

A VIEW FROM THE CLASSROOM: AN INQUIRY INTO HOW EDUCATORS OF ONTARIO'S LITERACY  
BASIC SKILLS PROGRAM CONCEPTUALIZE ADULT LITERACY LEARNING

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## **Abstract**

The Ontario Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities (MTCU) uses the human capital framework advocated by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to structure its Literacy Basic Skills (LBS) programs as an employment strategy (MTCU, 2016 pp. 1, 4-6). These policies embody understandings and values of adult literacy education that diverge from the frameworks used in the scholarly literature (Compton-Lilly & Nayan, 2016; Black & Yasukawa; 2014). Given the divergence, this dissertation presents the findings of an inquiry into how LBS educators conceptualize literacy and how these understandings of adult literacy learning are applied to their practice. LBS educators are the frontline workers of adult education programming in Ontario: they are responsible for delivering the program in ways that are in line with the directives of the MTCU while also being sensitive to the unique contexts and socio-cultural experiences of learners. The data for this research includes 14 audio-recorded interviews of LBS educators and field note observations of practice. The data has been analyzed using a grounded theory 3-part coding system (Glasner & Strauss, 1999, pp. 101-112; Glesne, 2010, p. 21; Lichtman, 2013, pp. 78-80, 257-258). From the data, it is evident that educators believe that literacy is a cognitive process and a social practice that is shaped by learners' experiences, and these understandings of literacy directly inform their practice. To conclude the project, I present a critical holistic pedagogical framework that crystalizes information from research and policy with the data collected from the inquiry to offer insights into how literacy education can be advanced to support policy, practice and future directions for research on adult literacy education in Ontario.

## Table of Contents

<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	<b>ii</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES</b> .....	<b>viii</b>
<b>LIST OF CHARTS</b> .....	<b>viii</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW</b> .....	<b>7</b>
INTERNATIONAL DRIVERS, POLICY DOCUMENTS, AND ORGANIZATIONAL RESOURCES.....	7
INTERNATIONAL DRIVERS OF LITERACY POLICY.....	8
ORGANIZATION FOR ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT (OECD) AND THE PROGRAM FOR THE INTERNATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF ADULT COMPETENCIES (PIAAC).....	9
UNITED NATIONS EDUCATION SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION (UNESCO).....	15
PROVINCIAL POLICY FOR THE LITERACY BASIC SKILLS PROGRAM (LBS).....	18
ONTARIO ADULT LITERACY CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK (OALCF).....	21
PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK (PMF).....	22
CATHEXIS REVIEW.....	24
LITERACY BASIC SKILLS ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH.....	26
THE FINAL STUDIES BY THE MOVEMENT FOR CANADIAN LITERACY, THE NATIONAL LITERACY SECRETARIAT AND ESSENTIAL SKILLS ONTARIO.....	28
ALPHAPLUS.....	32
ONTARIO NATIVE LITERACY COALITION (ONLC).....	35
CENTRE FRANCO-ONTARIEN DE RESOURCES EN ALPABÉTISATION (CENTRE FOR A) .....	37
SCHOLARLY RESEARCH ON PRACTICE .....	39
SCHOLARLY RESEARCH THAT ADVANCE HOLISTIC CONCEPTIONS OF LITERACY.....	41

SCHOLARLY RESEARCH ON THE SOCIAL PRACTICES OF THE ADULT LITERACY CLASSROOM.....	46
SCHOLARLY RESEARCH ON THE RELATIONS BETWEEN LEARNERS AND LITERACY WORKERS...	49
<b>CHAPTER 3: LITERACY THEORY.....</b>	<b>54</b>
PRAGMATIST THEORIES OF COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE.....	54
SELF-WORTH AND SOCIAL PARTICIPATION.....	55
CONSCIOUS REFLECTION ON EXPERIENCE.....	56
LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION.....	60
THE PROBLEM WITH A PRESENTIST APPLICATION OF DEWEY’S PEDAGOGY.....	62
COGNITIVE UNDERSTANDINGS OF LITERACY LEARNING .....	63
LITERACY AS A VISUAL AND PHONOLOGICAL PROCESS.....	64
LITERACY AND THOUGHT.....	66
THE ROLE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN LITERACY COGNITION.....	67
THE PROBLEM WITH A FOCUS ON COGNITION.....	67
LITERACY AS A SOCIAL PRACTICE.....	70
FUNCTIONALIST DEFINITION OF LITERACY .....	71
SITUATED PRACTICE .....	75
ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACHES.....	77
NEW LITERACIES STUDIES.....	79
MULTILITERACIES PEDAGOGY.....	82
CRITICAL PEDAGOGY FOR LITERACY LEARNING.....	84
<b>CHAPTER 4: METHOD.....</b>	<b>90</b>
EPISTEMOLOGICAL ORIENTATION AND ONTOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK AND THE CONSTRUCTIVIST PARADIGM.....	91

GROUNDING THEORY COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY.....	94
ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS .....	95
ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER.....	97
THE PARTICIPANTS.....	99
DATA COLLECTION: AUDIO RECORDED INTERVIEWS AND FIELD NOTES FROM OBSERVATIONS.....	101
DATA ANALYSIS: CONSTANT COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND 3-PART CODING SYSTEM.....	102
THE REFLEXIVE PROCESS.....	106
<b>CHAPTER 5: FINDING 1: EXPERIENCE SHAPES LITERACY LEARNING.....</b>	<b>113</b>
LEARNER BACKGROUND: HISTORY, TRAUMA, GENDER, AND CULTURE.....	115
SELF-CONCEPT AND SELF-CONFIDENCE.....	122
HOW THE CONCEPT OF EXPERIENCE IS APPLIED IN PRACTICE.....	128
THE ROLE OF EXPERIENCE IN THE INTAKE, GOAL-SETTING AND TASK-SETTING PROCESS.....	128
THE ROLE OF EXPERIENCE IN THE INTERPRETATION OF THE OALCF .....	130
ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL.....	131
INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION.....	132
USE OF DIALOGUE.....	134
ENGAGING LEARNERS IN NEW EXPERIENCES.....	137
DEVELOPING GROWTH AND PROGRESS APPROACHES TO ASSESSMENT.....	139
<b>CHAPTER 6: FINDING 2: LITERACY IS A COGNITIVE AND COMMUNICATIVE PROCESS.....</b>	<b>145</b>
MEMORY, READING STRATEGIES AND THE COMMUNICATIVE PROCESS.....	146
SKILLS EMBEDDED IN LITERACY LEARNING.....	153

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SKILLS AND TASKS.....	162
COGNITIVE DIMENSIONS OF PRACTICE.....	166
THE PROBLEM WITH STANDARDIZED ASSESSMENTS.....	166
LEARNER DIRECTION.....	171
<b>CHAPTER 7: FINDING 3: LITERACY AS A SOCIAL PRACTICE.....</b>	<b>178</b>
SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND SOCIAL ISOLATION.....	179
ANALYZING THE POWER DYNAMICS OF ONE’S SOCIAL WORLD.....	186
LITERACY EDUCATION IS SOCIAL JUSTICE WORK.....	194
THE SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF PRACTICE.....	197
PEER INTERACTIONS.....	197
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT.....	199
<b>CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION.....</b>	<b>207</b>
THE ROLE OF EXPERIENCE FOR A CRITICAL HOLISTIC LITERACY EDUCATION.....	209
INTAKE PROCESS.....	214
GOAL-SETTING.....	215
COURSE RESOURCES.....	216
TRIPS.....	216
THE COGNITIVE ASPECTS OF A CRITICAL HOLISTIC LITERACY EDUCATION.....	217
STANDARDIZATION ASSESSMENTS FOR FORMATIVE NOT SUMMATIVE EVALUATIONS.....	219
DIGITAL LITERACY.....	222
THE SOCIAL ASPECTS OF A CRITICAL HOLISTIC LITERACY EDUCATION.....	224
SOCIAL PARTICIPATION.....	226

CRITIQUE OF HUMAN CAPITAL THEORY.....	230
<b>CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS.....</b>	<b>234</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>242</b>
<b>APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM.....</b>	<b>263</b>
<b>APPENDIX B: ACRONYMS.....</b>	<b>265</b>
<b>APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....</b>	<b>266</b>
<b>APPENDIX D: TRANSLATION OF FRENCH.....</b>	<b>267</b>

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Overview of Cases.....	270
Table 2: The Organization of Codes into Categories.....	271



## LIST OF CHARTS

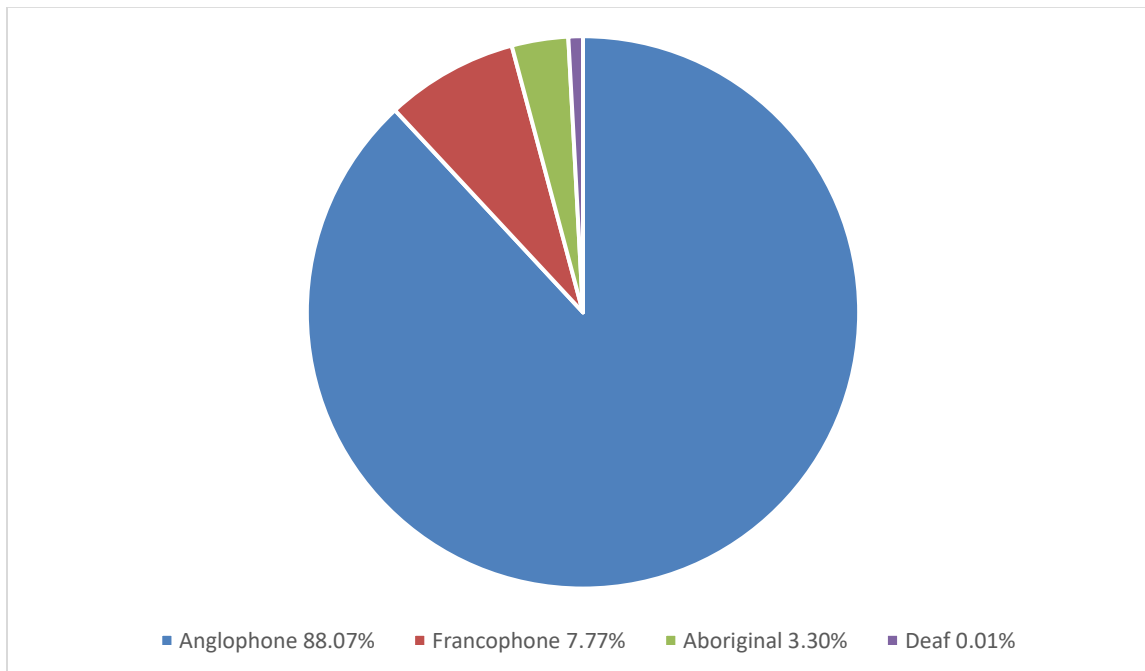
Chart 1: The Distribution of LBS Learners Across Streams.....	269
Chart 2: The Proportion of Participants Who Discussed the Significance of Experience to the Learning Process and Subcategories.....	272
Chart 3: The Proportion of Participants Who Discussed the Significance of Literacy as a Cognitive Process and Corresponding Subcategories.....	273
Chart 4: The Proportion of Participants Who Discussed the Significance of Literacy as a Social Practice and Corresponding Subcategories.....	27

## Chapter One: Introduction

Literacy Basic Skills (LBS) is a provincially funded adult education program that serves 37 294 adult learners in Ontario and 5 587 adult learners who use the e-Channel services offered by LBS programs at its 274 locations across the province (Cathexis, 2016, p. 9). The LBS program is divided into 4 streams: the Aboriginal stream, the Anglophone stream, the Deaf Stream and the Francophone stream. 32 847 of the in-class learners are in the Anglophone stream, 2 896 are in the Francophone stream, 1 233 are in the Aboriginal Stream, and 317 are in the Deaf stream (Cathexis, 2016, p. 9). Chart 1 illustrates the distribution of learners across each stream.

Chart 1

The Distribution of LBS Learners Across the Streams



The program is also divided into 3 main sectors: the college sector, the community sector and the school board sector. Of the 3 sectors, 15 570 learners are in the College stream, 11 439

learners are in the community sector and 10 043 are in the School board sector (Cathexis, 2016, p. 10).

The goal of the LBS program is to help Ontario residents who are out of school transition into employment, post-secondary education, apprenticeship, secondary school programs, or to develop skills for independence (Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities, 2015). The Instructors are the frontline workers of these programs: they are the key individuals that make pedagogical decisions to deliver the MTCU program and accommodate students' needs. As a result, program delivery is significantly influenced by the pedagogical practices of the instructors. Another source of influence on delivery is policy, since policy provides the framework that regulates program delivery. A third area of influence on program delivery is academic research since research informs practice and the education of teachers. A review of the conceptual frameworks adopted by policy writers and academic researchers shows a divergence in the theories that inform literacy education where policy writers tend to advance a human capital orientation towards literacy while academic research advocates for holistic and socio-cultural understandings of literacy and critiques the use of human capital theory (MAESD, 2016; Black & Yasukawa, 2014; Carpenter, Weber, & Schugurensky, 2012). *Given the diverse approaches to conceptualizing literacy as explored in policy and research, this dissertation seeks to investigate, how adult literacy educators conceptualize literacy and how these views inform their practice.* As educators are the frontline workers for the enactment of policy and the translation of literacy learning theory into practice, investigating instructors in their teaching context provides important insight into the way social, economic and political dynamics influence pedagogy and practice. In the process of reflecting on how educators conceptualize

literacy learning, I present a critical and holistic theoretical framework for adult literacy education that takes into account the experiential, cognitive and social understandings of literacy education that are needed to advance the practice of literacy education in Ontario.

This dissertation has been organized into 9 Chapters. Following the introduction, Chapter 2 provides a review of the policies, organizational and scholarly research that inform LBS programming and practice. The first part of the review examines the frameworks for literacy education that are advanced by international policy drivers, LBS programming frameworks and organizational reports that inform LBS programming and delivery. The review illustrates a disconnect between the approach to practice that is advocated by the MTCU, and MTCU's approach to program evaluation and assessment of learning. The second part of the literature review examines current scholarly research on adult literacy practice in Ontario between 2000 to the present. This section illustrates 3 key theoretical approaches to researching practice: One that emphasizes the holistic descriptions of literacy education, the second that offers social and cognitive approaches to analyzing the learning process, and the final set of research that focuses on the social relations between educators and learners. The review of scholarship illustrates key factors to consider when developing a method for data collection, analysis and theorizing literacy and practice. The third chapter provides a review of the theoretical orientations that emerged from the data. These theories include experience-based, cognitive, and socio-cultural orientations towards conceptualizing literacy and approaches to practice. Overall, chapter 2 and 3 bring together the research and theories that inform the discussion and the crystallization of the data into a critical holistic framework on how literacy learning is theorized in Ontario.

Chapter 4 outlines my method for investigating how adult literacy educators conceptualize literacy and how these views inform their practice. The epistemological and ontological assumptions of this research are situated in socio-cultural understandings that knowledge is contextual and reality is complex, multiple and shifting. From a socio-cultural paradigm, research cannot make the claim to be objective or easily abstracted since our understanding of knowledge and reality is situated in specific contexts that are interpreted through the mind of the researcher. The context, position and positionality of the research has a significant influence on each step of the research process and filters and organizes the ways information is presented. This is not necessarily a limitation as each researcher brings a unique perspective that can express connections and differences that widens the understanding of the field of research. Reflective practice on context, position, and positionality can also further illuminate the factors that shape the researcher's lens for viewing the world. To gain a wide and descriptive understanding of how educators conceptualize literacy education involves interacting with a diversity of teaching contexts and dialoguing with educators. To establish interactions and dialogue with educators, I designed a qualitative inquiry that provides a thick description of how educators conceptualize literacy and how these concepts relate to their practice. The data is derived from audio-recorded interviews of 14 LBS educators and field notes from site visits and observations of practice. I analyzed the data using a 3-step coding system based on principles of grounded theory (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012, p.8). Grounded theory and the application of reflexive practice allows for a rich description of how educators in multiple teaching contexts conceptualize literacies in a way that grounds the researcher's interpretation of the data.

In Chapter 5, 6, and 7, I present the findings of the inquiry where I show that educators conceptualize literacy learning as having three key aspects: an experiential aspect, a social aspect, and cognitive aspect. I present 3 categories that that emerged from my grounded theory analysis. The first finding is that educators conceptualize literacy learning and being literate in relation to the learner's experiences. Learner experiences create access and barriers to the acquisition of knowledge and skills and development of literacy practices. Educators highlight the role of history and trauma in the learning process and the role of learning in the development of the learner's self-concept. They also stressed pragmatic approaches to goal setting, developing learning plans and assessment. Their approach to teaching puts learner experience at the forefront of practice. The second finding is that literacy is conceptualized as a communicative and cognitive process that involves more than acquiring the knowledge and skills to read and write. Literacy was conceptualized by educators as including the learning of other skills embedded in communicative and cognitive practices such as oral, digital, financial and critical thinking skills. Educators stressed the importance of learner-directed practice to encourage students to take ownership of the learning process. The third finding is that educators emphasize that literacy is a social practice that is needed to participate in society. Teaching and learning literacy involves more than teaching what is necessary to assimilate into one's society: larger questions of social inclusion and power dynamics need to be considered when developing a pedagogical approach that would be meaningful and empowering to the learner. Educators stress the importance of community building and peer interaction to encourage social participation of the learner. Therefore, the educators conceptualize literacy learning in relation to the learners' experiences, and the social and the cognitive aspects of

education process. Moreover, the way educators incorporate the three aspects of literacy learning allow them to address oppressive forces that devalue the learner, alienate the learner from ownership of their labor, and encourage social isolation. As LBS is an employment strategy, the relation between literacy and labor needs to be a key point of discussion.

In the discussion chapter, I reflect on the slices of data that emerge from the analysis of policy, literature, theory and research to propose a theoretical framework for understanding literacy learning that is situated in the context of Ontario adult education. In the discussion chapter, I present a critical holistic framework that builds on pragmatic, cognitive and socio-cultural approaches to literacy learning in ways that address patriarchal, colonial, and neo-liberal labor values. A critical holistic pedagogy can be applied to advance practice in ways that support democratic understandings of literacy education that are more conducive to supporting the vocation to be human rather than supporting approaches to literacy education that can promote exploitation and advance a settler narrative. In the conclusion, I provide some suggestions on how this pedagogy can be adopted to advance the practice, policy and research in Ontario.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

There are two components of this literature review. The first is a conceptual review of the international drivers, policy documents and organizational papers that influence LBS programming. A conceptual review of policy frameworks demonstrates a disconnect between the MTCU's advocacy of contextual approaches to literacy education and the program reforms that adapt a competency based curriculum framework and decontextualized forms of assessment. In the second section, I provide a review of academic research that makes reference to Ontario adult literacy programs. In this section, I identify a shift in theoretical orientation in academic research on LBS programs, that is, from holistic understandings of literacy to more socio-cognitive/socio-cultural aspects of literacy education. This review of the conceptual field of adult literacy education illustrates the diversity of ideas that educators may draw upon when theorizing their practice.

### **International Drivers, Policy Documents, and Organizational Resources**

Literacy is a prominent part of economic policy in Ontario as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) associate literacy education with employment outcomes and social mobility. The notion that there is a correlation between literacy proficiency and employment outcomes has been advanced by the research and theoretical frameworks developed by international organizations, the OECD and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to a lesser extent. The OECD has specifically organized research of adult literacy proficiency known as "the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)" to illustrate the correlation between literacy and an individual's



capacity to compete in a knowledge-based economy. At the same time that the OECD organized PIAAC, UNESCO collected mass demographic data on literacy as a part of their global initiative, *Education for All*. This initiative provides data that is used to construct a connection between literacy as a human right and economic growth. UNESCO has also developed the *Belem* framework to advocate for life-long learning initiatives for adult literacy education as a human right. Although, LBS policy documents speak to literacy as a human right (Essential Skills, 2012, p. 3), LBS policy reform tends to focus on the OECD's notions of task-based assessment for employment skills. Indeed, between 2011 and 2013, the Ministry reformed the LBS program to adopt task-based approaches to literacy education popularized by the OECD. The key system reforms include the introduction of the Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework (OALCF) and the Performance Management Framework (PMF). These reforms have been criticized by literacy organizations such as Cathexis (2017) and Alphaplus (2015) who illustrate the disconnect between the theoretical frameworks used in policy and practice. This section of the dissertation reviews the international conceptual frameworks and research that drive LBS policy and program delivery.

### **International drivers of literacy policy.**

The OECD and UNESCO are the key international policy drivers that have influenced how adult literacy education is conceptualized in policy. These organizations publish reports on demographic data on literacy proficiency. They advance human capital conceptions of literacy by establishing a correlation between literacy proficiency and the economic outcomes of countries competing in a global economy.

***Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC).***

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) concept of the knowledge-based economy has been the key driver of federal and provincial adult literacy policy for over the last 30 years. According to the OECD, knowledge is the driver of economic productivity and so a nation's ability to compete in a global economy will depend on workers having formal education and the ability to constantly upgrade their theoretical and analytical skills (OECD, 2013, p. 5). As a result, workers will be increasingly valued for their vocational skills rather than their unskilled labour (OECD, 1996, pp. 3, 14). In a knowledge-based economy, literacy is one of the essential vocational skills needed for employment along with other cognitive processing skills such as numeracy, and problem-solving. Most policies on adult education cite the concept of the knowledge-based economy to justify the funding of adult literacy programs and the measuring of literacy skills. The OECD argues that it is important for government to develop policies to "upgrade human capital" (OECD, 1996, pp. 7, 17). By human capital the OECD is referring to skills that individuals need to secure employment. For instance, a high literacy proficiency is an example of a skill that the OECD believes is necessary to participate in a knowledge-based economy where there is a demand for highly skilled workers and an elimination of low-skilled jobs. Only individuals with high literacy proficiencies have the human capital to exchange their labor for employment, and so the OECD associates having vocational skills specific to a knowledge-based economy with social mobility and social participation. This perspective is key to Federal policy on employment training. As Cultural, Tourism and the Centre for Educational Statistics Division of Statistics Canada (2013) argue:

...societies need to better understand what skills people have, and how those skills are being used. This is more than simply a question of economic well-being. A great deal of discussion has been devoted to the aptitudes a population possesses and their bearing on international competitiveness – and this is a subject of great importance. Yet it must be emphasized that these aptitudes impact a range of factors that extend well beyond the relative economic standing of different countries. They also have profound consequences for such broad domestic considerations as economic disparities between different groups; health outcomes; levels of political engagement; and the degree to which people feel integrated into, or isolated from, society. The skills a country's population possesses do not only foreshadow its future international economic prospects; they also illustrate the challenges it faces, and shape the way in which it adapts to change.

(5)

OECD member nations decided to foster research that would yield data about employable skill sets of member nations. These data sets are used as indicators to predict which of its members have the most competitive advantage in a knowledge-based economy. One of the main surveys that emerged from this initiative was the International Adult Literacy Survey, a survey coordinated and funded by Statistics Canada that has been included in the evolution of skill measuring surveys, from the Adult Literacy and Life Survey (ALLS) in 2003 to the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) in 2011.

The assumptions of the IALS surveys are grounded in Human Capital Theory (HCT) and Item Response Theory (IRT) (Darcovich, 2000, p. 369). HCT framework conceptualizes literacy as

a form of human capital that, if developed, can increase an individual's chances of economic success (Culture, Tourism and the Centre for Education Statistics, 2011, p. 17, 44; Graff, 2011, p. 120; Grenier et al., 2008, p. 17). IRT is a framework that is used to measure literacy as a generic and a universal skill set and provides a method for developing a standardized approach to measure literacy proficiency (Darcovich, 2000, pp. 367 & 373; Grenier et al., 2008, p. 106; Sheehan & Mislevy, 1989, p. 3). In the case of the IALS survey, literacy is measured over a five-point scale that provides five descriptive indicators to represent levels of proficiency.

Individuals who score above a level three are seen as having the literacy capital to compete in a knowledge-based economy. The data collected using IALS over the last three decades suggest that there has been limited change in literacy proficiency despite the government's increase in funding adult literacy learning initiatives. In 1994, it was revealed that 46% of Canadians had reading levels below a level three standard (Ministry of Education and Training, 1998, p. 13). In 2003, the ALLS reported 42% of the population were below level three (Culture, Tourism and the Centre for Education Statistics, 2011, p. 28) and in 2013 the PIACC reported that 48% of Canadians were measured as having a literacy level lower than level 3 (OECD, 2013, p. 256).

The federal government also administered other surveys and tests to obtain more statistical information to develop stronger correlations between the IALS data, demographic data of participants and their reading skills. One of the major research projects that the government engaged in after the ALLS was the International Study of Reading Skills (ISRS) in 2008. This research provided demographic profiles and a wider understanding of the literacy skill sets of a sample of Canadians that took the ALLS (Grenier et al., 2008, p. 19). In the most recent PIACC survey, administered between 2011 and 2012, demographic categories that the

participants reported on included information on educational attainment, employment status, income, and linguistic background (Tourism and the Centre for Educational Statistics Division, 2013, p. 6; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2013, p. 28). The researchers found that low literacy proficiency was correlated with older individuals, those who do not attend post-secondary institutions, Indigenous people, immigrant citizens, and those whose first language was not one of Canada's official languages (Tourism and the Centre for Educational Statistics Division, 2013, pp. 43, 46). Indigenous peoples living on reserves were not included in the assessment (Tourism and the Centre for Educational Statistics Division, 2013, p.42). One of the reasons the researchers speculate as to why immigrants and Indigenous peoples did not do as well is because the survey was only offered in English and French. For many of the immigrants and Indigenous peoples who took the test, the nation's official languages are not their first language (Tourism and the Centre for Educational Statistics Division, 2013, p.42).

The researchers also reported that the PIAAC shows no difference in the literacy proficiency between men and women (Tourism and the Centre for Educational Statistics Division, 2013, p.29). Despite the lack of difference in literacy skill sets, women do not have the same labor outcomes as men. So while raising literacy proficiency may be necessary for economic participation, it does not provide an adequate solution to gender inequity in employment. Indeed, in Canada, women continue to be paid less for their labor when doing the same work as men: 87 cents to the dollar (Statistics Canada, 2017). Moreover, patriarchal notions of labor continue to permeate in society so that women continue to have lower participation in paid employment compared to men while over representing voluntary unpaid

labor such as child care (Statistics Canada, 2017). The female workforce also tends to be concentrated in the field of care and customer services such as teaching, nursing, social work, clerical and administrative positions, and sales. There has been no significant change in the gender distribution of occupations since 1987 (Statistics Canada, 2017). Women are also over represented in low-paying occupations and under-represented in high-paying occupations (Statistics Canada, 2017). This shows that employment is very much a gendering practice where improving literacy proficiency has a minimal impact on transforming workplace inequity.

Because an HCT framework is used to analyze the data, the research advances the belief that proficiency is dependent on individuals having access and taking advantage of educational opportunities, and that despite the demographic differences in IALS scores, anyone can improve their proficiency through academic programming. However, academic research on the theoretical frames used in the IALS survey argue that the way HCT and IRT conceptualizes and measures literacy provides a limited understanding of literacy education and should not be the main source of information to make programming decisions. For instance, St. Clair (2012) criticizes the use of IRT to measure adult literacy levels because IRT assumes that different tasks can be used to measure the same skill (St. Clair, 2012, p. 767). St Clair criticizes the use of the IRT to measure adult literacy levels because IRT assumes that “if one question is answered correctly” it means that the individual would be able to answer other questions correctly because those questions would share underlying traits (St. Clair, 2012, p. 767). The assumption underestimates how context and format might challenge that assumption. St. Clair also critiques the use of HCT to analyze the data. According to St. Clair, such a theoretical framework is problematic for two main reasons: in the case of the IALS survey, it holds literacy as the

center of knowledge when there are other forms of knowledge that can be used to determine the human capital of the country (St. Clair, 2012, p. 764); and, secondly, he argues that the idea that ability determines economic success is a contentious claim not justified in the research (St. Clair, 2012, p. 764). St. Clair concludes that there are significant limitations to using the IALS survey as the main measurement of adult literacy and to justify program decisions.

Researchers such as Black and Yasukawa (2014) have also criticized the IALS framework for advancing neo-liberal notions of education. They conducted a discourse analysis of contemporary adult literacy policies. They focused on the effect of the OECD on adult literacy frameworks of most industrial countries and make particular reference to Canada's involvement in setting literacy measuring practices. They argue that the OECD yields considerable international influence on literacy policy. It exercises significant power in naming and defining literacy and its relationship to economic development, and has encouraged a "vocational turn" in adult education policy (Black & Yasukawa, 2014, p. 233). Within the vocational paradigm, literacy is valued for its economic benefits, and literacy levels have become proxies for human capital. They argue that the OECD's literacy surveys are reordering society in favor of economic elites rather than balancing the need for social welfare in a market-oriented state (Black & Yasukawa, 2014, pp. 223-224). They further argue that the OECD uses western modernization theories of literacy that posit literacy as necessary to foster economic development. This perspective fuels fears that there has been a decline in literacy standards, a decline that is detrimental to a country's capacity to compete in a global market (Black & Yasukawa, 2014, p. 213). They are suspicious of the OECD's over reliance on quantitative

approaches to construct a statistical link between literacy and economic outcomes and claim this has created the perception of a crisis in education (Black & Yasukawa, 2014, p. 221).

Black and Yasukawa expand on St. Clair's criticism of IRT by elaborating on how IRT measures literacy. They argue that IRT has an autonomous conceptualization of literacy where literacy is measured as a single set of skills that have a generic and beneficial role in people's lives and is treated as a technology that is independent of context (Black & Yasukawa, 2014, p. 218). The OECD's perception of literacy does not consider ideological or socio-cultural conceptions of literacy and, as a consequence, the Organization's research does not consider how everyday literacy practices are used to exercise power (Black & Yasukawa, 2014, p. 218). Black and Yasukawa urge policy makers to conceptualize literacy in ways that are sensitive to context and local cultural norms and to recognize that vocational literacy practices are embedded in workplace practice and cannot be distinguished as a separate or generic set of skills (Black & Yasukawa, 2014, pp. 218, 222). They also make reference to the writings of Brian Street and his emphasis on the value of ethnographic study to illustrate literacy practices as multiple and culturally varied (Black & Yasukawa, 2014, p. 216; Heath & Street, 2008). They argue that using socio-cultural and ideological understandings of literacy will allow policy makers to consider the use, meanings and values of literacy among different groups (Black & Yasukawa, 2014, p. 218).

***United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).***

The United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has been advancing an international campaign for adult education and mass literacy as a means to promote human rights and social equity. This movement is embodied in the *Belem Framework*



*for Action*. This framework was developed by civil society organizations, intergovernmental agencies and the private sector of UNESCO's 144 state members at the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) (UNESCO, 2010, p. 6). The Document includes 4 preambles that advocate for adult literacy education: Preamble 4 that affirms that "literacy is the most significant foundation" of adult life-long education; Preamble 5 that asserts that a life-long education strategy is necessary to cope with social, economic, political crises and climate change and to promote gender equality; Preamble 7 calls for a conceptual framework for adult education that is based on principles of inclusion, emancipation, humanistic and democratic values;" and Preamble 9 declares life-long learning to be the solution to "alleviating poverty and for building equitable, tolerant, sustainable and knowledge-based societies" (UNESCO, 2010, pp. 5-6). They call for a pedagogy of adult education that promotes "holistic, multi-dimensional concept and practice that demands constant attention and continuous development" (UNESCO, 2010, p. 8).

Another key document from UNESCO that informs adult literacy programming is the *Education for All* initiative that tracks the global mass literacy movement. Goal 3 of the *Education for All* initiative involves "ensuring that the learning needs of young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programmes" (UNESCO, 2008, p. 59). The initiative encourages countries to develop secondary and tertiary education opportunities for youth and adults by establishing non-formal education programs and supplementing the cost of formal education among school leavers and disadvantaged groups (UNESCO, 2008, pp. 58-59). It is from this UNESCO document that the discourse of literacy as a human right has been cited in policy. The *Education for All* initiative particularly

states that “Literacy is a fundamental human right and a basic tool for making informed decisions and participating fully in the development of society” (UNESCO, 2008, p. 62).

The *Education for All* initiative also highlights the challenges women face getting access to education. UNESCO has collected statistics on literacy and gender and have found that women who represent 64% of the world’s population are more likely than men to be illiterate. Poverty and place of residence were also indicators of literacy rate. UNESCO overall found that individuals who faced exclusion from mainstream society due to social, cultural, or political reasons, particularly migrants, indigenous people, ethnic minorities and individuals with disabilities were most likely to have lower literacy rates (UNESCO, 2008, p. 65). UNESCO also acknowledges the concern that the IALS survey tends to focus on literacy in relation to work-related tasks and organizational priorities rather than workers’ cultural interests and demands (UNESCO, 2008, p. 66). The UNESCO documents further demonstrate the historical connection between labor and literacy in the document, *Literacy and the Promotion of Citizenship*, where UNESCO researchers speak to the way different countries support literacy education of adults. For Canada, they highlight the program developed by Frontier College in 1899. The aim was to teach reading and writing to isolated workers in logging, mining, and railway camps. Many of these workers did not speak English or French (O’Leary, 2008, p. 58). They were taught by laborer-teachers who were educators who took regular jobs in the camps and were paid the same wages as the workers and had a day to day understanding of the workers’ experiences (O’Leary, 2008, p. 58). Frontier College continues to be a leader in adult literacy education in Ontario and is known for its student-centered approach to teaching where the learner works with the teachers and program volunteers to determine the content of the instruction and the

approach to instruction is determined by what works well for the learner. The learner also plays a key role in setting program goals and is involved in the assessment process (O'Leary, 2008, p. 59). Frontier's college is also one of the many institutions in Ontario that receives funding to deliver the LBS program.

### **Provincial Policy for the Literacy Basic Skills (LBS) Program**

While adult literacy programming goes as far back as the history of Canada's education system, the most recent manifestation of adult literacy education in Ontario has emerged as the LBS program that was established in 1997 as a key part of Employment Ontario's strategy to transform labor market training and employment (MAESD, 2016, p. 5 & 8). In 2006, the LBS was placed under Employment Ontario after the signing of the Canadian-Ontario Labour Market Development Agreement and the Canada-Ontario Labour Market Partnership Agreement. These agreements brought a 900 million dollars per year investment to skills training programs such as LBS (Glass, Kallio, & Goforth, 2007, p. 30). In 2008, LBS saw a surge in student enrolment, which is attributed to the economic recession that led to a rise in unemployment (Ramsay, Sauve, & Shulman, 2010, p. 9). As Statistics Canada researchers point out, when the economic downturn occurred on October 2008, the employment rate fell within a year as 400 000 jobs were lost in Canada within a one-year period so that the unemployment rate changed from 6.3% to 8.6% (LaRochelle-Cot t & Gilmore, 2009, p.5). The highest number of job losses occurred in Ontario. The demographic group that was impacted the most were young men under 25; the unemployment rate among these workers raised to 10.8% (LaRochelle-Cot t & Gilmore, 2009, p.5). Indigenous people living off the reserve who were between the ages of 25 to 54 experienced losses of employment twice as high as non-indigenous people in Ontario

(LaRochelle-Coté & Gilmore, 2009, p.5). As a result, much of the province's focus turned to better integrating and coordinating literacy programs and the suite of social assistance services to support the unemployed. They also began to devote resources to developing program accountability assessments and this led to the introduction of the Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework (OALCF), and the Performance Management Framework (PMF). These reforms were introduced between 2011 and 2013 and restructured the LBS program by adapting more business managerial approaches to organizing the program. Such approaches were meant to increase the probability of a return on investment: more economically competitive citizens who can contribute to the revenue of the country (MTCU, 2014, p. 12). For this reason, LBS was viewed as an employment strategy of Employment Ontario and the perceptions of literacy constructed by the OECD play a significant role in shaping the program and justifying the investment of taxpayers' money. Although some policies continued to refer to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) definition of literacy as "a human right" (Essential Skills Ontario, 2014, p. 5), this definition has limited influence on program objectives. The most current definition of literacy developed by MTCU continues to emphasize skills training where literacy is perceived to be a skill that develops over a continuum and enables the individual to "solve problems, make decisions, participate fully in our diverse and technological society, and contribute to the innovation economy" (MTCU, 2014, p. 8).

While the reforms to the LBS program tend to follow the OECD notion of human capital and the IALS approach to assessment through IRT, the Ministry advocates that programmers adapt a contextualized tasked-based approach to learning as they believe that this approach to

practice best supports learner-centered, goal-directed, and transition-oriented practices. And these practices are necessary to support the over-arching purpose of the program: “for learners to develop knowledge, skills, and behaviors they need to achieve their goals at home, at work, in educational settings, and in the community” (MAESD, 2011, p. 4). The Ministry constructs a tasked-based approach to literacy as a transition from a skills-based approach. The Ministry argues that the main difference between a task and skills-based approach is that a task-based approach focuses on learner’s completion of literacy tasks rather than measuring the learner’s proficiency. The ministry critiques the skills-based approach to literacy assessment arguing that

Too often, skills alone become the focus of literacy assessments, whether the assessments are standardized or non-standardized. Readily available, skills-based assessments can provide a straightforward indicator of literacy progress since the criteria are deemed to be simply a presence or absence of a particular skill.

However, skills-based assessments reveal only a glimpse of the whole picture that is literacy learning. A comprehensive and learner-centered approach to assessment includes tools and processes that also look at task performance, social practices, and changes in learner’s lives.

(MTCU Foundations of Assessment, 2011, p. 6)

Overall, it seems as if the Ministry advocates for task-based learning because it focuses more on literacy tasks that are suitable for addressing the learners’ goals and context. Indeed, the Ministry emphasizes the use of “authentic” materials that the learner would use outside of the program and are relevant to the learner’s goal (MTCU, Foundations, 2011, p. 4). However, as organizational reports illustrate, there is a disconnect between what the ministry advocates for

practice and how they measure program accountability and learner achievement (Cathexis 2017; Alphaplus, 2015).

### **Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework (OALCF).**

One of the first documents associated with the program reform between 2011-2013 was the Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework. According to the Ministry, this document was constructed to support “the development of contextualized programming that reflects the learner’s culture, language, and other features specific to the learner and their goal” (MTCU, 2015). However, according to the *Service Providers Guidelines* OALCF supports a competence-based framework of delivery based on the IALS framework notion of building “a highly-skilled, highly-educated workforce in Ontario” (MTCU, 2015). While the OALCF document might advocate contextualized approaches to learning, the framework has been constructed to support a skill competency approach to learning that focuses on the development of “thinking and interpersonal skills, as well as the behaviors that help learners apply their skills to manage at work, in the community and other educational settings (MTCU, 2015, p.2). These skills include finding and using information, communicating Ideas and information, understanding and using numbers, using digital technology, goal-setting and engaging with others (MTCU, 2015, pp. 82-83). Learners demonstrate their achievement of the standard competencies by completing “purposeful tasks that show how literacy learning transfers to goal-related activities” (MTCU, 2015) rather than through the use of authentic materials from the learner’s life or specific activities that work towards the learner’s goal.

Moreover, the Curriculum includes a proficiency scale for measuring literacy which is also associated with a decontextualized skills approach to literacy learning that is associated with

the OECD orientation towards literacy. The learners' performance is specifically measured using task descriptors 3-level proficiency scale (MTCU, 2015, p.4). As the OALCF document explains,

The decision to include Levels 1, 2, 3, skills was informed by International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) findings, indicating that adults with Level 3 skills can meet most of the Essential Skills demands of daily life and can transfer their learning more easily from one context to another.

(MTCU, 2015, p.5)

It is interesting that although the Ministry seems to advocate a contextualized task-based approach to literacy learning, the OALCF is modeled after a skills-based approach to learning that adheres to standardized leveling practices and emphasizes the notion of transfer rather than a situated context.

#### **Performance Management Framework (PMF).**

In 2013, Employment Ontario launched the Performance Management Framework (PMF) to collect quantitative data to assess program performance. The aim of the PMF was to make the LBS more effective, efficient and customer-focused and to make the level of service expectations clear to all stakeholders and help the government see if they are receiving a return on investment (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2014, p. 12). According to the Service Providers' Guidelines, the PMF is used to collect data that would be distributed as evidence for program effectiveness, customer service and efficiency. The program effectiveness indicator was determined by the learner profiles, goal paths, and learner progress and gains that are determined by performance on standardized tasks (milestones and culminating tasks).

Although it was to be a transparent way to share program information, the data has not been made readily available to the public.

The Milestones and Culminating assignments are accessed from the Employment Ontario Information System Case Management System (EOIS CAMs). These standardized tasks were introduced in 2012 to “provide practitioners with a fair, meaningful, and understandable way to assess and communicate learner progress towards goal completion” (MAESD, 2011, p. 17). Before the system was officially introduced, researchers voiced concern about the use of standardized tasks to measure program performance since standardized tasks provide limited information about learner progress. According to Ramsay, Sauve and Shulman,

Practitioners stated that gathering data is important for learners, practitioners and funders, but the data can only explain part of the program if measuring program quality, and it only shows what the learner is capable of on that particular day if measuring learner skills. Assessment data must be used with caution since it only provides a picture of “what is” at this present moment. A learner may have had a “bad day” and not been able to really demonstrate knowledge or vice-versa; the learner may have shown higher skill than normally possessed. It is the assessors’ knowledge, experience and ability to analyze and interpret that can make the assessment a valuable tool and the assessment worthwhile. (2010, p. 58)

Despite this warning, the Ministry decided to go ahead and advocate for standardized tools to measure learner progress (MTCU Foundations of Assessment, 2011, p.6). As the Ministry argues,



Higher-stakes decisions affecting the lives of learners outside the program are usually better informed by more formal and standardized tools. Formal tools are usually developed by those with assessment expertise. These formal tools have gone through a transparent and rigorous process to determine their validity, ensuring that they measure what they say they will measure, and to determine their reliability, ensuring that they measure the same way under the same conditions with the same sorts of test takers

(MTCU Foundations of Assessment, 2011, p.7)

Program reviewers argued that the PMF promoted gaming behavior where service providers have learners complete milestones they were already capable of doing before they entered the program, giving many learners the same milestones, teaching to the milestone, delaying data entry until the learner passed the milestone, and keeping slow progressing learners off the system. In addition, program reviewers found that the time spent collecting, inputting and processing data for these systems were time consuming and made little time for professional development or other work that would enhance program quality (Cathexis, 2016, p. 139-140). These were the primary findings of the Cathexis report.

