.

## Motivations for Attending - help with achieving education and employment goals

For most interviewees, improved literacy was viewed as a way to enhance the possibility of them attaining employment.

*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. (Leanne)*

Some interviewees saw the literacy classes as a stepping stone to reengaging with educational institutions. When Holly was asked how a literacy program would fit into her future plans, she replied that it would help her do *“Year 10 and my HSC no matter how much it takes”*.

# What would encourage regular attendance and success of the program?

## Preferred frequency and times

The afternoon rather than the morning or evening was viewed as a better option.

*During a week day of course, probably afternoon because a lot of people probably don't get up early in the morning or you know have things to do in the morning, so afternoon is probably best or evening time... Yeah really if you've got children, different story. During the afternoon would probably be best. (Holly)*

# What would encourage regular attendance and success of the program?

## Class size and length of the lesson

Only two of the 23 respondents indicated that they would prefer a one-on-one situation rather than a group. There was a perception that group classes would enhance their learning outcomes.

*If you're all there for the same reason it wouldn't be a bad thing as a group...all learning together. (Anna)*

*It's more motivation. Like a lot of people are there and they're understanding and saying things that you need to understand. 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)*

# What would encourage regular attendance and success of the program?

Lisa felt that learners could find one-on-one tuition confronting:

*One-on-one feels like a counselling session about your own life. Just some people don't like that confrontation about things. They ... are not open to that much ... They wouldn't want a one-on-one. They'd feel more comfortable to do it in a group. I would, yeah.*

## What would encourage regular attendance and success of the program?

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

*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. (Luke)*

When asked about the length of the classes most of the interviewees said 1.5 to 2 hours. This length would give everybody time to speak and have a break midway. On this latter point, each class should *"...allow for the smokers so they can go out and have a quick puff"* (Chloe).

# What would encourage regular attendance and success of the program?

## Food

Light refreshments considered essential

Full meals were suggested as an incentive, but there was some concern that this might encourage people to “...*just come along for a free meal and disrupt the class. It wouldn't be helpful*” (Connor)

## What would encourage regular attendance and success of the program?

Venue crucial - *City is always good cos I [am] ...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...Yeah and Woolloomooloo [too] (Jim)*

*You gotta keep [it here] if that's where your target is. I know there's a fair few homeless people in Parramatta. You're going to have to keep it fairly local if that was the case. 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)*

# What would encourage regular attendance and success of the program?

## Venue

There was consensus that to encourage attendance and minimise drop-out, learners had to feel totally relaxed about the venue. In discussing one of the venues near Wynyard Station, Sam noted its appeal:

*Well, for example, this place is a church ... It's quite comfortable here and it is relaxed... It's not overwhelming or anything like that. So probably [if] ... this place is set up where you've got someone to normally greet you at the door and just say, "Hi" and then wander in yourself and then kind of find your own place and sit with people you may or may not know but you got that option there... so it's comfortable enough. Yeah, it doesn't feel like you're forced to do anything so somewhere like here actually is quite good... Cos the way it's set up here is great.*

## What would encourage regular attendance and success of the program?

Interviewees were asked whether educational institutions would be acceptable venues. Some interviewees felt that these spaces could be intimidating:

*Say someone who hasn't done, or hasn't got a very high level of education, so they've only gone to Year 8 or 9 or something and they haven't been anywhere near a school or training institution in say 15 or 20 years. I'm sure it'd be a bit daunting. Even myself, cos I never went to university, walking through the university campus would sort of be you know what I mean like a bit daunting cos you got all these academics there. (Sam)*

## What would encourage regular attendance and success of the program?

Easy access to the classroom was viewed as vital: When asked if 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 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.*

# What would encourage regular attendance and success of the program?

## Expectations of the tutor

When asked about what the participants expected from a tutor, the overwhelming response was that they wanted someone who could understand their needs.

*Just to be really open and understanding ... 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)*

# What would encourage regular attendance and success of the program?

## Expectations of the tutor

The importance of being non-judgemental and respectful was viewed as key.

*Just be really genuine. I suppose in the way that they sort of approach you and like keep it confidential so that you know that you're coming to a place where you are struggling and you do need help that you can come to someone and ask for that help and get the help that you need so people that don't judge you for what you're going through or what you've been through. (Leanne)*

# What would encourage regular attendance and success of the program?

## Expectations of the tutor

The importance of being treated respectfully and understanding the needs and experiences of homeless people, or those at-risk of homelessness was also highlighted by Lisa:

*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.*

# What would encourage regular attendance and success of the program?

## Expectations of the tutor

Lisa 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 that they can relate to.*

Lisa's observations suggest that it is worth considering the role that homeless people or those at risk of homelessness with more advanced literacy skills could play as co-facilitators or teaching aides. They could support teaching staff and contribute to the space feeling relaxed and comfortable.

# What would encourage regular attendance and success of the program?

## Expectations of the tutor

### There was concern about the tutor limiting embarrassment

*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? And so people aren't going to be as open...cos you've got to remember you see these people every day you know and 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)*

## What would encourage regular attendance and success of the program?

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

*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 in a literacy class.

# What would encourage regular attendance and success of the program?

## The composition of the class

When asked about gender composition of the class, some interviewees felt that students needed to be given the option of attending female-only, male-only or mixed classes. Chloe argued that some women, because of a previous history of domestic violence, would find it hard to participate in a mixed class:

*Gender I think would be a problem yeah... There's definitely some women ... that would not want to be in the same room as males or vice versa ...*

# What would encourage regular attendance and success of the program?

Chloe felt that there had to be choice:

*You could offer a mixed group, males only, females only and allow people to choose which one they want to come to. If you've got those three options, I think you would have a good success rate instead of just saying, "Right, the groups are going to be mixed and that's it". I think if those three options are there, it would be a lot better.*

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 ...*

# What would encourage regular attendance and success of the program?

## 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. 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 because a lot of guys would be able to put that on a resume... (Andrew)*

## What would encourage regular attendance and success of the program?

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 you know what foods to eat and what foods not to eat ... It would be good to have nutrition [information] to help them ... 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”*.

# Conclusions

The prospect of participating in literacy classes appealed to almost all of the interviewees. They saw much value in classes that:

- Are located in an accessible and safe place.
- Have a tutor who can make participants feel comfortable, and supported in class settings.
- Respond to the diverse needs of learners and tailor classes to provide supportive spaces for different levels of reading and writing skills.
- Package the service with other educational as well as broader service/s.
- Clearly indicate how learners are progressing - some form of certificate or statement of attainment for attending and progressing successfully through the class.

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