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**Overcoming the hurdles: Understanding motivation and supporting adult learners
with poor literacy and dyslexia in the homelessness sector**

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Abstract

Literacy difficulties are often reported by adults with experience of homelessness. Yet, research on their learning experiences and clarity on how best to support this group is lacking. The present study explored the experience of homeless literacy learners (HLLs) and asked what motivated them to engage with literacy support and the teaching related factors perceived to be most effective. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 HLLs (aged 31-68) engaged in literacy provision at a homelessness charity in the United Kingdom (UK). Thematic analysis of the data revealed five key themes: challenging early experiences; barriers to improving literacy; the perceived impact of poor literacy; current motivation to improve literacy; and approaches that support literacy in adulthood. A significant majority of HLLs reported early traumatic learning experiences and 7 out of 10 (70%) disclosed a diagnosis of dyslexia. Specialist dyslexia support was reported to help HLLs feel understood and positive relationships with teachers helped self-esteem and self-efficacy related to their literacy learning. Recommendations are made for specialist teachers to be made more readily available to support HLLs, as well as to advise service providers and professionals engaging with adult learners with experience of homelessness across the sector.

Keywords: adult literacy, homelessness, dyslexia, motivation, learning support, Psychologically Informed Environments.

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Practitioner points

- A high proportion of adults with experience of homelessness (70%) in the present study disclosed a diagnosis of dyslexia
- Adults with experience of homelessness reported that engaging with literacy learning enhanced their self-confidence and mental health
- A positive relationship with the teacher is highly valued by adult literacy learners, which promotes their confidence to share ideas
- Improving literacy was identified as a step to becoming more independent by adults with experience of homelessness
- Holistic (including emotional support) and inclusive teaching was acknowledged as important for adults with experience of homelessness.

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Introduction

The ability to read and write are fundamental skills that many people take for granted. From reading or writing text messages, filling in forms or planning journeys, we use our literacy skills on a daily basis. Sadly, many homeless people navigate life without these skills, which can hinder their journey out of homelessness (Dumoulin & Jones, 2014). In 2018, the homeless charity Shelter reported that 320,000 people across the UK were officially recorded as homeless; not including those in non-officially monitored types of ‘hidden’ homelessness, such as sofa-surfing, squatting, people living in over-crowded conditions or sleeping rough in hidden locations (Reynolds, 2018).

Despite a significant increase in measured homelessness over the last decade (Fitzpatrick et al., 2019), research in the field of adult literacy and homelessness remains scarce (Olisa et al., 2010). However, research in the UK and US does suggest that many homeless people have poor literacy (Barwick & Siegal, 1996; Dumoulin & Jones, 2014; Jones, 2019; Luby & Welch, 2006; Olisa et al, 2010). The value in improving literacy skills for this group has been widely acknowledged as building confidence, improving employability, providing skills necessary to be able to interact in work and their personal life (which can have a knock-on effect in ending feelings of social exclusion), and ability to access services (Luby & Welch, 2006). Further research that aims to expand our knowledge of how best to support the development of literacy skills in adults with experience of homelessness is, therefore, vital in providing key insights into good practice approaches for support services, practitioners and policy makers in supporting homeless literacy learners (HLLs).¹

¹ HLLs refers to adults who are experiencing or have recently experienced homelessness and are engaging in literacy classes or 1-1 literacy support.

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In 2014, a report by The Work Foundation and homelessness charity St Mungo's, emphasised the importance of bespoke programmes to support basic English and maths skills for homeless individuals and explored why so many homeless people lack these skills. Interviews with homeless adults found that traumatic childhood experiences, poor experiences of school, dyslexia, health conditions and lack of settled accommodation contribute to this widespread lack of basic skills. This report stressed the unsuitable nature of further education colleges for HLLs which, reliant on attendance and attaining qualifications for funding, are unable to offer the types of flexible courses required (Dumoulin & Jones, 2014). Crowther et al. (2010) found HLLs carry trauma, or memories of negative school experiences, preventing them from engaging with learning as adults. Furthermore, research at eight Adult Literacy and Numeracy (ALN, 2006) providers in Scotland, some of whom supported homeless learners, identified a need for programs to provide a holistic level of 'wrap around' support, where affinities between tutors and learners help them to engage through difficult times when they might otherwise have disengaged. Consequently, approaches to teaching HLLs may differ to typical teaching, with a greater emphasis around flexibility of programme delivery and teaching support.