**Cathexis review.**

The aim of the Cathexis report published on April 2016 was to investigate the relevance, delivery, effectiveness and efficiency of the LBS program between April 2012 and March 2016 (Cathexis, 2016, pp. 8 & 13). To complete the review, the company was given access to the administrative data from the PMF, interviewed community partners, individuals in the Ministry, support organizations, and service provider interviews. The reviewers also completed

consultation visits, an interjurisdictional scan of the program, learner discussion groups and interviews. They also collected information from learner and service provider surveys and completed three case studies (Cathexis, 2016, pp. 7, 14-15). From their case studies, they received further information on the challenges standardized measurements posed for educators. For instance, after completing a case study of a rural Northern Ontario Aboriginal community-based program, they learned that many of the educators were working with learners who were residential school survivors or were children of survivors and that these learners had the added challenge of learning while facing historical trauma that was also associated with “suicide, substance abuse, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, diabetes, poverty and unemployment (Cathexis, 2016, p. 176). They also learned that the program providers for the Deaf stream were more likely to have higher costs for their programs and require longer training times for their learners who often had weaker results, weaker outcomes, and lower learner satisfaction (Cathexis, 2016, p. 203). Cathexis concluded that the OALCF framework is not Deaf friendly. In addition, the Deaf stream is the only stream that takes in English and French learners and will also often take in learners who are not adequately proficient in American Sign Language (ASL). As a result, they are often working with learners who have lower levels of proficiency than the program assumes. Deaf programmers also noted the challenges of finding competent interpreters or accessing the supports and equipment necessary to help Deaf learners transition into work. Learners in the Aboriginal and Deaf streams were the least likely to meet progress standards, complete goal path requirements, and transition to next steps (Cathexis, 2016, p. 203).

With regards to delivery, the review found that “Over the years, LBS practitioners have deepened their understanding of how goal-directed and contextualized learning can contribute to a learner’s success to move within and beyond the LBS Program” (Cathexis, 2016, p. 7). And the practitioners applied contextualized frameworks to delivery by facilitating one to one tutoring, structured and unstructured classes, and independent study (Cathexis, 2016, p. 56). However, they also explained that “Without conducting intensive observation, it is not possible to determine the extent to which sites are fully implementing task-based learning” (Cathexis, 2016, p. 56). Moreover, the report provides a critique of the use of standardized milestones and culminating tasks. Educators found these tasks to be “not always meaningful to learners, time consuming and potentially damaging to the learner’s confidence” (Cathexis, 2016, p. 9). Although the report defends the use of the PMF as a tool for making it possible for the Ministry to ensure accountability for service providers and encourage quality improvement, they argue that the PMF promotes compliance and gaming behavior rather than program improvement and the data integrity is compromised (Cathexis, 2016, p. 9). They recommend that the Ministry continue to use the PMF but revise the measurement practices and avoid tying funding decisions to data from the PMF (Cathexis, 2016, p. 9). They argue that “excessive administration requirements decrease efficiency” (Cathexis, 2016, p. 12).

### **Literacy Basic Skills Organizational Research**

There is limited research on delivery of LBS programs since the federal government has declassified literacy education as a priority and discontinued research funding organizations. For example, Copian, formally known as the National Adult Literacy Database was defunded in 2014 (Goar, 2014). Moreover, the Canadian Literacy Learning Network, formally known as the

Movement for Canadian Literacy was defunded in 2015 (Canadian Literacy and Learning Network, 2014). When Alexandra Fortier, spokesperson for then Employment and Social Development Minister Jason Kenney, was asked to comment on why the government was eliminating Copian, she replied:

Our government is committed to ensuring that federal funding for literacy is no longer spent on administration and countless research papers, but instead is invested in projects that result in Canadians receiving literacy skills they need to obtain jobs.

(Goar, 2014, para. 5)

From the time the Conservative Government assumed office in 2006, there was a strong push to defund national literacy agencies. Upon entering office, they defunded and discontinued the National Literacy Secretariat. This agency provided funding for research into practice initiatives (Horsman & Woodrow, 2006, p. 12).

To cope with the loss of funding from these federal agencies, provincial literacy organizations reorganized to follow provincial priorities. For example, one such provincial organization that was discontinued was the Ontario Literacy Coalition. Although the Ontario Literacy Coalition changed their name to Essential Skills Ontario and focused specifically on the development of skills for employment, they were still defunded in 2015 (Essential Skills Ontario, 2015). Today the province remains the main source of funding for the 27 arm's length provincially funded literacy organizations. Indeed, most of the adult literacy organizations receive around \$100 000 annually from the province to develop resources and research for adult literacy education. Some organizations receive more than others. The organizations that

receive the most funding include Alphaplus, which receives \$ 616 177, and Centre FOR A, which receives \$244 850 (Cathexis, 2016, p. 83). Although there are 27 adult literacy organizations, I focus on Alphaplus, the Ontario Native Literacy Coalition, and Centre FOR A since these organizations have specifically developed current research to inform practice whereas most organizations focus on resource development or have not made their research public.

In addition to the government funded research organizations, it should also be mentioned that grassroots organizations play a significant role in the delivery of LBS programs. These organizations are often non-profit charities that rely on multiple sources of funding and volunteer labor. Examples of organizations include First Nation reserves, prison advocacy organizations, community shelters, community-initiated social organizations, community-initiated settlement service programs for new immigrants, organizations that specialize in the development of assistive technologies for learners with disabilities, labor rights organizations and centres of support for the Deaf community. These organizations often receive multiple sources of funding from different public and private sources, and they are often social advocacy groups such as the John Howard Society that advocate and provide support services for individuals who have experienced incarceration. These organizations shape the mandate that inform practice by attaching the delivery of the program to their mission statements.

**The final studies by Movement for Canadian Literacy, the National Literacy Secretariat, and Essential Skills.**

Prior to being defunded, the Movement for Canadian Literacy, Copian, and Essential Skills produced research that provides significant insight into adult literacy education in Ontario. A study by the Movement for Canadian Literacy in 2007 provided a description of the field of

practice for adult literacy educators in Ontario and Alberta (Movement for Canadian Literacy, 2007, p. 12). They found these literacy programs often operate on short-term funding schemes and that literacy workers are most likely to be white females between the ages of 40-55 with a Bachelor in Education (Movement for Canadian Literacy, 2007, pp. 10 & 12). Many worked as volunteers and few received health coverage or dental benefits (Movement for Canadian Literacy, 2007, p. 13). They also found that educators were expected to do a lot of paperwork to demonstrate accountability to funders and required to take on more program coordination without receiving a change in pay (Movement for Canadian Literacy, 2007, p. 13). The amount of administrative work decreased the time they could devote to marking and preparing class materials and caused many workers to engage in unpaid overtime (Movement for Canadian Literacy, 2007, p. 14).

Another significant study was developed by Literacy B.C. and funded by the National Literacy Secretariat before it was discontinued in 2006. This study provided an inventory of research practices at the national, provincial/territorial, community and individual levels and considered practitioners' perspectives on developing frameworks for teaching literacy (Horsman & Woodrow, 2006, p. 9). A research into practice methodology was adopted. This involved coordinating, supporting and synthesizing research from adult literacy educators. Interestingly, the perspective from the practitioners tended to provide a critique of government perspectives of literacy. Practitioners were particularly concerned with the government's emphasis on statistical orientations to measure literacy since the information it yielded was narrow and creates a gap in research on practice (Horsman & Woodrow, 2006, pp. 96-98). These researchers found that most practitioners stressed holistic perceptions of literacy as

most effective for practice (Smythe & Courage, 2007, p. 7; Horsman & Woodrow, 2006, p. 34). Smythe, in particular advocated for a holistic approach to literacy education when supporting learners with disabilities in adult literacy programs. A holistic approach would include building awareness about the learning disability, building relationships of trust when developing learning profiles, developing appropriate teaching strategies that address the learning disability, taking care of the spirit, and support advocacy and awareness of learning disabilities and professional development and reflexive practice (Smythe & Courage, 2007, p. 7).

These researchers also found that adult educators, particularly in Ontario, were concerned with the amount of statistical data they were expected to collect that often narrowed the scope of what literacy education involved (Horsman & Woodrow, 2006, p. 34). According to Horsman and Woodrow, Ontario distinctly transformed its adult literacy program to be an employment strategy rather than a social service (Horsman & Woodrow, 2006, p. 71). Horsman and Woodrow conclude that “the Canadian field of adult literacy is well surveyed but under-theorized . . . there is a need to make stronger connections between literacy theory and research, policy, and practice” (Horsman & Woodrow, 2006, p. 108). An example of the vocational shift in research can be best illustrated by Essential Skills Ontario’s (ESO) final research project, *Elevate*. Rather than focusing on the development of essential skills such as literacy and numeracy, the goal of the project was to help participants secure sustainable employment in the food processing industry. This project is grounded in an employer-centric approach to create an employment pathway in an area where there is a job demand and to develop program goals and resources based on discussions with employers and industry associates to determine the types of skill sets needed to work in the food processing sector

(Essential Skills Ontario, 2013, pp. 3, 6). The project found that these industries advocate for “industry-shared delivery models that incorporate entry-level job skills, traditional literacy and essential skills, as well as complex communication and problem solving in technology rich environments” (Essential Skills Ontario, 2013, p.3). The project’s researchers argue that, in a knowledge-based economy, traditional entry level jobs that originally did not require a high school diploma are increasingly being filled by individuals with degrees and diplomas due to increased use of advanced technology in these sectors (Essential Skills Ontario, 2013, pp. 4, 6). They also argue that the existing delivery model of the LBS programs are not effective because they

place greater emphasis on the ‘supply side’ of labour with little attention to the ‘demand side’ and, in this regard, “have proven to be largely ineffective in bridging the gap between workforce development programming and customized programming for local industry

(Essential Skills Ontario, 2013, p.5).

The research by Essential skills argues that LBS programs tend to focus on educational and community-based aspirations rather than labour-market priorities of job-seekers and employers (Essential Skills Ontario, 2013, p. 5). So, the ESO developed a six-week program for students in the LBS programs with a two-week practicum in a food processing plant.

Also, because the study is employer-focused, it does not adequately address issues of sustainability of this employment nor opportunities for growth and social mobility. At no point in the study was it mentioned how much the job paid. It did not mention that food processing workers are poorly paid and that may be why these jobs



remain unfilled. In recent Canadian Job Bank postings for food processing in Ontario, food laborer positions pay ranged between \$11.25 - \$15.00 an hour (Job Bank, 2016).

According to the Canadian Centre of Policy Alternatives, to earn a living wage in Toronto, a worker needs to be paid at least \$18.25 (Tiessan, 2015, p. 29). Long term work as a food laborer makes it difficult for an individual to make ends meet. What this research suggests is that an industry approach may not be worth public investment if the compensation and tax revenues generated from these jobs lead to lower tax brackets and maintain dependency on social services to subsidize incomes. Indeed, the ESO criticism that the LBS program does not focus on the demand side of employment, does not consider that individual may attend LBS program as a gateway to jobs that are more sustainable. Secondly, quantitative approaches are difficult to apply in the context of a specific LBS program and qualitative approaches are more appropriate to gain information about these specific learning contexts and test assumptions about the value of literacy training.

### **AlphaPlus.**

AlphaPlus is an arms' length organization that provides research and resources on the development of digital literacy within the LBS program. One of their earlier studies examined how distance learning can "maximize the effectiveness and efficiency of the LBS Program" (Porter & Sturm, 2006, p. 12). This study involved 154 participants and developed a series of mixed methods data sources such as surveys that provided information about the demographic factors that affect learning; feedback on online delivery; surveys given to the learner before and after the course to self-report on the development of self-management and technical skill sets;

a literacy assessment; learner self-logs; and interviews with learners and teachers (Porter & Sturm, 2006, pp. 12-16). Interestingly, one of the points this study highlights is that 87% of participants indicated that face to face interaction with the instructor was necessary throughout the online learning process. As these interactions decreased, student enrolment decreased (Porter & Strum, 2006, pp. 36-37). In 2012, AlphaPlus developed a qualitative study featuring 12 participants to investigate how learners use digital media to expand their communication skills (Greig & Hughes, 2012, p. 2). In this study, the researchers found that individuals who have low literacy skills often have difficulty securing employment, and it is difficult for them to take advantage of the opportunities to learn about technology in school since they lack the finances to have access technology at home and often are not sure how learning specific forms of technology will be applicable to the workplace (Greig & Hughes, 2012, p. 6).

Recent research published by AlphaPlus focuses on learner access to digital resources. AlphaPlus researchers have found that the digital divide continues to be a main literacy barrier despite the increase in internet connectivity. Seniors, individuals with lower incomes and individuals living in rural areas continue to have limited access and participation in digital literacy practices (Pinsent-Johnson & Sturm, 2017, p. 3). Funding shortfalls in literacy education create restrictions in the quality of digital literacy programming that can be offered in Ontario. For instance, library computer equipment used for developing digital workshops are often outdated and poorly funded. Funding shortfalls make it difficult to employ a teaching staff and so many groups rely on prepackaged self-serve online curriculums or “one shot” workshops that do not provide sustained and meaningful learning opportunities (Pinsent-Johnson & Sturm,

2017, pp. 9-10). Their research supports and advocates for the Federal government's initiative to declare internet connectivity an essential service and develop policies to increase affordable access to internet services (Pinsent-Johnson & Sturm, 2017, p. 33).

Alphaplus recently published a study that further illustrates the importance of enhancing access and the quality of digital literacy education at a national level. The researcher of this project, Smythe argues that "what it means to be literate has altered forever in the context of new digital technologies", and yet how digital technology can support reading and writing continues to be a topic that is under-researched and under theorized (Smythe, 2013, p.3). Similarly, to Sturm and Pinsent-Johnson, Smythe stresses that access to digital technology is a significant barrier to advancing an approach to digital literacy education that is embedded in a contextual understanding of how digital technology can contribute to individual, community and societal goals. To explore possible innovations to improve digital literacy education, Smythe conducted a study where she completed a literature review and interviews with educators from across Canada to find ways to support the professional development of digital literacy adult educators (Smythe, 2013, p.3). Smythe isolated 3 ways digital technologies are used in adult basic education classrooms: as a mode of delivery for long distance learning, as a basic skill that is taught in the course, and as a form of social media communication. The participants in her study tended to highlight how social media provided digital story-telling opportunities that had the most profound impact on transforming teaching and learning since digital story-telling allowed learners to become producers rather than consumers of social media (Smythe, 2013, p.7). Her findings also stressed the importance of collaborative practices

as the main strategy for encouraging critical literacy practices when using digital resources (Smythe, 2013, p.8).

AlphaPlus also published a study in 2017 that critiques the OALCF and the use of milestones to measure program performance. They argue that the milestones encourage inflexible approaches to assessment that do not support pedagogical principles of adult literacy education. They developed this perspective after completing survey interviews with instructors, assessors and program coordinators. Moreover, they found that the milestones are often a time consuming process, and that the milestones often do not match the learner's specific goals or interests, are too difficult, and not responsive "to the cultural literacy practices in the Deaf community" (Pinsent-Johnson & Sturm, 2015, p. 17). As Pinsent-Johnson and Sturm described in their report, the milestones "are not exact duplicates of actual texts that an individual learner encounters in day-to-day life but are re-constructed approximations that may or may not relate to an individual's actual experiences and reason for being in the program." (Pinsent-Johnson & Sturm, 2015, p. 29). Essentially, milestones are decontextualized tasks that are the antithesis of contextualized approaches to education (Pinsent-Johnson & Sturm, 2015, p. 27).

### **Ontario Native Literacy Coalition (ONLC).**

The Ontario Native Literacy Coalition is a provincially funded organization that advocates for community-based and learner-centered approaches to literacy practices that promote "A culturally-based approach to teaching that respects the learner and honours previous experience and prior learning" (ONLC, 2018). To support these principles of practice, the organization develops and advocates for culturally sensitive resources, provides training for

Indigenous literacy service providers, distributes culturally relevant resources, and completes research on the delivery of native literacy services (ONLC, 2018). One of the resources developed by the ONLC is a holistic framework for assessing literacy that integrates culturally relevant materials such as the medicine wheel (ONLC, 2017). This framework was developed after the organization completed telephone interviews with educators and found that the educators desired an approach to assessment that did not rely on standardized tasks since they considered these tasks to be too generic and failed to “consider that each learner has different life experiences which help them to develop different knowledge, skills and attitudes” (ONLC, 2017). The holistic framework of assessment requires educators to engage the following steps as a part of the assessment process: informal chat with the learner to establish a relationship of trust and an understanding of the learners’ strengths, interests and needs; observations of a learner’s communication style; and a process where a learner can have a say in the selection of learning resources.

Notions of a holistic approach to learning are also a key component of the resources that the ONLC have developed between 2015 and 2017 such as the Anishinaabe Reader. These documents discuss gender roles and literacy practices in Indigenous communities in Ontario. For instance, the Anishinaabe Reader explains that “Women are often referred to as the backbone of the nation. They are the keepers of the culture and language, and they hold the people together during difficult times” (Elliot, pp.10-11). The readers explore multiple understandings of gender roles to demonstrate that notions of gender are not static but can change to be appropriate for different contexts. Women are also associated with being the caretakers of water since they hold the amniotic fluids that allow for reproduction (Elliot, pp. 9,

17, & 30). Women in the Anishnabe culture are also associated with having special connections with the water and the moon through their menstrual cycle. As explained by the contributor Elliot,

Because women purify themselves on a monthly basis through their menstrual cycle, they have a very strong connection to Mother Earth and Grandmother Moon. The connection is symbolized by the fact that the moon's cycle also takes twenty-eight days. The time of the month is a good time to remain alone and quiet, and to maintain some distance from husbands or partners. It is a time for women to cleanse, and to take the time to re-establish their connection to Mother Earth and reacquaint themselves with Grandmother Moon.

(Elliot, p.11)

The readers also express the importance of oral literacy practices to Indigenous cultures in Ontario and how oral literacy challenges the notion of dominant narratives. These documents also describe the way Indigenous groups organize themselves politically and socially into complex systems of communications that allow for the building of consensus and the resolution of conflict (Jacobs, pp. 25-27). These documents highlight the diversity of literacy practices whose value is often misrecognized in colonial contexts that emphasize the role of written language and Eurocentric practices over forms of communication that are relevant to Indigenous communities.

#### **Centre Franco-Ontarien de Ressources en Alphabétisation (Centre FORA).**

The Centre FORA is an Ontario funded organization that develops resources for adult Francophone schools and research for the French LBS program, Alphabétisation et Formation

de Base des Adultes (AFB). Their most recent research examined the resources that are being used to help new French-speaking immigrants and young Francophone adults upgrade their language skills. These research projects involved written and telephone surveys that were given to AFB educators (Centre FOR A, 2016, p. 5). They found resources available for supporting French immigrants to be inadequate so educators often needed to revise and adapt them. They expressed the need for learning materials that used simpler language, and that better reflected the reality of the experiences of their learners. The participants also explained that they found that the new French-speaking immigrants often required the resources to be presented in print format and print resources are not readily available (Centre FOR A, 2016, p. 26). As one participant expressed,

Je pense que les ressources doivent être engagements et à la fois refléter la réalité canadienne et leurs réalités étant nouveaux arrivants au Canada. L'emphasis doit être placée sur la difficulté qui environne l'obtention d'un emploi, la réalité au niveau du genre d'emploi (et le salaire attaché) qu'ils peuvent obtenir, les préquis (académiques et culturel) afin de pénétrer le marché canadien, les attentes du marché canadien, l'importance d'un engagement tôt, la volonté et la flexibilité requises afin de bien s'intégrer au Canada, etc. Cette information doit être claire, simple et ferme, ca je pense que la qualité du succès des nouveaux arrivants depend dessus.<sup>1</sup>

(Centre FORA, 2016, p. 27)

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<sup>1</sup> Translation of French to English Available in Appendix D

For the second research project, the educators reported that the young adult learners tended to prefer online interactive resources that reflect the reality of their experiences and employment goals (Centre FORA, 2017, pp. 19 & 22-23). The educators also reported that there were no specific sets of resources or teaching methods that are ideal for youth learners.

As one educator explained,

Tout ce que vous voulez bien ajouter est important selon les cas. Aucune méthode n'est bonne pour tous, car chaque personne est différente. Donc une grande variété de livres, textes, jeux de mots, jeux de chiffres, tout est bien reçu du moment que nous en avons une utilité.<sup>2</sup>

(Centre FORA, 2017, p. 20)

The reports produced by Centre FOR A demonstrate the diversity of learners attending the program and the need for resources that reflect their experiences and preferred approaches to learning.

### **Scholarly Research on Practice**

There is little scholarly peer-reviewed research that has been published on the LBS programs in Ontario. To ensure my literature review is focused but wide enough to capture available scholarly research, I have included research that has been published in the form of books, theses, and dissertations. I also include research that goes as far back as 2000 since one of the participants made a direct reference to the work of Jenny Horsman and her seminal research project on the relation between literacy learning and trauma. I present the studies in chronological order. This arrangement demonstrates the shift in research on practice from one

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<sup>2</sup> Translation of French to English Available in Appendix D



that emphasizes the holistic aspects of literacy learning process, to research that focuses on the study of specific aspects of social practice in adult literacy education classrooms, and to the most current research on LBS that highlights the relations between learners and literacy workers as policy actors. The last study, in particular highlights the dependency of these programs on volunteer untrained labor to provide tutoring for learners. My analysis pays particular attention to how researchers conceptualize literacy learning in their analysis of practice. This arrangement demonstrates the shift in the theories that are being used to investigate practice. I found that the early theories that tended to focus on holistic frameworks offer a wider understanding of the literacy learning experience that emphasized learning as being more than cognitive processes and social interactions, but also emotional, physical and spiritual learning experiences embedded in a community of practice. Holistic studies tend to provide richer descriptions of the context of the study, especially research situated in Indigenous communities where the relationship between geography and social practice are highlighted. The later research tends to focus primarily on particular social practices of the literacy classroom. It suggests that towards the end of the reform period, research became more focused on the innovations to adult literacy education practices while the Holistic orientation focused on a wider understanding of the educators' approach to practice. It should also be mentioned that much of the scholarly researchers have worked for the LBS programs as educators, volunteers or organizational researchers. Such is the case with Jenny Horsman, Sharon Swanson, Christina Jones, Michelle Eady, Chirstine Pinsent-Johnson and Jacqueline Lynch.

### **Scholarly research that advances holistic conceptions of literacy.**

One of the most extensive research projects completed on adult education programs was developed by Jenny Horsman. Her research was published in a book titled, *Too Scared to Learn: Women, Violence, and Education*, that was published in 2000. The book presents her findings from research she completed that involved interviewing women attending adult education programs and educators across Canada. She found that the learner participants often related experiences of violence and trauma in their interviews and this became the central theme that emerged from her research (Horsman, 2000, p. 3 - 4). Horsman defines trauma as an individual's response to violence (Horsman, 2000, p. 32). The process of working through trauma extends the time it takes to complete the learning processes (Horsman, 2000, p. 79). She describes literacy as a process of building connections with oneself, others, and the meanings of text (Horsman, 2000, p. 146-150 and 167). Horsman found that "literacy learning is likely to work as a particular trigger for memories of violence for many women" (Horsman, 2000, p. 5). As she concluded,

Unless education at all levels acknowledges the violence in the lives of women and children, along with its impact on learning, many students will not only fail to learn, but may also experience the educational setting as a silencing place or another site of violence, where they are controlled and diminished by institutional structures or classroom interactions and shamed by their failure to learn.

(Horsman, 2000, p. 7)

Her research also warns against the application of deficit models of literacy since these approaches to adult education allow some forms of literacy to be more valued than others (Horsman, 2000, p. 21). Literacy education needs to combat the deficit model by teaching learners' ways to recognize the knowledge and skills they bring to the classroom and help them build on their existing knowledge and skills (Horsman, 2000, p. 21).

Horsman advocates holistic education that includes the recognition of body, mind, emotion, and spirit. This includes Indigenous peoples' approaches to holistic learning that involve finding the balance of the various aspects of the holistic learning experience in relation to the medicine wheel and the indigenous educators' critique of institutionally-based education that over-emphasizes the mind over the body and the social. She also argues that self-esteem is entwined with literacy learning and needs to be addressed when working with learners who have experienced trauma. If the education program fails to address issues of self-esteem and self-worth, it will enforce barriers for the learner to continue their learning (Horsman, 2000, p. 185). She suggests that Indigenous spiritual pedagogies of learning that often involve talking circles and check-ins allow for spaces to reflect on spiritual beliefs and develop strategies of self-care to address issues of self-esteem and self-worth (Horsman, 2000, pp. 185-190). Overall, Horsman believes that education should recognize the learner as a whole rather than deficient (Horsman, 2000, p. 77).

Her research also provides suggestions of practice that she has developed in reflection and consultation with the educators and learners she interviewed. For instance, she advocates the practice of drumming as a literacy practice that engages the body and oral literacy skills in an interactive way. As she described in her research,

A variety of creative approaches might be appropriate to play with concepts of being seen and heard and valuing oneself. Learning to play with voice, song, shouting, breathing, making different sorts of noise, drumming, and percussion, and learning to echo others' sounds, are among a wide variety of exercises that can help learners to put themselves out there and listen to others.

(Horsman, 2000, p. 193)

In addition, she also suggests that wilderness trips provide opportunities to help learners transform their understanding of their bodies since this allows learners to physically explore what their bodies can do and challenges the defining of the body in gender, racial and other oppressive terms (Horsman, 2000, p. 212). She cautions that literacy programs do not need to program for all aspects of the learner's wholistic educational experience: aspects of learning to support the development of a wholistic learning experience may be pursued outside of the program (Horsman, 2000, p. 178).

To address trauma in literacy education, Horsman believes educators need to encourage learners to explore different possibilities of meaning and she advocates for multiple meaning approaches to reading, whereby learners are taught that meaning is not exclusive to the text but that meaning is something the reader partially creates as they engage in the reading process. In this way, text holds different meanings depending on who is reading it. Horsman argues that it "is crucial to allow people who have always had their meanings contested or denied . . . to see the possibility for making their own meaning" (Horsman, 2000, p. 146-150).

While many educators and policy makers advocate for self-directed approaches to learning, Horsman found that too much control of the learning process might be challenging for learners who are working through trauma since the experience of trauma is often associated with the experience of losing control (Horsman, 2000, p. 138-139). A program that is flexible is not necessarily one that is learner-directed, but one that is able to provide the learner with the option to have structures that address issues of control and trauma and to make hidden layers of expectations and judgements transparent to the learner, so they can better recognize what social practices are meaningful and helpful for them. Horsman suggests that the educator needs to develop learning plans that combine boundaries and structure with agency and self-direction to make “it possible for a learner to explore her own limits and learn about making choices and being in control” (Horsman, 2000, p. 139). Such considerations also need to be taken into account when making decisions to develop individualized learning programs and developing opportunities for social interaction and group work (Horsman, 2000, pp. 141-142).

Finally, Horsman raises some insights to consider applying to goal-oriented education programs. Horsman found in her research that goal-setting is sometimes a challenge for learners who experience trauma since those who experience violence and trauma often are coping with feelings of having lost control, connection with self, and belief that life can have meaning (Horsman, 2000, p. 171). She advises educators not to assume that learners can arrive to class with a particular understanding of a goal they want to reach and that a part of the educator’s practice may involve helping the learners imagine their future where they can be the main actor to transform their life (Horsman,

2000, p. 172). As Horsman explains, “Supporting learners to imagine a future –to imagine the possibilities of change –is an important piece in literacy” (Horsman, 2000, p. 174).

The main set of studies that were published in scholarly journals prior to 2011 are qualitative studies that were situated in northern First Nations communities in Ontario. These studies focused on observing and sharing literacy practices. These researchers treat literacy as a holistic practice that is embedded in community members’ values and wider social relations. Sharon Swanson (2003), a research practitioner, published qualitative research where she examined the role of a literacy practitioner in Moose Factory. Swanson taught in a First Nations community and adopted a holistic approach to learning, as conceptualized by Diane Hill, a member of the Bear Clan from the Six Nations of Grand River Territory in Ontario who is often consulted on culturally responsive Aboriginal education initiatives that use indigenous models of teaching. Swanson conceptualizes the role of the teacher as supporting the mental, physical, emotional and spiritual aspects necessary for social interaction (Swanson, 2003, p. 63). Swanson’s study also emphasizes the need to teach literacy in ways that connect learning to the relevant cultural experiences of the learner. The same year, Christianna Jones, a researcher and program coordinator of an adult literacy program on Manitoulin Island, describes how the Seven Grandfather’s Teaching of the Objibwe were used as a conceptual framework for teaching literacy (Jones, 2003, p. 45). This approach focuses on learning as deeply connected to family and community relations and on the development of skills outside of the academic context as students participate in community activities and live their lives (Jones, 2003, p. 48). Instead of the classroom being a place to develop foundational skills, the classroom was primarily used as a space for reflection and dialogue to improve students’ understanding of

their experiences so they could be open to engaging in transformative learning practices. For this reason, Jones promotes a holistic approach to learning that perceives literacy education as embedded in social practice and the importance of situating practice in students' experiences and unique cultural contexts. Her definition connects the notion of holistic education to social practice.

### **Scholarly research on the social practices of the adult literacy classroom.**

Three years later, Michelle Eady (2006) developed a qualitative study describing the teaching practices adopted for Sioux students living in remote communities in Ontario only accessible by car in the winter. Unlike the other two studies where the LBS program was run by local community groups, this program was developed in partnership with the AlphaPlus Centre in Toronto and Confederation College. This program focused on individuals specifically looking to upgrade their literacy skills to attend college. As a result, the main focus of the article was on the distance learning practices where the relation between teacher and learner is often mediated by communication technology (either one-way or two-way). The article emphasizes that, in such a learning context, the teacher's main role is as a resource facilitator who tracks, encourages and instigates challenges to the student to enhance learning experiences. While the article does not focus on the concept of literacy, it does demonstrate the importance of the role of the educator and how program and practice are shaped by geographical, technological and social factors (Eady, 2006).

In 2009, Taylor, Ayala and Pinsent-Johnson developed a study to investigate the transfer of learning that occurs in employment preparation programs for adults with low literacy as well as the teaching strategies used by instructors to promote transferable literacy skills (Taylor,

Ayala & Pinsent-Johnson, 2009, p. 2). This research focuses on a project to map the transfer of literacy skills to the work placement of the learners. The researchers conceptualize literacy as situated in particular contexts that are not universal or generic. Using a constructivist worldview, they developed a multi-case qualitative study with adult learners as the key informants from a local school district LBS program in Eastern Ontario (Taylor et al., 2009, pp. 4-6). They collected field notes and developed member-checked narratives of their discussions with students from the program (Taylor et al., 2009, p. 6). They found that the transfer of learning occurs between school and the workplace when there is a strong relationship between the instructors and workplace coordinators (Taylor et al., 2009, p. 1). They stress the importance of having ongoing dialogues between the program graduates and instructors to share information about the relevance of the program to their workplace needs. They also stressed that instructors should make modifications to their program to reflect the skill sets the students need for their workplace practicums (Taylor et al., 2009, p. 6). They found that students learned best when they were able to dialogue about incidents that occurred in the work place and share information from the internet to improve literacy skills (Taylor et al., 2009, p. 9). Thus, the researchers argue that literacy skills are not simply transferable from one context to the next but are instead “re-contextualized by new forms of situated learning” (Taylor et. al, 2009, pp. 10-11) and that program planners and policy makers should take this into account when developing programs. The researchers identify the main limitation of their study as its focus on the practices of one school, noting other LBS programs have much more diverse contexts and practices, particularly since some of the programs are run by colleges and others by local community-based organizations (Taylor et al., 2009, p.12).



Sue Nash-Ditzel and Tammy Brown's (2012) investigation of practice in LBS programs examines how technology shapes practice. Nash-Ditzel and Brown conducted a phenomenologically-based teacher research study that included interviews with students in a college LBS program. They focused on investigating the use of Digital Reading Logs (DRL) as a strategy to make literacy learning more relevant for adult learners in an adult basic skills program (Nash-Ditzel & Brown, 2012, p. 95). They found DRL to be an effective strategy because it established a link between in-school and out-of-school literacy practices and was inclusive of cultural and social literacy practices (Nash-Ditzel & Brown, 2012, p. 96). Like the holistic researchers, they felt that culturally responsive teaching practices were necessary to support adult literacy learning. Nash-Ditzel and Brown, however, tended to focus on the cognitive and social aspect of literacy learning and referenced Vygotsky's concept *zone of proximal development* and proposed a concept of *hybrid spaces* to demonstrate the relation (Nash-Ditzel & Brown, 2012, p. 97; Vygotsky, 1978, pp.84-85). Following Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, they use the DRL as technology to scaffold the student's learning by taking into account the student's relationship with the teacher, the learning task, the student's culture and the student's out-of-school literacy practices. Moreover, the DRL provides a hybrid space for students to bring their cultural experiences and out-of-school learning practices to their writing. Following Gee's idea, the writers argue that DRL allows the classroom to become a space that brings together students' out-of-school language practices together with in-school language to facilitate literacy learning in effective and meaningful ways (Nash-Ditzel & Brown, 2012, pp. 96-97).

### **Scholarly research on the relations between learners and literacy workers.**

In 2013, York University professor Jacqueline Lynch developed a nine-month qualitative study of the in and out of classroom literacy practices of adult students with developmental or intellectual disabilities in Ontario. This study focuses on the perspectives of coordinators, voluntary instructors and learners on teaching and learning. The adult literacy classroom she observed relied on volunteer literacy instructors to deliver the adult education program. The sample size of her study included three adult learners, four tutors and two coordinators. Her study shares some similarities with Taylor et al. (2009). She references Barton and Hamilton's (2000) view of literacy as a social practice and that learning is shaped through broad social relations that develop through learning interactions (Lynch, 2013, p. 304). From her observations and interviews, she found there was a need for greater integration of the adult's out-of-school literacy activities into the classroom (Lynch, 2013, p. 302). She found that while her students saw the development of oral skills as significantly important, they wanted to learn more technical writing skills as they felt these skills would be more relevant to their lives. By contrast, the coordinators felt that sharing ideas and developing transferable skills for real life situations should be the focus (Lynch, 2013, p. 309). In her study, she recommends that in order to make the learning more relevant to students, they need to have more say in what they learn (Lynch, 2013, p. 316, 321).

In 2012, Carpenter, Weber and Schugurensky (2012) developed a study to explore the impact of these reforms on the pedagogy of adult literacy educators in Ontario. Their study employs a case study approach to gathering data and a political economy analysis of data in relation to neoliberal policies. They found that teachers were concerned with how the new

adult literacy education policies tend to over emphasize the use of managerialism, privatization and punitive accountability mechanisms to reduce professional autonomy and create a culture of fear in the classroom (Carpenter, Weber, & Schugurensky, 2012, p. 154). They argue that these policies overemphasize the use of standardized curriculum and testing that encourage teachers to teach to the test and to adopt Socratic rather than democratic and cooperative pedagogical practices. Teachers were also concerned about the amount of quantitative data they need to generate to account for “how money is spent, curriculum delivered, and student progress made” (Carpenter, et al., 2012, p. 154). The amount of paperwork caused teachers to have less time to focus on classroom practice (Carpenter et al., 2012, p. 154). Educators were also concerned that the accountability mechanisms demand measurements of literacy that are impossible to create and cannot be quantified (Carpenter et al., 2012, p. 154). The teachers who Carpenter, Weber and Schugurensky interviewed found that while these reforms may provide information to help Ontario government ministries make funding decisions, the data they generate is useless for improving practice (Carpenter et al., 2012, p. 156). They argue that the reforms have led to a shift from a learner-centered paradigm to a skills-based paradigm. One indicator of this is the push to get students out of the program within a specific time frame where literacy skills are taught as compartmentalized segments instead of being taught holistically (Carpenter et al., 2012, p. 157). They argue that the emphasis on a skills-based approach to literacy is more conducive to preparing students for low income jobs rather than jobs that will allow for social mobility (Carpenter et al., 2012, p. 157). They mention that several of the adult educators wanted to adopt pedagogical approaches that were inspired by the theories of Paulo Freire, where literacy learning could be linked to emancipation, and that

teachers felt the neoliberal reforms limited pedagogical variance, diversity and creativity in the classroom (Carpenter et al., 2012, p. 157, 160).

In 2013, Atkinson, an LBS educator developed research that also involved interviewing educators on how the movement towards psychometric regimes were causing LBS programs to move away from their community-oriented roots to one that advanced an employment centric agenda that views literacy as human capital (Atkinson, 2013, p. 151). She applied Foucaultian analytics to illustrate how modern forms of power are productive as well as oppressive as they work to elicit specific behaviors while punishing disobedient action (Atkinson, 2013, p. 2). She also introduces the concept of responsabilization to demonstrate how the provincial government rationalizes the need for literacy education by advancing the notion that the subjects of learning need education to be self-sufficient and govern themselves so they will not be dependent on social services (Atkinson, 2013, p. 2). The educators in her research believed that the policies that were transforming the way the program was structured was making it difficult for educators to adopt their individualized and learner-centered approaches to teaching that was vital to encourage learning (Atkinson, 2013, p. 2). She found that while the educators choose to disobey some of the policy imperatives, they were neither the less unwitting pedagogical agents for advancing government's literacy policies (Atkinson, 2013, iii). Her research advocates a post-colonial approach to breaking down systemic oppression and to create new conditions for "new forms of life to come into being" by denaturalizing the western narratives of universals to illustrate the narratives as products of historical and culturally situated practices (Atkinson, 2013, 22).

The most recent research on the LBS program was developed by Luk, who completed her research on volunteer tutors that support the LBS program (Luk, 2016, p. 72). She found that volunteers of the program often provide a significant amount of the instruction in adult literacy programs (Luk, 2016, p. 3). The MTCU had stopped collecting statistics on the number of volunteer tutors in 2004-2005. During that year the Community Literacy of Ontario reported that there were 4 547 literacy volunteers working in the program at the time and they contributed about 315 000 hours of work. The ratio between paid staff and volunteers at the time was 3.4 to 57 (Luk, 2016, p. 11). From interviewing tutors, she learned that tutors often spoke about the significance of understanding the learners' experiences of living in low socio-economic situations and they stressed the importance of learner-centered approaches to teaching. She used Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital, and field to explore practice (Luk, 2016, p. 22). Overall, her research brings into focus the often unacknowledged volunteer labour that is a significant part of LBS programming. Luk refers to tutors as the "forgotten policy actors" (Luk, 2016, p.85).

The diversity of research demonstrates the variety of approaches that can be used to investigate and conceptualize adult literacy education. However, I find that the holistic approach provides the widest lens for conceptualizing literacy education since it offers perceptions of literacy that are open to the connection of literacy learning to emotional, physical, and spiritual aspects of learning in addition to the cognitive and social processes. The social practice approach seems like a far better theory for narrowing in on a specific social practice and can be particularly conducive for the study of emerging classroom phenomena such as the use of a technological innovation or to investigate a particular teaching strategy.

Current research on social relations of practice also provide an important critical lens for a larger discussion on the social relations that inform practice. For the purpose of this dissertation, I found myself engaging in a more holistic orientation since I sought a wider understanding of what is happening in the classroom in relation to how educators conceptualize literacy. In the next chapter, I provide a review of the three main theoretical orientations to literacy education that are taken up in policy and practice: experiential approaches to education, cognitive approaches, and socio-cultural approaches. These three approaches to theorizing adult literacy education are the theories most commonly referred to by the participants in the study.

### **Chapter 3: Literacy Theory**

This chapter of the dissertation provides a review of experiential, cognitive and socio-cultural understandings of literacy education. A review of these theories demonstrates the key concepts that inform practice and provides insight into the relation between policy, academic research and practice. The review also brings into focus areas that can be expanded on in order to incorporate more holistic understandings of literacy education to support adult Ontario learners.

#### **Pragmatist Theories of Communication and Language**

Dewey theories are historically situated in the North American experience of education. Because he was writing between the 1890s- 1940s when the mass literacy movement traditionally associated with reading and writing was just emerging, he does not take up literacy as a concept. Instead the emphasis on reading and writing was associated with communication and language, a topic that Dewey addresses specifically in *Experience and Nature* (1929). Dewey was also philosophizing during a time when there was a movement towards anthropological research on indigenous communities. These researchers tended to advance colonial narratives that portrayed Indigenous people as “savages” who engaged in “primitive” social practices (Dewey, 1929, pp. 111-113). Indigenous peoples’ language and communication was represented as pre-enlightened literacy practices that would inevitably disappear as man progressed toward industrial economies and Eurocentric models of government. Such a narrative holds developmental assumptions that support colonial notions of European superiority and devalues the contribution Indigenous communities have made towards world knowledge, skill, and innovation (Hedican, 2014). A decolonizing lens should be applied when

reading Dewey's theory to offer a counter narrative. I have found through my studies that there are shared understandings between the pragmatists understandings of education and those of Anishinabe educators, particularly notions of learning as organic and grounded in experience, in addition to holistic approaches to learning that value the spiritual. A comparison between the literacy pedagogy of the Anishnabe and Dewey is not meant to "legitimize" Indigenous pedagogy through comparison to an academically recognized philosopher, but to show how understandings of learning in a decolonizing context challenge the ways ideas are attributed to one particular person or culture. There are advanced cultures and advanced understandings of learning that have emerged outside of Western Eurocentric theory that challenge the discourse of discovery and genius. Dewey himself acknowledged that the social contexts that allow men like himself to philosophize is a position of privilege. In this section, I make particular reference to Dewey because he used his privilege to advocate for experienced-based pedagogy that value the whole human experience and support democratic aims.

### **Self-worth and social participation.**

A key question that Dewey addresses in his philosophy is around issues of how humans value and attain a sense of self-worth. For Dewey, self-worth emerges from being a member of a society and recognizing the value of social participation (Dewey, 1891, p.150). However, participating in a community requires conformity to social norms, and in the space of conformity, there is the possibility of realizing freedom or becoming a slave to despotic regimes (Dewey, 1891, p. 151 & 202). Dewey was concerned with the question of how to conform to social norms without inhibiting one's freedom. He concluded that conformity inhibits agency when individuals are passive participants in their social practices; however, when they are fully



conscious of their practice, they become active participants and their conformity to social norms becomes an act of consensus (Dewey, 1929, p. 245). Communities that develop systems of consensus building foster intellectual development, creativity and imagination and support systems of learning that engage the learner in conscious reflection on lived experiences (Dewey, 1929, p. 242).

### **Conscious reflection on experience.**

Dewey's theory of education builds on the idea that learning involves reflecting on educative experiences to develop a conscious understanding of the value of active social participation. Dewey felt that passive social participation confines agency when it limits engagement with human imagination and this occurs when individuals are kept too busy to engage in fancy or reflective inquiry. A life of value that engages imagination is one in which labor is organized around human ceremony: events that allow for rich aesthetic and emotional experiences that provide a sense of a desired end to labor and a space for reflection upon experience (Dewey, 1929, pp. 111 & 216). A reflection on experience involves considering whether or not the action achieved its desired end. And if the end was achieved, it would encourage continuation of the social practice and, if it didn't, it would encourage transformation of social practice in future actions. And so conscious reflection on experience is a key aspect of the learning process (Dewey, 1891, p.3).