The importance of a 'holistic model' of support, where HLLs are taught by tutors who understand their literacy difficulties, empathise with the challenges they face, and operate within a wider framework of provision, is evident. In an action research report, Olisa et al. (2010) argued that literacy provision for HLLs which accounted for issues including negative memories of school, shame surrounding poor literacy skills, or inability to cope with administrative procedures, were not only more likely to retain HLLs but also contribute to their self-esteem and confidence. This aligns

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with the Psychologically Informed Environment (PIE) good practice approach used within many homeless services in the UK (Breedvelt, 2016; Keats et al., 2012; Maguire et al., 2009). A 'PIE' describes an approach used by people supporting individuals with compound trauma (trauma which occurs repeatedly in a variety of different contexts and relationships) or complex needs; placing the 'psychological makeup - the thinking, emotions, personalities and past experience - of its participants at the forefront of the way it operates' (as cited in Johnson & Haigh, 2011). Maguire et al. (2009) found a large body of evidence illustrating the prevalence of compound trauma in the histories of chronically homeless people. Aside from this suggested approach to supporting homeless adults generally, little is known about the teaching strategies deemed most effective with HLLs with literacy difficulties (Olisa et al., 2010). The current study provides scope for establishing what supports self-confidence and engagement, as well as considering how HLLs perceive support from tutors outside the mainstream adult education system.

To date, research has considered the reasons behind literacy difficulties for adults experiencing homelessness (Crowther et al., 2010; Dumoulin & Jones, 2014). The current study aimed to further develop this understanding, as well as to extend the focus to investigating the motivations for engaging in literacy classes for this population and to identify what HLLs perceive to be effective support strategies. Exploration of support strategies raises practical applications for service providers, in addition to furthering our understanding of effective literacy instruction. A qualitative, semi-structured interview approach was used to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the common hurdles perceived by HLLs in addressing low literacy?
2. What motivates this group to engage in literacy classes or 1-1 literacy support?

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3. What teaching-related factors are recognised by HLLs as supporting self-confidence and motivation to improve literacy?

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted. Data were ‘generated’ through this exchange, with themes emerging, rather than data being ‘collected’ by the interviewer (Mason, 1996). This semi-structured approach allowed rich data to be gathered; encouraging the participants to talk openly, while providing a framework for the researcher to work through that also allowed prompts to be able to further explore points raised and to keep the conversation focused (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Interviews were favoured as the research design over surveys, due to the aim to understand the lived experiences in-depth, and over focus groups which may have resulted in participants holding back sharing sensitive information or ethical issues around confidentiality.

Participants

Ten HLLs (3 females, 7 males; aged 31-68 years) were recruited from a national homeless charity in the South of England that uses a PIE approach, based on willingness to be interviewed and engagement with literacy provision at the service for a minimum of one term (ten weeks). Participants (see Table 1) were engaged with literacy classes ($n=6$), English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) ($n=1$), 1-1 literacy support ($n=4$) or a combination during their time at the service ($n=2$). HLLs are identified by

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pseudonyms to protect anonymity when identifying quotes and discussing individual HLLs perspectives.

[Insert Table 1 here]

All participants had worked in the past, but none were currently employed. Of those educated in the UK, one left school with one General Certificate in Education (GCSE); four left school before sitting GCSEs. Of participants from outside the UK, one was not sent to school, others reported guessing ($n=1$), cheating ($n=1$) or not sitting exams ($n=3$). Seven out of ten (70%) participants declared a diagnosis of dyslexia, though interview questions did not explicitly enquire about dyslexia. Jackie, Hazeema and Dez were diagnosed at primary school, Jon at college, Luke received formal diagnosis and specialist support in prison, while Ben and Ray were diagnosed by the charity service. Dez received specialist learning support at primary school but not secondary; Jackie and Hazeema received no specialist learning support at school, despite diagnoses.

All experienced homelessness or significant risk of homelessness, such as imminent threat of eviction, within the past two years in keeping with the service eligibility criteria at the time of this study. Experiences of homelessness disclosed during the interview included: living on the streets, in hostels, squatting, family relationship breakdown, vulnerable tenancy/threat of eviction.

Procedure

Interview topic guides consisted of nine core questions, developed after careful consideration of the existing literature. Questions were designed to explore participants

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views on: previous learning experiences, barriers to improving literacy, relationships with teachers and impact on learning, motivations for improving literacy, current experience of literacy learning, preferences of teaching, and teaching approaches perceived most effective. Questions were piloted with the co-author and a member of staff at the charity that provided literacy support to check for suitability of wording.

Ethical approval was gained from XXX². The first author invited the head of the literacy support in the charity to take part in the current study and they were then asked to identify suitable participants. Participants had an overview of the study and consent forms read to them, before giving signed consent to participate in the study. Interviews were conducted individually by the first author in a classroom, and audio-recorded. Interviews ranged between 15-45 minutes.

Interviews were transcribed fully and thematic analysis of data was performed using a traditional paper-based approach (guided by Clarke & Braun, 2013). Initial codes were identified across the data set, using theoretical thematic analysis. Coding involved reading and re-reading the transcripts, generating initial themes and sub-themes, while referring back to the research aims to check the significance of each theme. Emergent codes and themes were checked and finalised with the co-author.

Results

Thematic analysis of the interviews generated 5 overarching themes, each with sub-themes (see Figure 1). The main themes were: (1) Challenging early experiences, (2) Barriers to improving literacy, (3) Perceived impact of poor literacy, (4) Current

² Removed for blinding purposes

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motivation to improve literacy, and (5) Approaches that support literacy in adulthood.