For Dewey, to be conscious is to be aware of the likely consequences of participating in an action. Such an awareness, he argues, is more than a process of cognition. It is a process of idealization which he describes as a spiritual process. As he explains,

To be conscious of the impulse is to elevate it from a blind impelling force to an intended or proposed end; and thus, by bringing it before consciousness, both to extend its range and to idealize it, spiritualize it.

(Dewey, 1891, p.34)

The spiritual process of becoming conscious of action and anticipated outcomes allows individuals to take knowledge from their experience and abstract it from its temporal location so the knowledge can be used to contemplate the past, present, and future (Dewey, 1929, p. 328). Moreover, consciousness is a key part of the meaning-making process. The conscious meaning-making process operates over a continuum so that meaning reveals itself and is transformed over time through reflection on previous experiences (Dewey, 1929, p. 338). When individuals do not engage in the spiritual process of bringing things to consciousness, their understanding of experience is narrowed and they do not recognize the value of social participation and freedom. In such circumstances, individuals are susceptible to become slaves to habit and state coercion since such individuals' actions are influenced by habitual beliefs rather than conscious reflection. This leads individuals to follow norms based on belief rather than experience, and so their practice lacks the critical reflective practice required for thoughtful action (Dewey, 1891, p.184; Dewey, 1929, p. 44). As Dewey explains,

We have discovered at last that these ways are set, almost abjectly so, by social factors, by tradition and the influence of education. Thus we discover that we believe many things not because they are so, but because we have become habituated through the weight of authority, by imitation, prestige, instruction, the unconscious effect of language, etc. We learn, in short, that qualities which we

attribute to objects ought to be imputed to our own ways of experiencing them, and that these in turn are due to the force of intercourse and custom. This discovery marks an emancipation; it purifies and remakes the objects of our direct or primary experience.

(Dewey, 1929, p. 44)

Therefore, experience and reflection are key components of knowledge building since they encourage conscious reflection on action.

Critical reflection is required to support the development of deeper consciousness and transformation (Dewey, 1891, p.185) Without critical reflection on the normative values of institutions, one is at risk of passively accepting social practices that privilege certain people over others. As Dewey explains,

Reflective conscience must be based on the moral consciousness expressed in existing institutions, manners and beliefs. Otherwise it is empty and arbitrary. But the existing moral status is never wholly self-consistent. It realizes ideals in one relation which it does not in another; it gives rights to 'aristocrats' which it denies to low-born; to men, which it refuses women; it exempts the rich from obligations which it imposes upon the poor. Its institutions embody a common good which turns out to be good only to a privileged few, and thus existing in self-contradiction.

(Dewey, 1891, p.188)

Therefore, when societies fail to support critical thinking, they construct systems that create the illusion of supporting the needs of all when actually only supporting the needs of a narrow

group of individuals. And so, the process of becoming conscious must integrate experience into the reflection process.

Isolating human experience from the learning process also isolates human interest, the whole life of the individual, and paralyzes the imagination. According to Dewey, this is a form of oppression. As he explains,

...when one neglects the connection of these scientific objects with the affairs of primary experience, the result is a picture of a world of things indifferent to human interests because it is wholly apart from experience. It is more than merely isolated, for it is set in opposition. Hence when it is viewed as fixed and final in itself it is a source of oppression to the heart and paralysis to imagination.

(Dewey, 1929, p. 41)

Dewey critiques traditional philosophers who narrow learning to the cognitive aspects and ignore the primary experience that provides a holistic engagement with learning that is inclusive of the emotional, social and aesthetic as much as mental activity (Dewey, 1929, pp. 49-50, & 240). Moreover, separating experience from the learning process presents a reified reality that is fixed rather than representing the reality of learners as organic, changing and potentially transformative (Stroud, 2011, p. 35).

Dewey believed that because knowledge is developed through reflection and analysis of experience, “the act of knowing is always one of recognizing” (Dewey, 1929, p. 357), that is, meaning-making and knowledge formation are embedded in the process of reflection (Dewey, 1929, pp. 357 & 358). Dewey also argues that recognition is not the same as cognition. As he explains,

But recognition is not cognition. It is what the word implicitly conveys; re-cognition; not in the sense that an act of cognizing is repeated, but in the sense that there is a reminder of the meaning in which a former experience terminated, and which may be used as an acceptable tool in further activities.

(Dewey, 1929, p. 358)

The process of reflecting on educative experience to build a theory also “means the necessity of the introduction of a new order of conceptions leading to new modes of practice” (Downey, 2016, p. 11; Dewey, 1938, p. 5).

Dewey advocates for student-centered learning and inquiry-based approaches that are inclusive of the learners’ personal interests as well as the relation between experience and normative standards (Dewey, 1891, p.13). He believes that these approaches should shape the curriculum to promote deep engagement in rich and relevant learning experiences that promote reflexive thinking (Early & Kendrick, 2017, p. 47). Educators could facilitate experiential-based learning by becoming acquainted with the learner as a whole person with community, physical, historical, economic, occupational and educational resources (Dewey, 1938, p. 40). Supporting experience-based learning requires using resources that are derived from the learner’s ordinary life-experience and to use these resources to expand and elaborate on primary learning experiences to support the development of a skilled and mature person (Dewey, 1938, p. 73-74).

### **Language and communication.**

Dewey describes language as the symbolic incarnation of human experience (Dewey, 1929, p. 112). When human experience is represented in symbolic forms such as language, the

process allows meaning of the experience to be abstracted, heightened and concentrated in a form that is a vital part of the meaning making process (Dewey, 1929, pp. 112-113). The transformation of experience into language allows the individual to interpret the events of their experiences in ways that release and amplify the experience to add quality to the meaning of it (Dewey, 1929, pp. 196, 203, 210 & 225). So language becomes a necessary tool to engage in the reflection process since it provides the individual with a medium to abstract and translate contextually based experiences into symbolic forms for reflection and analysis. Language is also a vital tool for social interaction since it is a medium for building consensus that is developed relationally (Dewey, 1929, pp. 204 & 215). As a tool of social organization, language facilitates divisions of labor and ceremony.

Dewey believes that communication with others is a necessary part of the thought and meaning-making process since dialogue with others encourages reconsideration and revision of one's interpretation of the meanings of experience (Dewey, 1929, p. 196). As Dewey explains, "If we had not talked with others and they with us, we should never talk to and with ourselves" (Dewey, 1929, p. 200). Because communication expands meaning, it is a process that enhances life and illustrates the value of participating in a community to support individual self-worth (Dewey, 1929, p. 204). However, communication can also be used to establish domination (Dewey, 1929, p. 232). To be effective, the forms of communication used by learners need to reflect and develop the forms of communication that pertain to the lived experiences of individuals, so they can be active participants in the meaning making processes.

Dewey was critical of the information and skills orientation to education. This approach focused on transmitting information and skills of the past onto the present through the

development of standards and rules of conduct that encourage habits of conformity and devalue the organic connection between education and the personal experience of the learner (Dewey, 1938, p. 17 & 25). Dewey believed that learning depends on the quality of the experience, specifically whether or not the experience was agreeable to the learner in a way that would encourage further growth in that area of learning (Dewey, 1938, p. 27). Dewey also believed that learning experiences need to be democratic, so they promote accessibility, individual freedom and decency and kindness when engaging in social interactions. To achieve these democratic qualities requires mutual consultation between the educator and the learner where convictions are reached through persuasion (Dewey, 1938, p. 34). Moreover, Dewey believed that “all experience is ultimately social: that it involves contact and communication” (Dewey, 1938, p. 38). What pragmatists offer is a vision of the quality of life that moves beyond narrow definitions of economic productivity. Instead, a pragmatist view advocates for an education that supports the quality of life by facilitating reflection on experiences. An education that promotes conscious reflection on experience widens understandings of the value of social participation and self-worth.

#### **The problem with a presentist application of Dewey’s pedagogy.**

While Dewey’s theory acknowledges the significance of history to add human comment and record to the interpretation of experience (Dewey, 1929, p. 39), the emphasis on action and anticipated outcomes minimizes the role of history in forming experience and shaping action. The notion of organizing experience around action constructs an analytical framework of a history with a fixed beginning (when the action has started) and a fixed end (when the action was completed). This analytical frame can lead to presentist assumptions in the

application of experiential approaches to education that hold the belief that one can focus on the present action and dismiss the baggage that comes with history (Stroud, 2011, p. 18). So for instance, it can lead to a focus on the in-class activity rather than how the in-class activity is in relation to the learner's social history. Recognizing the significance of the learner's history is particularly significant when working with learners who have experienced trauma. As Horsman's research demonstrates, trauma is the reaction to violence. These reactions shape interactions in the present and literacy education often becomes a space where learners continue to react to an incident that occurred in the past and re-presents the violence in a different context. The adult learners' actions are also reactions to the past and reactions are inherited and intergenerational so our actions are also reactions to the lives of our ancestors. It is because of this that we are likely to reproduce actions that advance oppressive social norms rather than transforming these practices to be more democratic. Literacy researchers and educators need to recognize and reflect on the connection between history and reaction, so instead, we recognize the learner as working through their trauma and can engage in practices that are sensitive and supportive. Experiential educator Peter Jarvis believes that it is the educator's responsibility to consider the social past of the learner (Critten, 2016, p.51). Post-colonial literacy theorist Mishra-Tarc also highlights the notion that language "can potentially and violently demean various forms of sentient life" when social historical forces such as colonialism are ignored (Mishra-Tarc, 2015, p. 1).

### **Cognitive Understandings of Literacy Learning**

Many of the participants referred to the cognitive aspects of literacy learning. Cognitive theories of literacy focus on the examination of reading and writing and its role in facilitating



the development of mental processing skills and an extended capacity for abstract thinking. Cognitivist psychologists study how the mind/brain processes information and often use the metaphor of the digital computer as representing the mind/brain (Gee, 2015, p. 62; NRCNA, 2012, p. 54). Cognitive theorists often speak about literacy as a skill that allows for the successful completion of communicative tasks by allowing information to be processed as mental as well as physical representations (Cartwright, 2008, p. 3-4). Cognitive theory is concerned with language acquisition, particularly how habits of mind are suited to deal with complexity and apply knowledge to different contexts (Cartwright, 2008, p.7). So aspects of literacy such as reading and writing are both an instrument of communication and the medium of thinking (Olson, 2016, p. 54; Kolinsky, 2015, p. 388).

#### **Literacy as a visual and phonological process.**

In the case of learning to read and write English, the process of becoming literate is both a visual and phonological process (Kolinsky, 2015, p. 389). Cognitive theorists tend to focus on reading theories and methodologies. There are four main reading strategies that have emerged from the cognitive sciences: the phonics approach, the whole word method, the whole language approach, and the holistic approach. The phonics approach emphasizes the decoding process of literacy (Cunningham, & O'Donnell, 2015, p. 448; Treiman & Pollatsek, 2015, pp. 5-6; NRCNA, 2012, p. 33). Phonics theorists argue that the best way to teach reading is through direct instruction of the alphabetic principle, the connection between the letter and the sound it represents (Cunningham, & O'Donnell, 2015, p. 449). Assessment of reading involves assessing phonological awareness, print knowledge, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension and morphology (Cunningham, & O'Donnell, 2015, p. 451). The second reading strategy is the whole

word method. This method involves encouraging the learner to memorize the pronunciation of an entire word rather than attempting to sound it out (Treiman & Pollatsek, 2015, p. 5). Sight words are used to illustrate the pattern of letter-sound correspondence (NRCNA, 2012, p. 34). The third reading strategy is the whole language approach. The whole language approach focuses on reading for meaning and emphasizes the relation between learning and speaking (Treiman & Pollatsek, 2015, p. 5). Teaching strategies include immersing learners with print rather than using analytical approaches to engage in print text (Cunningham, & O'Donnell, 2015, p. 448).

The final strategy is the holistic approach. It emphasizes that reading is a means of gaining knowledge of the world, oneself and others. It involves helping the learner become more cognizant of their mental and emotional processes, including how emotional aspects of learning that are associated with one's self-esteem and self-concept (Habrat, 2013, pp. 241-242). Cognitive theorists such as Habrat emphasize the connection between language learning and self-concept: the tendency to maintain a positive belief about oneself (Habrat, 2013, p. 244). Self-esteem and self-confidence have an interdependent relationship to one's self-concept (Habrat, 2013, p. 245). She argues that self-esteem is developed when learner aspirations are balanced with achievement (Habrat, 2013, p. 245), and when the learner understands the impact of language on one's self-concept (Habrat, 2013, p. 246) Low self-esteem can create barriers to literacy learning since it diminishes the learner's willingness to take learning risks and work in groups or work independently (Habrat, 2013, pp. 248-249). Habrat believes that educators can support the building of a positive self-concept if they help learners establish short term realistic goals that ensure opportunities for success, help learners build a sense of

security, and boost students sense of identity through acceptance and recognition of the value of the learner as a member of the learning group (Habrat, 2013, pp. 250- 251).

### **Literacy and thought.**

Cognitive theorist focus on adult literacy learning in relation to the development of post-formal thought. Sinnot describes postformal thought as “complex logical thinking that develops in adulthood when we interact with other people whose views about some aspects of reality are different from our own” (Sinnot, 2008, p. 62). The development of this thought process occurs when the adult has the opportunity to engage in new learning experiences. It is in the realm of post-formal thought that the learner begins to recognize how one’s understanding of reality and the meaning of events are co-created and that “Both objectivity and subjectivity are useful in our epistemological understanding of the world” (Sinnot, 2008, p. 62). So, “‘truth’ is partially created by the one who is knowing it” (Sinnot, 2008, p. 62). Since adults have an embedded desire for felt connections with others, tasks that meet their social and emotional needs are more likely to determine whether they will continue learning (Sinnot, 2008, p. 42). Sinnot believes that to successfully teach adults, educators need to develop less rigid learning institutions and treat learners like adults by capitalizing on their individuality, replacing competition with team learning, and discussing the way learners creatively synthesize and organize information using visual and kinesthetic representational styles (Sinnot, 2008, p. 53). Given that adults live in complex worlds that are intersected with work, family, and civic engagement, instruction needs to be developed towards their wider goals to establish complex relations with their society (NRCNA, 2012, p. 109).

### **The role of digital technology in literacy cognition.**

For cognitive researchers, the challenge posed by digital technology is that information is no longer being filtered by librarian teachers and publishers before being presented to its audience (Goldman & Snow, 2015, p. 463). This has transformed the work place by increasing the demand for individuals who can analyze, synthesize and evaluate information. These skill sets are usually developed in a post-secondary institution (Goldman & Snow, 2015, p. 463). Skills have also been transformed with the use of computers. For instance, the conventional notion of comprehension has been transformed so that instead of the emphasis being on locating and identifying facts, combining explicitly stated ideas, and making simple inferences from single sources, the new skills of the digital age require the reader to analyze, interpret, integrate, critique and evaluate information within a single or across multiple sources of information (Goldman & Snow, 2015, pp. 463-464).

### **The problem with a focus on cognition.**

The main critique of cognitive theory is that it focuses too narrowly on mental processing when literacy education is embedded in social relations and experiences. Literacy historian Graff argues that cognitive theory often conceptualizes literacy in simplistic and reductive terms. It attempts to rarify literacy as an artefact rather than recognize the dynamic social and cultural influences that transform literacy practices. Instead, cognitive research in literacy aims to develop generalizations that can be uncritically applied to large groups of people (Graff, 2011, p. 114). Critten also criticizes the cognitive assumption that literacy can be taught as a series of discrete and observable skills because it assumes individuals process things logically and underestimates how social, emotional and environmental influences affect how

information is processed (Critten, 2016, p. 3). Moreover, cognitive theorists often speak about literacy as a transferrable skill set, but it is a challenge for researchers to follow how the skill might be used or reconstructed for new purposes and goals in different contexts (Conely, 2008). The *New Literacies* theorists argue that the cognitive model is inadequate because it narrowly assumes that reading and writing will lead to higher order thinking and underestimates how non-reading and writing activities facilitate higher order thinking (Street, 2006, p. 9). It is no surprise that the literacy theorists tend not to adopt an explicitly cognitive focus when developing a framework for understanding literacy. Instead, theorists like Vygotsky develop socio-cognitive frameworks. The socio-cognitive orientation conceptualizes literacy as a form of cognition that “cannot be understood fully apart from the contexts in which it develops (NRCNA, 2012, p. 25). So the development of reading and writing depends on context and is influenced by the values of the community and broader society of the learner (NRCNA, 2012, p. 25). Vygotsky is an example of a socio-cognitive theorist since he focuses on how language is less a neurological activity and how it is used as a means to master cultural and social practices (Olson, 2016, p. 52; Fleming, Rene, Bangou, & Sarwar, 2015).

Academics such as Smythe cautioned against cognitive-focused approaches to theorizing digital literacy education as such conceptions tend to advance linear perspectives of digital literacy as a skill that requires the development of prerequisite literacy skills. This perspective creates access barriers to digital literacy learning opportunities by creating the impression that print-based literacy needs to be mastered before introducing learners to digital technology. The linear skills-based model also advances accountability policies that focus on “rapid progress” of print-based literacy skills while underestimating the value of “slow learning”

that allows for the diversity of skills that facilitate deeper digital literacy learning opportunities that are more relevant to the learner's experiences (Smythe, 2013, p. 8 & 19). Smythe highlights the importance of conceptualizing digital literacy as intertwined with literacy education so it places "new demands on people's communicative repertoires that build upon conventions of a still-vital traditional print culture" (Smythe, 2013, p.8).

Another criticism of cognitive theory is that it tends to reproduce colonial narratives and understandings of how the mind works. This process is destructive as it works to disenfranchise indigenous literacy practices in return for colonial literacy practices that "lacks familiarity with the context and culture of its learners" (Odora Hoppers, 2015, p. 99), As indigenous activist Yerxa describes,

Colonialism, as I have been forced to discover, is like a cancer. But instead of the cells in your body betraying itself, the thoughts in your mind work against you and eat you up from the inside out. You're like the walking dead and you don't even know it because you are so blinded.

(Yerxa, J, 2014, p. 138)

Indigenous ally and settler activist Whitty argues that Indigenous peoples and allies are in the process of working through understandings of how the mind works in ways that take into account transnational and transcultural experiences. To do so requires an unsettling of dominant social narratives and the formation of mutually beneficial relations (Whitty, 2017, p. 18). According to Whitty, this will require individuals to take apart the damage-centred practices and develop practices that include localized narratives, new pedagogies and desire-centred narratives (Whitty, 2017, p. 18). Anti-colonial literacy theorist Mishra-Tarc argues that

literacy systemizes thought and being and radically determines our limits and possibilities of thinking and communicating with others (Mishra-Tarc, 2015, p. 10) and she believes that we need to provide a deeper examination of the relational pedagogical practice that renew dominant forms of language that are oppressive and how it affects how we recognize and interpret what we read (Mishra-Tarc, 2015, p. 5 & 10). Education philosophers such as Odora Hoppers speaks to a need for “cognitive justice” in education which demands for the right for different forms of knowledge to be created and sustained “turning the toxic hierarchy left by colonialism into a circle (Visvanathan, 1997, 2000) in which the inner cry for self-determination meets the outer voice of co-determination” (Odora Hoppers, 2015, p. 98).

### **Literacy as Social Practice.**

For the most part, the socio-cultural theorists conceptualize literacy as social practices that are situated in specific historical and cultural communities. Socio-cultural viewpoints look at knowledge and learning in terms of relationships between individuals and in terms of the physical, social, cultural and technological environments through which individuals interact with others. However, the field of socio-cultural theory is wide and diverse. Some theories emerge as a critique of previous theories and socio-cultural theorists will often situate their work in ways that integrate multiple socio-cultural understandings of literacy. To demonstrate the significant differences in positions within the field, I have organized the review into six main sections that illustrate different dimensions of socio-cultural theory including functionalist understandings of literacy, literacy as a situated practice, ethnographic approaches to understanding literacy, the New Literacies Studies (NLS) perspective, multiliteracies pedagogical perspectives, and advocacy for a critical literacy pedagogy. An understanding of the different

dimensions of socio-cultural theory allow for a better understanding of the diversity of approaches educators draw from when conceptualizing literacy and integrating these perspectives into their practice.

### **Functionalist definition of literacy.**

The functionalist theory of literacy that was popularized in the 1950's defines literacy as the knowledge and skill to read and write in order to engage in the activities of a particular culture or group (Knobel & Lankshear, 2011, p. 6). Knobel and Lankshear argue that a functionalist model of literacy is problematic since it does not focus on enriching the individual's mind, advancing positive self-expression, or promoting leadership of one's life; instead, the functionalist model reproduces passive ways of coping with the challenges of one's life (Knobel & Lankshear, 2011, p. 7). Knobel and Lankshear argue that functionalist literacy theorists are "politically naïve" or "willfully perverse" since they hold up the false claim that education will result in employment. This false claim leads functionalist theorists to make arguments that greater investments need to be made into education rather than confront the economic reality of employment shortages, and technology's role in replacing human labor opportunities (Knobel & Lankshear, 2011, pp. 9-11). So, while the mass literacy movement is raising literacy rates, it is not addressing social inequalities (Knobel & Lankshear, 2011, p. 11). Indeed, sociological philosophers such as Bourdieu argue that a functionalist definition of education ignores an understanding of how education systems stratify unequal social relations by reproducing literacy practices that privilege the cultural capital of the elite (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243). Knobel and Lankshear assert that functional literacy will not support heightened self-esteem; instead, it is only when the individual begins to question their relation to the world and



engage in critical literacy practices that self-perceptions can be transformed (Knobel & Lankshear, 2011, p. 11). They believe that under the guise of being a strategy of empowerment and a solution to unemployment, a functional literacy proficiency regime is being used to replicate social relations of schooling that support an oppressive division of labour that demeans the self-esteem of the individual by correlating social-class identification with capitalist constructions of job adequacy. In such a regime, learners have limited control over the educational process. Overall, functional literacy critics argue that this model of literacy practice focuses on controlling human behavior and limiting human agency for economic ends that has limited benefits for the learner (Enright, 2013, p. 27; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011, pp. 12 & 124).

As is the case in the LBS program, adult literacy education is usually associated with the education of a workforce. Deborah Brandt is one of the key theorists who has researched the connection between literacy and labour. Brandt theorizes how literacy is used as a means of economic productivity where reading and writing are valued as products and production processes. She argues that while the movement to mass literacy has been used to promote political participation and upward mobility, it has also been used as a means of social stratification to deny individuals of meaningful opportunities and to devalue their labour through the use of bureaucratically controlled testing systems (Brandt, 2001, p. 2). Lankshear and Knobel as well as Freire and Macedo argue that the use of these bureaucratic testing systems advances a techno-rationalist understandings of literacy education. A techno-rationalist view of literacy education reduces human goals to measurable and observable outcomes that are converted into quantitative data to evaluate the cost-benefits of programs

(Lankshear & Knobel, 2011, pp. 128-129; Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 113). Lankshear and Knobel argue that such a view focuses on the program's return on investment, specifically whether or not the individual's participation in the program leads to economic productivity. They argue that the techno-rationalist view encourages educators to focus on economic priorities over issues of equity (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011, p. 129).

Another aspect of the employment orientation to literacy is the concept of human capital. Brandt defines human capital as "the ways that individuals and companies invest in and profit by the development of intellectual capacities" (Brandt, 2001, p. 6). The IALS researchers perceive literacy as a form of human capital. They argue that achieving a level three on the IALS is a predictor of an individual's capacity to access systems of social mobility, be competitive in a global economy, and contribute to democratic systems of government (Culture, Tourism and the Centre for Education Statistics, 2011, p. 17, 44; Graff, 2011, p. 120; Grenier et al., 2008, p. 17). The government perceives literacy education as the means to contain rising social inequalities created by the knowledge-based economy where high level skills have become the main source of human capital (Grenier et al., 2008, p. 18). Individuals who do not have a level three on the IALS are perceived as having deficits that will make them less able to take advantage of formal educational opportunities, social mobility, and social well-being (Grenier et al., 2008, p. 21). Indeed, the purpose of the IALS was to provide information that can be used to develop policy for improving the human capital of individuals so as to maintain or increase the nation's economic competitiveness (Darcovich, 2000, p. 374).

Human capital is not the same as the cultural or linguistic capital that is associated with Pierre Bourdieu's theory of schooling as cultural reproduction. For Bourdieu, education aims to

reproduce social inequities by arbitrarily privileging the values and language of the dominant classes (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, pp. 30, 93, 115-117). These privileged values and language practices are used as gatekeepers for social mobility. As a result, when members of the dominant class go to school, the school system recognizes the knowledge and experiences of the ruling class while negating the experiences and knowledge of the subordinated classes. This leads the subordinate class to be seen as having deficits and makes them more likely to fail in the schooling system. Bourdieu illustrated this by doing a correlative analysis of statistics of academic achievement of students attending school in France (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, pp. 31-40). Essentially, while Bourdieu used statistical correlations to demonstrate the inequities reproduced by the schooling system, human capital theory uses statistical correlations to demonstrate the deficits of individuals and the need to support more adult literacy programming. Current social theorists, such as Heller (2008), have applied Bourdieu's concepts of cultural reproduction to illustrate how the OECD's conceptualizes literacy as a valued resource, to uphold the meritocratic myth of access and mobility, and to provide sites for the reproduction of relations of power of capitalists economic practices (Heller, 2008, pp. 50-51). Compton-Lily and Nayan (2016) use Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction to further critique how human capital theory devises policy and program frameworks that privilege certain languages over others. They argue that such frameworks are forms of symbolic violence as those who have a minority language are often expected to "jettison cultural ways of being in favor of official visions of literacy and school success" (Compton-Lilly & Nayan, 2016, p. 192). And so human capital is not simply the skills and knowledge necessary to compete in a global economy but represents "the ways particular groups of people and individuals are favored

within particular social and economic contexts” (Compton-Lilly & Nayan, 2016, p. 192). The use of human capital frameworks makes it possible to explain why some are able to achieve academic success more than others (Compton-Lilly & Nayan, 2016, p. 192). Enright argues that “Human capital theory profanes human existence by surrendering all aspects of life to the unremitting logic of capital” and is a form of neo-liberalism (Enright, 2013, p. 21). Enright argues that human capital approaches to education are dehumanizing since they mechanize human processes for the purpose of generating profit for others by privileging systems of education that devalue labour (Enright, 2013, pp. 26 & 27).

### **Situated practice.**

The socio-cultural perspective on literacy often stems from sociocultural theories of learning. For instance, academics who refer to literacy as a situated practice often reference Lave and Wenger (2011), who argue that learning happens when participating in socio-cultural practices (Lave & Wenger, 2011, pp. 29, 31, 54). From this perspective, the learner needs to have a sense of belonging to a community of practice, and the more intensive the participation in the activity, the more empowered the learner will feel. Thus, learning is primarily a social rather than a cognitive practice (Lave & Wenger, 2011, p. 43). Lave and Wagner argue that knowledge and learning are relational: knowledge has power that is related to specific circumstances where knowledge and understanding are developed through participation, and meaning is developed through negotiation with others (Lave & Wenger, 2011, p. 33). As a result, knowledge and skills learned in a community of practice cannot be easily transferred to a different context. Their notion that learning is situated in a community of practice leads Lave and Wenger to critique the practice of learning in schools, since schooling works on the

assumption that knowledge is independent of context (Lave & Wenger, 2011, p. 40). Socio-cultural researchers in the field of literacy often explore learning environments outside of school. They raise concerns around research into pedagogical structures or intentional instruction rather than social practice itself. They argue that pedagogical intentions are not always connected to the learning or perceived learning that occurs in the classroom and that the assumption they are connected prevents researchers from exploring the possibility of mismatches and conflicts between the practitioner's viewpoint and what is actually happening in the learning environment (Lave & Wenger, 2011, p. 113). While social literacy theorists often borrow from the ideas of Lave and Wagner to develop a situated literacy approach, some still find gaps in the framework. For instance, Street raises a concern that the situated literacy approach does not give sufficient recognition to the particular literacy that comes from outside the community of practice (Street, 2006, p. 16). It also underestimates the cognitive processes that allow the individual to abstract knowledge and skills from one context and transfer it to other contexts. Olsen's critique of socio-cultural theories of literacy is that the theory subordinates writing to a social practice and insists that all literacy practices are local: "Hence the study of language development, logical development and rationality often proceed without due attention to the significance of writing and the role played by the written tradition in the formation of the modern mind" (Olson, 2016, p. 40). Heller and McElhinney also criticize socio-cultural approaches to literacy for focusing on treating the literacy practices of certain groups as bounded and isolated rather than exploring its development and transfer to different contexts (Heller & McElhinney, 2017, p. 6).

### **Ethnographic approaches.**

The ethnographic perspective on literacy focuses on the everyday meanings of literacy practices inside and outside of formal schooling (Street, 2006, p. 13). These researchers tend to engage in more qualitative research. Interestingly, classroom ethnography became a prominent approach to researching literacy since it provides thick descriptions of what is happening in the classroom in ways that emphasize social and cultural processes. This approach has provided a radical shift away from a techno-rationalist view that focuses on product-oriented perspectives of literacy as a measurable skill. Ethnographic approaches emphasize the subjectivity of literacy skills and knowledge developed in various contexts. These qualitative forms of research, however, have been criticized because they often do not explicitly demonstrate how their findings might be applied to support practical work nor do they justify government spending on adult literacy programs (Street, 2006, pp. 15 & 47). Ethnographic research challenges the very idea of educating adults in formal schools, standardized curriculums, and that literacy proficiency can be measured quantitatively. Indeed, many cultural researchers and theorists argue that formal institutionalized forms of literacy education are in opposition to the ways adults learn. Rogers and Udin (2005), who do ethnographic research on literacy learning in non-western countries, argue against formal curriculum-based literacy education programs since adults learn from their own experiences. In this sense, personalized apprenticeship-based learning is more appropriate than standardized academic learning (Roger & Udin, 2005, p. 237). Roger and Udin argue that adults learn what they want to learn, when they want to learn it, and their learning goals are so specific that they cannot be generalized in a set curriculum (Rogers & Udin, 2005, p. 245). They also suggest that, while it is important to recognize the contexts that

learning is situated in, in addition, we must recognize how much and what an individual learns depends on the personal choices of the adult learner (Rogers & Udin, 2005, pp. 237, 248). Like most cultural theorists, they argue that holistic approaches to text should be adopted rather than presenting reading and writing in decontextualized forms.

*Literacy Lives in America* researcher, Brandt acknowledges the importance of having ethnographic understandings of literacy for expanding understandings of how context and culture shape literacy learning (Brandt, 2001, pp. 7 &8). The work of ethnographic researchers has also invited an interrogation of how literacy practices facilitate the “maintenance of racism, sexism, and other undemocratic interests” (Brandt, 2001, p. 8). However, as she explains, the problem with the focus on ethnographic approaches to understanding literacy is that

Ethnographic descriptions do not often speak directly enough and in a sustained way to the histories by which literacy practices arrive or do not arrive in local contexts, flourish or not in certain times and locales. Nor do they often invite a search for the interests beyond those of the local users that hold literacy practices in place, give them their meaning, or take them away. Nor do they often fully address the mixed motives, antipathies, and ambivalence with which so much literacy is learned and practiced.

(Brandt, 2001, p. 9)

And so, Brant developed a contextualized approach to researching literacy that involved completing comparative analyses of individual’s life history and literacy practices in relation to social forces that influence the way literacy learning is practiced.

Some ethnographic literacy researchers focus on site-based ethnographic research such as Smythe who examines publically accessible digital literacy environments to explore how digital literacy is transforming literacy practices and shaping the quality of access to employment services and literacy learning opportunities. She found that as a society, we tend to be groomed for a corporate “clicking” digital culture that focuses on consumption over creativity. This encourages surface level learning and minimal critical engagement in how gender and class identities are negotiated and encourages passive literacy learning practices (Smythe, 2013, p.22). Smythe is particularly concerned with how digital culture is producing automation tools that require adult literacy learners to have to navigate new forms of bureaucracy that eliminates the labour and support that used to be provided by frontline service workers (Smythe, 2018, pp. 198-199). The assumption that computers can replace labour underestimates the increase in the cognitive labour that is shifted onto the individual who is trying to access government services, and as a result the automation of labour has devalued the cognitive labour that is required when using digital tools (Smythe, 2018, 208). Smythe also speaks to the significance of recognizing how these technologies are reshaping human activity in ways that “serve the techno-capitalist interests of the few” (Smythe, 2018, 210). In her research she completed with Breshears, Smythe argues that no pedagogy towards digital literacy should treat digital resources as neutral but recognize how these resources shape access to services and learning opportunities (Smythe & Breshears, 2017, p. 71).

### **New Literacies Studies.**

New Literacies Studies (NLS) theorists believe that literacy can never be taught in isolation from its social impacts: the process of becoming literate is always linked to a process



of communicating values, assumptions, habits, traditions, and prejudices (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011, p. 23). Socio-cultural researchers such as Lankshear and Knobel defined literacy as “an active inductor into a system of political and social values” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011, p. 23). While this can allow for oppressive neo-liberal, patriarchal and colonial perspectives to be reproduced, there is also a space to invite the teaching of anti-oppressive values that work towards “breaking down privilege, gross exploitation and oppression, and replacing these realities with the pursuit of social justice” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011, pp. 23 & 24). For Lankshear and Knobel a socially just society is one where the voice of each person is heard, and the right of each person to live up to their full potential and to live with dignity is honored (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011, pp. 23 & 24). One way that literacy educators can support the process of building a just society is by adopting reader response approaches to learning that challenge the notion of an authoritative interpretation of text through the exploration of multiple interpretations of different readers (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011, p. 62).

Graff provides a critique of NLS approaches to research arguing that the socio-cultural focus of NLS could be enhanced with more attention to the historical contexts in which literacy perspectives developed and their development over time (Graff, 2011, p. 116). Graff’s essay on the role of literacy education in 20th century Ontario shows that the acquisition of literacy does not lead to significant gains but instead reproduces social stratification of working class and ethnic minorities (Gee, 2015, pp. 40-41; Graff & Duffy, 2011, p. 38). He argues that the idea that adult literacy education is benevolent to the individual and the idea that there are universal norms for reading and writing are myths used to perpetuate the westernization of culture (Graff, 2011, p. 113; Graff & Duffy, 2011, p. 45). These myths of the benevolence of literacy

education reflect the desire to end poverty, elevate human dignity, and foster a just and democratic world, none of which are inherently *bad* ideas. However, treating literacy as the cure for all social ills obscures the causes of social and economic inequities by attributing them to the illiteracy of marginalized people (Graff & Duffy, 2011, p. 35). Graff's historical analysis shows that literacy education movements were about social control rather than intellectual growth: instead of providing education that would support the lofty claims of the literacy myths, the focus of literacy education was to make workers and minorities accept inequitable positions in the large scale development of commercial and industrial capitalism (Graff & Duffy, 2011, pp. 38, 43). Heller and McElhinny concur with Duffy and Graff's perspective that literacy theory needs to provide a better engagement with the historically situated contexts of literacy practices. As they explain,

ideas about language play a central role in the making of social difference and social inequality. Our starting point is our present and future: we are looking for ways to understand what is happening around us now, and to develop the tools we need in order to pass that we need to go first to the past, in order to understand how it came to pass that we have inherited both the specific conceptual tools and the conditions that make us want to use and refine them, or possibly pick up or make new tools altogether. (Heller & McElhinny, 2017, p. 2)

As they explain, historical understandings provide a wider understanding of the tools that are inherited and how those tools shape literacy practice and whether or not the tools need to be transformed.

A focus on social interactions can also cause the educator to underestimate the significance of environmental interactions in the learning process. Indigenous writers often speak about the need to repair the *broken circle* by re-engaging the connection to land and identity. The connection to land and identity is expressed by Indigenous writer McMahan who explains,

I was Anishinaabe. I had the connection he spoke of. I was raised in the bush. I was raised hunting and fishing. I was taught how to subsist off the bounty and beauty of Mother Earth. Finally, I connected with “being Anishinaabe.” I couldn’t dance a crow-hop but I could shoot the moose needed to make the drum to sing one. My connection and reconnection to the land is what makes me Anishinaabe. It guides me. It teaches me. Today, when in need I turn to my bundle, my pipe, my drums, my medicines, which all come from the land and without my bundle, I am nothing.

Without land I am not Anishinaabe. (McMahan, 2014, p. 141)

For McMahan, the connection between land and identity is integral to connecting with community. It provides the resources that allows him to build the tools to participate in his society and allows him to walk back into his social circle “with values and understanding what it means to be a man, a father, a husband, a son, and a contributing member to the larger conversation” (McMahan, 2014, p. 141).

### **Multiliteracies pedagogy.**

Multiliteracies theorists argue that technology is bringing together innovations in communication and social interactions to form new ways of human meaning-making.

Multiliteracies theorists argue that technology has transformed traditional literacy practices so

that communication is increasingly multimodal and “a new regime of social power” (Kalantzis & Cope, 2015, p. 17) as well as “new structures of agency” (Kalantzis & Cope, 2015, p. 17) are emerging from these new meaning-making processes (Kalantzis & Cope, 2015, p. 17; Darvin & Norton, 2017, p. 89). Given the new meaning-making regimes, pedagogical approaches to teaching literacy need to draw “on students’ experiences of meaning-making from various contexts” (Early & Kendrick, 2017, p. 44), require overt instructional approaches, critical framing and transformative pedagogical practices. In this new regime, “educators are viewed as designers of learning processes and learning environments” (Early & Kendrick, 2017, p. 45). The role of the educator is to help learners re-contextualize the texts that they are reading and to help learners develop a metalanguage when engaging in reading.

Multiliteracies theories also have implications for research into literacy practices. Because literacy learning contexts are increasingly multimodal, literacy practices can no longer be studied as closed homogenous spheres but need to be explored as transcultural spaces that are characterized by a mixing of cultures “facilitated by migratory processes, communication systems, and economic interdependencies” (Darvin & Norton, 2017, p. 90). Multiliteracies theorists such as Darvin and Norton argue that the new regime for social interaction also fosters social fragmentation and isolation where humans are finding themselves confined by computers and ushered into private spaces (Darvin & Norton, 2017, p. 90). It is a space they refer to as *networked individualism*, “where people are linked by scheduling, monitoring, surveillance and regulation” (Darvin & Norton, 2017, p. 90). The information they receive via their social network devices are tailored to their preferences and, as a consequence, public knowledge is undermined by private perspective (Darvin & Norton, 2017, p. 90). So the skills

and resources that learners need to discover truth are far more complex and challenging. Skills that are necessary to be an active citizen include understanding how information is created, organized, distributed, and accessed” (Downey, 2016, p. 13). The new regime of digital social interaction is not evenly distributed and inclusive, thus creating technological inequality (Downey, 2016, p. 13). Theorists such as Downey argue that historical models of literacy need to consider how knowledge is socially constructed through traditional and contemporary literacy practices (Downey, 2016, p. 17). Moreover, learners need to be taught “to evaluate for credibility, and quality and to ask questions and critically reflect on the books, articles, and websites that they read” (Downey, 2016, p. 17).

#### **Critical pedagogy for literacy learning.**

Critical pedagogy is an approach to education that focuses on the vocation to be human and the recognition of the historical reality of dehumanization through systems of oppression (Freire, 1970, p.43). In his writing, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire argues individuals are not conscious of their oppression because they see themselves individualistically in relation to the ideal represented by the oppressor and have little awareness of their relation to belonging to a group with shared experiences of oppression (Freire, 1970, p.48). Freire refers to Albert Memmi’s notion of a “colonized mentality” to refer to the oppressed desire to be peers of the oppressors. Those that react against the violence of the oppressors are unfairly characterized as “savages” and their practices are characterized as “barbaric” (Freire, 1970, p.48). The idealization of the oppressor and dehumanization of the oppressed stems from the alienation of participation in conscious thought processes (Freire, 1970, p.62). To transform dehumanizing practices, educators need to develop systems of education that are focused on humanizing

pedagogies that recognize the creative nature of human beings and encourage praxis: actions that are a result of reflection on the world and how to transform it through labor (Freire, 1970, pp. 124 & 145). A humanizing pedagogy for the oppressed means recognizing that humans are communicative creatures and respecting this involves engaging in dialogue about action rather than dictating it (Freire, 1970, pp. 124 & 137). Freire believes that a humanizing pedagogy is one where the oppressed have an active role in the construction of the education program (Freire, 1970, p. 124).

Literacy education as a critical practice focuses on actively using reading, writing, and other forms of communication to “analyze, critique, and transform the norms, and rule systems” (Luke, 2014, p. 20). The aim of critical literacy is social justice through the transformation of dominant ideologies, cultures, economic institutions and political systems (Luke, 2014, p. 22). The work of critical literacy learners involves an analysis of dominant ideologies, inclusion of the perspectives of traditionally marginalized groups, and engagement in text construction, and the reconstruction of social and material relations in everyday cultural and political life (Luke, 2014, p. 23; Pandya, 2014, p. 161). Critical literacy educators reject highly structured competency based curriculums and skill conceptions of literacy that perceive failure as a deficit of the learner (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 121). They also criticize standard tests that are used to evaluate the learner’s language proficiency and autonomous concepts of literacy that emphasize decoding written language disconnected from context (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 29). They argue that oppressive pedagogical approaches to teaching literacy negate the histories, the cultures and the day-to-day experiences of subordinated populations by privileging the codes of meaning of the dominant population (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p.

121). The privileging of certain codes of meaning is reproduced through the banking model of learning. Such an approach to learning is insensitive to the knowledge and experiences the learner brings to the classroom and instead treats the learner as a container into which the teacher deposits delivered content. This content often represents the values and perspectives of the oppressor and is presented in a way that makes it seem rarefied and abstract. So, in a banking model framework, learning is a transaction where the teacher deposits knowledge in the learner and withdraws it in the form of testing. The knowledge deposited in the subordinated individuals is of little value to them since they are not given the opportunity to consider the content in relation to their reality. As a result, subordinated populations continue to fail in schooling systems that support the banking model. For literacy education to be emancipatory, it must help the learner to be literate in his or her own history, experiences and culture and recognize and transcend the dominant codes and culture that work to negate and marginalize the experiences of subordinated people (Freire & Macedo, 1987, pp. 35, 37; Taylor, Quigley, Kajganich, & Kraglund-Gauthier, 2011).