Each theme will be discussed in turn below.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Challenging early experiences

This overarching theme about participants' experiences in childhood and adolescence yielded three sub-themes, which point towards difficulties faced at school and a lack of support.

Violence and bullying at school

Nine out of ten HLLs attended primary and secondary school: 4 exclusively in the UK (Paul, Jackie, Jon and Dez), 1 in Pakistan (Hazeema), 1 in the UK and Israel (Issac), 3 in the Caribbean and the UK (Mary, Ben and Ray). One did not go to school or access education until the age of 46, learning to read/write while in prison (Luke).

Bullying, threats and violence (inflicted by teachers, or from parents towards teachers in defence of their children) were referenced by four HLLs. Jackie described being beaten by those who taught her, resulting in confrontation by her mother who removed her from the school: *'They used to beat me and make me write with my right hand...I went home and told my mum one day and she...obviously, she hit them...That wasn't nice'*. Further, Hazeema attributed deep-rooted fear of learning to the association of violence and punishment by teachers in the past: *'If I fail, the teacher beat me, so it's in my memory...it makes me scared...I have a feeling in my heart that I am scared (of) studying.'*

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Dez contrasted positive learning experiences in primary school where he received his dyslexia diagnosis and learning support, with those in secondary school where he felt disconnected and bullied by teachers: *'You don't wanna go back to a place where people are going to humiliate you, discourage you, and say: 'If you've got spelling like that, you'll never get anywhere in life.' ...I thought teachers were supposed to be... awesome, like I had in primary school! But it was the complete opposite in secondary, they simply didn't care.'*

Although Jon had Special Educational Need (SEN) support at secondary school, it was perceived as a place he was sent to keep him out of the way. The stigma attached to receiving this sort of support, led to bullying from peers: *'My friend knew I was going there...you know how kids can be horrible, it affected me more...I stopped going because everyone knew I had issues and I couldn't read, write, spell properly, or grasp the concept of things...'*

Of those who attended secondary school in the UK, bullying seemed prevalent: *'I was bullied quite a lot, I got picked on, I was a loner...kicked out of school...I didn't get much of an education'(Paul); 'I got bullied a lot in my secondary school. I didn't like going ... and at the end of it I missed all my exams.'* (Jackie).

Lack of support at home

Luke described being brought by his grandmother who did not send him to school, despite his siblings all going: *'I grew up with my grandma..she didn't got the strength to send me to school and I didn't have the sense about going to school...so there was no one around me to send me.'*; while Issac reflected on parental neglect: *'Just...had a bad life....I wasn't eating properly...my mother would run out of the house a lot, she would disappear for weeks. So, I would just eat cornflakes...Everything was*

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hard, stressful. The impact of losing a parent was also noted: *'I had a very good school...best days of my life...being at primary school...but at the age of 12, when I was just about to go to secondary school, my father died...and that really had a knock on effect...I sort of lost the person who could explain everything to me...I lost that...and I went to secondary and I found it very difficult.'* (Dez).

Often, HLLs felt parents and teachers were dismissive of their literacy difficulties: *'I realised I wasn't learning and I talked to my parents about it, talked to my teacher about it...they wasn't listening.'* (Ray); and *'I suppose I didn't have a person to 'lead' me, so I was leading myself, so I presume I took the easy route.'* (Mary)

Ineffective support

Although some mentioned teachers who *'went out of their way'* (Jon, Dez) to help them, the majority referenced teachers who were strict or dismissive: *'They were more focused on the kids who could read and write basically...clever...and get on with their work without having to explain things over and over.'* (Jon). Others reflected on the difference in teaching approaches and support in the past, compared to in the present day: *'In them days, they never had like they have today... teachers to help you with a lot of things if you are dyslexic...they never had that years ago. It's all just like one big class, they never had little groups..'* (Jackie); *'When you're a kid, in secondary school, and you're swearing...with your teacher, that's a big no-no...that was an instant get out of the classroom. And nobody picked up on that, WHY is this kid swearing? You know he wants help, he's asking you to explain the work but then he's swearing, why is he doing that? It seems very weird to me now...there has to be a reason behind that.'* (Dez).

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Many expressed frustration that teachers got annoyed at them; sensing they were not listening, understanding or caring how much they struggled: *'They didn't really understand... I was explaining to them I don't understand certain things and they'd get kind of annoyed about it... just give me the work to get on with regardless, even if I didn't understand it, it wouldn't really matter.'* (Jon). *'The teachers didn't really help me...I just got pushed aside... but I couldn't understand half the work.'* (Jackie).

Support and understanding about literacy difficulties did not appear to improve if they went to college. HLLs appeared resigned to being ignored or unsupported, despite this being when some of them received formal assessments of their difficulties: *'I wasn't properly diagnosed with it until college...but even in college they wasn't too bothered about dyslexia.'* (Jon) *'I went to XXXX college...I went to class, I told them I'm not reading, the kids, they're way ahead of me...but the teacher wasn't listening either. So I just give up.'* (Ray).