In Freire and Macedo's book, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (1987), Freire outlines the pedagogical approaches necessary to promote adult literacy with an emancipatory agenda that concerns itself with the vocation of being human. First, he suggests that teaching adults to read and write should be recognized as a political and a creative act (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 34). Critical pedagogy should stimulate creativity and risk-taking by valuing what the learner brings to the classroom and encourage the subjectivity of individual expression (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 57). Second, what is read and written should come directly from the world of the learners (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 35). This should be done in ways that help the

student to develop a positive self-image about how they conceptualize reality, and this must be done before exposing the student to dominant discourses (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 128).

Third, the critical educator should educate students about the dominant culture and its codes to foster awareness of how these structures reproduce inequities. It is also important to recognize that Freire doesn't treat theory as something that is static and abstract. For Freire, critical pedagogy emerges from the reflection on practices that are situated in specific learning contexts. When theory is applied to context it becomes open for reinvention (Freire & Macedo, 1987, pp. 62, 135). As a result, Freire did not necessarily see his emancipatory literacy as the final word on the subject but as a working theory that can be improved upon through reflexive practice.

While Freire's approach was developed from working with indigenous and farm labor communities in the second half of the twentieth century, Allan Luke has further developed the theorizing of critical literacy to address western cultures whose literacy practices are being transformed through the use of digital technologies that are increasingly engaging individuals in global literacy practices. Luke argues that in North American contexts there is a power struggle over how information is interpreted (Luke, 2014, p. 20). In digital contexts the construction of text is a malleable human technology that is open to re-invention and reshaping for particular cultural and social purposes (Luke, 2014, p. 21 & 22). Critical literacy in a digital context involves the use of technology and media to analyze, critique, and transform norms, rule systems and practices that govern institutional practices (Luke, 2014, pp. 21 & 27). Critical literacy pedagogy for digital contexts also involves teaching the learner to engage in analyzing normative texts to identify its ideological and hegemonic functions (Luke, 2014, p. 27).



The main criticism of critical or emancipatory approaches to literacy is that there is a lack of empirical evidence that equates critical pedagogy with the emancipation of marginalized members of society (Taylor et al., 2011). Indeed, Freire points out the challenges of doing research to evaluate the success of critical pedagogical approaches by making reference to his work in Guinea-Bissau. One challenge Macedo points out in evaluating the effectiveness of critical pedagogy is that one can't use technocratic rationalist evaluations (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 113). Freire suggests that one way he would evaluate the success of literacy programs is to ask and discuss with the stakeholders whether his involvement has had any significance for the educators or the education program (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 114). Thus an approach to theorizing literacy within a given context requires a reflection on practice and dialogue with program stakeholders.

Rosario-Ramos and Johnson (2014) argue that critical literacy should encourage the critique of social structures that support inequality and engage the learners in the social practices that engage the history, cultural life and practices of the learners' communities (Rosario-Ramos & Johnson, 2014, p. 114). They also advocate for community-based classrooms that engage learners in counter story-telling: the telling of stories from the perspectives of people on the margins "as a way of challenging inequalities in their social worlds and of enacting social change" (Rosario-Ramos & Johnson, 2014, p. 113). Mills argues that "Critical approaches to literacy aim to disrupt hegemonic discourses about what counts as literacy and for whom" (Mills, 2016, p. 41). She argues that there are key concepts that need to be associated with a critical literacy pedagogy. The first is an understanding of domination and privilege. The second is ideology and how meaning making processes support forms of domination (Mills, 2016, pp.

43 & 44). The third concept is oppression and how education reproduces oppression by providing inadequate forms of education for certain groups (Mills, 2016, p. 45). And the last concept is agency which she defines as “the ability to shape and control one’s life, free from the power or hold of oppression” (Mills, 2016, p. 45). She also adds that it is important for educators to understand that many critical theorists do not believe that literacy learning guarantees economic freedom especially if the learner is unable to gain a reflexive understanding of the social circumstances and historical traditions that influence the practice (Mills, 2016, p. 51). She also argues that a critical orientation towards education is not easy “since educational systems and institutions are primarily establishments of cultural reproduction” (Mills, 2016, p. 57).

This dissertation examines how educators conceptualize literacy in relation to the multiple frameworks presented in policy, scholarly research and literacy theory. This theoretical review demonstrates the three main theoretical orientations that influence policy, research, programming and practice in Ontario. Given the diversity of theoretical orientations that can be drawn upon to conceptualize literacy, this dissertation explores how the concepts and contexts work together to inform the practice of adult educators in Ontario. In the next chapter, I present the methodology that was developed to collect and analyze data to investigate how educators conceptualize literacy.

## Chapter 4: Method

As a former LBS educator, I initially selected my topic in order to learn more about adult literacy programming in Ontario to become a more effective educator. After engaging in a review of policy, scholarly literature and theory, I began to recognize how conceptualizations of literacy determine our understandings of the effectiveness and value of literacy education and practice. I became interested in the diversity of perspectives on the topic and the competing disciplinary perspectives that educators might consider when engaging in practice. *Given the diverse approaches to conceptualizing literacy as explored in policy and research, my research seeks to investigate, how adult literacy educators conceptualize literacy and how these views inform their practice.* To answer these questions, I completed a qualitative inquiry.

This qualitative inquiry involved using inductive and holistic methods for gathering information that allowed me to construct thick descriptions of how LBS educators conceptualize literacy and allowed me to investigate a diverse set of practices and perspectives of adult educators in Ontario. It focuses on addressing the specific teaching contexts in relation to other pedagogical perceptions and literacy practices. Investigating instructors in relation to their professional environment is important because it accounts for many of the social, economic and political dynamics that influence perceptions of pedagogy and practice. This qualitative research project focuses on observing instructors' practice and listening to what instructors have to say about their experiences in their specific working environments (Lichtman, 2013, pp. 3-4). As a result, this study focuses on ways the instructors conceptualize literacy in relation to their practice.

For this research, I recruited 14 participants from the Aboriginal, Anglophone, Francophone, and Deaf streams. I was also able to recruit participants from all three LBS sectors: the community, school board, and college sectors. I collected data through audio-recorded semi-structured interviews and field notes gathered from classroom observations to better understand how educators are conceptualizing literacy in relation to practice. I used grounded theory approaches to analyze the data which included a constant comparative coding method. The final analysis crystalizes the data I collected in relation to the research on policy, literature and theory. As this research involves human participants, I followed York University's research ethical protocols and an ethic of care when working with participants. This means that I committed myself to engaging in research that avoids harm, is based on informed consent and maintains the anonymity of the participants. This chapter provides an overview of the methodological approach; method choices; ethical considerations; approaches to participation recruitment; approaches to gathering, coding, and analyzing data; and reflexive practices.

### **Epistemological and Ontological Framework: The Constructivist Paradigm**

My research is situated in the socio-cultural field of research. Research in this field critiques the limitations of scientific methods when applied to the study of human phenomena. It utilizes a wider variety of theoretical approaches from the social sciences such as, and not necessarily limited to, interpretivist, constructivist, postmodern, and critical theories (Lichtman, 2013, p. 10; Lukenchuk & Kolich, 2013, p. 61). These approaches embrace the epistemological assumptions that knowledge is contextual, rather than objective and universal. Ontologically, most social science researchers perceive reality as complex, constructed, multiple and ever-changing rather than singular, objective and fixed (Lichtman, 2013, pp. 11-13; Glesne, 2010, p.

8). In this view, many work under the assumption that reality does not exist independently from the mind but, instead, the world is always interpreted through the mind (Glesne, 2010, pp. 8, 9). However, this is not to say that realities only exist in the mind: they exist as social constructions. These unique individual realities are socially constructed by positionalities such as culture, politics, economy, race, gender, sexuality and other intersections that shape the way one understands their reality. This means that individual perspectives on reality are developed through interactions with the language and thought of the wider society. Research in this paradigm is more concerned with how social interactions, embedded emotions and cognitive processes facilitate learning. I situate the research I am proposing in the constructivist paradigm of the social sciences because it offers theoretical understandings that are more appropriate for investigating the learning processes and instructional practices of adult literacy educators.

A constructivist approach to research involves examining the context that shapes the foundations of adult literacy practice, whether it is constructed through experience, research evidence, mythologies, ideologies or theories. From a constructivist paradigm, the goal of research is to understand human ideas, actions and interactions in specific contexts or in terms of wider culture while at the same time expressing how the researcher constructs knowledge and how the researcher's unique context affects what she constructs (Glesne, 2010, p. 8; Lichtman, 2013, p. 14). Epistemologically, I perceive knowledge as conditional and constructed within specific contexts and conceptual frameworks, and as often embodying moral and political intents (Ulysse & Lukenchuk, 2013). Knowledge, in this paradigm, is not absolute or relative: it is constructed through interactions between the social world, history, culture,

mental life and environment. This paradigm encourages the deconstruction of text to reveal systematic inclusion and exclusion of people and ideas (Glesne, 2010, p. 13).

Ontologically, the constructivist paradigm suggests that there are multiple realities that are socially constructed, ever-changing, subjective and relative to the way the world is interpreted through the individual's mind (Glesne, 2010, p. 8; Lichtman, 2013, pp. 11, 13). That is why it is important to engage in a research that will allow for interactions with a diversity of teaching perspectives in the LBS sector. Without necessarily supporting the notion of cultural relativism, a constructivist approach assumes that there are multiple ways of experiencing and interpreting a shared reality. My paradigmatic approach also borrows from existential traditions, as I argue that while social factors have a significant influence on perception, I do not think human beings have socially determined existences. On the contrary, the variability offered by socially mediated perceptions and the opportunity to engage in philosophical inquiry exercises the individuals' agency and creates a space for them to take responsibility for shaping their destiny (Ulysse & Lukenchuk, 2013, p. 21). Therefore, I am working under the assumption that through conceptualizing practice, teachers can be agents or interventionist of social reproduction and cultural practices. I regard teachers as skilled professionals who actively theorize and adjust practice in order to make predictions and develop pedagogy that facilitates learning.

It is important to examine how teachers conceptualize literacy, rather than only how they teach literacy, because teachers' conceptual frames play an important role in shaping literacy pedagogy. Their role in the classroom is often as mediator between policy and learner, content and learner, and the institution and the learner. Teachers are given multiple

opportunities to apply multiple interventions and approaches to literacy to diverse populations. Their work involves continuous adjustment to adapt to unforeseen circumstances, to respond to the readiness of the learner, and to investigate different approaches. Understanding this is important when developing policy guidelines for professional practice. Educators' experiences provide rich insights into what works and what doesn't work in the classroom. As a result, improving pedagogy involves encouraging the teacher to be thoughtful, creative, and innovative in their pedagogy rather than having them deliver a prescribed curriculum to be taught in a specific way. This can be done by developing a better understanding of how teachers conceptualize literacy in relation to their experiences. In understanding how teachers conceptualize literacy, I intend to develop a stronger theory of adult literacy learning. Additionally, researching how literacy is conceptualized among the multiple perspectives of instructors in the same program will provide a better understanding of how adult literacy practice is socially constructed (Pring, 2015, p. 77).

### **Grounded Theory Comparative Case Study**

A grounded theory comparative case study was used to investigate how educators conceptualize literacy learning and practice. Grounded theory is an exploratory approach to qualitative analysis. It is not hypothesis driven but involves generating hypothesis for further study (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012, p.8). As a result, I did not go into the research with a specific theory to test, but instead, I went into the field to study how literacy learning was being conceptualized and put into practice by the educators. While I had completed an initial theoretical review to understand the context I was researching, I needed to go back to the policies, literature and theories to further investigate the concepts that emerged from the field.

For example, my policy review did not initially include a wider organizational review, and the theory section did not contain a section on experience-based learning. However, once I interacted in the field, I began to see the relevance of including pragmatist orientations to education and updating the review on organizational research. And so grounded theory allowed me to develop an inductive and iterative technique to influence the final shape of my literature review and develop categories and concepts that are grounded in data (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012, p.11).

### **Ethical considerations**

Because this project involves human participants, before recruiting participants, I acquired ethical approval from the York University Research Ethics Board (REB) as well as additional research boards associated with the institutions that I applied to research. In addition, I developed additional principles and practices to encourage ethical behaviour throughout the entire research process, and these principles include seeking informed consent of participants, avoidance of harm, and confidentiality (Glesne, 2010, p. 162). To practice informed consent, I fully disclosed the purpose of my research to the potential participants and ensured they knew my data gathering procedures and what will be required of them before they signed the consent form. This information was presented to the participants in verbal and written form, and in both forms, it was reiterated that there would be no penalty should the participant choose to withdraw from the study.

I am not aware of any harm that was experienced by the participants during the research, and to minimize any harm, the participants' identities have been kept confidential. If they mentioned any information that might identify themselves or the schools they are working



at, I anonymized the information on the transcript by replacing it with a more generic form of the word. So for instance, if the participant mentioned the name of the college they taught at, I replaced the word with “the College.” Instead of using the participants’ names, a pseudonym has been provided. The only document that includes the participant’s name are the consent forms. These forms are kept in a confidential file that has been locked in storage for 5 years and will be destroyed at the end of that allotted time period. The data I collected for the study is kept on a hard drive with privacy security software to prevent others, aside from the researcher, from having access to it. Audio-recordings of interviews were deleted once the transcript was generated.

I also adopted an ethic of care based on Noddings (1988) advice concerning how researchers conduct themselves when doing research with teachers. This meant recognizing participants as informants on the topics and researching for teaching rather than research of teaching. Research of teaching avoids a focus on “narrow achievement goals” (Noddings, 1988, p. 227) and the use of “sophisticated schemes of evaluation” (Noddings, 1988, p. 227). This approach is more concerned with “the needs and views of teachers rather than with the outcomes produced through various instructional procedures” (Noddings, 1988, p. 227). The aim is not to comment on teachers’ competence but to gain knowledge to build a better practice (Noddings, 1988, p. 227). So when designing the research project and engaging in the research process, I focused on providing a space for dialogue and reflection on practice in ways that worked towards a more mentorship relation between educator and interviewer and a conversational exchange of professional knowledge.

## **Role of the Researcher**

I see my role as a qualitative researcher as an interpreter of the information the participants have disclosed to me in the interview and a “filter through which the information is gathered, processed and organized” (Lichtman, 2013, p. 190). Cousin (2010) adds that when we engage in research, we should also consider the field identities that we construct as researchers during the inquiry. This involves considering how “the research encounter is a negotiation of a shared space in which we assume ‘field identities’ which involve adjustments of voice, dress, language and posture that are mindful of how we will be received” (Cousin, 2010, 17). This process renders a subjective description of the participant where the researcher has significant power over how data is collected, interpreted and presented. As much as possible, I worked to present myself as a graduate researcher who was a student as much as a researcher. My previous attendance at LBS organizational conferences, and discussions with LBS managers, made me cognizant of the political situation that created a culture of distrust between the Ministry and educators that emerged as a result of the excessive surveillance and monitoring of program delivery and the worries of funding shortages and discontinuations. I also understood from these meetings and my experience as an LBS educator that the labor conditions of the profession created additional stresses since the work was often low paid and precarious. So I did not want to be interpreted to be doing evaluative research that increased the surveillance culture introduced by the PMF or the practices of teacher evaluation. I wanted to be a good listener and focus on learning from the educator and understanding the context of their practice. As a result, I worked around their schedule to establish times for interviews and observations and asked them to select the meeting spots for the interview that was most

comfortable for them. While most interviews, interviewed at the site, one asked to interview at a local café and another interview was held after a conference I attended with a participant. I organized myself to be available for the whole day of the interview, so the interview could stop and start to accommodate the participants work. This was particularly important as some educators needed to stop the interviews or start late in order to help learners and coordinate work with other staff members. Also, some participants are working at community centers where they hold multiple roles outside of being the adult literacy educator and often had to delay meeting with me if they needed to support an absent colleague or to address pressing tasks needed to support the operations of the center. During observations, I came early and asked the educator if there was any specific spot that they would like me to sit during the observation so my presence would be as least inconvenient as possible. When educators invited me to participate in activities, I did since I understood that community and social interaction was an important part of their practice. As an Ontario Certified Teacher, I also maintained my ethical standards of practice and so if a learner or the educator asked me to use my expertise as a literacy educator to help them or support a learner, I did. As much as possible, I tried to make my presence in the room adaptive to the culture of the classroom so in some cases I engaged in class activities, and in other cases, I was just an observer. In one case, the educator thanked me for using my knowledge and skills to support a learner, and in another class, the participant told me that she forgot that I was even in the room. I also did not do classroom observations if the educators felt my presence would be disruptive to the teaching and learning or if the educator did not feel comfortable having an observer in the classroom. In one case, an educator working in the women's shelter, did not allow classroom observations

because they often worked with women who experienced violence, and they avoided bringing outsiders into the classroom to enhance the women's sense of security and privacy. The architecture of the building of the shelter was built to protect women's anonymity: the classrooms had frosted windows so you could see that classes were in session but the figures of the learners were blurred so they could not be identified. Most floors had a common open space where I did encounter women using the services of the shelter but surrounding the space were small individual private consultations rooms.

### **The Participants**

Once I received approval from the REB and the other participating institutional ethic boards, I contacted the LBS service providers (either by phone or email, depending on what contact information is available through the Ministry website). When I spoke to the providers, I provided full disclosure about my research project, and asked for permission to contact their instructors to participate in the study. The majority of schools I contacted did not return my calls or reply or my emails. Those who did reply to my requests raised their concerns about the observations. The concerns were that...

- 1) They felt the observation compromised learner privacy
- 2) They did not feel comfortable having an observer in the classroom
- 3) They were currently working as program managers and were not teaching during the time of the study.

In these cases, I completed the interviews without the observation and asked the managers to speak about their previous teaching experiences. In most cases, they provided me with a site

visit so I could get a sense of the atmosphere of the learning environment and see some of the learner’s work.

After being connected with an instructor, I provided the instructor full disclosure of the project and if they agreed to participate, I arranged a convenient time to visit their class. Prior to commencing the project, I presented the participant with the written consent form. I engaged in snowball sampling where I inquired whether the participant might be able to connect me to other potential participants. This technique resulted in the addition of 8 participants. Diane had introduced me to Abby who invited me to share my research with The Festival of Literacies Collective, a Toronto based literacy organization that focuses on bringing together literacy community educators and researchers. Attending these conferences, allowed me to build a relationship with educators and through my participation in the organization, I was able to recruit a large portion of the participants for the study. Indeed, 7 of the participants are associated with the Festival of Literacies and 5 of the participants I recruited after I became participant of the organization. Table 1 describes the participants, the sector and the stream that they taught and whether an observation was completed.

Table 1

Overview of Cases

Case	Participant(s)	Role(s)	Stream	Sectors	Interview	Observation
1	Margot	Educator /Program Coordinator	English	Community	✓	✓
2	Glenda	Educator	English	Community	✓	
3	Nicholas	Program Coordinator	French	Community	✓	✓
4	Peter	Educator/ Program Coordinator	Deaf	College	✓	

5	Fiona and Barb	Educator Educator	English	Community	✓	✓
6	Sharon	Program Coordinator	English	School Board	✓	
7	Rose	Educator	English	School Board	✓	
8	Diane and Abby	Educator/ Program Coordinator Tutor	Aboriginal	Community	✓	✓
9	Florence	Educator/ Program Coordinator	English	Non-LBS Community	✓	✓
10	Juliet	Educator	English	School Board	✓	✓
11	Gemma	Educator	English	Community	✓	✓
12	Ava	Educator	English	Community	✓	✓

There are 14 participants from 12 different LBS sites. The study includes interviews from all 4 of the LBS Streams (Aboriginal, Deaf, English, and French) and all of the Sectors (Community, School Board, and College). It also includes Case 9 that looks at a literacy program that operates outside of the LBS funding model but provides services similar to the LBS program. Four educators agreed to an interview but declined the request to observe teaching. As a result, there are no observations of a College LBS program. I opened the study to include Program Coordinators and tutors as it became increasingly noticeable that they play an integral role in delivery.

#### **Data Collection: Audio Recorded Interviews and Field Notes from Observations**

Although I present data collection and data analysis in two separate sections, these processes were completed simultaneously, as I began the analysis during and between cases. There are two sets of data I collected: audio-recorded semi-structured interviews and field notes from classroom observations. Because I am working from within constructivist

assumptions, I perceive the knowledge derived from the interview as a co-constructed process between the participant and the researcher (Lichtman, 2013, p. 189). My primary role in the interview is to ask questions to guide a discussion about the participants' knowledge, experiences and beliefs about teaching literacy to adults in ways that are focused but not constraining (Vogt et al., 2014, p. 60). For this reason, I used open-ended questions (see Appendix 3) that encourage greater latitude in how the questions can be answered. Having a semi-structured interview also allowed me to ask follow up questions to clarify my understanding of their responses and the concepts they were using to frame their understanding of literacy learning and practice. The second form of data I collected were field notes from focused observations on the specific pedagogical interactions between the educators and their students. These observations helped me understand how the instructor's teaching context might inform their practices and beliefs. I focused on recording information that pertains to how adult educators conceptualize literacy. I provided participants with the option of having the interview after the observation, in anticipation that in some cases it may be more convenient or preferable for the participant. This accommodated educators teaching schedules and was flexible to when they had breaks or time available for the interview.

### **Data analysis: Constant Comparative Analysis and 3-part Coding System**

The aim of the analysis is to ground my understanding of how adult literacy learning is conceptualized based on the data obtained from the interviews and observations. To do this, I applied a grounded theory approach to generating theoretical concepts from the data. This involved engaging in a 3-part coding system known as the constant-comparative method where I code each case separately and then use the codes to do a comparative analysis (Lichtman,

2013, pp. 80 & 257-258). The first part of the coding system involved open coding where I reviewed the transcript and field notes for each case and assigned names and categories of the slices of raw data that could be used to address how educators conceptualize adult literacy and its relation to practice. Some of the slices of data carried multiple codes that I recorded in case the data would reveal connections and patterns that would bring them together in the second part of the coding stage: axial coding. Axial coding involved organizing the codes I generated from the raw data into general categories, concepts and themes. In the final stage, the selective coding stage, I isolated the key concepts that emerged from the codes. These concepts are large threshold ideas that are consistent with what the participants say about the literacy learning process. When generating categories, I included contrasting data such as the contrasting perspectives. For example, for the code “other literacies,” I include the contrasting perspective of educators who restrict their definition of literacy to reading and writing. From my analysis, three categories for conceptualizing literacy emerged that I refer to as the three orientations to literacy education:

- 1) Experience-based or pragmatist orientation: 13 out of 14 educators speak to the significance of learner experience in every aspect of the literacy learning process.
- 2) Cognitive orientation: 14 participants spoke to the cognitive dimension to literacy that involves understanding the external and internal processing of literacy.
- 3) Social orientation: 14 participants spoke to the significance of the social dimension of literacy learning that considers how literacy practices facilitate relationship-building.

Table 2 illustrates how the codes were organized into the three main conceptual categories.



Table 2

The Organization of Codes into Conceptual Categories

Categories	Codes
Experience-based Orientation	History + Trauma History + Trauma + Gender + Culture Self-concept Confidence (also includes self-esteem) Individualized instruction = One-size-does-not fit all + individualized learning + learning plans + goals + flexibility Growth + Progress
Cognitive Orientation	Memory + Empathy Communicative process = Information Processing + communication process Reading + Writing + Financial Literacy + Oral Literacy + Digital Literacy + Embedded skills = Numeracy + ASL + digital literacy + financial literacy + oral literacy + critical thinking standardized assessments = content vs skill vs task self-directed learning = Self-directed learning + learner centered learning+ learner led
Social Orientation	Social function = function + social participation + social interactions + social engagement Social Isolation (includes social exclusion) Power dynamics (includes critical thinking) Peer Interactions = Group work + group discussion + peer interaction + class discussion + class trips Community Engagement = Community participation + community organization + community participation + community+ collective work + cooperative approaches + community of learners

Addition signs represent codes that were combined and equal signs indicate what the code became during the axial coding and selective coding process. Codes that seemed similar or connected were joined together; so for instance, I found similarities in what the participants shared about information processing and communicative process so I brought those codes together. While self-concept is a code that might better fit in the cognitive category, I found that the educators often spoke about self-concept in relation to the learner’s experience. Once the analysis was completed, I crystalize the insight from the data and the literature review to

present a critical and holistic conceptualization of adult literacy education for Ontario. I use the categories that emerge from the study to organize my discussion. As it is a grounded theory analysis, it offers a hypothesis rather than a conclusion and suggestions for the direction of future inquiry.

While coding provides a systematic way to engage and organize the data, it has been criticized for advancing positivist quasi-statistical understandings of research particularly in the organization of data into tables and statistics (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014, p. 715). These forms of research have been criticized for reproducing the research methodological practices that are associated with the neo-liberal turn in research that undermines the quality and thoughtful analysis of data (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014, p. 715; Lather, 2013, p. 639). Coding also tends to advance Cartesian dualist assumptions that there are patterns to be found in data and “if you think you need to find a theme, you probably will” (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014, p. 716). Coding can superficially treat words as numbers that can diminish the significance of stories and tends to reproduce the model of a tree of knowledge that branches out into categories or a hierarchy of concepts rather than looking at data as shifting assemblages (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014, pp. 716 & 717; Augustine, 2014, p.747). For this reason, academics such as St. Pierre and Jackson suggests reading theory widely and borrowing concepts, inventing approaches and creating new assemblages when developing an analytical method (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014, p. 717; Augustine, 2014, p. 749). Theory plays a significant role in the data analysis process of this research. A theoretical review was completed before the coding process commenced so concepts from the theoretical review influenced the direction of the coding process. In the process, the theoretical review was revisited as the data suggests other concepts and theories

that could further inform the analysis. The discussion also provides an important aspect of the analysis since it is there that the mind reflects more deeply on the data-analysis as it connects the data with the theories associated with the research.

### **The Reflexive Process**

The goal of reflexivity is to make the subjective aspects of the research clear to the reader and to demonstrate how subjectivity shapes the conceptualization of the project, the collection, interpretation and presentation of data (Dean, 2017, p.44; Cousin, 2010, p. 10; Spencer, 2011, p. 48). As the subjective aspects of the research are wide and varied, and the reflexive process may continue beyond the scope of the dissertation process, this section focuses on highlighting some of the key ideas that emerged through my ongoing reflection on the process. Key factors influencing my experience as a researcher include embodied aspects of identity such as race, age, size, and physical abilities; and social positions that may include aspects of my identity such as my positionality, including social, locational and ideological placements associated with the research context (Dean, 2017, p. 8; Glesne, 2010, p. 157). Here I highlight the racial, gender, and class dimensions of my identity and how it influenced the reading of literature, my methodological choices, and my data analysis.

With regards to embodied identity, I am a female racialized minority, and as a consequence, I have experiences that are outside of the normative disciplinary perspective. My position in this research is as an educator who wants to improve her practice and a graduate student at a university. I am also a Canadian citizen which affords me the access and privilege to be able to complete graduate studies and participate in democratic practices. As my ancestors were indentured labor from India who were brought to Guyana in the late 1800s to work on

sugar plantations, my history and culture are also intertwined with colonialism and the settler narrative. My understanding of literacy is different from normative L1 speakers and L2 language learners in Canada. For instance, my family has been speaking English as their first language since the early 1900s, and English is the only language that we converse in. However, we have our own dialect and cultural understandings of English outside of standardized normative practices of educational institutions. The English spoken by my ancestors is the language of family, friendship, community and a part of how I process thought and emotion as I interact with the world. I understand that this language is often characterized by colonial educational institutions as broken, rather than a language of breaking and being raw. And so, I have always had my experiences as a minority inform my interpretations of my interactions with normative institutionally based socio-cultural practices. For instance, I had the privilege of growing up in multicultural communities in Markham and Scarborough where I regularly interacted with individuals who did not have English as a first language, had various levels of proficiency, spoke different dialects of English and had a plurality of socio-cultural communication practices. So my social practice was not to see English as fitting a given standard but a negotiated communication practice. So, as a literacy educator with my language experiences, I often do not experience the frustration some of my colleagues articulate to me when they encounter learners whose writing does not meet the academic standards of the institution or a place of work. Instead, I wonder if that student, like myself, is simply uncertain about how their language is being received in the respected context and that they require strategies to approach communicating with a different audience. I also know the challenge of expressing a difference of opinion against a dominant narrative and the attention needed to the

presentation of evidence to make an impact and to be heard in environments that encourage the silencing of dialogue. So my approach to teaching attempts to value self-expression, language negotiation skills, as well as explicit instruction on the standards of practice within a unique reading and writing contexts. My desire to have a framework for better understanding the process of developing reading and writing skills is the main driver of this inquiry.

The normative discourses of the institution have a significant impact on the research process and what information is the most accessible and predominant available on adult literacy education. This is particularly the case with regards to the information used to construct the literature review since literacy theory and adult education tends to privilege the theories constructed by white males. The theories of white male scholars such as John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, Bryan Street, Paul Gee, Bourdieu, and Paulo Freire continues to be foundational to scholarly work on literacy education, and these names were the first that came to mind when starting my research. These scholars' writings are also commonly taught in teacher education programs and graduate education, and their writings were the most frequently cited and accessible through article and library book searches. However, with that said, there are also significant female scholars and scholars of color such as female scholar Deborah Brant who I came across after I read a chapter written by Harvey Graff in which he made reference to her research. Many female theorists also work in partnership with male scholars such as Michele Knobel and Jean Lave who often publish with Colin Lankshear and Etienne Wenger. There is also Alan Luke, who is a visible minority and one of the original New London Group theorists. To engage with academic theory of literacy written by women of colour, I had to draw upon less conventional search tactics. As a student of Aparna Mishra-Tarc of York University, I was aware

of her work and when she published her book in 2015, the news was announced to the Faculty, and I was able to find and review her theory for the research. For literacy theory written by Indigenous scholars, I was referred by one of my participants, Diane, to the work of the Ontario Native Literacy Council for resources on indigenous pedagogy. Other sources, I found by specifically developing searches that focused on indigenous literacy education. Thus, while I have access to resources outside of normative perspective, it required less conventional routes to find them as non-white male perspectives are often less prevalent in academia.

Gender also became a factor that I became acutely aware of in the data collection process. As a College LBS educator, I understood that there were classes that often create spaces where one gender was more likely to attend one program over another. For instance, at the college I worked at, the apprenticeship LBS program tended to attract more male learners than the Academic Upgrading wing of the LBS program that tended to have higher levels of female attendees, especially since that particular LBS program was often seen as a bridging program to Nursing. These classes represented the gender divisions in the workplace where only 22% of females in Ontario are registered in apprenticeship programs and only 7.3% of registered nurses are male (Statistics Canada, 2017; College of Nurses, 2016, p. 12). I was surprised to see that other programs in the community sector also had gender divided programs that were sometimes intentional. For instance, Glenda, who taught in a women's shelter, and Diane, who taught at an Indigenous women's resource centre, had classes that were intentionally structured for female learners. Florence also taught an all-female class, but in her case, the class was also open to male community members, but so far no men had enrolled for the term I was observing. In the case of Fiona and Barb who taught in a program

that specializes in supporting individuals who have experienced incarceration, the majority of the learners I encountered were male. Indeed, Fiona and Barb estimated that about 80% of the learners in the program were male (Interview, February 28, 2017) which reflects that fact that men represent 88% of the provincially incarcerated population and 93% of the federally incarcerated population and this is probably why programs that serve learners who have experienced incarceration are more likely to have larger male learner populations (Statistics Canada, 2017). Seeing how the programs are structured to reflect gendered employment and institutionalization practices in Canada, made me more cognizant of the role of gender in literacy education and labor. These observations as well as my own gendered experiences often led me to ask follow up questions if the educators mentioned gender when responding to the questions and this has had an impact on my analysis.

My embodied experiences and positionality also affected my conduct at research sites. As a woman of color and a Muslim, I was concerned about how I would be received when doing research in predominantly small Christian communities with mostly white populations. However, I also believe that participating in interracial, intercultural and interfaith interactions is an important aspect of democratic action, and so when doing research outside of my home town, I made arrangements to stay in local bed and breakfasts and go to locally owned coffee shops, restaurants and public gathering spots to interact with people of the communities I visited. And so my beliefs on how minority females ought to be received led me to work past my fears and risk traveling outside of the city and into the country. I found as a researcher and a visitor, I was welcomed.

When I reflect on the power relations between the participants and myself, I found that we were often able to associate with each other as equals. Most of the educators that volunteered to participate in the study had 10 years of experience and felt stable in their employment and fairly confident in their pedagogical understandings of literacy education. Because I worked as an LBS educator, I was often treated as a fellow colleague rather than a graduate learner. We also all had similar levels of education that included an undergraduate degree plus additional degrees or certificates. During the interview, I acted mostly as a listener rather than a contributor to the dialogue. I asked additional questions when I wanted more information for clarification, or to ask participants to expand on ideas that were emerging from the codes. It was challenging to complete the interview with Peter since I had to hire interpreters and this separated our physical responses from the words we were expressing and the interpretation was not always precise, especially since the interpreters did not have a background in the jargon associated with the LBS program. In Peter's case, I asked him to review the transcript and he reworded some of the sections to better represent the ideas he shared with me.

Finally, my history and context impacts my reflection on the data, and the interpretive and theorizing processes. As my undergraduate education focused on Canadian History, I have brought this perspective and way of thinking to my study of literacy practices in Ontario. This research has been completed during the Idle No More Movement and the completion of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. These historical events have led me to reflect on how institutions reproduce colonial structures and racial practices that undermine the goals of democracy and self-determination. I am also working under neo-liberal contexts that in many



ways continues a settler narrative of people as labor to be exploited for wealth with a very narrow consideration of human value. Being in these contexts enables me to see the limitations of technical rationalist tools that have been implemented in the educational institutions and its associations with neo-liberal agendas that narrow literacy for employment purposes in ways that promote a deficit rather than a holistic understanding of the learning process and of the learner. I also have found spaces of resistance to colonialism and neo-liberalism in the community of academia and the community of LBS learners, educators, organizations, and policy writers, and have increased my participation in support of these spaces. And so, I often think through how literacy is theorized in relation to histories of reproduction and resistance to colonialism and neoliberalism.

Therefore, this dissertation presents a qualitative inquiry based on the analysis of the data collected from the audio-recorded semi-structured interviews and classroom observations of 14 LBS educators from 12 different learning sites. The data is analyzed using an interpretive grounded theory framework so that the findings are data driven and embedded in reflexive practices that illustrate how the interpretive process shapes the organization and presentation of the information. The analysis of the data is then used to construct a framework for understanding *how adult literacy educators conceptualize literacy and how these views inform their practice*. There are three key findings that emerged from the data that respond to the question: LBS educators in this study conceptualize literacy learning in terms of experiential, social and cognitive understandings of the learning processes. The next 3 chapters will present the main three ways educators conceptualize literacy education.

## **Chapter Five: Finding 1: Experience Shapes Literacy Learning**

The first finding that emerged from the data was the significance of experience in shaping the literacy learning process. Experiences create access points and barriers to the acquisition of knowledge and development of literacy practices. These experiences are informed by culture, gender and history in ways that can support learning or can create barriers to future learning opportunities. Experience also shapes learner's self-concept and perception of whether or not they can engage in new learning experiences. Educators integrate learner experiences into the literacy learning process during the intake, goal setting and the development of learning plans.

Thirteen of the 14 participants spoke about the importance of taking the learners' experiences into account when teaching literacy. For educators, such as Peter, being literate is having the opportunity to express lived experiences. As he explained to me, being literate is

. . . being able to be in the real world. Read...Have opportunities, you know, people have knowledge and skill sets and it is just an opportunity to express those. And it doesn't matter how much you can read or write and what level you are at, you know. It's just an opportunity to show what your life experience has been.

(interview, January 23, 2017)

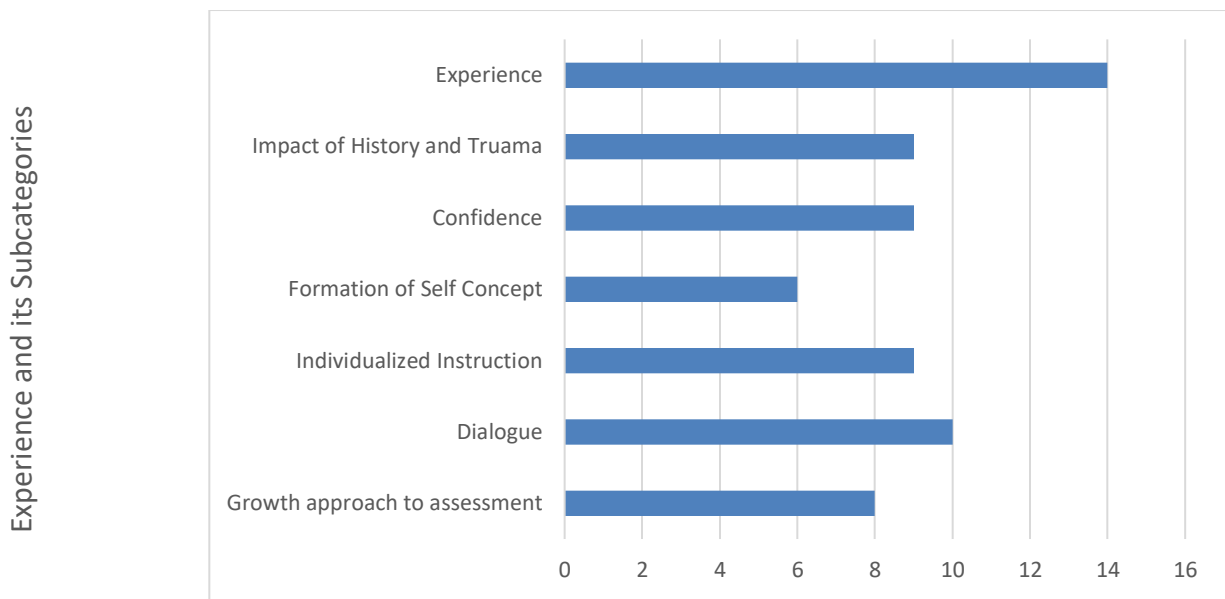
Educators Peter, Margo, Glenda and Barb associate the acquisition of knowledge and skills as a byproduct of experience and that the capacity to acquire new knowledge requires the expression of previous knowledge and skills to engage in new experiences. Although Fiona was

the only participant who did not speak directly about experience, she did speak to subcategories associated with experience such as the impact of learner history on new learning opportunities, how the past shapes the formation of a self-concept, and the importance of adapting a progress-oriented approach to assessing learning (interview, February 28, 2017).

Chart 2 illustrates the subcategories associated with experience and the number of participants that spoke to the subcategories.

Chart 2

The Proportion of Participants Who Discussed the Significance of Experience to the Learning Process and Subcategories



Number of Participants that made reference to Experience and Subcategories

## **Learner Background: History, Trauma, Gender, and Culture**

Taking students experience into account when making delivery decisions does not just mean looking at student's experiences as an asset but recognizing how experiences might create barriers and insecurities about the learning process. Nine participants spoke about how a learner's past experience can create barriers to literacy learning. For instance, according to Ava, children's lack of experience in comparison to adults made them more willing to engage in new learning experiences while adults were often more reticent about engaging in new experiences.

As she explained,

Well my first experience teaching adults, I was a teenager myself, and I taught skiing... night classes... and adults had this fear. "I can't do that. Oh, I can't do that." ... And then on Saturday, I taught kids and there was no fear... And so I really noticed the difference right there, and I myself was a teenager, and it was so much more fun teaching the kids because they were willing to try stuff and when they said they were afraid, it was a different sound than when an adult said, "I can't do that" because there was like this declaration not a confession and so ... when I started working with adults, there was a lot of fear and maybe shame and maybe confusion... and that had to be respected and handled and taken into account. And you also have to accept the fact that we are working with adults that that has to be really respected. These folks have already done whatever they have done in life... so it isn't a matter of, well I am going to teach you something... You definitely can't use

that tone in my opinion. That tone with adults is not very...not very constructive.

(interview, June 15, 2017)

Educators like Ava believe that their approach to teaching literacy must be cognizant that adults, unlike children, bring understandings of the learning process into the classroom and these understandings influence their level of engagement in literacy activities and their willingness to take new risks and embrace new learning experiences. So it becomes important for the educators to find a way to encourage learners to share these experiences, so the educators can build on them and find ways to address experiences that create a sense of fear and insecurity.

Ten of the participants discussed the role of learner history in creating challenges to developing literacy skills and knowledge, particularly traumatic experiences. When asked if there was an area in adult literacy that ought to be researched, Glenda, whose program is situated in a woman's shelter, expressed that she would like to learn more about how adults learn when they have experienced abuse or trauma, particularly since it is difficult to anticipate when a task might stimulate the memory of a traumatic event (interview, November 29, 2016). She wonders what is the best way to support a learner who has experienced trauma and is working through the memory of trauma. She explained to me that she thinks that most of her students have experienced abuse, and these experiences have led them to fear men (interview, November 29, 2016). Glenda also teaches a mixed gendered adult literacy class and discussed the challenges of coordinating group interactions to encourage female students to participate in conversation when they are in a mixed group with men (interview, November 29, 2016). As Glenda explained to me,

Men are more confident. More willing to ...get into discussions I think than women are sometimes. Especially when it's a mixed group. I notice in my night classes the men tend to dominate the small groups unless you are very careful about how you group people. Especially women from other cultures. I do have a lot of women from other cultures in this class too. I think it is helpful that it is entirely women. That they feel safe. We think about their safety a lot here I think because most of them have experienced abuse and they have some fear of men, many of them.

(interview, November 29, 2016)

Because Glenda teaches a women's only class and a mixed gender class, she often spoke about how gender makes the experience of her students' unique. From her students' writing, Glenda noticed that her female students often feel like "unseen invisible people" (interview, November 29, 2016). Glenda attempts to challenge this narrative by organizing and presenting herself in a way that she believes shows that she is taking their learning seriously and values their time by arriving to work early so that she is always prepared to start the lessons at the appointed times. She believes that treating her students as professionals is a means of challenging the narrative of invisibility (interview, November 29, 2016). I was not able to determine precisely what Glenda meant by "other cultures" as I was not able to observe Glenda's class and, at the time of the interview, I did not think to ask her what she meant. Glenda did use the word culture in her definition of literacy where she saw literacy as "understanding the culture in which they live... being able to read the books that people are reading on the street car around them" and overall being able to be a "participating member of society" (interview, November 29, 2016).

Based on her definition of culture here as the one in which learners are living now, “other cultures” may refer to cultures outside of the dominant literacy practices of the community and the normative literacy practices needed to participate in popular literacy tasks. This was the second interview that I completed and it was in this interview that I began to become cognizant of the connection between gender and culture.