Barriers to improving literacy

Many barriers to engaging in education were mentioned, forming this next theme. Four sub-themes are discussed below which identify learning challenges and contributing factors.

Dyslexia

Five HLLs with dyslexia spoke extensively about their diagnosis, others focused on general literacy difficulties. Four out of the seven HLLs who disclosed dyslexia received a diagnosis from school or college but only one recounted having the condition explained to them in a positive way. After struggling with poor literacy, sometimes for years, diagnosis did not always signal greater understanding or support. Many perceived

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dyslexia as *their* problem, recognising peers or siblings had not experienced the same difficulties at school: *'It would be easier to understand (if) I didn't go to school so (wouldn't be) expected to read. Where my peers learn, my family members that I went to school with learn; so I definitely didn't have that barrier from them.'* (Ben). Frequently, HLLs with dyslexia spoke of being pushed aside, feeling unimportant or a burden, which led to a reluctance to attend in some cases: *'I just got pushed aside... so I didn't go to school anyway.'* (Jackie)

Mental health difficulties

Mental health difficulties and learning anxiety related to past trauma were specifically identified as barriers by some HLLs: *'I couldn't properly remember the things and concentrate...I do love some courses but because of this issue I can't do it, it's too much pressure on my head? I'm thinking the teacher will beat me, although I know it's not true...but the memory of my childhood...'* (Hazeema). Dez explained how despite receiving support for his dyslexia from the service and feeling comfortable in his class, his anxiety disorder sometimes made engaging with learning more of a challenge: *'The only barrier (now) I would say is my mental health...when I'm depressed, my anxiety is worse, so that does affect my learning because I can't concentrate sometimes.'*

Lack of support and understanding from teachers

Eight out of ten HLLs spoke explicitly about previously not feeling listened to by teachers. Lack of support ranged from being 'pushed aside' for not keeping up with work (Paul, Jon, Dez and Issac), being physically beaten (Jackie and Hazeema) and feeling bullied by teachers (Paul and Dez). Lack of understanding from teachers was

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identified as something which causes learners to shut down or give up: *'When I feel comfortable, I will relax and speak to the teacher but if the teacher has an attitude ...then I will put up a barrier.'* (Ben). *'I think they didn't know I was dyslexic, what dyslexic is...I just give up.'* (Ray). Many spoke of asking teachers for clarity or help and being met with rejection or criticism, rather than support: *'I found it very hard just being given instructions...I didn't really understand what the hell I was supposed to be doing...and when you would ask (the teachers), they would be like 'We told you!' ... very unsympathetic: 'I've already told the whole class, weren't you listening?!' ...and then, it almost got to a confrontation...so I'm like: 'Forget about this.' ...and I'll leave or start disrupting the class...and that's most of the times when I got chucked out...so after enough times that happened, I stopped going to school.'* (Dez). Often HLLs had tried to return to mainstream adult education, but were again overwhelmed within a class environment, due to their learning difficulties. For example, *'I did go to college once...but it didn't work out. I went and they said they were going to get small groups, just for me, so I registered...but then they said: 'Oh sorry, we didn't have enough people for that, you have to go to a regular class' I just left after 2 or 3 times, I couldn't bear it...because there was things to write on the board..I can't really understand what I need to do'* (Issac).

Practical circumstances

Responsibility for others and the need to earn money was identified by two participants as the greatest barrier: *'What got in the way is... responsibility. I have to feed myself, I have to eat, I have to survive, so I have to live, bills to pay....going to education did not pay, surviving appealed to me more.'* (Luke). *'What affect me the most is my family, my Mum past, my Dad past, that affect me a lot. So then I was just left with the*

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responsibility of my sisters, my three sisters. My mother told me to take care of them so I had to go out there and look for work, do something to earn money. (Ray); while Mary reported age as a barrier to learning when associating learning with her career aspirations; 'By the time I realised what my options were (aged 68)... it was too late.'

Perceived impact of poor literacy

An awareness of the implications of poor literacy was shown by many participants, producing three subthemes detailed next.

Career prospects

Jackie described how she was put off applying for jobs due to difficulties filling in application forms: '*I just chuck them away because I can't fill them out...I see so much big forms and obviously I couldn't do them, so I've lost so many opportunities and good jobs*', while Paul recognised the importance of literacy skills for career prospects: '*I'm actually trying to look for work, but I thought, I'd better... brush up on my literacy and then hopefully get a decent job after that.*'

Poor self-confidence and mental health

Negative experiences relating to literacy difficulties included: bullying and violence, invalidation and dismissal of their struggles/experiences. Luke reported self-harm as punishment for getting an answer wrong: '*When I start to write, it make sense in my head, but when someone read it, like a teacher...I see a red mark and I'm hitting my head and it hurting me.*'

Without adequate support at home, many HLLs felt helpless: '*From the beginning, I didn't have any ways of knowing which way to go to get what I*