Another reason why I began to explore the significance of gender and culture in relation to trauma is because of my observations and interview with Diane, who teaches in the Aboriginal stream of the LBS program in a women’s centre. Diane considers the intersection of gender and culture when designing her lessons. As her program is developed for Indigenous women, she includes literacy activities that are culturally relevant. For example, I observed a lesson that involved using the hand drum, an instrument that is traditionally associated with healing and is played by many Indigenous women including those who live in Northern Ontario. She believes that providing women opportunities to share, without forcing them to do so, is a key way to empower women and break patriarchal practices. So during the drumming session, women were encouraged to decide how they would like to participate. Some women chose not to drum because they believe women should not when they have their period, and one student indicated that she only drums when she is wearing a skirt. However, all women participated in the class by offering other forms of engagement such as sharing stories and information about drumming.

Diane emphasizes the importance of teaching literacy skills that work toward decolonizing dominant and patriarchal ideologies that influence the interpretation of indigenous culture. The lesson I observed demonstrated this: the lesson examined colonial and

patriarchal interpretations of Indigenous culture and the colonizer belief that women are excluded from certain practices such as drumming while they have their period because they are considered to be unclean. In contrast, according to Diane and many other indigenous scholars, the reason women abstain from certain practices while they have their period is because they are considered to be too powerful during their periods, since to have a period is to have the power to drain one's self of negativity. So while women have their periods, they are encouraged to avoid stepping over children, animals, instruments and participating in certain ceremonies and activities to avoid passing the negative force onto others. As Diane explained to me,

...a woman is in ceremony when she is bleeding because...you know, it's women are the caretakers of water so we are seen as earth and water and Mother Earth the body and also the water because babies in amniotic fluid, right. When the baby is in so we carry the water and so we're...our bodies' earth and we are also, we are the caretakers of the water and that was always in our traditions. And there even is like that comparison to the water is the earth's blood, right....the water is like the earth's blood: it is flowing and life giving so we look at it from a whole different point of view when we look at our blood flow or you know, it is not that it is bad or dirty. Because you know, even I... way back when I was learning too I was like oh...like for me because I wasn't raised with the traditions when I heard someone say back in the 80s oh that's because it is dirty or something and I thought oh that doesn't sound very good to me. I didn't know any different but my view is totally different than that from that today, right. Like



it is not dirty. It is only because the colonizer's made it like it is dirty, right. That...

Oh you are bleeding you are dirty, right like. And I guess, you know, whatever

they have their reasons what you associate blood with, right

(interview, April 21, 2017)

Also, the women in the session I observed discussed the significance of women as the carriers and the caretakers of water and their leadership in the protests against the Dakota pipelines.

Diane makes the teaching of culture, colonization, current issues in the community and patriarchy a part of her literacy lessons to help support the empowerment of her learners

(interview, April 21, 2017). Diane also explained that because of the amount of time spent collecting data to fit the accountability framework designed by the ministry, it is not always easy for the educator to facilitate culturally relevant pedagogy (interview, April 21, 2017).

Ava shows sensitivity to her learners' experience by arranging many task choices for them to select from and invites learners to volunteer to participate in class discussions rather than insisting on it. I noticed that while the male students contributed to the questions she put to the class, the female learners did not contribute to the class discussions. The female learners tended to speak only when directed to such as during attendance or for administrative purposes, for instance, one female learner spoke to explain that she would be leaving class early. While the learners came to class on time, the women came to class later than the men and left early while two of the male learners came early and were reading newspaper articles that they received from previous classes. Female learners also completed individually assigned tasks that were individual and work-book oriented. I wondered if perhaps my presence made learners reluctant to communicate or, because of the series of focused tasks, the learners were

focused on completing their tasks rather than engaging in discussion (field notes, June 15, 2017). Bearing in mind the information I received in Glenda's interview, I wondered if female learner's in the class also felt uncomfortable speaking in a room with men and if cultural practices made their silence seem more appropriate than participating in discussion. Interestingly, the main topic in Ava's class also discussed women and indigenous knowledge. The main reading that was assigned was a story about a Bear Clan grandmother and on the wisdom of elder women (field notes, June 15, 2017).

By contrast to Ava's mixed gender class, the learners in Diane and Florence's all-female classes were far more vocal and active in group discussion. These classes also had shared racial identities. All the women in Diane's class were Indigenous and all the women in Florence's class were Black. The women in Ava's class were mixed-race and gender. I should also add that in Juliet's mixed gender class, there was equal participation of men and women in class discussions (field notes, June 12). Interestingly, in Ava's class the women in the room were predominately South Asian while in Juliet's classroom the women were predominantly Black.

In the center that Fiona and Barb work in, males outnumber females by a 5 to 1 ratio. The staff explained to me that this centre predominantly provides services for those who have experienced incarceration or use mental health services. On my visit, I mostly came in contact with male learners and female educators although there was one male staff member who works in reception. It was a drop-in class where learners could choose whether or not to come to classes that day. I did meet a few female learners who spoke to the educators briefly before taking their work to other parts of the building. Some of the educators explained to me how forms of social isolation, whether it be detention or being kept out of mainstream society, also

creates trauma that can create a barrier to engaging in the learning process. Barb suggests that there is a difference in the way her female students and male students engage in learning. She finds that her female students are usually 30 years or over and come to class with a readiness to learn whereas her male students, most who have just come out of prison, seem to be more interested in experimenting and investigating the reception they will receive from the program (interview, February 28, 2017).

### **Self-concept and Self-confidence**

Six of the participants commented on how experiences shape the way the learners see themselves and their ability to learn. Barb holds the perspective that experiences can affect one's mindset towards learning. She found that this was particularly the case with male students. As she explained to me,

...many of the males are coming from a place that their previous school experience was extremely negative, meaning that they were told that they could not do something and they were told often enough that they could not do it and they eventually began to believe it. Which may work into the mindset that a lot of the students that I have had who are as of adult age now do have learning disabilities. And many are within border line, I suppose being recognized as mental disorders of some form or fashion. Years ago there was no diagnosis and they were just shoved through remedial classes. I believe remedial might have been the word. Now we have more of an appreciation or understanding what mental illness entails and it does not mean that you are incapable of learning; you just have a different way of learning.

(interview, February 28, 2017)

Barb argues that experience can lead individuals to form a negative self-concept of their ability to learn and so the role of the LBS educator is to help the student attempt to reverse that concept. As she explained to me, it is quite a daunting task since the learner's previous experiences may have led the learner to internalize a deficit concept of their ability to learn. As she explained,

I would also say that it can be reversed from the perspective of the person who is delivering the skills in order to get someone better literacy skills. That if they already pegged someone into not being able to do it, it's just buying into what the student has already known forever. And will never break out of. So it's just a downward spiral that will never see the end. And the unfortunate part of that is that many students that I come across have had that so ingrained that it is sometimes like unwrapping a roll of yarn and you just keep pulling the cord and you wonder, does it ever have an end? Because as you come to think that you are coming to the end there is another little sprig that pops out and you have to start pulling that until you get to the core and I don't know if we ever...sometimes, initially reached the core and but I think...I don't know if we ever reach the core but I would like to think that we've pulled enough threads that it allows them to break free so that it is not holding them in a position that they feel that they can never escape from.

(interview, February 28, 2017)

Participants like Barb and Abby shared the challenges of working with learners who come to the program with negative experiences of schooling that they have internalized. They believe students' schooling experiences create developmental concepts that make students believe they should be able to understand and acquire certain concepts, such as mathematical concepts, and when they are unable to grasp these concepts, they feel frustrated. Abby described a student she worked with who became frustrated because he could not grasp a mathematical concept and how he connected an expectation of what he should know to his childhood experiences:

Well in this instance, even before we started, he has always said, I should know this. I don't know where this...well, I mean, adding and subtracting fractions, I don't know when they teach you, like grade four? So, he's done grade four. So I think that is probably why he keeps saying that he should be able to do this. So, I don't know, I think it is just...I guess it is just more generic in terms of learning. It's like, you know, it's very hard to let go... Yeah, I don't know....

(interview, May 17, 2017)

Abby explained that "it is hard to let go of the should expectation" (interview, May 17, 2017) because these "should" expectations are rooted in the learner's conception of what every child can do and, if the learner cannot do the task, it leads to feelings of stress that he is frustrating his tutor when he isn't able to complete what he is attempting to do (interview, May 17, 2017). Abby wonders if his previous learning experiences might make him feel worried about not being able to learn at the same pace as others. Many of the participants suggest that these

deficit self-concepts about their ability to learn needs to be addressed by developing a delivery style that supports the development of confidence.

Glenda believes that self-determination promotes self-confidence and so in her class the learners determine the topics that they will cover in the program. Recently, her students asked her to develop math lessons and she commented on how the experience of successfully learning the topic transformed their perception of themselves and helped them build their self-confidence (interview, November 29, 2016):

I think some classes don't have math but the women love it. That... if you asked them I am sure that is what they would say is their favorite thing and they see themselves....they see themselves as like women who can't do math and then all of a sudden their doing these complicated algebra problems and seems to give them a real feeling of success and confidence.

(interview, November 29, 2016)

According to Diane, this negative self-concept is connected to a lack of self-esteem that causes learners to feel that they are not able to express themselves creatively and openly, especially when the thoughts and ideas they express are going to be judged and marked (interview, April 21, 2017). For Diane the challenge is that the learners' self-concept can keep them from even entering the program. This self-concept not only constructs barriers to learning but also makes entering the program a challenge and causes those who enter the program to drop out without reaching their goals:

I find in those situations it is harder for them to continue to be because they get... they go back to their kind of child self, sort of and say oh, this is too hard or I am too

dumb or that old voice comes back into their head. And then they don't come back to the program. So sometimes that's...because that's the people we are here for. But because they do not believe in themselves we try to make it as easy as possible. Or they don't like somebody or someone gave them a dirty look downstairs. That was one time too, oh that woman doesn't like me and I am not coming back here again. And there is nothing that you can do, like you know, case by case you do the best you can with each unique person, right.

(interview, April 21, 2017)

Rose adds to the idea that negative learning experiences lowers learner's self-esteem and that negative learning experiences pose a barrier to learning since it can determine how much effort the learner is willing to put into the program. As Rose explained,

....this is the point you don't know how they feel but you can tell if they have been discouraged through their schooling experience. Perhaps they had a teacher who has not encouraged them or who has given them negative feedback. Because the biggest thing we deal with is self-esteem, low self-esteem. And I got to say, for many of them, 80%. You have been told all your life that you are not that good or, you know, you have been told that you can do better and probably you have been working to the best of your ability. So you really have to try to work on that.

(interview, April 3, 2017)

Nine of the participants spoke about the importance of helping learners build self-confidence. The significance of self-confidence is an integral part of how Nicholas defines being literate:

To be literate is to be able to develop one's emotional intelligence, to understand emotions and feelings, to make critical thinking, to analyse the world around us, to allow an individual to learn to be assertive and to build self-confidence and confidence to open doors to a new world.

(interview, February 6, 2017)

Many participants spoke about how improving literacy was a means of building self-confidence.

Juliet believes that self-confidence comes with being able to feel like one can read anything:

So, to be able to read what you want means you have access to information. Not just newspapers which I adore but also the information on your child's prescription and the self-confidence that comes with being able to read anything. And that self-confidence, many learners will tell us, us being professionals or researchers, that then they feel more confident to ask questions of their doctors or their children's teachers. So being able to read whatever you want means to be able to speak up for yourself when the doctor tells you to take these pills, they will feel more confident to ask why when their reading and writing skills improve then before they begin noticing the improvement. So for me that is the social justice aspect of having access to more information. Being able to speak up for yourself and advocate for yourself. Not just say, okay. And going along with something that is clearly unjust. Yeah, understanding what is going on.

(interview, June 12, 2017)

When I observed Juliet's practice, I noticed that when she assigned students tasks she often circulated to provide encouraging feedback on learner progress and would occasionally sit with



the learners and walk them through the steps to complete the task. She explained to me during the interview that for some of her students, although they are capable of doing the tasks, they lack the confidence to start on their own and so these one-on-one visits allow her to encourage them to start the task. She also found that this was the case with writing and reading more than math (interview, June 12, 2017).

### **How the Concept of Experience is Applied to Practice**

Educators in the study described to me how learner experience informed their practice and their role in facilitating new experiences to build on learner's previous experiences. They also consider the learners' experiences when they use program tools such as the OALCF. As a result, each learner is often engaged in tasks that are unique to their goal path and different from their peers. This approach makes it necessary for educators to provide individualized instruction and to develop activities that encourage dialogue between learner and educator. These spaces for dialogue allows the educator to learn more about the learners and these insights further inform their practice.

#### **The role of experience in the intake, goal-setting and task-setting process.**

Educators consider the learner's experience as a part of every step of practice. Margo has developed a discussion-style intake process that focuses on learning the interests and experiences of new students in the program. She then tries to "draw out" (interview, October 25, 2016) as much as she can from the intake discussion to plan the initial activities that work towards the learner's goals. And, when teaching the learner new concepts, she will relate the concepts to the experiences the learner has shared with her. As she explained, "so, for me, having lived experiences is a big factor in adult education because you can relate...help them to

the relevance of what they're learning to their lived experience whether past or current" (interview, October 25, 2016). She also considers the learner's experience when working with the learner to establish their program goals so that each activity builds on previous learning experiences that are constructed as a next step towards a goal that the learner is pursuing (interview, October 25, 2016). Margo believes that the role of the educator is to learn about the learner's experiences and use that information when developing learning plans (interview, October 25, 2016). A large part of her job is planning and selecting the literacy activities to build on the learners' experiences and aspirations (interview, October 25, 2016).

I observed a discussion-oriented approach to lesson planning in Florence's class. I had come to the site early and was allowed to sit in the classroom while Florence was having a discussion with a student about on-going housing issues. Florence listened as the learner explained the problem and asked the learner about what she would like to achieve. They discussed strategies that could be considered to address the issues of mold and plumbing and the poor state of the apartment the learner was living in. They then established that the first step towards improving the learner's living conditions would be to write a letter to the landlord. Florence then worked with the learner to break down the steps to writing the letter by asking the learner what should be in the letter and added aspects of the letter that she believed was important to include and how to structure and format the letter to be effective. She instructed the learner to use the lesson today to write down all the problems she is having with apartment to prepare the content that would be structured into a formal letter. Between the group activities, the learner used the period to complete the task. In fact, I noticed that in Florence's class, every learner had an individual task that they were working on that reflected a personal

goal they were aspiring towards. Florence explained to me that it is important that the goals established in the class should work towards supporting learner's goals in life and relate directly to their experiences (interview, June 8, 2017).

**The role of experience in the interpretation of the OALCF curriculum framework.**

Most educators appreciate the flexibility offered by the OALCF curriculum since it accommodates the development of tasks that are specific and relevant to what students need to learn to achieve their goals. Margo finds that because the curriculum is not structured or time bound, she is able to work with the learner's experience and aspirations when developing a goal path and or selecting tasks. As she explains,

So like I said, adults have other lived experiences. They have other factors that they can bring to bear on understanding of the lessons so their past experiences, their current experience and their aspirations. So we try to, we also look at goals because the curriculum is not as structured, it is not as time bound as teaching children, there is more there, more flexibility to explore things in different ways and not feel as restricted as the formal structure requires with children.

(interview, October 25, 2016)

Sharon points out that it is important to read the framework against the students' experiences, since in the case of adults, there is a good chance that they already have the knowledge and skill of a particular curriculum objective, and it may be a waste of time to reteach them something they already know. Adults are not blank slates and rather than delivering content under the assumption that the learners have no experience of the topic, it is better to take the time to find out what a learner needs to learn and work from there. For instance, Sharon was

teaching math and she had developed a lesson on following recipes and measuring ingredients. She found that the learners in her group already understood how to measure and the lesson was a waste of time that could be spent working on other aspects of mathematics. This is why educators such as Sharon emphasize the importance of establishing goals that focus on helping students learn what they need to learn to meet their goals rather than working from a prescribed curriculum (interview, March 16, 2017).

**One size does not fit all.**

When I asked educators what approach to teaching literacy is most ineffective for their teaching context, 7 educators said a *one-size-fits all* approach. As Margo explained, “So for me the most ineffective way is a one-size-fits all where you are giving everyone the same thing irrespective of their interests and their levels” (interview, October 25, 2016). In most of the classes that I observed, aside from Diane and Ava’s classes, the learners were all engaged in different activities. Margo and Nicholas kept separate folders for each learner where they would collect tasks that would be relevant for the learner’s goal path and build on their learning experiences. I saw the specific connection between the learner’s experience, goal and the tasks most clearly in Florence’s class. As I mentioned before, one student was receiving help learning to construct a letter to her landlord about the things in her apartment that needed to be fixed and another student was completing practice tests of a book she was reading to apply for her hair-dressing license. I saw how Florence helped students decide on the tasks they needed to learn to reach their goals by having conversations with them about what they would like to do to change their lives, and she would then help them develop strategies to do this. During the

interview when I asked how she selected literacy tasks for her students to complete, she replied,

It is more like a conversation with them. Sometimes it is very impromptu. So I wasn't even planning to do...have Student A write that letter but because it is such an urgent issue for her and something she has been talking about since last week. I was like okay, you know what and she has been trying to get out of the building for a number of years. It is time to actually write a letter and to actually maybe do a lesson around that letter. So she has written that letter. Next week, we will work on like self-editing. So you are making the lesson applicable to her experience.

(interview, June 8, 2017)

Many educators explained to me that the discussion about goals is ongoing since experiences and circumstances may lead to new considerations and priorities with regards to their personal aspirations and, in turn, this may change the learner's goal path.

### **Individualized instruction.**

Nine educators emphasized the need for individualized instruction. For Nicholas, generating individual learning plans is one of the ways he takes students experience into account when he designs their learning program. To develop an individual plan that takes into account the student's experience, Nicholas believes it is important for the educator to develop a relationship of trust with the learner, so the learner will be comfortable providing information to the educator. One way such a relationship can be developed is by encouraging one-on-one interactions between educator and student. As Nicholas explained to me,

The individual learning plan approach is of prime importance. One-on-one interaction and teaching are a large part of how we teach. Although some classes are offered in groups and on-line, we must be able to assist at any moment. Many adults are reticent when it comes to school or learning, because of learning experiences in their past. To be successful in our teaching, we first need to acquire the adult student's trust. The relationship between teacher and student is very important and will make a difference in the results attained.

(interview, February 6, 2016)

When I observed Gemma, I noticed that rather than teaching the class as one large group with the teacher at the center, she taught learners one-on-one. They met briefly at the beginning in a circle to discuss what they would be working on during class and then worked on their own. While they worked, Gemma circulated around the classroom and worked with each learner individually for a period of time before moving on to check-on another learner. In one case, the student was reading a novel, and she sat with the student and had the student read out loud to her. I noticed that rather than focus on fluency, Gemma would have the students take breaks between paragraphs to ask her questions that would allow the student to demonstrate comprehension by connecting what she read to her life experiences. This student was reading a biography on Hellen Keller's struggle to learn to read and write since she was Deaf-Blind. The student explained to Gemma that she identified with Keller's struggle since she also had a disability that made it difficult for her to read and how she read more slowly than other people since she needed to stop every so often because it was a strain on her eyes (field notes, June 14, 2017).

One-on-one tutoring from the educator or the tutor is an essential part of Margo's practice (interview, October 25, 2016). Margo holds drop in sessions so students receive one-on-one teaching support from the participant or a tutor until the student is capable of completing the task on their own (field notes, October 25, 2016). Margo trains tutors to be up to date with the students' goal paths and to report on skill sets they think the students need to improve on (interview, October 25, 2016). While I observed her class, there were two tutors in the room that explained to me that the learners made appointments with them and they came in to meet with them and, as a result, different tutors would be coming in at different times. Margo also provides one-to-one support in ways that are similar to a tutor. So, for instance, she is often the one who works with the learners when she is introducing a new task (October 25, 2016).

Relying on tutors to provide one-on-one support can sometimes be a challenge since not all tutors have received training and sometimes, as Diane points out, it is hard to find the right match. However, Diane also explained to me that sometimes tutors can provide better support than the teacher if their experience aligns with the learner's goal. For example, she was once able to find a tutor with a background in science and experience working in a laboratory to support a learner who specifically needed someone with a background in science and working in a lab to support her goal towards passing the science and math admission requirements to enter a midwifery program (interview, April 21, 2017).

### **Use of dialogue.**

Ten educators emphasized the significance of dialogue in the learning process. Of the 8 field studies I completed, I found that all educators included conversation based activities that

encouraged learners to share their life experiences and perspectives on the topics of discussion. Peter also holds experience as key to differentiating characteristics of the adult learning process from children's learning processes. Peter explained that, because adults have more experience than children, dialogue style learning is a more effective approach to teaching adults:

I think there is definitely more interaction with adults. People talk about their experiences a lot more. You know sharing their experience through their education system: the challenges that they have experienced learning English. So with children you don't necessarily have that dialogue; it's a lot more one way. And you watch them grow and you watch them experience that but you are not necessarily having a give and take with children in the same way. I feel like, you know, in classrooms with adult experiences you can have a lot deeper conversations that go two ways.

(interview, January 23, 2017)

For Margo, observation and dialogue with the student are also the primary tasks of the educator, in order to learn as much as possible about the learner and their needs and to develop activities that are relevant to them (interview, October 25, 2017).

Diane also encourages discussion in her class and applies traditional indigenous literacy practices such as the talking circles in order to encourage learning through dialogue. She finds the talking circle to be important to engage learners with multiple perspectives outside of the back and forth between educators and learners and it ensures that learners can discuss things that are relevant to them. For instance, as the class I observed was the final class in the term, Diane used a talking circle to review the work they did and discuss what activities they found most helpful to supporting their goals. Many of the ladies in the group were a part of a group



searching for housing solutions, and Diane had organized guest speakers to provide them with resources needed for housing such as housing workers who could speak to them about what to do if they found mold or bugs in their home or someone to speak about financing. Diane believes that talking circles allow her to cover important topics that are relevant to the learners and their experiences in ways that are less structured and more organic (interview, April 21, 2017). I noticed that her learners tended to actively participate in a talking circle more than discussions where the teacher stands at the front and leads a discussion with a structured framework of power-points or board notes. Like Diane, many educators in the program create opportunities for learners to meet and speak with representatives from different community organizations that share similar experiences with learners as a means of engaging learners in dialogue. For instance, Florence told me that she once invited guest speakers from *Historica* or *Passages Canada* to speak to her students about her personal experiences. The speakers provided learners with a message of perseverance that encouraged learners to continue to work with the program to pursue their life goals (interview, June 8, 2017).

From Diane's perspective, experiential learning is learning that facilitates a holistic experience that engages the heart and soul rather than over-emphasizing theoretical education with a focus on reading and writing. When I asked her what approaches to teaching she finds the most ineffective, she replied,

Maybe a lack ...a lack of experiential learning...that expectation of...you know the...what would you call it.... ...the opposite of experiential learning...I don't know what would you call that....that you are not experiencing it as much. Because a lot for us to... we have been more of an oral culture through time and also not

....for us it is not in our blood memory about using pen and paper and using letters and words. It's more story telling like...so I think...but we can't do that in our modern time, right. Like I mean we can but we can't. Like we have to have accountability because of the way the system is set up. We have to have that way of learning, right where pen and paper, you know, reading books and theorizing, I guess or...instead of....maybe that's the word like compared to experiential there is like theory. Like you were saying kind of earlier too, right. Not that theory isn't important. It is just that....Maybe it can be intimidating I think to people where because they are judged instead of free flowing from their heart and soul and so I think that hinders them sometimes from being able to open up freely about who they really are and what they are experiencing in life and learning.

(interview, April 21, 2017)

Other participants in the study echoed Diane's sentiment that educators need to have some understanding of a learner's previous experience to make decisions on how to support the learner. Less-structured approaches to learning that are context specific, rather than prescribed, allow for a richer engagement with the experiences of the learner.

### **Engaging learners in new experiences.**

An experience orientation towards adult literacy does not just mean taking into account the learners' past experiences but also facilitating new experiences that encourage learners to engage with different perspectives. For Sharon, teaching literacy also involves exposing learners to new literacy practices. For Sharon a good way to facilitate new experiences is to organize class trips that engages students in a diversity of literacy practices with their peers. For

instance, one year she took a group of learners to see their first play and she describes the experience as being transformative:

I took a whole group of students to the first live play that they have ever been to and that experience was transformative for a lot of them. They have never been to a live play. They went and saw of Mice and Men. I was amazed at how much they enjoyed it and how they, you know, participated in follow up discussion. So, things like that were really quite good.

(interview, March 16, 2017)

Also, for Sharon, being literate is not simply being able to read, which she adds is an important skill that is her primary teaching focus, but being able to engage in experiences that widen one's personal circle so as to be able to connect to the larger community and the world. So the teacher should not simply provide tasks that reinforce existing literacy practices but expose students to different perspectives and practices that will widen their social engagement

(interview, March 16, 2017).

Juliet believes it is important to expose learners to new and different experiences, based on her recollection of studies on the subject:

...other studies have shown that the more different experiences you have the more your reading and writing skills will improve. So, it is from a study that was done with kids a million years ago. So why can rich kids read better than poor kids? Well they go traveling and they have all these different experiences and they go to museums and duh duh duh. Whereas poor kids traditionally just stay in their neighborhood and do the same things over and over again. And so for my students

most of whom live in poverty to do something different and go out of their neighbourhood in a safe way as a part of a group who is in charge, they can have some different experiences which then hopefully will make them better readers and writers.

(interview, June 12, 2017)

In the class, I observed the learners discuss one of their future projects to go on an excursion into the community garden to bake bread on an outdoor oven, something that many of the students had not done before. This led to an interesting discussion about what ingredients they should add to the bread and discussions on how they would prepare the dough.

#### **Developing growth and progress approaches to assessment.**

Eight of the LBS educators in this study believe the best way to evaluate literacy is to look for progress or growth. As Fiona explained to me, “The best way to evaluate student work...I think I can evaluate progress best in conversation with them, watching them work a problem and having them explain to me as they go” (interview, February 28, 2017). Barb also believes that progress is the best way to measure student achievement in the program, and she has her students compose a paragraph which she provides significant feedback on and uses it as a spring board for determining the learning plan for her students. She keeps the paragraph and continuously refers to it as the student progresses through the program to see if their work is improving. Barb described this process to me:

Everyone who comes to me will always have a written sample. I will always ask for a written sample. And as the progression of life goes through, I have always kept that first one. I will always keep their last one before they go wherever

they are going and I will always. . . ones that have left from beginning to end and they're always and it's like my personal photo album and I will say, "here" what is it that you see? And they always have this—because I always write with a green pen -- There is no more green pen on my writing. And it's not green pen where it's xed and a run-on sentence and this. It's me having those ongoing conversations that are no longer: "Watch your run-on sentences. Watch your periods. Watch you exclamation marks"

(interview, February 28, 2017).

For Diane, it is important that the learner experiences growth since growth builds confidence (interview, April 21, 2017):

And then there are ones that do really good and they thrive on the other spectrum too. You know, their kids are grown and there have been a couple of mothers here where their kids have said, "well mom ever since you have been in the program you have been reading better. You have been writing better." Their confidence is better. Filling out applications, you know. They see a growth in the parents, right. And that is when I am happy because that is what I would like to do for all of the ladies that come through this door, you know, but it doesn't always work out. It is case by case, right.

(interview, April 21, 2017)

For Margo the purpose of evaluation is to assess the learner's skill level by providing them with a range of activities and observe their performance and reduce and increase the difficulty of the activities based on learner's progress (interview, October 25, 2016). She also believes

that the educator helps the learner take ownership of the learning process by teaching them how to self-evaluate through discussion and “track their progress.” And so in her class rather than having the learners depend on her to tell them how they are doing, she opens a conversation with them by asking them “how they are doing” (interview, October 25, 2016). Margo’s approach encourages learners to be expressive about how they are doing in the course and, in turn, she finds that this encourages learners to communicate with each other about how they are doing. As she explained to me, her progress approach to evaluation

has created an atmosphere where actually other students are telling each other how they are doing. So when a new learner comes they will observe where the person is at and when they see the person making progress they will say “wow, they are improving.” For example, last week we got audited and the gentleman that I was referring to, all of the learners were like, “you need to talk to the Agency, you need to talk to her, you need to tell her how you are doing.” He’s like “no.” He’s very shy. And they say “no, you’re doing so well. You need to tell her where you started.” So they see how each other are progressing and they encourage each other.

(interview, October 25, 2016)

A progress approach to evaluation matches the MAESD perspective on evaluation, where the completion of milestones are designed to map the progress of students. However, educators have found that sometimes it is hard to illustrate progress, especially through milestones, and that a shortcoming of a progress focused approach to evaluation is that it does not leave room to illustrate persistence, which Sharon and Barb argue are also important aspects of

achievement. Moreover, as Sharon pointed out in the interviews, the model the Ministry has for tracking progress doesn't consider what progress means for the learner (interview, March 16, 2017). MAESD measurements are grounded in predictions of progress based on labor market skill projections rather than being grounded in the experiences of learners. Sharon completed organizational research on how students perceive progress and found that they often measured progress based on being able to do things they were not able to do in the past. She described one case for me:

When we did our research, I remember one woman that I interviewed and I said to her, "So, what does progress mean to you? And she said, "Learning how to do long division." I went, well when will you ever use it? And she said, I don't care. I could never do it in elementary school. Now I can do it. That was hugely important to her. So I guess we have to be careful about...that we do not define progress and let the adult define progress.

(interview, March 16, 2017)

Juliet suggested that a portfolio might be a good way to evaluate progress. As she explained to me,

I think developing a student's portfolio is the best way to show improvement especially in writing skills, but if they can also keep a journal of what they read and that shows that they are increasing with more....no they are engaging with more difficult reading material. So material that has more critical examples or more bigger vocabulary. That kind of thing. But I think a portfolio is the best way.

(interview, June 12, 2017)

Another reason a portfolio might be ideal is because I noticed that educators in this study tend to be developing aspects of portfolios as they develop binders to collect samples of work and to organize tasks for each learner. So a portfolio-based approach might cut down some administrative work for educators who are already organizing individual binders and tasks for lesson planning and tracking purposes. Juliet also questions whether it is relevant for there to use milestones or any sort of overarching way to measure learner progress across the province. As she explained to me,

I think it should be assumed that if you are in a class, you are learning. The only people that don't learn are dead, so let's start with that rather than say "show me how much you have learned." Let's start with everyone is learning. Everyone's ...and recognizing that everyone learns at different pace and at different ways and learn different things differently, so one person might learn writing one way...they want to see all the things. Another person learns writing by just writing it all out first and then organizing ideas. So how do you show overall that everyone is progressing? You just assume that they are like shut up. And I think like, portfolios, you know, just what does this person generate? In the same way that grad school: how do I show how much I have learned? I write a big piece of paper. You know, I write 10 pages to tell you what I have learned. And why not the same for adult learners? Why can't they write a page of all the things they have learned how to do over the year? Or every six weeks or every....sorry grad course after 12 weeks so after 12 weeks. You have been here for twelve weeks. Let's write down



everything I have learned.

(interview, June 12, 2017)

Gemma also critiques standardized approaches to assessing literacy education which takes a *one-size-fits all* approach which is often counter-productive to the learning process since it focuses on learning outcomes that are not specific to the learner's goals. A goal-directed approach to education that takes into account context and experience requires a more fluid evaluation process that is relevant to the changes in the learner's life and is focused on helping the learner achieve their specific goals (interview, June 16, 2017).

Overall, the educators emphasized the importance of the learners' experiences as a part of how they conceptualize literacy learning among adult learners in Ontario. In practice, this leads to individualized approaches to learning that are goal directed, based on tasks that are relevant to the learner's experience and engages the learner in new experiences. Evaluation involves looking at learner growth and progress as the indicator of achievement. Added to this narrative was the discussion of how the intersection of culture and gender shape learner experience. According to the educators in this study, it is not enough to consider the learner's personal experience and actions but how social and historical forces shape the experiences of the learner and their perception of themselves.

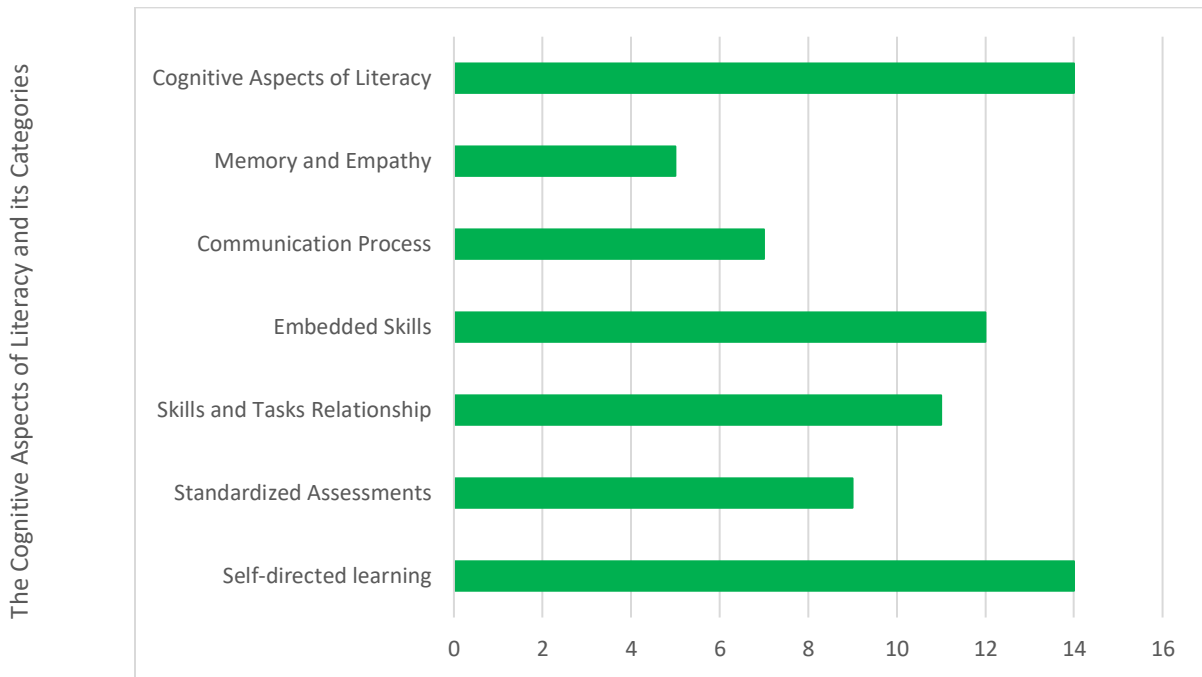
## **Chapter 6: Finding 2: Literacy is a Cognitive Process**

The second finding that emerged from the data described literacy as a communicative and cognitive process that involves more than acquiring the knowledge and skills to read and write, but also learning other skills embedded in communicative and cognitive practices such as oral, digital, financial and critical thinking skills. Educators use cognitive strategies to teach literacy with the understanding that reading and writing is more than teaching decoding and grammar. According to these educators, adult literacy education involves using texts that are relevant to the learner to teach the skills associated with achieving their goals. Literacy learning should encourage self-direction so the learner has ownership of the learning process.

All the educators referred to literacy as a process of acquiring knowledge and skills necessary to process information cognitively and to do communicative tasks. They spoke to the cognitive functions of literacy in supporting thinking processes, memory and empathy. Many educators expanded their definitions of literacy beyond reading and writing to incorporate digital, financial and oral literacy skills. Chart 3 illustrates the subcategories presented in this section on the cognitive aspects of literacy along with the number of participants that spoke to the subcategory.

Chart 3

The Proportion of Participants Who Discussed the Significance of Literacy as a Cognitive Process and Subcategories



The Number of Participants that Made Reference to the Category and the Subcategories

**Memory, Reading Strategies, and the Communication Process**

Five of the educators stressed the relation between literacy learning and cognitive process such as memory and empathy. Rose was one of them. Rose has a background working with individuals in rehabilitation for brain injury, as well as with seniors, and so the cognitive dimension of literacy is significant to her practice. She sees literacy as the connection between memory and empathy:

I worked in brain injury for 5 years and a lot of people didn't have...couldn't remember. Memory was one of the biggest issues but there is a lot of repetition

to help them get back to their lives. I just...I guess trying to, you know, feel how the other person....trying to empathize as best I can. Sometimes, they will share their information and sometimes they won't but when you....It's like that open self-disclosure: you gave me one piece of information about your life and I was thinking of, you know, having been in a situation similar to that but on the other side like on your dad's side. I'm thinking of myself like yeah, you know. It's how you feel. It is an incredible experience, you know.

(interview, April 3, 2017)

For Rose, literacy is communicating information to people and the process of communication supports memory development and is integral to building empathy. Rose's approach to teaching is to try and understand what the learner is thinking and feeling from the small bits of information the learner is willing to share. She then uses that information to attempt to empathize with the learner's experience by connecting it to her own experiences and understandings and then relating her experience to the learner to help the learners understand the task they are working on. At the time of the interview, my father was in the hospital, and I explained to her before the interview started that I was keeping my phone out and might pause the interview because I was expecting a call to see if he needed me to stop in and visit him on my way home from the interview. So she related to my situation by explaining how educating adults was different from educating children since adults have responsibilities to look after others and those responsibilities often preoccupy their mind while they are engaged in educational work. She believes educators need to be cognizant about this while they facilitate learning (interview, April 3, 2017). Rose also believes that the educator should encourage

learners to be empathetic because this involves understanding the other rather than being reactive and is a key part of the communication process. Rose encourages students to practice empathy by trying to understand the perspective of other people (interview, April 3, 2017). And so literacy learning involves helping adults process information in ways that allow them to better understand and empathize with others and involves working with memory and recognizing the emotional aspects of the learning process.

Gemma also interprets literacy in terms of processing information and, like Rose, speaks about how memory shapes the way we engage and interpret interactions with the world. When I asked her what it means to be literate, she explained,

It is interpreting the world as you walk through it and whether that is the digital world and under digitally literate or the physical world and you're literate: you are actually able to read and I just find it so fascinating that there is people who... like...if they can't read how can you...literally... how can you walk through the world like.... It is like you are not even in this world. You are in another world and yeah. It's got to be one of the biggest challenges like I think about it a lot and I am like, wow, that would be really challenging. And then, they have strategies like they memorize this word like what this word "sigh" means or you know like their memories must be incredible because they have this way of connecting certain images to meanings.

(interview, June 14, 2017)

From Gemma's perspective, memory helps learners process new information and plays a significant role in shaping the learner's meaning making process, and while reading is not necessary to engage in memory work, memory is necessary to engage in reading work.

Sharon also relates literacy to cognitive processes. She specifically believes that a more challenging and important aspect of literacy is learning to articulate thought processes. For the educator this involves developing a better understanding of how learners think and what makes them absorb information (interview, March 16, 2017). She explained that sometimes it is clear that the learner has the skill, but the expression of the skill on paper poses a challenge because it requires an expression of the thought process. She illustrated this point by describing an incident when she was assessing numeracy for the program intake:

I use to do assessments in the one-to-one and it was very typical of men from the islands like Jamaica and Trinidad, those different islands.....and I did word problems as an assessment. So I will give you 100 dollars, you are going to buy a pair of pants for 45, a belt for 8, pair of socks for 2.50, whatever. And you give the guy a hundred dollar bill. How much money will you get back? Never did anybody pick up a pencil or paper. These guys would go, well the 45... I could put another 50 but then I am going to take that 5 and put it over there on the belt. But then I am going to have some money left. By the time they finished, they wouldn't be perfect but they would be within a dollar. And I would say to them, "Okay, so what did you do? Did you add, subtract, multiply, divide?" They'd go, "I don't know, I just took this from there and did this. You know, I just...usually they say...I just worked it out, but they could not articulate the process or the operation. And so, I see that a lot. They can

do the math in their head or they do good at approximating and estimating but paper math...pencil and paper math that's a challenge.

(interview, March 16, 2017)

According to Sharon, teaching writing can be a challenge since, like solving a mathematical problem, it involves articulating thought processes that the learner may not be fully conscious of. Also, it provides some insight into how reading and writing is different from oral literacy processes. Oral literacy does not provide a visual demonstration of the workings of the mind in the way pen and pencil approaches to solving word problems can provide more of a visual record of the operations used to complete word problems.

Educators also discussed cognitive strategies that they use when teaching reading and writing.

Margo and Sharon use sight words as a visual strategy to support phonics based decoding.

Sharon described to me how she would instruct learners to look for visual cues to read words:

I have a whole strategy that I use to do with W\_H words, you know. Here's how you can figure it out, you know. Is it an information word. It starts with "wh" information words, okay so you know it starts with a wh. What does it end? You know, typically you will see learners spell want: w-h-a-n-t and my strategy would always be.... Is it an information word? Is it a question word? No? Well, then it doesn't have an h in it.

Just remember that. So to give them these little strategies.

(interview, March 16, 2017)

Sharon acknowledges the importance of cognitive reading strategies such as decoding as a necessary component of the learning process:

They do need to be able to decode. All those things they need that because it

would be a disservice not to give them those...Help them get those skills, for sure. I mean, Math is a little different and teach them how to use a calculator. But reading, for me, is hugely important because that opens up the world to them. So they need those basic reading skills. Writing too, but let's face it, when I think of how much writing...I have a son who is out there working....honestly, he doesn't write much in his job. He writes little tiny incident reports. He fills out a form. But he's not writing reports and essays and all that stuff. So, but the reading is important, but I think, beyond that it's connecting the text to their personal life and then outside of their own personal circle. Connecting it to the world ...community and the world (interview, March 16, 2017).

While reading and writing is a component of the work Sharon does, helping the learners develop the skills to widen their personal circle is the priority. For this reason, advancing literacy skills at certain levels of proficiency are not always necessary to help a learner successfully meet their goals. In addition, adult learners come to the classroom with various skill sets and so different aspects of the learning process need to be stressed for different learners. As Sharon explained, educator needs to be cognizant of the skill sets the learners bring to the classroom rather than treating the learner as a "blank slate" (interview, March 16, 2017). So, for instance, the learner may have good critical thinking skills but simply needs to learn to decode. So in this case, the educator prioritizes teaching decoding rather than critical thinking (interview, March 16, 2017).

I found that Margo tended to focus on discussing cognitive approaches to developing literacy, and from doing a scan of her classroom, I also noticed that many of the classroom



resources focused on supporting aspects of reading such as decoding and whole word strategies. For instance, I noticed she tended to have sight word lists on the wall that would be used to support decoding. In the interview, Margo also tended to talk about supporting “emergent” readers who required decoding instruction (field notes, October 25, 2016).

For Deaf educators, visual and expressive strategies become more significant to the teaching of reading and writing than sound based strategies. While there is an oral skill component to the OALCF framework, as an educator of Deaf learners, Peter modifies the section on “speaking with confidence” to focus on expression using ASL by developing presentations (interview, January 23, 2017). As an educator of Deaf learners, Peter often emphasizes the significance of learning to read visual cues. As he explained, when teaching reading, “we look a lot for content clues and using those to understand the global meaning of the paragraph or the story, you know, instead of focusing on each word and the meaning of each word try to take a more global approach to that with that just understanding the content” (interview, January 23, 2017).

Seven of the educators emphasized the communicative aspect of literacy. Educators like Peter define literacy in terms of processing information for the purpose of communication. When I asked how he defined literacy, he replied, “It means an opportunity for people to receive information to express themselves. It’s communication through sign language, through English, through reading and writing” (interview, January 23, 2017). Ava believes that what constitutes literacy depends on the technology that the culture uses to communicate. In the case of western contexts such as Canada, the constant shift in communication technologies causes literacy to be something that is constantly changing, but print literacy remains the

dominant form of communication (interview, June 15, 2017). For Ava, communication technology such as computers changed the necessity of being print literate by accelerating the demand for print literacy, as the economy is becoming increasingly mechanized and digitized: “we wouldn’t really need a computer if we didn’t use didn’t use written words” (interview, June 15, 2017).

### **Skills Embedded in Literacy Learning**

Nicholas also believes that technology has shifted what it means to be literate and has redefined literacy to include more than just reading and writing:

One thing for sure, literacy is not what it used to be. Technology changed everything and to be computer literate is an added value to someone’s skills. Understanding technology is now an essential skill to a portfolio no matter what is the transition path...pursuing post-secondary studies or seeking employment. In other words, literacy now goes way beyond having writing and reading skills. In 2016, we are also talking about financial literacy. It’s critical to understanding budgets, interest rates...we are making financial decisions every day that affects our life.

(interview, February 6, 2017)

12 of the educators believe that literacy is more than just reading and writing but includes embedded skills such as numeracy, financial literacy, digital literacy, oral literacy, the reading of visual cues, critical thinking, conflict resolution, interpreting documents, life skills and other soft skills. Rose finds that teaching digital and financial literacy is becoming increasingly important given how innovations in computer technology have transformed how individuals interact with information and through the complexity of financial institutions (interview, April 3, 2017):

A lot of it as we talk about protecting your information...not giving out your social insurance number. Reading documents that you might get from the bank.

Knowing your credit report. What's a credit report? How is it going to affect your life if it is positively or in a negative way. We've got a couple of articles, one from Ontario Reader, *Sarah can't pay her bills*, and that's a really good one because it puts it in the context she is having difficulty because she overspends and how she can get back on track. So that financial literacy is important for their stability. You need to have some things in place to really be able to focus on learning and our learners as adults quite often have children, families. We have a lot of people who are in a sandwich generation, taking care of their children and seniors. It is a challenge for them at best. So they need to have a lot of things in place....Interpret documents correctly.

(interview, April 3, 2017)

Rose demonstrated how embedded financial and digital skills are embedded in communication processes by describing a learner's challenge in understanding how *AirMiles* work:

...there are a lot of problems with AirMiles and one of our learners ... switched over from dream miles to cash miles and then... Airmiles put a stop on all the cash miles. So in a way, when he thought... he was going to pick up 40 dollars worth of points and wasn't able to use them because they put a stop. But part of it was not reading the email that he got about this, you know, hold that they had put on it. He got another one that saying that they are taking it off as of Wednesday. So he is going to try again but...I mean, it is just that thing that you think might be easy. But

definitely, emails are one of the most important. Because that is the way that they are still communicating.

(interview, April 3, 2017)

She also explained to me that there is a generational difference with regards to the skills sets individuals need to develop. Whereas younger adults have grown up engaging with social media and digital interfaces that can provide instant access to information, senior adults were born in less digital-oriented societies and are used to a world where information is processed at a slower pace. Yet, the senior adults are better at face-to-face interactions and communication than her younger students who, in a digital revolution, have less opportunities for dialogue and in-person interactions (interview, April 3, 2017).

Juliet explained to me that evaluating digital information is becoming an increasingly important topic in the literacy classroom. Often in class discussions, learners will sometimes say something that would not sound factual and when she would ask them where they retrieved their information, they would explain that it appeared on their *WhatsApp* feed. She explains that educators need to spend more time helping learners discern how to assess digital information for reliability (interview, June 12, 2017). Indeed, when I was observing Juliet's class, a learner asked me to help her read an email she received via *Facebook* that she was worried about. It turned out to be chainmail. After I helped her decode the language, I then had a chat with her about chainmail and showed her structural features that could help her identify it and suggested that it was best to delete it. In teaching her how to identify the structural components of chainmail and how they work, I found that the learner not only seemed happy to learn a relevant skill, she also seemed more relaxed and less worried about navigating

through social media. In addition to teaching learners how to assess digital information for reliability, Juliet would also like to teach learners how to use applications but explained that they did not have the resources to support teaching many of these digital skills (interview, June 12, 2017). Indeed, some of the classrooms I entered had outdated computers that had long loading times that made it difficult for learners to incorporate their use in class. In Juliet's class, the *WiFi* connection was strong and so learners accessed digital resources through their personal phone devices if they had one and others opted to use printed resources.

Many educators found that their work often involved helping learners recognize the skills that they had and how they could be used to support their goals. Indeed, this was the case for Diane:

... they already come with skills because sometimes, they never looked at it that way. They never saw that they had skills by raising their children. They are just like...yeah...I am just a mom, that's all, you know but it is not that's all. Right so, I love that part of...because that's so important to teach them that like to see themselves differently that's a part of the learning. It is more than the ABCs and 123s. Of course, that is a part of what we have to do, you know, for our funder but that empowerment is so important.

(interview, April 21, 2017)

Diane identifies how skill sets that are often gendered are devalued and unrecognized by learners and that the educator often has to help the learner reassess their skill sets and help them recognize the value. For instance, she found that many female learners did volunteer work that involved doing tasks that would be similar to what they would encounter in the

workplace, but the learners did not think these experiences would qualify as work experience because it was not paid labor.

As an educator in the Aboriginal stream, Diane is also concerned with the emphasis on print literacy as a skill, since the Indigenous peoples she teaches come from traditionally oral cultures and so print is not in the “blood memory.” In her class, the development of oral literacy skills such as story-telling is an important literacy practice (field notes, November 3, 2016). The sharing circle I observed provides an example of how non-educator directed discussions facilitated learner control and the direction of the discussion (field notes, November 3, 2016). Such an approach to supporting oral literacy created a space where learners shared the wealth of knowledge they bring to the circle and presented their knowledge in ways that respected the contribution learners bring to the learning process.

The drumming circle also demonstrates the significance of oral literacy in the communication process. To facilitate a drumming circle, the educator first taught the learners how to drum the song by drumming and singing the song for the learners. She then taught the learners the key phrase to say together and we went on rounds where we would say a key line and then sing together. Drumming and singing requires being adept in multi-tasking and a combination of listening and speaking since the participants take turns speaking and then speaking in unison. It requires the drummer to sit up straight to keep the beat and get the right sound from the drum. The participants have to listen to both the drum and think about what they are saying simultaneously (field notes, November 3, 2016). The integration of the sharing circle and the drumming demonstrates the integration of critical literacy and soft skills into the oral literacy practices.

Oral literacy is also an important part of Ava's practice. She believes exercises that bring attention to the act of listening shifts the way individuals think by introducing them to different perspectives on various topics. So about once every class, she invites learners to speak about a topic and provides learners with a list of different things to try doing when they are listening to encourage active engagement with the topic (field notes, June 15, 2017):

One thing that I do because I don't like...don't want to put anybody on the spot and you don't want to preach to them so one of the techniques I use, and Thursday is my communication class, it's a regular exercise that we have now woven into our day. And we don't do it every week and nobody is on the spot, they can decline if they don't want to but there is a sort of understanding that at some point everyone is going to take their turn. And we do a speaking and listening exercise where whoever chooses to be the speaker that day will be given some parameters. We repeat them weekly about how long to speak. How much detail to go into to sort of like be clear about the point they want to make and then the listeners...all the things. So I created a job list for the listeners so they realize that they are active in this. And...It's a, you know, it's ongoing. But little...eventually they are going to take what they want from it and...if they are not, they are not but it really supports folks who are shier and more afraid to speak up because it creates a safe environment for them and it ...for those individuals who tend to like to talk a lot and they are not answering the question, it's an exercise that maybe over time they start to help them with their communication and with the boundaries that are agreed on about

your role of what a listener is it, you know, you try to stay in them. So it shifts how people think.

(interview, June 15, 2017)

The day I was observing, the learners were not ready to present on a topic and so she was working with them to help them prepare.

While 12 of the 14 participants saw literacy as embedded and connected to other skills, Abby and Fiona perceive literacy as predominantly reading and writing with other skills as somewhat separable. Abby believes that literacy refers strictly to the skills required to process print. As she put it, “literacy to me is the ability to read and write. And that is that” (interview, May 17, 2017). As she began to share with me other skill sets she supports when she tutored, I asked her if it would be better if the program were named something else other than a literacy program. To this she replied that the use of the word literacy...

....serves as a bit of a sign post for people to come for help in reading and writing. So there is nothing wrong with that. But I think it also serves as a gateway for people to access other assistance. And that I don't think is...I think that my point is...I don't see the need to be so rigid about, you know, you should only talk about literacy in the literacy program and you should only talk about something else in some other program. I think there is a bit... I think there is a fair amount of room going, you know, overlapping and whatever. I don't think it has to be quite such rigid boxes around you know...literacy programs should only...because they are only funded for this, for reading and writing and nothing else. Well, you know, things happen and



people do whatever they need to do. So, I don't know if that is any different from any other services.

(interview, May 17, 2017)

For Fiona who works as the math educator for her LBS program, she incorporates day-to-day numeracy skills, such as financial literacy and digital skills and using the internet to develop emails and conduct web searches, into her definition of literacy. However, she argues that that when these subjects are taken into a higher level they are less literacy and more specialized skills:

I guess literacy to me is to have the language skill whether it's reading, writing, comprehension to speaking to be able to accomplish your day-to-day tasks. For some day-to-day tasks it includes the work place so they have to be at a level to function in a work place. Numeracy is a part of that as well to have the basic number skills to also be able to manage your own finances to whatever type of, you know,---clerk—to me it's up to a certain level. There are higher number skills that aren't literacy anymore. They are more specialized skills. There is a certain basic level and this day in age, the digital literacy is a part of that as well. How do you fill a form out on line? How do you attach a document to an email? How to use email for starters? How to do a google search, select a good website.

(interview, February 28, 2017)

Because other skills are embedded in literacy practices, educators and programs will integrate these additional skills as a part of their lessons.

Nicholas argues that one of the challenges of teaching adults is that they enter the program with a multitude of competencies, and so when one teaches adults they need to consider this when planning lessons rather than teaching in a way that assumes the learner has no knowledge or existing skill in the area that the educator is instructing:

Adults bring a different perspective than children. They have their own experience and have acquired a multitude of competencies. One could say that they are not a blank slate. As adult teachers, we should take this into consideration when developing teaching strategies that are unique to everyone.

(interview, February 6, 2017)

Educators also question whether literacy should be situated in *Employment Ontario* and not left as its own department under Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, especially since not all learners want to upgrade their literacy skills for the purposes of employment. For instance, Florence also voiced her concern of the employment focus of the LBS program because it often did not focus on helping learners learn the skills they needed to navigate the social service systems that they need to survive, such as how to deal with landlords that are not taking care of the property her learners are renting, or helping learners navigate the healthcare system so they can receive access to mobility devices (interview, June 8, 2017). Her program is goal-oriented and task-based in the sense that she sits down with her learners to develop a goal that will be relevant and useful for their specific circumstance, such as improving one's living conditions (field notes, June 8, 2017).

## **The Relationship Between Skills and Tasks**

Eleven of the participants spoke about the relationship between skills and tasks with regards to their practice. Nicholas pointed out to me that the OALCF focus is on developing and measuring skills rather than delivering content (interview, February 6, 2017). This point was also made by Margo who explained to me that the OALCF is a framework, not a curriculum, since it focuses on outlining the skills the program should help the learner develop to meet their various goals paths, whether it be independence, employment or post-secondary education:

So it is a framework and not a curriculum. So it is a framework looking at skills that need to be developed. So we're looking at the skill gaps the learner may have depending on their goal path. So we're looking to develop these skills rather than a defined curriculum and to prepare them for defined assessments. Even though there are assessments, we are more looking at the skills that they need to acquire to be able to complete the assessments but the assessments are more task-based and more relevant to labour force or to post-secondary environment.

(interview, October 25, 2016)

Distinguishing the difference between a framework and a curriculum is important to Margo because it allows the educators to determine the content that is explored in the form of tasks. For Margo, tasks refer to the activities used to facilitate the learning and development of skills.

Margo believes that for the acquisition of skills and knowledge to be functional, the tasks need to be relevant to the learner's goal path (interview, October 26, 2017). This point was also made by Nicholas:

We evaluate the competencies that need to be improved to attain the goals of the adult student. It may be short term but in line with the long-term goals. We may use oral or written evaluations without even them knowing that we are doing so. Some adults are not comfortable with evaluation in the traditional sense and we should be flexible.

(interview, February 6, 2017)

These educators tend to take a task-based approach to help learners develop the skills they need to pursue their goals, and so a significant part of their job is to select tasks that are appropriate for scaffolding and preparing the learner to develop the skills necessary to achieve their goals. Margo specifically bases her task selection decisions on her observations of the learner while they are working on tasks and on the learner's requests and interests (interview, October 23, 2016). Most of the LBS educators believe that goal-setting is an integral part of their practice as adult literacy educators, and this involves working with the learner to establish a goal and mapping the skill sets needed to attain the goal, which have to be concrete and relevant to the learner. Successful completion of task can be used as evidence of an acquisition of the skill. However, the educators emphasized that these tasks cannot be as generic as the milestones, the tasks have to work directly towards the learners' specific goals.

Sharon believes that literacy tasks should be selected from real everyday text that the individual encounters rather than set tasks from workbooks (interview, March 16, 2017). This is

also important to Sharon because she believes that skills are not easily transferrable from one context to another, so it is important that one learns the skill in the context that they will be using it:

...if you want to get better at baseball, you don't practice hockey. You practice baseball. So if you want to get better at writing...I don't know, filling out application form...you have to fill out application forms. Because, you know like, some instructors will say, well everybody is doing essays...and I'll go, why is he doing an essay? His goal is employment. When will he ever in God's name will he write an essay? And an essay is completely different than writing a letter of complaint to a landlord or an incident report in the work place. It's not the same thing

(interview, March 16, 2017)

One of the challenges that come with switching to the current task-based approach is that the milestones are used as pre-set standardized tasks that measure learner progress and program accountability. As a result, educators feel the need to select tasks that they predict the learner can do successfully rather than tasks that are relevant to the learner's specific goals. Moreover, Sharon has noticed that some educators will focus on teaching simplified versions of the tasks so the learners can reach the milestones rather than having learners work with the task that allows them to work towards their goals (interview, March 16, 2017). When I asked Sharon if she thought a task-based or a skill based approach to measuring literacy was better, she explained that they both had their drawbacks but task-based approaches were more

practical if learning plans were based directly on the tasks that were relevant to the learner-determined goals. As she explained in relation to her experience teaching in LBS,

When I first started, it was task-based. Quite frankly, we didn't have to document a thing. But it was task-based. What do you want to do? And we would have these learning plans: Where I want to write a letter, I want to write a recipe. I want to, you know, do. . .It was very concrete. And then it went. . . then it switched to the old matrix where it was a set of. . .it looked just like the common curriculum where it was all these list of embedded skills, you can decode. . .first letter/last letter. It was like. . .And so they worked with that for a very long time. Felt like highschool. You know, felt like elementary school. And now it has flipped again where the outcome is what's emphasized and it is task-based not skill based. But you still need the skills so how do I mesh that with task-based. It is very challenging.

(interview, March 16, 2017)

When I asked Juliet as a follow up question whether she thought a task-based approach or a skill-based approach was better, she replied that it depended on what the learners prefer. In her class, she found learners were more concerned with developing the skill regardless of the task. She explained that her learners are often less concerned with what they read and more concerned with learning how to read (interview, June 12, 2017). When I observed her practice, I also participated as a tutor to help one of her learners with the task of her choice. The learner wanted me to help her read and was more concerned with working on the pronunciation of the words rather than the meaning of text and seemed to appreciate the decoding and whole word

reading strategies rather than the comprehension and summary strategies I provided. At the end of our reading session, she even asked for the sight word list I had generated to facilitate her reading (field notes, June 12, 2017).

### **Cognitive Dimensions of Practice.**

Educators stressed the problems with relying on standardized assessments in the measuring of learner's achievement and the value of learner-directed approach to promote ownership of the learning process and their literacy labor.

#### **The problem with standardized assessments.**

Nine of the educators spoke to me about the advantages and setbacks of using standardized tasks to determine learner proficiency level. In particular, educators question the generic tasks selections made by the Ministry as a quality measuring tools. For Rose, the challenge of the task-based approach is facilitating transfer and retention, specifically, making sure learners are not going through the motions of completing the task but absorbing information that they can apply to another context and retaining that information. She believes that these skills are important for the post-industrial workforce:

Sometimes people can do tasks once and I'll give them the theory behind it and they can't apply it to another one. So it has to be repeated. I just see how they learn or they go from one task from another to another to another. No space in between to absorb what they are doing. They just want to get the job done. So maybe that person will be really good on a production line but it's not going to help them when it comes to retaining that information. You need that blank space. And it is hard to retrain somebody who has been doing things that way all

their life, you know, and they are maybe they are 35. But it is possible, you know. Really possible.

(interview, April 3, 2017)

The tasks are supposed to prepare learners for employment; however, because they are generic and are alienated from a real world context, they may come off as something that needs to be done or a “chore” as Juliet put it. Rose also points out that whether an individual can transition into the workplace is sometimes dependent on whether the manager can empathize with the employee and address their special needs rather than the need to develop a skill (interview, June 12, 2017). For instance, a Deaf Learner may be skilled in his occupation and in his ability to read and write; however, employers may be reluctant to invest in the infrastructure to support the employment of Deaf persons.

Educators such as Glenda believe that the milestones are not the best way to evaluate a learner’s progress in the program because standardized tasks do not reflect the tasks that are relevant to the learner. When I asked her what are the best ways to evaluate literacy learning she replied,

If I won’t offend anyone probably not the milestones. From the ministry. I am not sure what they assess exactly. For me personally, when someone says you know I never I never could do math before and now I can do this problem. Or I never liked reading and now I love this book. I know that you can’t measure that and that it’s impossible to use it probably as a standardized question of any kind but for me personally that tells me a lot. Or now I can help my boy with my homework and I couldn’t before. Those personal kinds of stories.



(interview, November 29, 2016)

Educators such as Juliet suggest that it would be better if they could do portfolio based assessment that directly provides a record of the tasks the learner completed to reach their goals and demonstrates the learner's progress in working towards developing a literacy skill (interview, June 12, 2017). Many educators like Barb, Nicholas and Margo already keep portfolios of their learners' work that they use to monitor the learner's progress towards a goal and to inform their teaching and reassess the task selection process.

What Milestones do is add an extra layer of work for the educator, so the educator has to consider which Milestone is most relevant to the learner and can be a demonstration of the embedded skills. As Sharon explained,

So I think that's what we try to do is goal setting and then the instructor is supposed to be with the learner and that's also very challenging. Okay, let's take those tasks. They are going to be our milestones and from there she looks at, well what are the embedded skills and knowledge. And I mean, it's a lot of work.

(interview, March 16, 2017)

While some educators find the milestones to be extremely burdensome, some educators like Rose believe the Milestones are not a complete inconvenience and can be effective task-based assessments depending on the context. But she finds that for some contexts, she needs to develop her own tasks to scaffold the development of skills until the learner can do the milestone independently (interview, April 3, 2017). Rose and Sharon explained to me that before the Milestones, the school board developed demonstrations which were tasks that specifically helped learners develop literacy skill sets for specific apprenticeship programs. They

found these tasks are much more appropriate than the milestones. One of the things I noticed is that educators sometimes have to spend time creating tasks to help the learner develop the skills necessary to do the milestone rather than the skills that work towards their goals.

Not all educators are against standardized assessments. Some educators such as Margo would like the Ministry to develop standardized task-based assessments to facilitate the intake process. She would like the assessments to be organized in such a way that the information can be transferred and received in a file in case the learner changes programs, so the programs would not need to reassess learners using their diagnostic tools (interview, October 25, 2016). She also points out that this would be advantageous as a tool for referring learners to programs that would be more suited to support their learning (interview, October 25, 2016). She said that it is important to be trained in multiple different teaching strategies to expand the tool kit learners have available to them:

Let's say are at the base. Barely, literate, or not literate or innumerate. Because sometimes, I am working with a learner and so I have to explain this a lot to them. Sometimes I am working and I am asking them questions. I am observing. And they will just stop. Because my face, I try to process and to think. I am trying to process what they are saying and I am trying to think what can I do. And then they are looking at me and I am like no no no it is not you, I am trying to think. So when they see the look on my face sometimes its like okay and I am like no its not you. I am trying to think about what you are saying and how to use it to help you. So I think if there was a little more, you know, in the tool box. And also, and maybe this is related to the framework....of actual....so we're doing using a framework for

delivery and assessment, final assessment but I don't have the same kind of assessment for entry the diagnostic. You know how the milestones are task based, if we could have like standardized task-based diagnostic assessment.

(interview, October 25, 2016)

Other educators argue it is important that diagnostics be developed that are specific to the services that the program offers. As an educator of Deaf learners in a college-based program, Peter's program has developed its own intake assessment process that includes writing an essay, three online tests on reading, document use, and numbers, as well the use of the *American Sign Language Proficiency Interview (ASLPI)*. The ASLPI includes a series of questions and responses that are used to evaluate the individual's receptive and expressive proficiency. The ASLPI ensures that the learner has an expressive proficiency level that will allow her to fully participate in the class (interview, January 23, 2017). It should also be noted that because Peter is a college LBS educator, the standards for entering his program are higher than community or school board programs since the main learner pathway is college.

Rather than use a task-based assessment to help her develop learning plans with learners, Florence designed a self-evaluation questionnaire that she distributes to her learners at the start of the program where she lists common tasks that are often completed to help learners reach their goals such as writing a letter, counting, reading the newspaper, or reading a magazine, and she asks the learners to rate the level at which they feel comfortable doing the listed tasks (interview, June 8, 2017). Similar to this, other educators such as Gemma will do a needs assessment during the intake process that focuses on uncovering the tasks learners need to successfully accomplish to meet their goals (Interview, June 14, 2017).

### **Learner direction.**

All educators emphasized that learners need to direct the learning process and different educators created different approaches to encouraging learners to do this. Some educators encourage a drop-in centre approach to learning where the educators open the centre and make instructors available to meet during regular business hours, and the learners come to the centre when they require support from the educator. This is the approach used in the centre Margo works at where she is both teacher and manager of the facility. Margo told me she promotes “self-directed” approaches to learning whenever she can. When I visited the centre, I saw that all the learners were working on different tasks that required different levels of proficiency. Some would use the computer, and others would print out the files and work on it in paper. Some would use the centre as a space to work and make appointments with the tutors to work with them. Others came to collect the resources they needed and receive feedback on their progress on the tasks from the educator or the tutors they were meeting (field notes, October 25, 2016). This approach allows the learners to all work at their own pace and allows for a continuous intake of new learners. It also requires a lot of planning as Margo creates an *Evernote* file for each learner where she organizes the activities they will do based on the information she collects about their learning experiences and their progress on the tasks. One way she manages the workload is to specialize in working with learners that have an employment pathway goal and referring out learners that have a post-secondary goal. She will, however, make exceptions for learners who have particular reasons for wanting to study at the centre (interview, October 25, 2016).

In such a space, the educator plays a significant role as a resource to the learner and keeps track of progress and suggests strategies and tools the learner can use to accomplish their tasks. As Barb explained,

And we keep...it's keeping a check in... It's like checking-in. You know, like when your sixteen and your parents say, "you know, you have a curfew" and you break curfew. There are then penalties to be paid if you break the curfew. They know that it is not as severe as a curfew but there are penalties in a sense that you've made the decision, you've made the commitment. You have shown the right initiative. We're here to support you and yet the drive has to come from you. We can't drive the bus. We can be a passenger on your bus. We can help you navigate the obstacles but you have to be the driver because eventually wheels might fall off and how do you decide that the bus has got to be parked so you can fix your wheels? And going through the ...I guess...the journey is putting those skills in their work box or tool box so that when the wheels of the bus do fall off they're not just parking the bus, and saying, "well that's another failure" and on to the next one and the bus just stays there. They get out of their bus and they pull the wheels off because they got their tool box.

(interview, February 28, 2017)

Barb and Fiona hold a drop-in format class once a week and educator-led classes for the other four days. Educators such as Peter and Nicholas also develop digital modules that target the development of very specific skills that learners can select and work on independently on their own time and at their own pace. However, as Nicholas pointed out to me when I visited his

centre, these self-directed approaches, particularly those that are overly dependent on digital technology, run the risk of creating a narrow learning experience that doesn't incorporate opportunities for peer interaction where spaces for dialogue, soft skills and community can emerge (field notes, February 6, 2017). Such a learning experience can be isolating for a learner, which can have a negative effect on the learning experience. I noticed that most educators I interviewed and observed included teacher-directed activities that facilitated peer-to-peer interactions. For instance, in Rose and Juliet's classes, learners select the tasks they will work on for the first half of the course and this gives the educators the opportunity to provide learners with one-to-one support, individualize their learning plans, and provide feedback on the learners' progress. For the second half of the class, they develop class exercises that feature opportunities for peer discussion and for organizing group activities like going on trips, working in the community garden, or having a class discussion. Similarly, Florence's students had two tasks they needed to complete, an individual task and a group task. The group task involved fun low stake grammar and vocabulary games that encourage comradery while the individual tasks worked towards supporting the learners' specific goals (field notes, June 8, 2017).

Educators also promoted self-direction by having learners determine the content of the lessons. In Glenda's class, the learners decide as a group what they wish to learn and then Glenda collects and organizes the resources to support their learning. As much as possible, Glenda organizes discussion-based activities to maximize peer interaction and opportunities for dialogue:

I basically try to base the curriculum on what they want to learn as much as possible. Right now they're saying they want to learn French, for instance, and I'm

thinking whoa... for a while they wanted... you know....it was chemistry so we delved into some basic concepts around chemistry and I was busy getting the things that we needed for our little experiments all the time but they loved that and they were so curious and they seem to thrive on that kind of thing so I will see what I can find about... I mean I have high school French but for sure we need some tapes or something. But I will investigate that it seems to be a common interest of theirs at the moment.

(interview, November 29, 2016))

Florence and Ava also develop course content in consultation with their learners. Ava's class organizes and decides on their end of term trip and a potluck once a month. Ava also has learners determine how the class time will be spent. This occurs at the end of a topic they covered where she will ask them to reflect on what they learned and share on the board the ideas that emerged as from the previous lesson. Once this is done, as a group they will decide how the class time will be spent and what they will learn. She describes her approach as "Participatory Humanitarian." She described the approach this way:

Participatory Humanitarian approach that it is their learning and I am just there to help. I am just there to help organize it a bit and I got access to resources so I know where to look for stuff and where to get stuff. So, I encourage them to ask or look or I'll offer suggestions for them to use stuff. I invite them to bring their own material in but the most effective was, for myself, is to have it driven by them, the folks that are here.

(interview, June 15, 2017)

Ava also explained that the approach does not always work out the way she would like since sometimes learners will choose not to participate and sometimes their attendance is very poor, but she maintains the practice whenever she can to encourage learners to take ownership of the learning process. In addition, the learners in Ava's class, rather than the educators, construct and present at the sector's annual conference.

Self-direction also involves the educator being non-directional when facilitating group discussions. In Juliet and Diane's classes this meant not focusing the conversation but allowing the learners to take the conversation outside the initial topic that was being introduced. And while Juliet organizes the content and the lessons, she leaves space open for learners to take direction of the lessons. For instance, while I watched her start a conversation with the learners on current events, the learners led the conversation and determined its direction. Juliet explained to me that learner direction has a significant influence on the learning process. Juliet takes learner input into account when determining the content and approach to teaching and explained to me that sometimes including learner direction means teaching in ways that may not reflect the educators' ideas on best practice. For instance, although Juliet prefers to have the room organized into group tables, her learners insisted that the desks be kept in rows (Juliet, p. 10).

When I observed Diane's class, I saw how she facilitates talking circles to encourage an unstructured dialogue that encourages learners to determine the direction of the discussion, and the knowledge from the session emerges organically rather than being prepackaged and distributed and provides opportunities for learners to benefit from the knowledge of others and see themselves as a contributor of knowledge rather than recipients. As a result, the topic



changed three times but the voices of the learners' voices dominated the conversation. Diane also reiterated that sometimes what the learners want to learn does not reflect the educators' beliefs on best practice. She has found that not all Indigenous students want to experience the cultural component of the program as many have been raised with a negative perspective of their culture. So Diane makes this aspect of the course optional:

And also the learners have a choice. Just because they are aboriginal doesn't mean they want to learn about the culture. Because sometimes they don't and you still have to respect that, right? So, there has been ones that, oh no for one reason or another. The way that they were raised. You know, whatever their beliefs are, you know, because they also sometimes go on the stereotypes too of native people themselves. So they like...maybe they don't want to learn about spirituality because maybe they grew up going to church. They will be like, ooh...like no, I don't want to learn about native spirituality. So then of course we won't force them, right. They don't have to come to a drum circle. They don't have to smudge, you know, they don't have to use a talking stick or whatever. We won't force them. And if they don't want to learn about the legends because we have a book about 10 legends or they don't want to learn about indigenous culture/history through their like say reading comprehension, then we won't give it to them. We have other books we have from other sources that we give them as well. So we are very conscientious because each unique individual that comes in we do a training plan for what...how they want to learn. Like they have a say in their learning, right.

(interview, April 21, 2017)

On the other hand, there were students who were eager to participate in the cultural component of the course and those who would have liked more as they discussed how they might arrange drum-making workshops as a part of the discussion (field notes, November 3, 2016). It is a challenging decision educators need to make in determining whether they should prioritize learner-determination when it is in conflict with their notion of best practice.

Sometimes the learners may also require the experience of an alternative practice before they can determine what is the best approach.

In summation, educators describe literacy learning as being intertwined with cognitive and communicative processing skills. Learning to read and write is a process that engages memory, emotion, and is a process of internalizing and externalizing information. And, so, while educators traditionally associate literacy learning with print literacy, many expand their definition of literacy to include embedded skills, such as those related to financial, digital, and oral literacy, that are required to engage in literacy tasks that are relevant to the learners' goals. Most educators employ task-based approaches to help the learner develop and to have an indicator of learner skill level; however, most find standardized tasks such as the milestones to be ineffective means to support literacy learning. Tasks need to be selected based on their relevance to the learner to better reflect their social and cognitive needs. Educators encourage learner-direction so the learner will work at a pace that is appropriate and encourages the learner to take greater ownership of the learning process

### **Chapter 7: Finding 3: Literacy as a Social Practice**

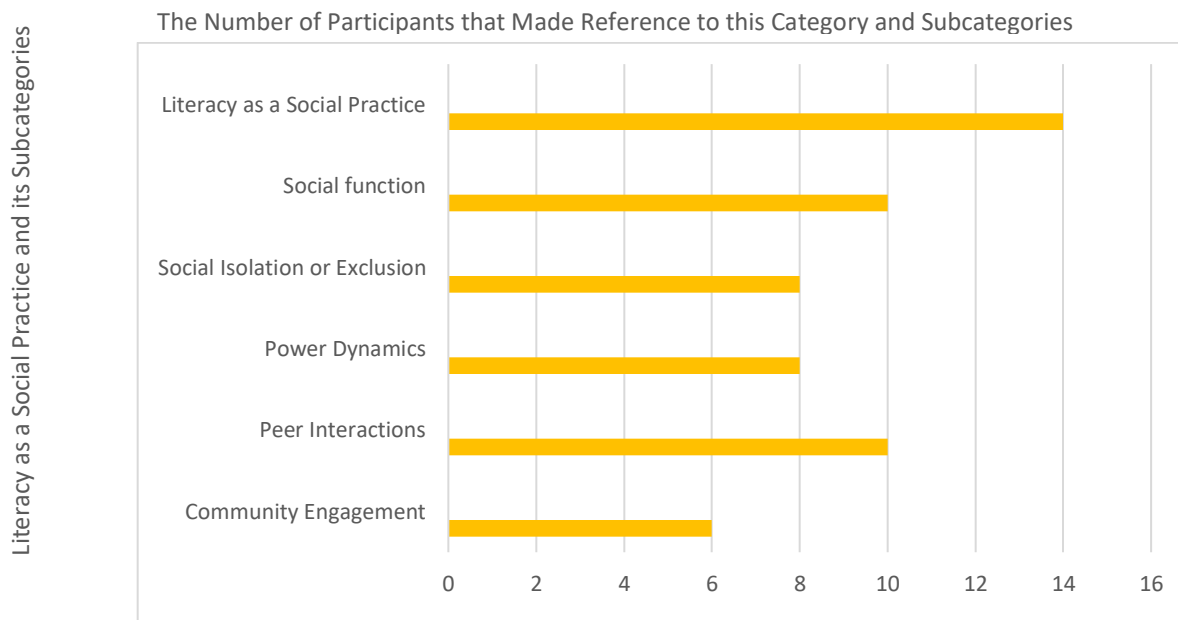
Thirdly, adult educators described literacy as a social practice necessary to participate in society. Social practices are contextual and changing. Literacy can promote social inclusion and social participation but can also facilitate social isolation and invisibility. Literacy learning is a process that includes assessing one's relation to one's social world and becoming aware of the power dynamics behind social practice. Literacy learning practices also create a space to question the power dynamics between the learner and the educator. It is not enough for the educator to teach the learner the dominant literacy practices since these are often the practices that work towards disempowering the learner. Empowering literacy practices involves developing communities of practice that go beyond dominant social practice. To facilitate the social aspect of literacy learning, educators facilitate group interaction, support participation in community-based activities, use learner generated content in the lessons, teach social skills and develop culturally relevant pedagogy. These three categories provide a frame for understanding how literacy is conceptualized by educators and the relation between conceptions of literacy and practice.

All educators in this study described literacy as a social practice that is needed to participate in society. However, most participants emphasize that this involves more than raising adult proficiency levels in reading and writing: literacy education involves teaching the contextual and cultural communication skills necessary to engage in societies that are diverse and experiencing economic and technological changes. Half the educators stressed that the teaching of context-based practices also includes considering larger questions of social inclusion

and power dynamics within normalized adult literacy practices. Chart 4 illustrates the subcategories that emerge from the analysis that relate to how literacy is used to shape social interactions.

Chart 4

### The Proportion of Participants Who Discussed the Significance of Literacy as a Social Practice and Subcategories



When asked to define literacy, 10 educators stressed a social functionalist definition of literacy that values literacy learning for full participation in society (Knobel & Lankshear, 2011, p. 6). The most traditional functionalist definition of literacy came from Margo. When I asked her what it means to be literate, she replied,

So to be literate for me then again is to know the things I need to know to help me function. So whether that be uhm numerical skills, digital skills, uhm life skills. Whatever learning the skills I need to help me to function

in society and to get through the tasks/the activities that I need to perform.

(interview, October 25, 2016)

A functionalist model of literacy learning focuses on the skills and practices that are required to participate and understand the meanings of social practices.

Florence defines being literate in functionalist terms as well; however, she explains that being literate is more than being able to make a contribution to the economy but also the community:

It means...that they are able to be engaged in society. They can contribute to society. They can be productive members of society whatever that means. It doesn't necessarily have to mean work. It can just mean volunteering somewhere. It could just mean being involved in different community groups. But they are active participants in society. And so literacy as a tool it has helped them, it has helped them to come out of the shadows and be able to do things that everyday people do like everyday tasks that we often take for granted.

(interview, June 8, 2017)

Her definition challenges the policy norm that a student is a contributing member of society if they are working and contributing tax revenue that leads to a return on investment in their education (MAESD, 2014, p. 12).

Glenda concurs with the idea that literacy learning should allow individuals to be fully participating members of society. However, for Glenda, the emphasis should be on helping learners engage in culturally situated practices:

...to me literacy means... understanding the culture in which they live, being able

to read the books that people are reading on the street car around them, you know. Understanding math well enough to conduct their daily lives well and uhm... Preparing them for college or for their education if that is their choice. Being a participating member of society.

(interview, November 29, 2016)

Similar to Florence, who uses the metaphor of being in the shadows, Glenda raised concerns about how normalized practices render women invisible, and so while women may have acquired the normative literacy practices of their society, these practices are gendered and not necessarily empowering for them. Glenda's pedagogical approach insists on female leadership and active participation of women in the form of dialogue based discussion and the selection of curriculum content.

One of the topics that the educators often raised was how digital technology has transformed the value of literacy. This is also significant because the learners are both pre-millennials and first millennials. So, many of the learners had learned to read and write in an age before the computer became the dominant mode of communication in the workplace and in school. This point was highlighted to me by Ava as well as other participants. Ava believes that computer technology has transformed the way we interact with each other to create new norms of communication. To illustrate this point, she explained to me that in the 1980s there were still jobs in Canada that did not require the ability to read and write. For instance, she managed a restaurant where one of her servers did not need to read or write but could rely on memory to communicate the customers' orders to the cooking staff, but with the introduction of computer software this task became automated. However, to successfully automate the

production process the server and the cook need to be good readers, so the orders could be inputted into the computer by the server and read by the cook. In this way, digitization transformed the skill set of the workplace by accelerating the need for reading skills. Indeed, helping the server learn to read was what led Ava to decide to become a literacy educator (interviews, June 15, 2017). Ava believes that the literacy required to fully participate in a community is not dependent on proficiency level but context. She explained to me that many of her students come to her class could read and write. The challenge for her learners is that they often come from different cultures or a different context, and her work involves helping them develop the literacy practices to fully participate in a shifting and changing society. For instance, we had a discussion about the increasing presence of visual modalities that are now replacing some of the traditional word-based ways of communicating. She explained to me,

...at some levels I really like that we have the shift to the more visual but over time symbols and icons have taken on more meaning and folks who have not been a part of how that meaning has been developed are pretty lost, still. So there is still a gap. Maybe down the road that gap won't be there when it is developed by a younger generation. Now by the time new systems are in place, well then everybody will be kind of...but at the moment a lot of folks are left behind. And the shifting geopolitical thing is connected with it as well because Canada is the perfect example of Canadians who are still learning to be with the English Language. They already know how to be in their own culture and their own language. They probably have more education than I have. But because of the language, the written word thing and the cultural understanding that comes with the language, there is that gap

there. So if you are helping someone learn to use the computer but they don't understand what the symbols mean, they are still left out. They are still not able to participate fully.

(interview, June 15, 2017)

Ava attributes cultural shifts in literacy practices to the introductions of new technologies such as the printing press or computers. She believes that these technologies transform our literacy practices and, in doing so, how we communicate and interact with each other (interview, June 15, 2017). Thus the significance of reading and writing as the predominant form of literacy has to do with the evolving skill sets that are required to participate in specific cultural contexts. As she suggests, literacy

...is a way of being. It is how we are in the world and it has more to do with emotional intelligence, social intelligence, compassion and being than it does simply with being able to read and write and balance a check book. But because of how we are living today, especially in this culture in the west, you can't manage without being able to use the written word somehow...

(interview, June 15, 2017).

### **Social Exclusion and Social Isolation**

I found that many of the LBS centers tended to serve populations who have experienced forms of social exclusion or social isolation. Eight of the participants highlighted the importance of literacy learning as a means to address social isolation or social exclusion. When speaking about social isolation, Ava connected the concept back to the idea of violence and trauma and referred to Horsman's (2000) research on the subject. As she explained to me,



I think of that piece that Jenny Horsman did about the violence and that is one of the hugest biggest pieces to inform our field because it has ripples that come out of that one thing because it really anchors on something that is real and connects to society. So anything else that would come out of that type of thing is how ...it is not just about the learning but how it is connecting to our society. Because learning doesn't happen in isolation.

(interview, June 15, 2017)

For Barb, communication for the purpose of social participation and human interaction is the main function of literacy (interview, February 28, 2017). She believes that learners are motivated to learn because they want to be recognized for their contribution to society:

They see others whether or not there are others that are of the same age or the same social grouping or you know or you reflect back on where people are that you went to school with and you use that as a kind of marking tool. Well where am I? How do I rank? What if we were to meet on the street what would we talk about and it is those kind of things that I think when we get to a certain age . . . we take inventory of where it is where we want to go? And how it is that we have to do . . . What we have to do to get there. And I think in many cases, the students walk through the door whether or not they are fresh on parole or whether or not they have hit rock bottom and they are just out of a treatment program. Everyone wants a better life regardless if you are educated like we are or whether or not you don't even have your grade 12. We all want something better than what we have. And it's that motivation that wants them to be better whether or not it's for themselves

because they are they are tired of where they are at because they don't want to stick the needle in their arm anymore or they have dependents because they have children that are looking to them as role models. Or if they are just looking at society and society looking back at them and saying, "What value are you? What do you have to contribute?"

(interview, February 28, 2017)

Barb adds the notion of social recognition as the motivation behind her learners' desire to improve their communication. It speaks to the idea of how society is used as the measure of self-worth. This is also significant in contrast to Margo's definition because Barb teaches a college transition program, so many of the learners who enter the program know how to read and write; however, their proficiency in reading and writing is not recognized as acceptable to enter a college program. So the learners in the program tend to be working towards upgrading or learning to express their skills in ways that will be accredited by an academic institution. Barb emphasized the idea that learners ascribe a sense of value to social participation. She believes that learners often see society as a space to take inventory of their life.

Rose spoke to me about the isolation that learners with disabilities have encountered by being sheltered at home where they become increasingly dependent on their parents to govern their transactions outside the home. For this reason, Rose believes it is important for the literacy educator to encourage learners to engage with society independently. For instance, she often encourages learners to open their own bank accounts and manage their own banking rather than relying on their parents to do it for them (interview, April 3, 2017). She described role-playing activities she would use to help learners practice their language skills for different

social contexts such as visiting a doctor. Florence also explained to me that sometimes learners engage in practices that can isolate them from participating in society. She finds that when learners encounter setbacks in achieving their goals, they have the tendency to become “reclusive” and they will avoid coming to class. She explained that these moments of reclusion can cause a student to take longer to complete their programs (Interview, June 8, 2017).