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want.' (Mary), and that they could only depend on themselves: *'I had to basically do things myself and try and teach myself to read.'* (Jon). *'I find it hard at times, because everything you had to read. It was a struggle...I find it hard for quite a few years...to do anything.'* (Luke). Without the ability to communicate through writing or understand information from reading; HLLs felt isolated: *'It make me shy, it make me not want to be around no one...'* (Ray)

Utilising strengths and resourcefulness

HLLs demonstrated awareness of their skills and the importance of developing these to compensate for their literacy difficulties. Skills included listening and using common sense. Others spoke of being reliant on practical skills: *'I can do it with my hands...I cannot do paperwork.'* (Luke). These HLLs also relied on visual skills: *'I'm more of a visual learner'* (Ray), *'I have memory, I go around places and that's how I get around London... visually. Landmark... things like that.'* (Luke). Others identified creative skills (artistic: Jon, Ray; or design skills: Ben) they had utilised in previous employment.

Current motivation to improve literacy

Participants made reference to things that motivate them to want to work on their literacy skills. The following subthemes demonstrate a range of factors in this respect.

Wanting to achieve

HLLs recognised literacy difficulties had prevented them from achieving their individual goals. Be that finding a career, *'I want to brush up on my literacy...so I can get a decent job out of it.'* (Paul), or *'I thought to myself, to get a job as a carer, even*

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though I'm qualified I can't really do anything...if I can't write out anything, that wouldn't be no good, because I have to write every day...in the books, to write out what I fed you, how I was with you...and if I can't do that it's not very good.' (Jackie); or becoming more independent: *'I find life difficult because before I couldn't read and write...I couldn't go places where I want to go on my own; I had to ask my brother or sister to read my letter...or sort something with my bills...it was so hard.'* (Luke). Six out of 10 HLLs also reflected on developing their basic skills for self-improvement purposes: *'It's like a beacon of hope for me when I come here, I know that I'm coming here to do something for myself. To better myself. And...over the years I've never really had anything positive like that in my life.'* (Dez).

Self-improvement supports confidence and mental health

HLLs recognised the value of literacy classes in supporting their mental health and social interactions: *'I enjoy my own little bubble...but...so you don't go insane and get more depressed...two days to interact with other people...is a good thing, I suppose?'* (Jon); and routine helps: *'I make some routine worth my life, so I just come over here and learn from, have fun with the teacher and students... is good impact on my life.'* (Hazeema). Dez recognised learning how to interact socially with people, in a safe environment, was a huge motivator after a long period of isolation: *'I came to class to learn to interact with people again...I was completely disconnected. I wouldn't have been able to do this 8 months ago.'*

Specialist support and positive experiences of learning yielded improvement in their self-confidence, even after significant trauma: *'I feel very confident in learning because...it make comfortable...they already know your position and very friendly when they tell you about it.'* (Hazeema). Some HLLs reported pride in their achievements

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since engaging with literacy learning at the service: *'I felt really proud of that [having work published in service magazine], I'm really chuffed that I'm actually learning how to write a whole...thing. I'm quite happy.'* (Jackie); or recognising persistence pays off: *'You know, it's good to do it and keep doing it, keep practicing....when I first started I thought 'Ohhh' but as I... mature in it, you think; 'Oh yes, well, last week I had a problem with this and now I get it!'* (Mary); *'To have something I was so afraid of become so positive in my life...I think that's the best gift anyone could ask for.'* (Dez).

HLLs reflected on becoming more self-motivated as they got older, realising the value of learning, and where possible attempted self-teaching in lieu of teaching support: *'I taught myself how to write and I managed to find some books on Maths and English...and I thought 'hang on a minute, I'm going to brush up on this!'* (Paul).

Personal interest in the subject was also identified as a motivating factor in practising reading independently, such as finding a *'really good book'* (Jon) or an interest in human rights for Luke. Furthermore, six out of ten HLLs were motivated by the opportunity to sit exams as a goal, while seven out of ten described learning grammar, punctuation and improving their writing as motivating.

Helping others

HLLs gave examples of teaching others and this motivating them to improve themselves further (Paul), supporting people in prison and acting as a role model to motivate others (Luke), volunteering (Paul, Jackie, Mary and Luke) and the desire to have a career in the caring profession in the future (Jackie and Luke).

A desire to support family and children motivated some HLLs: *'I guess I always think about my family, so that push me out more'* (Ray), while others found support reciprocated by their own children: *'She want to teach me now! She say, 'Dad, I*

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understand you didn't go to school when you was young, do you want me to teach you grammar?' (Luke).

Approaches that support literacy in adulthood

The final theme to be presented showcases the approaches that were reported to help support HLLs literacy development.

An informed dyslexia diagnosis

Some HLLs experienced relief as a result of their dyslexia diagnosis; particularly those diagnosed by the service they were attending as adults, as there was a sense that no one had understood them before and hope that they might finally access the right learning support to help them overcome their literacy difficulties: *'The person with dyslexia, any person with a disability, want to learn to help themselves from that...so it's more about coming and speak to someone who understand my problem and recognise my situation and try to help me how to get out of it.. if I can.'* (Ben).