Gemma explained that when individuals have faced forms of incarceration it is not always easy to establish program goals. As she explained to me in reference to a learner who she had completed an intake for,

It sucks that that is the way our immigration system works where you just get detained when you are an irregular arrival and it is like. And then imagine, having been somebody who...like I am sure he has been through so much trauma and then coming here, the first place you go is in prison. Like it just seems...I don't know. So, I have actually noticed that for some people who come through, who have a history of incarceration whether they are coming through immigration or otherwise they ...it's often a lot harder for them to think about what their goals are because they are still dealing with the trauma of that. And I think trauma plays a role in learning for sure.

(interview, June 14, 2017)

This reflection emerged in the interview after an observation of her class where I saw her working with a learner through the intake process. As her program has a continuous intake process, the program developed interview practices that allow the educator to get to know the learner and gather information to develop a learning plan. This includes some diagnostic

exercises to provide information about language level as well as questions to help establish the learner's goal. The student she was providing the intake for had just received immigration status, but because he had not arrived in the country with the appropriate paperwork, he had been placed in detention between November and April. I discovered this when I was chatting with the learners during a break, and I had asked him where he was from. He pointed to a country on the map that was near the equator. I had asked him if he had experienced a Canadian Winter since I noticed he had some challenges identifying vocabulary words that had to do with winter sporting equipment but, otherwise, seemed to have a good conversational vocabulary. He explained to me that he had been in detention throughout the winter since he had not brought the identification papers that were required when he arrived in November and, so, he joked to me that he had missed his first Canadian winter.

Gemma tends to separate the social piece from the literacy learning piece, but she sees the social element of her teaching as necessary to support the learning process because social isolation is a major barrier to literacy learning and one key way to resolve it is to support practice that builds opportunities for fellowship and community engagement. As she explained,

we are always trying to create other opportunities for learning and also for fellowship. So it is like because it is more about....if social isolation is your barrier... that it is more about fellowship and the community than the actual learning ,or it is more about that first, so you have to start from there and then you can address the literacy stuff but it is like, yeah, the social isolation element is powerful. It's palpable. It's very much what can hold people back and so, yeah, we try to create as much as possible a community feeling.

(interview, June 15, 2017)

When I observed her class, I found the learners tended to work on their literacy tasks independently without much peer to peer interactions. This was understandable since the learners in the program had different goals and levels of proficiency, so that some were reading short chapter books that were under 100 pages while others were working with texts that were longer than 200 pages. However, before class started and during the lunch period, I saw that the learners sat together and interacted with the other classes in the program. Gemma showed me that the centre offered many social activities that learners were invited to attend and participated in such as the development of community gardens, yoga classes and fishing in the community pool. And so even though the learners worked on their school tasks separately, they interacted with each other socially outside of lesson times.

Diane has also worked with learners reintegrating into society after being incarcerated and the complexities of social inclusion for Indigenous women. She explained to me the irony that some women take higher prison sentences so they can have access to ceremony, and they can continue to be connected to culturally relevant social practices even though higher prison sentences will further isolate them from mainstream society. As she related,

This one particular lady she actually got...she was in trouble with the law. And she ...she wanted...her lawyer was to get her like a lesser...reduce her charges or whatever. She goes, "no I want a higher one." And her lawyer like didn't understand. And she explained why: she goes, "because when I go to jail if I am not at a higher level, I am not going to get these services." So, she knows what it is like to be incarcerated. "If I am charged with higher, I am going to get these strong Aboriginal

services because then I can go to ceremony while I am incarcerated and I get all these other programs.”

(interview, April 21, 2017)

While the right to religious ceremony while in prison is protected under the *Human Rights Code* and the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, an Ontario Human Rights Commission on *The Policy on Preventing Discrimination based on Creed* found that provincially Indigenous People often encountered restricted access to ceremony while in prison (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2015, 11.1). Indeed, the commission also speaks to the struggle that Indigenous People encounter being able to access to ceremony in public institutions such as schools, hospitals and supportive housing facilities. As a consequence, it is possible that Federal prisons provide better access to ceremony than provincial prisons and social institutions. Moreover, research from Deena Rymhs (2012) suggests that because of the large concentration of Indigenous adults in prison and the nature of incarceration, the prison has become a vital space for educating, developing a political movement, and practicing Indigenous culture. Her research focuses on analyzing the letter writing practices of Indigenous prisoners and offers an understanding of cultural literacy practices that are often not recognized by normative institutions but have played a valuable role in supporting individuals to have access to ceremony (Rymhs, 2012, pp. 229-230). In Ontario ceremony refers to spiritual services of Indigenous groups and this includes talking, sharing or sacred circles, smudge ceremonies, sweat lodges, one-on-one sessions with an elder or knowledge keeper, participating in the making or use of medicine pouches, dream catchers or drums. These ceremonies are a part of a wholistic lifestyle in the sense that they are medicine for healing and support the physical, emotional, mental as well as

the spiritual health of the individual (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2015, 11.1).

Indigenous women represent a higher percentage of the incarcerated female population at 38% provincially and 31% federally versus indigenous men who represent 26% provincially and 23% federally (Reitano, 2015/2016). Indigenous people make up a quarter of the overall imprisoned population in Canada even though they represent 4.3% of the population (Reitano, 2015/2016; Statistics Canada, 2011).

Diane develops lessons to support indigenous women who experienced incarceration. The lesson I observed was developed to support incarcerated women who were imprisoned in the 1970s. The educator prefaced the lesson by describing the historical significance of the “Strong Woman” song we were going to play. “Strong Women’s Song” was originally developed for a big drum played by women in the Kingston penitentiary to support the healing of female prisoners who were held in solitary confinement (ojibwe.net, 2018). Although the big drum is traditionally played by men, because small drums were not accessible in the prisons, the women played the song on a big drum (interview, April 21, 2017)

### **Analyzing the Power Dynamics of One’s Social World.**

While educators did speak to the functionalist aspect of literacy learning, they were cognizant of the power dynamics embedded in normalized notions of literacy. Eight of the participants discussed the importance of developing an approach to teaching literacy that encourages learners to be aware of the power dynamics and consider their position in relation to these power structures and how to address them. When I interviewed Sharon, I found that she articulated the issue of power in most of her responses to illustrate how she conceptualized

literacy teaching and learning. She began by defining literacy in relation to socially contextual situations:

I think literacy... for how I see it ...for the people I have worked with and supported. It's the ability to negotiate in many different social contexts. You know, it's not just about reading and writing and numeracy. It really is, for me, a social practice and it's different depending on the situation. And there's uhm. . .I forget her name Teacher Y. I can't remember her last name. She had a beautiful example where, you know, to fill out an application form at Macdonalds is very different from filling out an application for WSIB [Work place Safety Insurance Board]. You know, you have to know the politics of WSIB. You have to know what kind of response is going to get you the best kind of results. So that was really....I think what sort of helped inform my practice when I was a one-to-one tutoring coordinator was the different social practices that people found themselves in and what were the skills and knowledge that they had to...and political savvy they had to bring. And I do believe that literacy is also...there is a whole power component to it.

(interview, March 16, 2017)

Throughout the interview, when she would describe how she would approach the teaching of the task, she always emphasized helping the learner become aware of the power component of the literacy practice. For instance, when describing to me her approach to teaching letter writing, she emphasized the importance of taking the audience into consideration when developing the tone of the writing (interview, March 16, 2017). And, so, according to Sharon, teaching literacy also involves helping students become aware of power structures and the



work of the literacy educator involves suggesting strategies of how the learners might navigate through them to attain their goals. Some of the ways educators like Sharon would do this is by having lessons on “How to ask critical questions.” For instance, she once taught a lesson on how parents could ask their children’s teachers critical questions without coming off as aggressive (interview, March 16, 2017).

For Sharon, “literacy is about being in the world” and having the “skills to read the world” (interview, March 16, 2017). Sharon also made a specific reference to Freire when speaking about literacy:

I think, that, you know, Freire’s, you know, “read the world, read the word” kind of thing. I think that’s what it means to me is... you just don’t support the learning of the skills...it’s much more than that and I always say to instructors now, and I say it to students: literacy means absolutely nothing if you don’t take it outside the classroom. It’s got to have an impact on what you do outside of this classroom.

(interview, March 16, 2017)

Sharon also explained to me that an important part of teaching literacy to adults is teaching critical thinking skills since the way learners think critically as adults is different from the way they would engage in critical thinking as children since, as adults, experiences play a more significant role in how they think through a situation.

For Ava, empowerment comes from accepting oneself and others, and this can happen if the program is able to create a safe learning environment where people feel that they are not being judged:

[For] every colleague that I have ever spoken to within the field who works in different programs, it is a common thing: it is a safe environment and people are not judged. They are accepted and they learn. They learn how to accept themselves even beyond accepting others. I think that the number one is accepting yourself because once you do that it is so much easier to accept other folks and other ways and other ways of thinking. And it is incredibly empowering. It's hugely empowering.

(interview, June 15, 2017)

Abby is suspect of the role the educator plays in the power structures that govern normalized literacy education. As a tutor she is particularly concerned that the relationship between tutor and student also creates a power imbalance that she worries might be irresolvable:

I wish it could be less of a power imbalance but I don't know if that will ever be the case. I guess, I always have something they don't have and that they want to have as far as the learner is concerned. So, I think that is always, I think I have to come to terms with that. More than...you know, it will never, however far that I can teach them there will always be an imbalance.

(interview, May 17, 2017)

When I asked Abby if there was a way to resolve the power imbalance between tutor and student, she explained to me that the influence the educator can have in addressing power dynamics is limited:

...part of me also kind of feels like, well when we come to our, you know, learning session...our tutoring session we create a bit of a bubble. That you can do that but it

doesn't change the fact that once we get outside of this bubble, the world is a much harsher place. And unfortunately, I don't think, I...the sort of pessimistic side of me is coming through is this...I don't feel like I have been able to change what happens outside of the bubble.

(interview, May 17, 2017)

Abby demonstrates a concern with the limitations of the student and educator relationship even to provide a space to re-address concepts of power. She described the learning context between the learner and the tutor as being in a "bubble," a term that Diane also used to describe the space of ceremony that indigenous women have access to if they agitate for higher prison sentences. It suggests that while the literacy practices within the specific context can be more empowering and culturally relevant, these practices do not necessarily reflect the literacy practices of the dominant society that the learners will have to re-enter and re-navigate through.

From Juliet's perspective, there is a level of flexibility when it comes to the power dynamic in LBS programs and she attributes this to the maturity of the learners:

Well, oh, yeah it has been a long time since I taught children. The difference for me is, in an adult class, it is more a level of comradery that we are in this all together.

That while I have the power as the employee of the school board, I have a choice of how that power is exercised and they control a fair bit of the power in the classroom dynamic and they don't expect me to exercise control all the time...

I am happy for them to take control and they do it...that's fine... In an

adult classroom, we can negotiate a bit about what happens. I can suggest a field

trip and they can say, “no miss that sounds stupid.” Okay, fine. A while ago...In February, I thought it would be fun because we were reading all about civil rights. Some people thought it would be fun to learn the songs like let’s learn, we shall overcome. Let’s sing it all together and they were like “no, no, we are not singing. Absolutely not, no.” Whereas if it was children, they are much more ...much happier to go along with stupid ideas...I mean, ideas like that. You can sort of say, yes, we are doing this and let’s all do it ...

(interview, June 12, 2017)

Juliet stresses that to address the power balance the educator needs to encourage learners to take some control of the learning process and this also includes educators recognizing resistance to doing an activity as recognition of the limits on the power of the educator to direct the learning process.

Florence attempts to address the challenge of power imbalances by situating her program outside of the Ministry Funded LBS model. In such a classroom she believes the educator is an equal member of the program with the learners:

....the teaching method is learning from each other. That is what I am trying to say. ...Is learning from each other though I am the facilitator...I’m the teacher...but...I give information but so do they. They provide information to....And that can be information that I have not heard about before so...it can be information about what is going on in the community and what is happening in their lives. And so we brainstorm and say what can we do? But everybody here is an equal member of this program like no one is treated less than the other.

(interview, June 8, 2017)

Florence also brings to attention that Ministry funding creates power relations that are not empowering for learners. Since it shapes the role of the educator and can control what is done in the classroom. She has found that the amount of work educators are required to do to justify funding often takes away time that can be spent supporting learners. Moreover, government funding comes with the expectations that educators should focus their energies on delivering education that supports the government mandate to promote employment rather than consider the goals of the learner. As Florence explains,

. . . since I work at [names the College], I see both hats. I see LBS, and I see this program. I see what LBS can do. I see how Ministry funding is very patriarchal and bureaucratic, very limiting sometimes, and I don't want to write reports all of the time. I don't want to have to submit a business plan. I don't want to have to do the initiative burden of doing cases and files and put it on CAMS, that to me is a waste of my time, personally. It is necessary through LBS because it is government money and so there is so many accountability measures that are in place to make sure that tax dollars are being operated properly. But also the fact that, for me, it's...adults don't always need to find a job. Sometimes they can't find a job. Sometimes they don't want a job. In order to get a job eventually they have to get other things in place first like a home, like food on the table. Like doing everyday tasks. And so for learners in this program, not all of them want a job. For some it is about personal goals. One, Participant D, is already working but wants to get her hairdressing license so she can open up her own business one day. And so, the fact that LBS is so

employment focused, I try to...I steer away from that because if it is employment like what kind of employment? Like we live in a society now where there is precarious employment: contract work, general laborer, and so that for me is problematic.

(interview, June 8, 2017)

Educators see limitations to using literacy education for employment purposes. Sharon believes that although her work is focused on teaching reading and writing, the employment-orientation of LBS programs makes it necessary to consider other skills required to support participation in a changing workplace but reading and writing continues to have a significant role with critical thinking skills as an embedded part of literacy education. Still Sharon is concerned that the OALCF framework does not address the changes of a far more digitized economy:

The other thing that is challenging is that whole employment piece. Because, and I am not sure the framework really makes it overt in that computers, artificial intelligence. I don't think that has been factored in. Because what I have been reading is that all the jobs that perhaps some of our learners can easily do and have been doing for years are slowly being eliminated and but not just the job but the skill set required to do the job. So what use to be reading/writing tables, you know all that other stuff, interpreting documents, doesn't have to be done now. The computer does it. So what's left that is employable skills is critical thinking skills and I don't think there is enough sort of overt attention given to that area. So how are you teaching critical thinking skills in the classroom? I am just teaching them how to read and write.

(interview, March 16, 2017)

I got the sense from my interview with Sharon that she shares the concern with Knobel and Lankshear that using literacy as a strategy to solve unemployment in a digital economy is naïve since the jobs that require basic reading and writing skills are being eliminated by word processors (Knobel & Lankshear, 2011, pp. 9-11). And so, it is necessary to move beyond teaching reading and writing to develop a practice that is also inclusive of teaching critical thinking.

### **Literacy Education is Social Justice Work**

Five educators related the opportunities to teach critical literacy and do social justice work as a part of their practice and how they conceptualize literacy. Educators such as Juliet, Ava and Florence decided to become adult educators because of the opportunities the profession offered to do social justice work. Ava believes LBS programs offer opportunities for social justice work because they provide a place and a program for individuals who are struggling to get employment, such as students who may have a post-secondary background but lack Canadian experience and cannot upgrade their skills because they do not have the money to pay for private language lessons (interview, June 15, 2017). Florence specifically connects literacy to social justice since literacy helps learners develop the skill sets that will allow them to become active members of the society that she is working in:

. . . connect adult literacy to social justice...through a social justice lens because I feel that if adults do not have the basic skills whether that be reading, writing and math like, if you look at it, how can they be active members in our society? How can they vote? How can they, as learner A was doing, how can they write

a letter to their landlord saying how crappy my apartment is like, why are you not doing anything about it? It gives you options to have a goal and to find your path and pursue your goals. So I have seen just based on the experiences of the learners that were here tonight and those who I have known in the past. Yeah when you do not have the basic skills how can you, you know, achieve your goals but I always look at it through that lens because...I just think we need to do things to help society...Like people need the support. There has to be things in place to help them get there, yeah.

(interview, June 8, 2017)

An opportunity to support a movement for social justice is also what draws educators such as Juliet to the position. Indeed, she volunteered her labor to these programs for many years before taking a position as a full-time adult educator position in the LBS sector:

Oh, so I have been doing literacy work paid and volunteer for over 30 years. Initially, it was a summer job that looked interesting and then as I became more aware of the social justice issue of literacy, that really spoke to me, and I think that is what keeps pulling me back. Yeah it is more of the social justice aspect of people not having access to the written word. And, not having access not because they don't want to but because there are larger forces at work that meant that they weren't able to have access. And then just a love of reading for myself and not...you can't read...it is such a barrier to so much things. I wanted to break down those barriers.

(interview, June 12, 2017)



Before Diane became a literacy educator, she was trained as a community worker and she explained to me that this plays a significant role in framing the way she teaches literacy so that there is a focus on empowerment through education (interview, April 21, 2017) For Diane, literacy is a means of empowerment. When asked how she defines literacy, she replied,

It's about empowering, empowering people. That saying you are never too old to learn. For me, it is simple. You know its. . .I mean. . .People can say many different things about what it is but after being in it for about 13-14 years now, it is more than that piece of paper I always say, you know, because, meeting the learners, they are human beings and they just want to be seen in life, right.

(interview, April 21, 2017)

Diane believes that literacy learning in an adult context can also be liberating as it can help learners “get those old ways of thinking out of them that they had in their childhood (Diane, p. 17). Literacy education helps individuals believe in themselves and recognize that they have skills (Diane, p.2). This is particularly significant in Diane’s teaching context since she teaches learners who often do not enjoy the same power as men and so literacy education helps bring women together and into society. As she explained, “my theory that women to break that power dynamic get them back into society where they feel good about themselves. They may have been broken by circumstances beyond their control. So it is more about empowering” (interview, April 21, 2017). As she explained to me, the talking and drumming circles provided a space to readdress patriarchal and colonial narratives that have been disempowering to women. The culture component that the educator integrates into the adult literacy program offers a space to redress the disempowering colonial practices that many of the Indigenous

adults encountered under systemic and institutionalized racism brought by practices such as the residential school, the child care system, incarceration and displacement and dispossession of sacred lands. Diane also explained that many of the program staff are also learning about the culture along with the learners since they have a shared education experience that excluded the history and traditions of Indigenous people.

### **The Social Dimensions of Practice.**

Participants emphasized the role of educators in facilitating social participation and encouraging the learner to widen their community of interaction. This meant facilitating opportunities for peer interaction and community engagement.

#### **Peer interactions.**

Ten of the educators described to me how they use group work to practice social interaction, since literacy is often learned through social participation. For instance, Glenda and Sharon try to facilitate learning environments that promote the idea of being a part of a community of learners as opposed to the sage on the stage. Glenda organizes resources and leads the learning process in ways that are meant to provide learners with a space and context to share their experiences with each other (interview, November 29, 2016). Glenda believes that it is important to organize learning spaces that focus on women's education and provide learners with opportunities to share their experiences (interview, November 29, 2016). Sharon adds that part of building a community of learning is developing "a community of trust" (interview, March 16, 2017). To facilitate community building and social interactions, educators emphasize the importance of promoting group work. Rose and Florence organize low stakes vocabulary and sentence structure exercises in ways that promote group interactions

(interview, April 3, 2017). Nicholas believes that the OALCF is designed to facilitate lessons that promote group work. Curriculum categories, such as finding and using information, communicating ideas and information, understanding numbers and using numbers, using digital technology, managing learning and engaging with others, can all be delivered in ways that promote social interaction (interview, February 6, 2017).

Ava believes that in an LBS classroom the role of the educator is to listen and not make the lesson about herself but instead be there to facilitate group interactions, especially since encouraging group interactions and student expression is a key way to develop soft skills needed for social inclusion (interview, June 15, 2017). Her approach to teaching aims to establish a collective environment. She works with the learners to develop group charters and group norms. The aim of this is to develop an environment that will “make people comfortable that they have a voice. As much as I possibly can, the curriculum is informed by what that particular group wants to do and how to balance that depending on what their needs are” (interview, June 15, 2017). The lesson that I observed focused on delivering content that would promote a discussion about power relations as well as personal relations. For instance, she started by instructing learners to read a short story on the wisdom of grandmothers that built on a previous conversation they had before on describing and talking about grandmothers. The story was written by Beverly Hungry Wolf of the Blood tribe (Blackfoot). They read an excerpt from the story and had a discussion about it. They discussed issues of gender and race as well as the history of the residential schooling. She speaks about the issues explored in the writing and how it is similar to the speakers they had for black history month and speaks about the connection to social justice and issues of power (interview, June 15, 2017). The reading and

discussion was followed by a discussion about a documentary that questioned the practice of celebrating Canada's 150<sup>th</sup> birthday in light of the consequences that the nation building project has had on Indigenous communities and culture (interview, June 15, 2017). While the lesson I observed was predominantly teacher led, I did see that it was discussion-oriented and aimed to encourage learners to share their experiences in relation to the content she presented.

Ava described her pedagogical approach towards creating a collective environment:

. . . if it's appropriate we do sort of let's take stalk and try from the very very beginning to create a collective environment, and so, I have different strategies that I use and I always start saying, that it is really important to always ask why, these are my three rules of thumb: always ask why, and then, no is a fine answer, if you are not particularly comfortable that day to participant or speak up or do something that it is absolutely fine not to, and that the most important skill in communication is listening and then from there throughout everything else I do, I always somehow end up coming back to those three things. And then we will establish group norms earlier on. Sort of develop our own charter. Make people comfortable that they have a voice. As much as I possibly can, the curriculum is informed by what that particular group wants to do and how to balance that depending on what their needs are.

(interview, June 15, 2017)

### **Community engagement.**

Six of the participants expressed the importance of having literacy programs facilitate forms of community engagement to encourage social participation. Ava believes that it is

important for the educator to develop learning plans that provide learners with the opportunity to widen the learner's community. This is particularly important to promote leadership and independence (interview, June 15, 2017). One way she encourages learners to expand their community of practice is to have them develop and present conference papers. So, for instance, when she was invited to develop a proposal to present at a conference, she encouraged her learners to participate with her (interview, June 15, 2017).

For educators like Nicholas, promoting social engagement in the community is one way to understand the literacy skills that the learners need to develop and, to facilitate the process, he will encourage the learner volunteer to use their existing skills to support other learners in the centre or encourage learners to volunteer to sit on boards and meeting panels that help educators coordinate learning activities (interview, February 6, 2017). Promoting social engagement also involves developing relationships in the community. Nicholas explained to me that he spends one third of the days in a calendar month in meetings with organizations and local industry and attending community events. For instance, the day of my observation, he was in the process of organizing his notes for his meeting with a woman's newcomers outreach group that evening. Educators also discussed the importance of teaching learners how to use social media to build a social network and maintain relationships. Nicholas explained to me that although many of his learners did not have computer access, he anticipates that networking and social media will increasingly play a significant role in recruiting learners to the program and spreading awareness of what the services the centre offers (interview, February 6, 2017). Other educators in the study such as Barb suggest that a part of the role of the literacy

educator is to help the individual use social media to establish social networks between the student and the community (interview, February 28).

Dianne spends a lot of time engaging and coordinating community activities within the centre. In addition to managing and teaching the LBS program, when she can, she reaches out to, participates and engages with other Indigenous Peoples organizations such as the Ontario Native Literacy Coalition and connects her students with elders who can expand learning opportunities. She regularly organizes for speakers representing different cultural and social institutions to come in and speak or develop workshops for the learners. The lesson I observed for her class was the final one for the term and during that lesson Dianne asked the learners for feedback on which speakers they found relevant to their learning and if there were other speakers that they would like her to invite to complete workshops with them.

Gemma explained to me that one of the advantages of having an LBS program that is located in a community centre that provides multiple opportunities to engage in activities that promote social inclusion, and she argues that often this engagement can be more important than reading and writing instruction:

we try to create as much as possible a community feeling. We have barbeques, regularly, you know. Things like that. We go on trips. Usually we go to the island but we are not going this year because it is flooded. But yeah, that kind of thing. And we are right downtown which is awesome. We have a very convenient location, in that sense, so we can walk down to the water. We can...We've done lots of day trips to like Fort York. We have done things like gone to other public libraries where they

have 3D printers and cool things like that. Just try to introduce people to new...to other spaces ...other service that are available.

(interview, June 14, 2017)

She also provided me with a tour of the facilities and I saw that rather than stay in the assigned classroom, learners often took their work to different places in the center and would meet with other learners from other classes during lunch. Gemma commented that it is good to also help learners find groups that value the literacy skills that the learners bring to the program. For instance, she had one student who, although struggling to read and write, excelled in oral story-telling, so she connected the learner with a story-telling organization and he ended up finding employment following this route. So sometimes the role of an LBS educator is not so much helping a learner acquire new skills as becoming aware of communities that value and support the development of the skills the learners already have. As she explained to me, “he didn’t even know that that was a thing that you could get paid to do and go to schools and different community events and...he is already like...he would do that anyways. He didn’t know it was something that you could get paid to do” (interview, June 14, 2017).

One of the things that the educators illustrated to me was that not all adults who traditionally benefitted from their programming were seeking employment. These programs also provided services in the past that focused on community building and preventing social isolation. She described to me one particular program that the ministry stopped funding that did just that:

And we also...it was at (names the institution) so they had seniors. So it was an integrated program where you had the seniors with the residents in the same area.

And, it was good because people interacted, you know. So, sometimes, they wouldn't just...they encouraged people who were seniors to interact with the residents and that was really good. That was an excellent accommodation because there is more of a community. They are building a community there and that helped (interview, April 3, 2017)

One of the ways Florence encourages social engagement with the community is to organize workshops for her students that feature community speakers such as political representatives and speakers from organizations such as Historica Canada (interview, June 8, 2017). One of the follow-up questions I asked Florence was what made her decide to situate her literacy program specifically in the community church. She explained that it was difficult to get space in schools and other community centers. The spaces and times made available for classes were often organized in ways that would be inappropriate for adult learners. For instance, in one case her learners were placed in a kindergarten classroom and instead of receiving access to the space at a regular time or day in the week, she had to work within a patchwork of times that were not flexible to the needs of her students. The program is situated in a predominately black community that has a history of church organization as a main site for social support. The church is situated at a main intersection of an "underserved" (interview, June 14, 2017) community where learners can walk to the classroom and she can develop a routine schedule. Moreover, the classroom is situated in a space where learners are regularly interacting with members of their community who use the space for prayers, weddings, and special events. The day I attended there was a wedding rehearsal and learners were familiar with the family getting married and interacted with the family during their break (interview, June 8, 2017). These



students have a strong sense that the program is for their community. Florence added that the Church has a “grassroots community” (interview, June 14, 2017) aspect to it. It is seen as a place that is more directed by community rather than a mammoth organization (interview, June 14, 2017).

Another way that Gemma promotes community engagement is to have learners create content for the community centre’s website. For instance, she asked the learners to put together their knowledge on natural remedies to develop a text about the topic that could be placed on the community website. She described the process of organizing this project:

...there is also like one about healing our community so like taking care of each other. So that was all about natural remedies because people have so many natural remedies that they are always sharing in class and it is like an awesome way to get people to come out of their shell a little and just talk about...yeah, this is like...and it is fascinating...I learned so much from, you know, there is this and this plant and these are good for this and these things, and I am like whoa slow down. I am taking this down like...we need to share this information.

And yeah, I think that is a good starting point for everyone like I haven’t run across anyone who isn’t engaged about talking about cooking and food.

(interview, June 14, 2017)

Educators conceptualize literacy as a social practice that involves more than an education in the normative practices needed to function in society but an education that supports the development of one’s contextually situated practices in ways that facilitate empowering forms of social participation. According to the participants, literacy education for adults needs to

address practices that exclude learners from participation in society, such as the devaluation and misrecognition of learner's literacy skill sets and social isolation. This involves practices that value, recognize and support the development of the learner's skills, examining the power relations that shape social participation, and helping learners navigate the power structures in ways that will help learners achieve their goals. The social aspect associated with literacy education is a space that offers opportunities to do social justice work. Educators in this study believe that group work and community engagement practices are two effective ways to support the development of literacy as an empowering social practice.

Therefore, the educators in this study conceptualize literacy in terms of experience, as a cognitive process and a social practice. Educators in the study recognize the significance of experience on learning, particularly literacy learning. Experience informs the direction of learning in these classrooms. So having one-on-one dialogues with the learner is an important aspect of their practice since what educators learn about their students' experiences inform the resources they use and their approaches to facilitating learning. Considering learner's experience involves more than considering experiences in the classroom or lived experiences in isolation to other social forces: considering learner's experience includes recognizing the learner's experience in relation to their culture, gender, and history. Experience informs the learner's self-concept, specifically how they value themselves and their confidence to risk engaging in new experiences. Recognizing the significance of experience involves dialoguing with learners about their lives and developing learning plans that are driven by the learners' goals, use resources relevant to the learner, and facilitating new experiences in the classroom. Secondly, educators in the study see literacy as being a cognitive and a communicative process.

For this reason, it is valuable to have knowledge about various cognitive strategies of learning. Strategies selected should be determined on what works best for the learner and not on the understanding that one-size does not fit all. However, the holistic strategy seems paramount since educators in the study stress cognitive processes beyond reading and writing but also the significance of emotion and memory. Educators also raised the significance of digital technology in how information is processed so that literacy has become more than reading and writing; instead reading and writing is often an embedded process in the use of digital information. Standardized tasks or skills proficiency scales are not the ideal way to support cognitive aspects of learning. While some educators appreciate having standardized tasks and proficiency scales to use as diagnostic assessments for learning, they prefer to develop assignments that are specific and relevant to the learner for the summative evaluation. Individualized learning plans focus on recognizing the value of learner labor and building the learner's self-confidence and motivation so they will take ownership of their learning. Thirdly, educators in the study describe literacy as a social practice that is necessary for social participation. They also raised the point that many learners who struggle with literacy learning often have experienced forms of social exclusion and so a part of their work includes building strategies to help learners increase their social participation and this involves facilitating peer interactions and connections with the larger community. In the next chapter, I will build on these ideas further by discussing the experiential, cognitive, and social aspect of literacy education in relation to the theory and research on adult literacy.

## Chapter 8: Discussion

Educators who participated in this study conceptualize literacy in ways that move beyond an employment centric focus in policy and move between a variety of conceptual understandings of literacy that are employed in academia to understand literacy learning. For the most part, educators conceptualize adult literacy education in terms of learner experience, cognitive processes, and social practices. Such an approach to literacy education is necessary to provide a space for democratizing and empowering literacy education by providing services that allow Ontarians to upgrade their literacy skills and potentially readdresses social inequities. Literacy education in Ontario is intrinsically tied to economic practices and the way that literacy is conceptualized has implications for those who benefit economically from mass literacy education. In the case of Ontario, colonialism, patriarchy, and neo-liberalism are the key oppressive forces that work towards reproducing social inequity by advancing education systems that benefit an elite rather than all residents in the province. Under the human capital framework, a perception is advanced that power and economic wealth are determined by merit, an individual's willingness to develop the skills they require to compete in a knowledge-based economy. This perspective hides the effect of oppressive forces on educational outcomes in Ontario. The perspective masks how oppressive forces shape education access and outcomes so that even if institutions were to increase access for education, the participation in the system will always reproduce inequity since it is founded on a system of competition that constructs a hierarchal distribution of power to undermine democratic goals. And so, how one conceptualizes education within the context of Ontario has implications for democratic practice.

It is therefore necessary for the LBS program to operate under a framework that prioritizes education as a human right, specifically the right to have a life that allows for the full expression of being. Literacy education should work towards the common goals of living together with other humans with respect and dignity. Education should not be narrowly confined to the pursuit of employment, but as Freire argues, the vocation to be human (Freire, 1970, p. 43). With this said, that does not necessarily mean that literacy education cannot be used as an economic or labor market strategy. Literacy is embedded in labor in that language allows people to communicate, coordinate, and reflect on labor practices in ways that allow a community of practice to promote economic well-being. The problem is when literacy education is used to advance a narrow agenda. Within Ontario, there has always been a tension between education as a human right or as an employment program. This tension is embedded in Ontario's history as a settler colony that has shifted towards democratic principles. Today, literacy can be taught in ways that support democratic action or reproduce social and structural inequities. A literacy pedagogy that is attentive to these social and structural forces can offer a space to address these social inequities by recognizing how patriarchy, colonialism, and neoliberalism are embedded in literacy practices and literacy learning contexts. Once an understanding of how these oppressive forces work to reproduce inequities is recognized, strategies for teaching literacy can be developed to promote transformation of inequity by conceptualizing literacy in relation to the experiential, social, and cognitive aspects of the literacy learning process.

This dissertation seeks to explore how adult literacy educators of the LBS program conceptualize literacy in relation to the policies, research, and theories that inform how adult

literacy education is theorized and practiced. What I found was that adult educators recognize the capacity of literacy education to be both empowering and disempowering to learners. The educators who participated in the study were often theorizing strategies to build a practice that was relevant to their learners needs. In bringing together the data derived from the study of policy, literature and data collected for this study, I noticed that the challenge of developing practice that supports learning involves addressing the social and historical forces that inform literacy education in Ontario. This chapter presents a conceptual framework for developing a pedagogy for supporting learners in Ontario that brings together the data from the research in relation to policy, research literature, and adult educational theory explored in this inquiry. This dissertation advances the idea that adult literacy education in Ontario ought to support pedagogies that are holistic and critical in its approach to addressing the experiential, cognitive, and social aspects of literacy learning.

### **The Role of Experience in the Critical Holistic Literacy Education**

The participants in the study believe that experience plays a key role in literacy learning. They believe that knowledge is the by-product of experience and so learner experiences need to be taken into account in every aspect of the learning process. Researchers believe it is important to value the whole experience of the learners including the physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of the learning experience in addition to the mind (OLNC, 2014; Smythe & Courage, 2007; Swanson, 2003; Jones, 2003; Horsman, 2000). Such an approach is based on the idea that the learners should be valued as whole humans rather than focusing on aspects of their education that serve economic interests. For Indigenous People ceremony has an important role in the literacy learning process since it often includes various social interactions

that create holistic experiences such as talking circles, smudging and drumming. These were the practices that I observed in Diane's class. Dewey also embraces emotion, social and aesthetic understandings as a significant part of experience. Dewey emphasizes the importance of conscious reflection on experience in formation of self-worth and language's role in spiritualizing meaningful experiences that encourage the continuation of social practice based on consensus to social norms or the transformation of norms in ways that express individual creativity, imagination and lead to social practices that are a better expression of freedom (Dewey, 1929; Dewey, 1891).

The critical holistic literacy classroom offers a space for learners to consciously reflect on their experience, and in doing so, the critical holistic educator helps learners recognize the value of their labor and facilitates critical and meaningful learning experiences. A critical holistic approach to literacy engages Indigenous and pragmatist theories to encourage the exploration of transformative literacy practices that deconstructs oppressive norms. A holistic and critical pedagogy recognizes the value of experience as necessary to develop literacy practices that encourage self-worth, values the social history of the learner and works with the learner towards meaningful goals. Such a pedagogy encourages imagination and innovation rather than habitual conformity and supports democratic practices where interactions between teacher and learner are based on negotiation and consensus rather than top down managerial relationships.

A critical holistic pedagogy also does not limit conscious reflection on experience to the in-class literacy practices or the out-of-school literacy practices: it incorporates the in-class experiences, the out-of-class experiences and the social history of the learner. A holistic critical

pedagogy recognizes that literacy practices are embedded in larger historical narratives so that actions are not isolated: actions are also reactions to one's history. In the case of Ontario, it is vital that the educator recognizes the learner's relation to the settler narrative that is a pervasive bi-product of colonialism that continues to reproduce itself with regards to how we value our labor, our relations to the environment and to other human beings in our province. And under a settler narrative, the culture, social institutions and way of life of Indigenous People are dismissed as ancient museum relics that would eventually disappear (Hedican, 2014). Under a settler's narrative land is seen in terms of how it can be exploited for commercial profit rather than sacred space for living, healing and reflecting. The settler narrative devalues the worth of human beings and the environment, and so, addressing this social history allows learners and educators to explore more holistic understandings of human worth that can potentially transform colonial discourse to encourage social practices that allow learners to better value themselves, others and the environment. The historical impact of literacy on Ontario is illustrated by Graff's research that demonstrates the role Ontario's literacy education movement has had on perpetuating social control rather than intellectual growth (Graff, 2011; Graff, 1979). Literacy education should help the learner become more than literate in normative discourses but also literate in his or her own history, experiences, and culture and recognize and transcend dominant codes that work to negate the value of their labor and marginalize their experiences.

It is also important to recognize that social histories are gendered and reproduced in literacy practices as demonstrated by research developed by the ONLC (Elliot, p.11) and information from the interviews with participants such as Diane and Glenda. When examining



the social history of learners in Ontario, it is important to recognize how gender has been interpreted through a colonial lens to further perpetuate the devaluing of women's literacy and fossilized understandings of minority cultures. The adult literacy classroom is the ideal space to interrogate these narratives and to explore the lived experiences of minorities, so learners can see society and culture as constantly transforming to reflect new understandings that better value women's labor. Diane's incorporation of drumming and discussion of women as carriers of water facilitated a culturally relevant discussion that re-addressed colonial narratives of Indigenous women. The use of the talking circle also allowed for the sharing of multiple understandings of the role of drumming as a cultural practice that has traditionally been practiced by men and women. The talking circle challenges the notion of an authoritative narrative and encourages learners to actively participate in the meaning making process. The ONLC also offers resources that present multiple understandings of the role of women and their literacy practices and advances the idea that indigenous culture is not fixed and fossilized in the past but that indigenous cultures are organic and transformed to suit new contexts while at the same time respecting tradition. A critical holistic approach to literacy education should encourage learners to share their experiences and encourage engagement with resources that challenge normative narratives that are steeped in oppressive practices.

The challenge of incorporating social history into the conscious reflection process is that learners may not want to reflect on experiences of historical trauma or gender-based violence because these experiences are not positive. And as Dewey points out, a negative experience encourages the discontinuation of the social practice (Dewey, 1938, p. 27). Yet, without reflection on these experiences, the reproduction of violent meanings becomes habitually

reproduced in other dimensions of life, particularly since trauma is a reaction to violence: trauma moves like a ripple in water through individuals lives and the lives of their family members. These reactions shape interactions in the present and literacy education often becomes a space where learners continue to react to an incident that occurred in the past and re-presents the violence in a different context. The effects of trauma and the literacy education process has been extensively documented by the work of Horsman, and she raises the issue that the expression of trauma often reveals itself in the literacy classroom (Horsman, 2000). Following Dewey's ideas, this makes sense, since language is a medium for reflecting on experience since language symbolizes experiences with words that are attached to memories and emotions (Dewey, 1929, p. 112-113). The incarnation of words associated with violent experiences would be a challenge for the educator and learner to work through. So while it is important for educators to encourage conscious reflection on social history as a part of a holistic education process, it is also important to be sensitive and supportive of learners working through trauma and encourage practices that promote support and healing. It is for this reason that I recognize why educators such as Glenda and Ava emphasized the importance of prioritizing safety over social participation and why many educators consult with their learners on the content of their programs and give them the options of using alternative forms of content or to allow the learner to set aside the tasks and content they are not ready to do. A holistic critical pedagogy requires sensitive consultation with the learner on the content and strategies that would be used to reach learner's goals through participation in literacy practices. Educators should encourage learners to consider the possible ways to engage in learning experiences and elicit learner feedback on their level of comfort. Learners should be

encouraged to take on tasks outside their comfort zone when they are in a place where they are self-directed and are in the process of taking ownership of the learning process. So it is important for educators to engage the learners' previous experiences to continue the conscious reflection process, and facilitate rich learning experiences that will encourage learners to continue working towards their goals in life. Under a critical holistic pedagogy, experience plays a vital role in informing all aspects of the learning process including the intake process, goal setting, course resources, and school trips.

**Intake process.**

Intake processes offer meaningful opportunities to gain insight into the experiences the learners bring to the program. As it is usually the first meeting between the learners and the educators, not all the learners will necessarily be comfortable disclosing information, but questions can be developed to allow the first meeting between the educator and the learner to be organized around a meaningful dialogue. Questions that can facilitate a discussion on experience may include asking the learners to share information about their previous learning experiences, their expectations of the course, the reasons they chose to enter the program, their dreams and aspirations, and life values. Such information, provides a good starting point for setting goals and gathering resources that would be relevant to the learners' experiences and aspirations. While some educators in the study stressed the value of having standardized diagnostic tools to support lesson planning, researchers such as Smythe and Courage point out that these tests are costly and not always accurate (Smythe & Courage, 2007, pp. 19-21). Moreover, what these diagnostics can tell educators is limited in comparison to the information

educators can gain from meaningful discussion with learners and observations of practices over time.

### **Goal-setting.**

Goal-setting is a good way to encourage literacy education that engages conscious reflection on experiences since it encourages the learner to see their labor analytically as a process with a beginning, middle, and end. Goal-setting is an activity that encourages reflection on how learning experiences contribute towards achievement. However, as Horsman demonstrated in her research, learners who have experienced trauma may encounter challenges setting goals because violence is often accompanied with an intense feeling of losing control of outcomes and this may lead the learner to feel as if there is no point to setting goals because they have little control of the future and so living loses meaning. She advises educators to help learners re-imagining possible outcomes, and in doing so, re-imagine future possibilities (Horsman, 2000, p. 174). Conversation-based intake processes are necessary to help an educator get a sense of why the learner has come to the program and what they are hoping to achieve. For some, learner's may come to the program feeling aimless and perhaps they have been persuaded to come to the program by external forces as Barb and Amy expressed. It is important for the educator to develop an intake process that allows them the opportunity to have this conversation with the learner and to help them explore the possible goals that can be reasonably achieved even if the goal is just to be a part of a learning community. Goal-setting interviews can always be revisited later on in the program when the learner demonstrates a shift in perspective. From what I observed in Florence and Gemma's classrooms and from my interviews with Margo and Nicholas, the opportunity for the educator to sit down and have a

one-on-one conversation with the learner about their goals creates a space for conscious reflection on experience and for re-imagining future possibilities.

### **Course resources.**

Research conducted by adult literacy organizations and academics emphasize the importance of using resources that are relevant to the culture and the experiences of the learners (ONLC, 2018; ONLC, 2017; Centre FORA, 2017; Centre FOR A, 2016; Lynch, 2013; Nash-Ditzel & Brown, 2012). This notion is echoed by Juliet who believes the best source of texts should come from the learner's life and Sharon's assertion that rather than teaching learners how to write essays, we should focus on teaching them to read and write texts that help them build the knowledge and skills to accomplish their goals. A critical holistic approach to selecting course resources would involve asking the learners about the types of texts they engage with on a daily basis, collecting resources that reflect the learners' experiences and social history that they have shared with the educator, and consulting the learner about the types of resources needed to support their learning towards their goal. Educators such as Florence develop a positive rapport with her learners so they actively reach out to her with ideas of what they would like to learn and how learning this skill will help them accomplish their goals.