When diagnosis is accompanied by a positive explanation of dyslexia as a learning difference as opposed to a disability, one HLL felt reassured: *'When I found out I had dyslexia, in primary school, he (my father) was like 'Ffft, that's nothing, it just means you are special...so he just had a really good way to help explain everything to me...'* (Dez). Luke recognised progress could be made despite his diagnosis and previous lack of education: *'It's not like I cannot learn, it's because I didn't go to school, so I'm behind learning.'*

Holistic and supportive teaching

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Some HLLs had received specialist support with assistive technology at the service they were attending, such as speech-to-text apps, having life-changing implications for their independence. All 7 HLLs with dyslexia stated they felt the service had helped them overcome issues associated with their dyslexia. Seven HLLs spoke of an emotional bond they formed with their teacher, based on a nurturing and supportive relationship they had never previously experienced. However, some were able to recognise the importance of boundaries and that it was appropriate to develop a wider support network: *'She did the right thing by putting me in to a class...I was scared to go...but it was ok.'* (Luke).

Positive relationships with teachers

In contrast to previous experiences, HLLs spoke about positive relationships with teachers at the service where they currently engage with literacy support. They felt more understood than previously and consequently were more able to express themselves: *'I'm not so angry....I never used to raise my hand, ask the teachers for help, even my peers for help with spelling or writing and that but since I came here I've been more vocal.'* (Jon); or manage the work as a result of smaller groups and specialist provision: *'When I was in school, I didn't get as much...as I'm getting now. More understanding...more clear.'* (Paul), *'I feel very comfortable. I'm very rarely anxious in XXXX classes..it's the people, you know? You need...we all need a little human touch, you can't be all letters and numbers...'* (Dez).

Relief of receiving what they perceived as the right kind of teaching and support was evident, particularly for HLLs with dyslexia who had struggled to keep up in classes without specialist provision. They valued compassion when it came to helping them learn: *'She's understanding....it's not even to do with her as a teacher, it's to do*

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with her as a person...she try and help me...' (Ben) and being 'pushed' gently to overcome their literacy anxieties: *'I like the way she work with me, she push me and she say to me, 'You can do it, you can do it, just relax'... she try...'* (Ray). *'It's almost like she's a counsellor and teacher at the same time! She's like... 'look, it doesn't matter that you've got so much to do, you structure it, you do one thing a day...' but she doesn't need to do that....but she's going that extra distance, she could see that I had a problem and I was struggling and she tried to remedy it in her own way...so that was like...priceless.'* (Dez). Making learning fun and using humour was also recognised as beneficial to learning.

HLLs spoke of emotional barriers lifting and how teachers had given them a confidence to share thoughts and ideas, in a way they previously had not: *'They go at your pace, not theirs. I mean obviously we get pushed because there's like, deadlines and things, so we do get pushed a bit...to like...come out of our comfort zone? To do things we wouldn't really think that we would be good at doing, or understand what to do.'* (Jon).

Inclusive and multi-sensory teaching

Luke spoke about the experience of learning to read in prison and having a specialist dyslexia teacher come and work with him: *'She used to come in with a little book thing where you have to shut your eye and [demonstrates feeling] got like that to tell what letter it is and you have to touch it...and it was.... 'What letter is that?' ...I can remember (laughs), talking to you, I can remember the method she used...it was so good!'* He was clearly able to visualise the memory, to the extent he was excited by how vivid it was, some years later.

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Another HLL commented: *'I use alphabet letters...pronounce the letters and try to get that sound in my head'* (Ray) when describing how the teacher was helping him with learning phonemes. Likewise, when Hazeema spoke about their teacher making 'funny voices' to help them remember in the classroom, she was able to recognise the effectiveness of this strategy: *'When people make fun and playing....it makes (it) more easily go in (your) mind...'*. Visual stimuli was also appreciated, with many perceiving this as an area of strength, for instance: *'I like visual, I like my learning to be exciting, fun, encouraging...I don't like it to be too boring. I like action!'* (Mary)

HLLs felt having tasks clearly explained, teachers being patient and understanding, using humour and games and having a goal that they were working towards helped them learn more effectively. *'They've taken the time, they are more interested in your wellbeing and if you're struggling... they've got more time and patience for you than schools back then.'* (Jon). However, not all HLLs were able to articulate specific strategies which helped them to learn effectively.

Group and individual specialist provision

Advantages of class teaching were perceived as learning alongside people who have similar obstacles and the benefits of social interaction: *'Obviously you need a class because you get everyone's opinions and things are more explained...you're interacting with people and there's more stuff to understand because of other people's opinions and thoughts on things.'* (Jon). Disadvantages included not getting on with everyone, working at a different pace or in a different way to other people and knowing how to manage frustrations about others.

HLLs taught in a 1-1 setting enjoyed having all the attention from the teacher and not having to worry about conflicting learning styles: *'I wouldn't want to be in a*

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class...where everybody have a different stage of learning....You have to really make sense to be able to speak to me, if you don't make sense, I won't give you the time of day.' (Ben). There was respect for the luxury of having specialist 1-1 teaching provision and keenness to utilise the opportunity, especially since some HLLs felt unable to engage with classes due to their specific difficulties, *'I can't bear to be in a class, I have my own way, I'm slower than others...so, that's helped me a lot...amazing.'* (Issac). Disadvantages included not having other people to bounce ideas off and the potential to be distracted by personal issues. HLLs developed bonds of trust with teachers who supported them, but sometimes some reported becoming distracted from learning due to the need to speak with someone they trusted about personal issues.

Discussion

The current study aimed to extend the existing literature on literacy learning in adults with experience of homelessness by considering factors that have previously been a barrier to learning and, importantly, to question what this population view to be motivating and crucial to supporting the development of literacy skills. Participants' responses shed important light on the type of support that is valued. Five themes were generated: challenging early experiences, barriers to improving literacy, perceived impact of poor literacy, current motivation to improve literacy, and approaches that support literacy in adulthood.

Early learning experiences played a fundamental role in how HLLs perceived themselves. These were predominantly negative for HLLs; many reporting bullying, inadequate teaching support and poor understanding of their difficulties at school and home. Findings suggest parents/carers were often not equipped to cope with HLLs

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literacy difficulties. HLLs also experienced regular punishment from teachers, culminating in learning trauma for many. These findings align with Crowther et al. (2010) regarding vulnerable adult learners carrying trauma about early education experiences. A positive finding, however, that emerged from the interviews was that all HLLs in the current study sought and found compassionate teachers who truly understood their learning support needs, to counteract previous negative learning experiences. This finding highlights the value of specialist teachers from the learner perspective, who are trained in understanding literacy difficulties and homelessness.

Olisa et al. (2010) argued that of the many causes of low literacy in adults, dyslexia is perhaps the greatest challenge. If not already identified, it can be difficult to diagnose in HLLs, since co-occurring factors such as substance misuse and mental health difficulties can affect the results of standardised assessments (Olisa et al., 2010). Seventy percent of HLLs from the current sample identified as dyslexic, lending support to the over-representation of dyslexia amongst this population (Macdonald & Deacon, 2015). Rose (2009) defines dyslexia as a learning difficulty which primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling. The literature identifies the challenges that adults with dyslexia often face, within and outside of the education system. Tanner (2009) highlighted that adult dyslexic learners' lived experiences often reflect feelings of failure, recognition of unsuitable opportunities to learn, and the pressure of needing to demonstrate literacy skills in many aspects of daily living. Difficult educational experiences are commonly reported, along with low expectations and insensitive teaching when adults with dyslexia reflect on their early experiences, which can lead to feelings of exclusion, irrespective of experiencing homelessness which arguably adds to further social exclusion (Humphrey & Mullins, 2002;

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Palfreyman-Kay, 1998; Makay, 2002; Phipps et al., 2017). Such challenges likely impact self-perception (Tanner, 2009). The present findings add to the existing literature by representing HLLs.

Perceptions of dyslexia can fall in two categories: those who take a ‘medical/deficit’ view, where it is seen as a disadvantage, and those who see it as ‘difference’, incorporating a set of strengths and weaknesses (Griffin & Pollak, 2009; Tanner, 2009). The current findings suggest mixed perceptions from HLLs about their dyslexia. Those diagnosed without receiving productive or positive explanation of their condition were more likely to take a ‘deficit’ perspective and report embarrassment about being identified as dyslexia. As identified by Crowther et al. (2010), HLLs recalled difficult early experiences with education and reported dyslexia and mental health difficulties as barriers to learning. In contrast, HLLs who received a diagnosis along with positive reinforcement and support to help overcome their difficulties, appeared more positive and self-assured about their dyslexia; raising an important point about needing to reduce early stigmatisation that often comes with labelling (see Macdonald, 2010; Riddick, 2000).

Researchers have argued that there is a lack of support and focus on the significance of conditions like dyslexia from homeless service providers, in particular relating to the disabling barriers and social-class structures affecting the lives of people with dyslexia (MacDonald, 2009; MacDonald & Deacon, 2015; Yates, 2013). ‘Barriers’ were often referred to by the participants in this study and may be defined as obstacles to participation and thus change, structural exclusion, and inequalities (Macdonald, 2019). Some UK service providers have in-house specialist dyslexia tutors, yet for smaller organisations there may be financial obstructions in providing specialist

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provision (Olisa et al., 2010). Awareness from teachers and services about the impact poor literacy and dyslexia can have on HLLs life experiences and perceptions, is key to delivering meaningful support. The present findings suggest that raising self-efficacy in HLLs with dyslexia around literacy abilities and self-esteem may be central to providing appropriate support and increasing participation (also supported by Crowther et al., 2010; Dumoulin & Jones, 2014; Nalavani et al., 2013). Self-improvement was found to support HLLs mental health by providing routine and regular social interaction. Findings suggest specialist literacy teaching enabled them to recognise progress in their literacy skills despite previous negative learning experiences or experience of compound trauma. HLLs felt more motivated to overcome literacy difficulties as adults, when they were more able to recognise the significance of poor basic literacy skills upon daily life.

Developing positive relationships with teachers, who empathised not only with their literacy difficulties but personal experiences, was found to be fundamental in ‘pushing’ HLLs to realise their full potential. Here operating within a PIE may be key. PIEs are flexible to the needs of the individuals or groups they are applied to; consequently, there are only guidelines for the application of PIEs rather than strict rules (Keats et al., 2012). The aim is to reduce feelings of exclusion and build relationships by participating in a secure and consistent context, with an emphasis on good quality relationships (Phipps et al., 2017). Trauma-sensitive approaches to teaching have developed significantly over the past 30 years to support and foster inclusivity for children in mainstream and specialist settings (e.g., see *Compassionate Classrooms*’ (Morrow, 1987) and ‘*Trauma-Informed Positive Education*’ (Brunzell et al., 2015)). Using the same theoretical approach, PIE has been applied successfully in working with

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adults experiencing homelessness (Keats et al., 2012) and in this case is being extended to literacy learning. For teachers supporting HLLs within the classroom, PIEs commonly mean classes take a less ridged approach to learning than traditional class environments, allowing time to check in about general well-being, to share aspirations or fears, provide informal peer support for one another, in addition to focusing on literacy content: the approach taken in the charity where this research took place. To date, there is a lack of research that has systematically examined how literacy learning may occur within a PIE. However, the present findings add to this by demonstrating that a positive attachment to teachers was perceived as critical to HLLs learning and engagement. Yet this does not come without a note of caution. Attachment to their teacher could find HLLs distracted by the urge to discuss only personal problems in a 1:1 lesson, rather than focus on learning. Furthermore, while some HLLs acknowledged the benefit of peer support and were open to developing a wider network of holistic support, others expressed a desire for 1:1 lessons and recognised that they worked at a different pace to others.

Finally, an important part of the data was when HLLs identified strategies that they felt were effective in helping them learn. Those noted referred to multi-sensory learning, including physical letter shapes to practice reading and using ‘funny voices’ to help remember pronunciations. Although there are limited studies around multi-sensory teaching support for adult learners with dyslexia; these findings align with recommendations by dyslexia specialists as good practice within schools (Phillips & Kelly, 2016). Further research is needed around the benefit of multi-sensory teaching strategies in supporting adults with dyslexia and impact of 1-1 support vs classes.

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Although a wealth of data has been considered here, limitations can also be acknowledged. Recruitment of HLLs took place from only one service provider. The reason for this was because the target sample was planned as those engaging in literacy classes and it was known that this service provider offered this service. The potential bias in the sample is acknowledged, as the service identified suitable participants for the intended research and it may be that these were adults that had more positive experiences, yet this could not be controlled. Indeed, a wider pool of participants would be useful to determine whether the findings are generalisable to the wider homeless population. That said, the HLLs interviewed had experienced varied forms of homelessness and were largely representative of this population. It could be argued that given the depth of data provided in qualitative methods, larger sample sizes are not needed.

A practical implication to come from the present findings is to raise awareness of current good practice operating within specialist services supporting HLLs and the possible benefits of the PIE teaching approach. In order for HLLs to experience a consistent level of inclusiveness across the sector, specialists and service providers must work closer together to develop deeper awareness of HLLs needs. Furthermore, specialist teachers within the sector need to collaborate with one another to develop a good practice approach and support smaller organisations; many of whom, without adequate funding, rely on volunteers and untrained teachers to teach HLLs. Further large-scale research which seeks to robustly evaluate ‘what works’ for supporting homeless literacy learners would be hugely beneficial.

In conclusion, HLLs who engage in literacy or 1:1 learning support recognise the value of developing their literacy skills as part of their journey out of homelessness.

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Specialist teachers using a PIE approach to teaching, support HLLs to develop literacy skills, self-confidence and self-efficacy. HLLs who have experienced compound trauma require an alternative approach to teaching which is not always possible due to policy constraints and funding cuts within mainstream educational provision. Yet, the demand remains and warrants further support.

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Table 1. Participant pseudonyms and characteristics

Participant	Gender	Ethnicity	Literacy level ^a
Ben	Male	Black/Caribbean	Pre-entry
Ray	Male	Black/Caribbean	Pre-entry
Dez	Male	British/Asian	E3
Isaac	Male	British/Jewish	E3
Paul	Male	White/British	Functional Skills Level 1
Jon	Male	White/British	Functional Skills Level 1
Luke	Male	Black/Caribbean	Functional Skills Level 1
Hazeema	Female	Asian/Pakistani	E3
Jackie	Female	White/British	E2
Mary	Female	Black/Caribbean	Functional Skills Level 1

Note. ^aIn line with Adult Literacy Core Curriculum assessment levels (DfE, 2018), progression (lowest-highest): pre-entry E1, E2, E3, Functional skills Level 1, and Level 2.

Figure 1. Homeless adults’ experiences of literacy learning: Five themes and subthemes