### **Trips.**

Organizing trips outside of the classroom provides an opportunity for facilitating rich aesthetic experiences that can be a source of conscious reflection that is shared with all members of the class. Horsman's research speaks to the importance of nature retreat trips for women who have experienced violence. She argues that trips that allow a learner to explore their physicality in nature through activities such as hiking help learners who have experienced violence

reconnect with their bodies in a potentially positive way (Horsman, 2000, 212). Many participants such as Juliet also include class excursions as a part of their program to encourage learners to socially interact with each other and to facilitate new learning experiences. These shared experiences can be a source for conscious reflection of a shared group experience. As Gemma mentioned these trips also introduce learners to the wider opportunities available to develop the physical or emotional aspects of the learning process outside of the program. Gemma, like Horsman believes that the program does not have to provide all the support for all the elements of a holistic education. A holistic orientation, doesn't necessarily mean the educator is responsible to program holistic content, instead it may just be a matter of recognizing the value and accommodating the importance of out-school experiences and their contribution to supporting the learners' holistic educational experiences.

### **The Cognitive Aspects of a Critical Holistic Literacy Education**

Most literacy theorists and participants in the study conceptualize literacy in ways that connect social interaction with cognitive processes. So that communication and interactions with people is an integral part of cognitive development where literacy is the medium of communication between the social external and the cognitive internal. The participants in the study stressed the importance of an approach to teaching that supports a positive self-concept by engaging in practices that were sensitive towards supporting the learner's self-esteem and self-worth. Barb, Diane and Abby spoke to the importance of developing practices that support self-confidence since confidence influences whether or not the learner will continue their studies. A holistic understanding of literacy education provides a broader analytical framework that views literacy education as more than development of grammar and decoding skills but as

related to larger cognitive processes such as the development of self-concept. Holistic educational strategies value the emotional and social aspects of literacy learning since these aspects play a vital role in building a positive self-concept (Habrat, 2013, pp. 241-242). Cognitive researchers, such as Habrat advocate holistic approaches to literacy education that facilitate group work that values the learner's contribution to group interactions (Habrat, 2013, pp. 250-251). Recognizing one's value as a member of a group is one of the significant strategies for developing a positive self-concept. I noticed when educators like Juliet circulated to help learners and assess their work, she avoided using deficit language. Instead she would ask the learners questions about how they were doing on the task to encourage conversations that recognized the work that the learner was doing. Juliet also encourages learners to articulate their thought processes and to encourage them to develop strategies for completing the task. I found that in this classroom learners took risks sharing information and were active in class discussions. A critical holistic approach to literacy education encourages practices that facilitate recognition of learner's labor and the whole learning process, rather than a product-focused approach. Recognition of the value of labor is an important step towards encouraging self-direction and self-determination and support learner ownership of their labor.

Colonialism affects the cognitive aspects of literacy learning in ways that devalue the learners' self-concept by reducing the value of their contribution to their labor. Under colonialism the labor of minorities is further undervalued and exploited. The settler mentality of labor that is advanced by colonial discourse continues to be a pervasive part of education and education plays a significant role in teaching learners to internalize the colonial mindset, so individuals misrecognize the value of their labor and their value as a whole human being

outside of the settler narrative. Colonial literacy practices affect the way literacy learners relate to each other and to themselves. To address this, a holistic critical pedagogy embraces decolonizing practices. Decolonization academics such as Odora argue that a decolonizing pedagogy needs to encourage self-determination in order to encourage cognitive justice (Odora, 2015, p. 98). In the literacy classroom, this might be facilitated by encouraging self-direction in the learning process where learners have more control of what they learn, the pace and the time they learn, how they will participate in the class and how to evaluate the tasks. Participants such as Glenda believe that encouraging learners to determine the content of the classes also promotes self-confidence.

Neo-liberalism is the continuation of the settler narrative, as under a neo-liberal context, individuals are not valued for their holistic selves and contribution to society but only for how their skills can be applied to serve economic interests. In such a context, economic productivity holds priority over human rights and dignity. One's belongingness is dependent on the individual's labor and capacity to assimilate and develop skill sets that serve economic priorities over the vocation of being human. When literacy education is limited to employment-oriented goals, it re-enforces this narrative and encourages the learner to devalue themselves by internalizing a skills-deficit perspective. This perspective causes the individual to misrecognize their contribution to society and internalize a negative self-concept that is a blow to their self-esteem.

#### **Standardized assessment for formative and not summative evaluations.**

Cognitive theorists often design standardized tasks and tests to measure literacy proficiency. However, while these designs can be useful to support research and be used as



diagnostics, the implementation of standardized tests and tasks as summative assessments encourage deficit understandings that do not support a positive self-concept. Many researchers have spoken out against the use of standardized tasks-based learning (Horsman, 2000, p. 21; Carpenter et al., 2012). Instead they encourage critical approaches to education such as those advanced by theorists such as Freire to address oppression and promote democratic education (Carpenter et al., 2012, p. 157, 160). The ONLC develops frameworks for assessing non-standardized tasks that provides a holistic approach to evaluation based on consultation with the learner with a focus on learners' progress towards their goals (ONLC, 2017). That is not to say, that all standardized tasks should be abandoned. Educators such as Margo and Sharon, argue that these assessments and reading strategies can be used as diagnostic tools to help educators support learning. This can be valuable for organizing lessons and developing an intake file to facilitate the development of learning plans and to provide supporting documents in the event the learner transferred to another program.

Participants in the study also spoke about the limitations of using standardized assessments to measure learning progress, instead they believe educators should focus on collecting evidence that demonstrates learner progress towards their specific goals and a portfolio-based assessment would probably be more conducive to showing progress rather than proficiency measurements. Standard psychometric testing, provides statistics that help researchers and policy makers gain narrow indicators of a population's skill set; however, standardized literacy tests do very little to support the learner. The participation in these tasks also alienates the learner from their literacy labor since its aim is to demonstrate learner accountability rather than to engage learners in meaningful literacy practices that will support their aspirations.

These decontextualized tasks often are an abstraction from the learner's goals and focuses the learner's energies on completing tasks that do not have a direct correlation with their goals. Moreover, learners often do not have ownership of the standardized task, and they often cannot be used outside of the program. As a result, standardized tasks alienate learners from their labor and facilitates detachment from a holistic engagement in the learning process.

A critical holistic approach to literacy recognizes the limitations of standardized literacy proficiency assessments. It recognizes that these assessments reflect dominant literacy practices that are normalized through institutional practice and are often used insensitively without regard to how they favor certain literacy practices over others and reproduce colonial, gender, and neoliberal forms of oppression. It is because the IALS tests does not value the literacy practices of Indigenous people and Immigrants that their proficiency on the IALS assessments were the lowest since these tests favor the language and literacy practices traditionally associated with colonial interests. Literacy educators should be encouraged to move away from a test regime approach to education to a goal-based approach to literacy education that focuses on the literacy practices relevant to the learner and encourages learner ownership of literacy labor. However, because the pedagogy encourages self-determination, the learner may desire a standardized test to be their summative assessment. In this case, it would be a good idea to explore why this is relevant to the learner's goals. For instance, standardized tests are often used as proficiency measurements to access education, citizenship and employment opportunities. If taking the test is a prerequisite to meet that goal, then it may be the most desired task that the learner requires support in, and one does not want to discourage the learner from directing their goal paths.

## **Digital literacy.**

Exploring multiple interpretations of texts, especially digital texts is one way to help learners develop the skills to critically process information since this technique works against the perspective of an authoritative-single interpretation and advocates the idea that the meaning-making process of reading and writing is a co-created between reader and writer. Encouraging learners to share their interpretations of text in relation to their experiences as a group is a way to engage learners with other perspectives that they can use as a point of discussion to negotiate a collective meaning. This encourages learners to see that shared meanings can be negotiated rather than dictated by an authority, and they can be an active rather than passive part of this process. Doing so, also brings awareness to one's connection to the reading process. This approach is particularly pertinent in a reading context that is embedded in digital media practices. In an age where the acceleration of digital technology is bombarding learners with targeted messages that are dictating meanings at an unconscious level, learners may feel alienated from the meaning-making process and misrecognize their role in the co-creation of meaning and passively accept the authority of external narratives as truth. Literacy education should teach learners how mass media messages are constructed to create the impression of authority, encourage learners to reflect on how they process messages, and what role they can play in co-creating the meanings of literacy texts. Sinnot refers to the process of recognizing how reality is co-created as post-formal thought processes. Educators can facilitate post formal thought processes by encouraging individuals to express interpretations of texts with other learners in a way that promotes cooperation in the meaning-making process rather than competition for an authoritative narrative. Educators such as Ava

raised her concerns that learners were often alienated from the meaning making process of new digital literacy, and in her class, I observed how she used different modalities of text (poster, article, and documentary preview) to discuss the different perspectives on the Canada 150th celebration. She then invited learners to share their perspectives on texts and this lesson provided an opportunity for learners to review multiple perspectives and share their interpretations of the texts. A critical holistic pedagogy must also consider how digital technology practices are being used to advance neo-liberal agendas through automation practices and passive consumer-based social participation. These literacy practices further devalue labor and shape access to technological resources as Smythe points out in her research (Smythe, 2018, pp. 198-199; Smythe, 2013, p. 7). To address this, a critical wholistic education involves investigating who these digital practices benefit and serve and engaging learners in creative as a pose to just consumptive literacy practices.

Many of the participants commented on how digital technology has transformed traditional literacy practices, particularly how information is distributed. Information is no longer filtered by academic institutions and established media sources; instead, individuals need to determine how to filter and evaluate information for themselves (Downey, 2016, p. 17; Goldman & Snow, 2015, pp. 463-464). As a result, higher order cognitive skills are increasingly important as well as being able to use digital technology to access and process information. Although information is digitally transmitted in multi-modal forms, print literacy continues to be the predominant way information is delivered. As Ava pointed out, the digital age has expanded the demand for reading and writing skills which are embedded in most digital practices. As a result, educators need to design programs that can teach literacy as embedded in digital practices and strategies

for processing information. While the emphasis on print-based literacy practices support digital literacy practices, the emphasis also undervalues the importance of oral literacy skills, especially as a form of meaningful social interaction that reflects the literacy practices valued by Indigenous people in Ontario. As the OLNC points out, oral traditions are valuable practices that help learners socialize, establish consensus and work through conflict (Jacobs, pp. 25-27). These skills are ideal for socializing and fully participating in a democracy. Rose also mentioned the significance of oral literacy to promote meaningful dialogue and the advantage of having older learners paired with younger adults since the older learners bring more knowledge about oral social practices while the younger generation bring more knowledge about digital practices.

### **The Social Aspects of a Critical Holistic Literacy Education**

The participants in the study define literacy as practices individuals learn to fully participate in society. A functionalist orientation towards literacy advocates learning the normative practices on the grounds that they are the practices that will best allow the individual to integrate in society. While these normative practices facilitate wider and more complex social interactions they also construct, reproduce, and uphold relations of power that can marginalize and isolate individuals. Without critical intervention, normative practices continue to be shaped by patriarchy, colonialism, and neoliberalism. Critical pedagogies are a necessary part of literacy learning in order to address these oppressive normative practices in ways that are transformative. While most participants conceptualize literacy as a skill needed to function in society, they recognized that simply following norms was not always useful and empowering to learners. And so, the education of literacy norms needs to be partnered with an analysis of how these practices can empower or reproduce oppressive relations of power.

Socio-cultural theorists such as Bourdieu would take this critique further and consider how participation in these norms legitimizes and reproduces their power (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 1986).

A critical holistic pedagogy works towards exploring how literacy practices are normalized and engage learners in dialogue on how these practices construct or reproduce power relations. This is important because sometimes educators need to encourage literacy practices that do not reflect cultural norms. For instance, Glenda emphasizes learner directed education because the social practices of her learners often render them “invisible” and so the literacy classroom can instead create a space where learners can explore leadership roles in education in a space where the teacher is traditionally the leader and practicing alternatives to normative practices in society facilitates the transformation of norms. Educators in the study often saw literacy education as a space for empowerment and social justice but this was dependent on the pedagogical practices of the learners, educators, and institution. Educators such as Florence felt that the reforms of the LBS program and the inaccessibility of social services in certain communities made it necessary to establish schools outside of the government funding model to develop literacy education that encourages social justice.

Text selection and reading can be a source of intervention by providing opportunities to explore alternative perspectives, engage with multiple interpretations of texts, and to construct counter narratives to oppressive discourses. Luke (2014) encourages “reader response” approach to develop the tools to explore and challenge how dominant narratives construct concepts of the self that devalues the individual with deficit or narrow understandings of their contribution to society (Luke, 2014, p. 24). Educators should also consider applying Horsman’s “multi-meaning”

approach to the reading of the text. This approach encourages learners to consider the potential meanings that have been contested or denied by dominant literacy practices (Horsman, 2000, p. 146-150). Recognition of possible meanings can support learners' awareness how language is used to internalize their experiences and inform their self-concept. Rosario and Johnson's "counter-story" telling method is another way to encourage learners to read and tell stories that explore marginalized experiences and to break the silence that often accompanies their histories and experiences (Rosario-Ramos & Johnson, 2014, p. 113).

### **Social participation.**

I noticed that one of the common narratives I heard from educators was that learners who struggle with literacy often experience forms of social exclusion. This included seniors in retirement homes, individuals who have experienced incarceration, individuals with learning disabilities, residential school survivors, detained immigrants and residents receiving treatment in health institutions. These are all individuals who have experienced forms of social isolation and will require support integrating in the societies that they were excluded from. A part of the work of literacy educators is to help learners re-integrate with society or to help them expand their circle of social interaction in ways that are empowering and meaningful. Educators emphasized the value of engaging learners in communicative tasks that emphasized peer-to-peer interactions or dialogues with educators and people outside of the program.

Individuals are often isolated from mixed gendered interactions both in institutional settings such as hospital, penitentiaries and residential schools. Labor practices are also gendered as I noticed through my interactions with health care training programs and apprenticeship programs since women are over represented in health care professions and

men in apprenticeship professions. Literacy classrooms that are employment centric often specialize with working with certain groups of people and certain individuals who are interested in certain employment pathways. So employment focused programs can also implicitly encourage gender divisions in the classroom. In some cases, this allows educators to support learners who have experienced gender-based violence by creating a safe space for learning. Horsman's research also mentions that individuals who have experienced trauma may find it difficult to work in groups where dialogue and activity-based learning reduce control of the direction of the learning (Horsman, 2000, pp. 141-142). I can see this in my observations as I found that spaces of peer and educator interactions involved activities that have limited direction, could move away from routine and often lacked predictability. These interactions provided rich learning experiences that create a sense of community and offer spaces for valuing the experiences of the learners. However, in some classes such as Ava's, I noticed that some learners showed great reluctance to participate in peer interaction and these individuals were usually female. Ava had explained to me that she avoids forcing anyone to participate in group activities and she and other educators emphasize the importance of creating an environment where learners feel safe. I noticed that in all female classrooms such as Diane and Florence's, all learners fully participated in the activities. Judy's class provided an exception to this perspective. Her class was mixed race and mixed gendered but all learners contributed in various ways that were similar to the all-female classes.

A holistic critical pedagogy would encourage equitable gender relations, facilitate critical discussion on gendered practices and help learners participate in mixed gendered groups. And so, while a holistic critical pedagogy may support gendered classrooms, it would still encourage



mixed gender interactions and discussion on gender oppression, particularly in the work place since the LBS program is a part of the Employment Ontario department. Therefore, a significant part of critical holistic practice involves establishing structures that facilitate peer interactions by devising approaches that allow the learner to become comfortable while increasing their participation in socially interactive literacy tasks. This may involve starting with one-on-one interviews between the educator and learner, writing short notes or text messages to peers, and as suggested by Rose, role-playing social interactions in the classroom before the learner goes out and interacts with the greater community. These decisions require consultation with the learners and making them aware of the pedagogical choices available to them. It also means facilitating a positive class environment where learners are encouraged to be supportive, compassionate, respectful and cooperative.

While some educators focus on developing individual program plans, a critical holistic framework would emphasize the educators' role in facilitating social interactions between peers since social interaction is a key component of literacy learning. It helps learners engage collectively in potentially positive shared experiences that can be a source for a shared conscious reflection. It helps learners develop their cognitive post-formal thought skills since it offers them a space to explore multiple interpretations with text and see how knowledge and understandings are co-created rather than advancing a notion of a single authoritative interpretation. Moreover, social interaction helps to support learners who struggle with literacy as a consequence of social isolation. I have seen the participants balance the need for individual programming and group interaction in the following ways:

- 1) Juliet divides her class into two sessions: The first is for working individually and the second session is for working as a group.
- 2) Florence organizes low stakes vocabulary and grammar building activities that learners complete as a group while they also work on the tasks that work towards their individual goals. While they are working she circulates and consults with each learner individually. If learners need to speak to her before they can complete the next step in their task, they will stop and work on the group activity until Florence is available to speak to them.
- 3) Margo and Barb arrange their program so one day a week is a drop in day where learners can come in to receive individual one-to-one support while the other days, they provide group-oriented tasks.

Darvin and Norton, as well as the researchers from Alphaplus (Pinsent-Johnson, 2017, p.3) have also raised the importance of developing literacy practices that encourages digital inclusion (Darvin & Norton, 2017, p. 90; Pinsent-Johnson, 2017, p.3). As critical theorists Darvin and Norton argue, digital media is not necessarily empowering but instead it is creating and re-establishing unequitable regimes of power and socially isolating practices. In some of the sites I visited, the digital technology was outdated and had slow loading times that made them unpractical for learning while other sites had state of the art digital technology. The most advanced technology I found was in the Francophone and Deaf classes. These educators develop online learning modules; in addition, to managing literacy programs.

Under a holistic critical literacy pedagogy, digital inclusion involves more than providing learners with access to up-to-date technology and good Wi-Fi connections. Digital inclusion

should also consider how digital technology and media promote socially isolating practices that support uncritical processing of information. Learners also need to learn more about how the internet is used as a marketing tool and how their digital productions and data can be exploited for commercial use. Finally, digital literacy education needs to teach learners how to secure their data and avoid malware, especially since malware is embedded in the composition of digital texts. A wider and critical understanding of digital media, digital literacy labor, and data security will enable learners to engage in digital practices that are more empowering and encourage the development of meaningful online relations and digital literacy practices. A critical holistic approach to digital media would encourage learners to adopt a framework for evaluating how the digital information that they use contributes to their goals physically, emotionally, cognitively, and socially. It would also be concerned with questions about how these practices reproduce or construct relations of power and ask the question, who is empowered by these practices?

### **Critique of human capital theory.**

HCT is not allied with critical holistic understandings of literacy. An analysis of HCT demonstrates the neo-liberal aspects of the mass literacy movement in LBS policy. Black and Yasukawa's analysis of Ontario education policy demonstrates the relation between HCT orientation to education policy and its neo-liberal implications (Black & Yasukawa, 2014, p. 221). Human capital theory devises policy and program frameworks that privilege certain literacy practices over others. Scholarly researchers such as Compton-Lilly & Nayan argue that such frameworks reproduce forms of symbolic violence as those who have minority languages are often expected to "jettison cultural ways of being in favor of official visions of literacy and

school success” (Compton-Lilly & Nayan, 2016, p. 192). Literacy theorists such as Enright argue that human capital approaches to education have a dehumanizing effect since it mechanizes human processes for the purpose of generating profit for others by privileging systems of education that devalue labor (Enright, 2013, pp. 26 & 27). So, while the mass literacy movement is under a HCT framework, it is not addressing social inequalities (Knobel & Lankshear, 2011, p. 11). Moreover, mass literacy education under a functionalist or HCT framework does not promote social inclusion nor guarantee an equitable distribution of wealth. It facilitates the acceleration of the digitized economy that is increasingly replacing the labor of low skilled workers and the education of low skilled workers is decreasing the demand of high skilled workers.

HCT frameworks of literacy also tend to adopt techno-rationalist views of literacy education that reduces human goals to measurable and observable outcomes that are converted into quantitative data to evaluate the cost-benefits of programs (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011, pp. 128-129; Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 113). Essential Skills Ontario’s final project picked up on the fact that entry level jobs in Ontario are continuously being filled by workers with a post-secondary education (Essential Skills Ontario, 2013, pp. 4, 6). So jobs that might have provided a middle class income to individuals without a post-secondary education are increasingly disappearing and being replaced with unstable and precarious employment. And so, mass literacy education under an HCT framework devalues labor.

A critical holistic pedagogy needs to encourage democratic action towards improving the quality of life. This means helping learners recognize the value of their labor and how wealth is distributed so they can take action towards addressing how economic changes are affecting

how labor is valued and support learners towards working for a fair wage. Such activities may expand beyond the scope of the program but the course that is situated in an employment program should encourage learners to critically engage with the economic realities of how their labor is being valued and encourage them to strategically organize and agitate for labor that will allow for a living wage and to value the labor of others. HCT frameworks of literacy do not fit with a holistic critical approach to literacy education because these frameworks are often used in literacy education to reproduce social norms even when they are oppressive to the learners.

### **In Summation**

This critical holistic pedagogy that I have presented here has been constructed in dialogue with the participants who generously shared their experiences. It offers a way to conceptualize adult literacy in Ontario to support democratic practice. Such a pedagogy, challenges the settler narrative by prioritizing the vocation to be human over narrowing learner's value to their labor-market potential. A critical holist pedagogy works to address how patriarchy, colonialism, and neo-liberalism affect the experiential, cognitive, and social aspects of literacy learning and offer democratic interventions that encourage conscious reflection, learner direction, and peer interactions. It recognizes the value of a learner as a whole human being and a holistic learning experience as being physical, emotional, spiritual, and social, in addition to being cognitive. The critical holistic classroom is a space to engage in conscious reflection on experience to encourage self-worth and action that is based on reflection rather than habit. Every aspect of the literacy learning process in the critical holistic classroom, from the intake process to the organization of school trips, should consider how to support conscious

reflection and facilitate new rich experiences that will encourage learning. The critical holistic pedagogy seeks to develop a program in consultation with the learner, so every part of the learning process is driven by goals that are set by the learner, resources that reflect learner experience, learning strategies negotiated with the learner, and discussion-based evaluations. When programs are delivered in negotiation with the learner, it facilitates self-direction and encourages the learners to take ownership of the learning process and their labor. A critical holistic framework holds that truth is co-created between the writer and the reader of text; moreover, there can be multiple interpretations of text with no central authoritative interpretations. Engaging in multiple interpretations of text supports the development of post-formal thinking that is necessary for readers of digital text since in a digital culture, the reader is the one who evaluates the validity of the information presented in the text. Critical holistic practice involves engaging learners in evaluating norms and assessing whether the norms facilitate social inclusion or social isolation. The critical holistic educator is the facilitator that dialogues with the learner to encourage conscious reflection on experience, to help the learner build a structure or explore strategies to meet their goals, and organizes peer interactions to widen the learner's community of practice and social participation. Applying a critical holistic framework to adult literacy education in Ontario offers a way to address oppressive systems in ways that can be empowering and support the learner.

## Chapter 9: Conclusion and Implications

The Literacy Basic skills program in Ontario is the largest publicly funded adult literacy program in Ontario. The educators of these programs play a significant role in the education of the learners in the program since they work with learners to develop strategies to meet educational goals. As a result, how educators conceptualize literacy and implement these concepts into practice has significant implications for how literacy norms are reproduced or transformed, the development of skill sets for the workforce, and the development of democratic practice.

Educator's practices are influenced by contextual forces such as their teaching contexts, the learners and the policy and organizations that influence their understanding of literacy learning and practice. This project provides a thick description of how educators conceptualize literacy education and how they engage in practice in relation to the influence of these diverse understandings. It also provides a holistic critical framework to encapsulate an understanding of practice based on the research and to offer suggestions on how adult literacy education practices can continue to advance in Ontario.

The dissertation started with a review of the policies, the research and the theories that are drawn upon to inform programming and practice for the LBS program. Policy has a significant influence on the direction of LBS programming because, the Federal Labour-Market agreements administered by MTCU provides funding for the program. This can create tension between how literacy is conceptualized in policy versus in practice. While MTCU policy documents advocate for contextual task-based learning that is supported by the participants in the study, the tools the programs are directed to use, such as the milestones are out of step with contextual-based approaches to practice. Instead the tools for programming that were

constructed by the MTCU reflect human capital theory and item response theory frameworks of education. These frameworks prioritize labour-market priorities over human rights. The employment focus and managerial tools that have been used to reform the LBS program has been criticized in program review, and scholarly and organizational research. Organizational research generally advocates for holistic approaches to literacy education and approaches to teaching that were far more cognizant of learners needs and experiences. The views of scholarly and organizational research often reflect the perspectives of the participants in this study. The theoretical portion of the review, creates a landscape to illustrate the three orientations that inform the field of practice: theories of experience, cognitive theories, and socio-cultural theory. These theories demonstrate the complex aspects of literacy learning. Overall, the literacy review sets the stage for the qualitative inquiry into how educators conceptualize their practice.

The qualitative inquiry reveals three key findings on how educators conceptualize literacy education: educators conceptualize literacy learning in relation to learner's experience, as a cognitive and communicative process, and as a social practice. Firstly, educators in the study believe that learner experiences are vital to informing all aspects of the literacy learning process and they try to learn about learner experience and adapt their practice to reflect or address the experiences of the learners. This includes developing intake interviews to get to know the learner; setting goals in dialogue with the learner; developing tasks in consultation with the learner; using resources that are relevant to the learner's life and aspirations, organizing events that engage learners in new experiences and developing assessment process that encourage a reflection on progress. When considering the learner's experience educators



also stressed the importance of understanding how gender, culture and history shapes learners' experiences. Educators believe that experiences influence the learner's self-concept and can encourage or discourage learner participation in the program, and so the more the educator understands about the learner's experience the better they can support the learner. As a result, one-to-one dialogues with an educator such as the intake process plays an important role in helping educators develop individualized learning plans that are customized to build on learners' experiences, facilitate new experiences and work towards their unique goal path.

Secondly, educators in the study conceptualize literacy as a cognitive and communicative practice. While educators believe it is important to employ a variety of cognitive strategies, they emphasize the importance of task selection that relates directly to the learner's experience and goals. They also believe it is important to be mindful of the emotional aspects of learning and that each learner processes information in their own way. They encourage learner direction so their practice is flexible to the learner's needs while encouraging the learner to be more active, cognizant of the learning process, so they can recognize the value of their skills, their work, contribution to the learning process, and in doing so, be self-directed in their learning and take ownership of the learning process.

Thirdly, the educators conceptualize literacy as social practices that are contextual and changing, particularly as a consequence of the increasing application of digital technology in the areas of communication and information processing. Literacy education plays a significant role in addressing social isolation by encouraging and facilitating social participation; however, a critical pedagogy is necessary to engage learners in practices that are empowering. Educators address social isolation by facilitating tasks that encourage peer interaction and group work,

role-playing and participation in activities that widen the learner's social circle. Some educators incorporate a critical dimension to their practice by encouraging the learner to reflect on how the content of the course relates to the learner's experiences, discussing the power relations the literacy practices reproduce, or using resources that introduce learners to perspectives outside of the normative discourse.

These three findings can be placed in dialogue with the literature review to generate a critical holistic framework that can be used to inform adult literacy education in Ontario. A critical holistic framework of adult literacy education takes into account the pragmatic, cognitive and social dimensions of literacy learning in ways that support democratic practices. A critical holistic framework sees literacy education as wider than an in-school practice, mind-focused activity, the process of learning to read and write, or a functional social skill. A critical holistic framework sees literacy as a social, emotional, cognitive, physical and spiritual process. Such an approach recognizes the value of the whole human and operates outside of the settler narrative that narrows human value to their exploitable labor potential. A critical holistic framework highlights the importance learner experience in the development of self-worth. Self-worth is a quality of being able to value one's participation in a social practice. This process involves conscious reflection on experience. The approach to conscious reflection on experience should be expanded to a reflection on one's social history as well as personal and in class experiences.

Secondly, a critical holistic approach to literacy education recognizes that literacy learning is integrated with cognitive and communicative processes. A critical holistic approach to literacy encourages learners to be self-directed and take ownership of the learning process. This

involves supporting learners to develop the skills they require to meeting their goals and including the skill of evaluate content and to explore multiple perspectives of the topics explored in texts. A critical holistic approach also includes valuing literacy practices outside of the dominant discourse such as culturally relevant oral literacy skills. While a critical holistic approach applies multiple cognitive reading strategies and may use standardized tasks and tests to support learning, such an approach would avoid using standardized tasks and tests as summative assessments. Summative assessments should involve literacy tasks that will directly allow the learner to achieve their goal and will be a task that they can keep and dispose of as they wish. Consultation with the learner on approaches to deliver is vital because a critical holistic approach does not just involve learner ownership of their literacy labor but also of the process.

Finally, a critical holistic understanding of literacy education involves recognizing the importance of literacy education as a social skill that facilitates participation in communities of practice. A critical holistic pedagogy is in opposition to a human capital approach to literacy education that narrows the value of the learner to their employment skills. Critical holistic pedagogies recognize that HCT frameworks are applied to determine who is included and excluded from social practices in society. A critical holistic pedagogy is concerned with widening the space for social participation, especially for learners who have experienced forms of social isolation. Being sensitive to issues of colonialism, and gender-based violence, this pedagogy does not dissuade the educator from having separate classes for populations that have experienced violence; however, it seeks to encourage social interactions that build towards full inclusion with all members of society regardless of gender or culture.

Using a critical holistic framework to advance the practice in adult literacy programs, cannot be done by educators alone. It requires some program reforms and additional research. The work of policy makers, academics and grassroots organizers are necessary to advance the democratic frameworks of learning as well. However, there are some lessons for educator practice that have emerged from this study, firstly, the research suggests that the time educators spend in conversation with learners is valuable. It is an opportunity to create a conscious reflection on learning experiences that is foundational for developing a learning plan, is necessary to support learner ownership of the learning process and to facilitate peer interactions that will widen learner's social participation. Secondly, it is important to engage learners in literacy tasks that reflect their goals in life. This may be helping learners engage in tasks where the literacy component is an embedded skill required to achieve the goals and will be a task that they can directly apply to their goal. These goals need to be learner generated as much as possible, and so it is important that program goals are developed in consultation with the learner as well as resource selection and strategies for learning. Thirdly, while aspects of learning can be individualized, educators also need to facilitate social interactions. Social interaction is a key component of literacy learning. It helps learners engage collectively in potentially positive shared experiences that can be a source of a shared conscious reflection. It helps learners develop their cognitive post-formal thought skills since it offers them a space to explore multiple interpretations of text and see how knowledge and understandings are co-created rather than advancing a notion of a single authoritative interpretation.

Policy is a reflection of the political climate and the political climate determines what shifts in policy will support effective programming. Simple policy reforms can go a long way to

supporting the advancement of a critical holistic framework in the LBS program. This dissertation advocates for the reform of the theory that informs adult education policy and provides three suggestions on how this reform can be actioned. The first action is most appropriate for a conservative political climate. It involves simply removing the milestones as a means to measure learner progress and program performance. Doing so will allow for a theoretical framework that informs program delivery to match the tools of learner and program assessment. The second suggestion is to reform the PMF system to reflect the findings of this dissertation, particularly that educators need to have more time to focus on working with learners rather than collecting data for administrative purposes. The first two approaches maintain HCT as the key framework that informs policy at the provincial level, but makes suggestions that are more practical to program delivery. Even though it means that the framework that informs policy, programming and practice are different, the argument can be made that they ought to since they reflect three different contexts. However, as I mention in my analysis of HCT, this framework is not democratic and contributes to the reproduction of inequities. It would take extensive policy reform to change the theoretical framework that informs adult literacy education policy at the provincial, federal, and international level, and I admit that while my perspective on HCT receives acknowledgement in academic circles and by adult literacy practitioners, it is not popular in political circles. So such a shift in policy would not be well received unless the critique of HCT moves outside the confines of academia and into the political conscious of the wider community. At this point, I imagine that the best strategy of reform is to work with grassroots organizations to building awareness of the limitations of HCT policy and facilitate public debate on the issue.

This project also made me cognizant of future directions for research. It made me appreciate a wider need for research on how colonialism, patriarchy and neoliberalism have shaped Ontario's adult literacy education throughout its history, and how it is reproduced in practice. The more I reflect on the social histories that inform learning, the more I become aware of the potential for pedagogy to reproduce inequities or support democratic practice. However, that is not to say that democratic literacy practices are not thriving in the province. The inquiry has also made me more cognizant and curious about the role of institutional and non-institutional role in encouraging and discouraging social participation and readdressing social inequities. One of the areas that this dissertation does not cover but is a significant space for future exploration is the bottom up influence of grassroots organizations in providing the foundations for the current LBS program and democratic literacy practices that are outside of the institutional context. The more I reflect on the project, the more I wonder about the extra-institutional literacy practices that influence the delivery of LBS programs and literacy learning in Ontario. As a literacy worker, I come away from the research with a pedagogical framework to support adult literacy education in Ontario, and I hope to have the opportunity to continue to practice and refine it.

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## Appendix A: Participant Informed Consent Form

### Participant Informed Consent for a Study on How Literacy Basic Skills Educators Conceptualise Literacy Learning

**Study Name:** How do Adult Educators of the Literacy Basic Skills Program in Ontario Conceptualise Literacy Learning?

**Purpose of the Research:** The focus of the research is to investigate how adult educators define and think about adult literacy learning and how they make decisions on how to teach reading and writing. To do this I intend to interview adult literacy educators in the Ontario Literacy Basic Skills program about their thoughts on how individuals learn and how to teach literacy. I will also observe their teaching to better understand their ideas in relation to practice. This research will support my professional development as an adult educator and meet the requirements for my dissertation.

**What You Will Be Asked to Do in the Research:** If you accept my request to participate in this research project, it will involve observing your teaching for 1 hour, an interview with you about your work for 1 hour, and on completing the interview you will be asked to spend up to two hours reviewing and responding to the interview transcript which will be forwarded to you by email. You may choose not answer certain questions and to withdraw answers any time during the interview process or as you review the transcript.

**Benefits:** This research will provide you with a space to dialogue and reflect on practice, contribute to the mentorship of an adult educator, contribute to research to improve adult education pedagogy and to further your professional knowledge as well as the professional knowledge of others.

**Risks and Discomforts:** I do not foresee any risks or discomforts that will be experienced while you are participating in this study.

**Voluntary Participation:** Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time. Your decision not to volunteer will not influence the nature of the ongoing relationship you may have with the researcher, or York University either now or in the future.

**Withdrawal from the Study:** You can stop participating in the study at any time, for any reason, if you so decide. The decision to withdraw will not influence the nature of the ongoing relationship between the participant and the researcher or York University either now or in the future. Data collected will be destroyed immediately upon the participant's request to withdraw from the study. Paper notes will be shredded and disposed and information on electronic devices will be deleted.

**Confidentiality:** Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law. Your identity will remain anonymous throughout this process and after a retention period of two years, all data will be destroyed. All information you supply during the research (i.e., field notes and the recorded interview) will be held in confidence and unless you specifically indicate your consent, your name will not appear in any report on the research. Data will be collected in the form of field notes (based on observations and informal conversations) and one recorded audio interview. Your data will be safely stored in a locked cabinet, and only the principle investigator, Farra Yasin, will have access to this information.

**How the research will be presented or reported:** This dissertation will be published and made public. Information will also be presented at conferences and used to develop journal articles.

This research project has been reviewed and approved by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee at York University and conforms to the standards of the Canadian, Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process, or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact the Senior Manager and Policy Advisor for the Office of Research Ethics, 5<sup>th</sup> Floor, York Research Tower, York University, telephone 416-736-5914 or email [ore@yorku.ca](mailto:ore@yorku.ca) .

Legal Rights and Signatures:

I \_\_\_\_\_ have carefully read the Information Letter for the project, *A View from the Classroom: An Inquiry into how Adult Educators of Ontario's Literacy Basic Skills Programs Conceptualise Literacy Learning*. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent. I also understand that I may decline or withdraw from participation at any time without negative consequences.

My signature below verifies that I have received a copy of the Information Letter, and that I agree to participate in the research project as it has been described in the Information Letter.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Name (printed)      Participant's Signature      Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Name (printed)      Participant's Signature      Date

## Appendix B: Acronyms

ALLS	Adult Literacy and Life Survey
ASL	American Sign Language
Centre FOR A	Centre Franco-Ontarien de Resources en Alphabitisiation
CLLN	Canadian Literacy and Learning Network
EO	Employment Ontario
EOIS-CaMS	Employment Ontario Information System Case Mangement System
ESO	Employment Skills Ontario (formally known as the Ontario Literacy Coalition)
HCT	Human Capital Theory
IALS	International Adult Literacy Survey
IRT	Item Response Theory
ISRS	International Study of Reading Skills
LBS	Literacy Basic Skills
MAESD	Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development (known as the MTCU prior to 2015 and after 2018)
MTCU	Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities
MCL	Movement for Canadian Literacy
OALCF	Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OLC	Ontario Literacy Coalition
ONLC	Ontario Native Literacy Coalition
PIAAC	Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies
PMF	Performance Management Framework (also referred to as the Performance Management System (PMS))
UNESCO	United Nations Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies

### **Appendix C: Interview Questions**

1. What made you decide to become a literacy educator?
2. From your point of view, what is literacy?
3. What does it mean to be literate?
4. What makes teaching adult students unique from children?
5. How do the needs and wants of your students influence the way you teach reading and writing?
6. What approaches to literacy teaching are most effective?
7. What approaches to literacy teaching are most ineffective?
8. What are the best ways to evaluate literacy?
9. Is there anything else you would like to add about the teaching literacy?
10. Is there any aspect of literacy learning that you would like to learn more about or you think ought to be researched?

## **Appendix D: Translation of French**

Original text in French:

Je pense que les ressources doivent être engagements et à la fois refléter la réalité canadienne et leurs réalités étant nouveaux arrivants au Canada. L'émphase doit être placée sur la difficulté qui environne l'obtention d'un emploi, la réalité au niveau du genre d'emploi (et le salaire attaché) qu'ils peuvent obtenir, les préquis (académiques et culturel) afin de pénétrer le marché canadien, les attentes du marché canadien, l'importance d'un engagement tôt, la volonté et la flexibilité requises afin de bien s'intégrer au Canada, etc. Cette information doit être claire, simple et ferme, ca je pense que la qualité du succès des nouveaux arrivants depend dessus.

English Translation:

I think the resources must reflect the Canadian context and the context of being newcomers to Canada. Emphasis should be placed on the difficulty surrounding getting a job, the reality of the kind of job (and the salary attached) they can get, the pre-requisites (academic and cultural) in order to penetrate the Canadian market, the expectations of the Canadian market, the importance of early engagement, the willingness and flexibility required to integrate well into Canada, etc. This information must be clear, simple and firm. I think that the quality the newcomers' success depends on it.



Original text in French:

Tout ce que vous voulez bien ajouter est important selon les cas. Aucune méthode n'est bonne pour tous, car chaque personne est différente. Donc une grande variété de livres, textes, jeux de mots, jeux de chiffres, tout est bien reçu du moment que nous en avons une utilité.

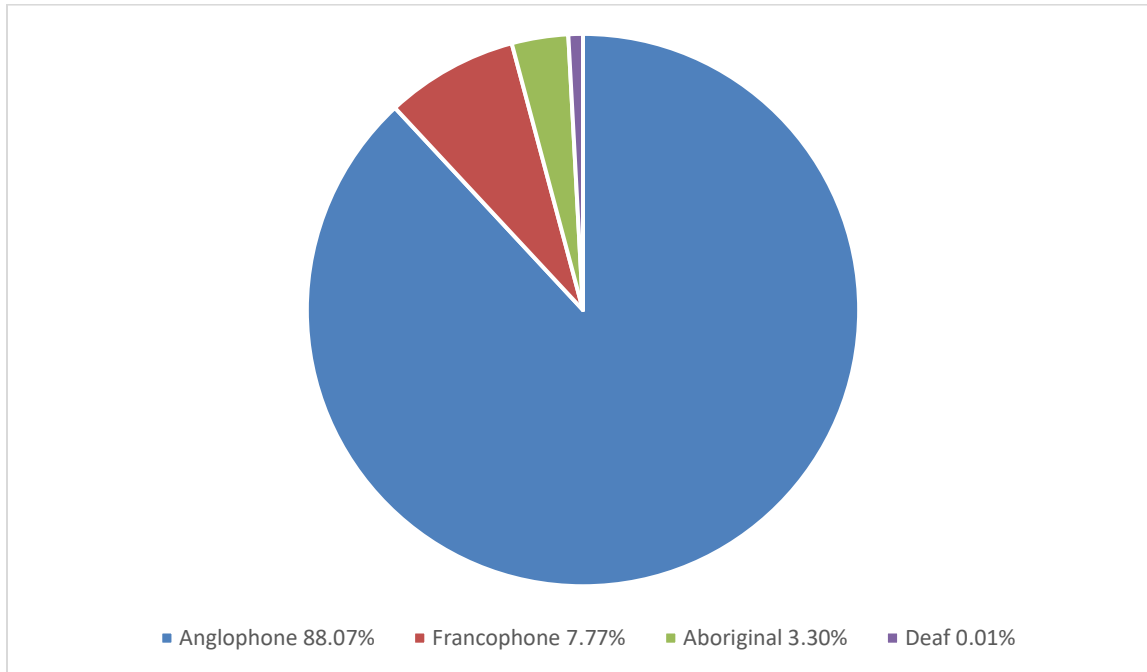
English Translation:

Everything you want to add is important depending on the case. There is no specific method that is good for everyone because everyone is different. So a wide variety of books, texts, word games, numbers games, can be put to good use.

### Chart 1, The Distribution of LBS Learners Across the Steams

Chart 1

The Distribution of LBS Learners Across the Streams



**Table 1, Overview of Cases**

Table 1

Overview of Cases

Case	Participant(s)	Role(s)	Stream	Sectors	Interview	Observation
1	Margot	Educator /Program Coordinator	English	Community	✓	✓
2	Glenda	Educator	English	Community	✓	
3	Nicholas	Program Coordinator	French	Community	✓	✓
4	Peter	Educator/ Program Coordinator	Deaf	College	✓	
5	Fiona and Barb	Educator Educator	English	Community	✓	✓
6	Sharon	Program Coordinator	English	School Board	✓	
7	Rose	Educator	English	School Board	✓	
8	Diane  and Abby	Educator/ Program Coordinator Tutor	Aboriginal	Community	✓	✓
9	Florence	Educator/ Program Coordinator	English	Non-LBS Community	✓	✓
10	Juliet	Educator	English	School Board	✓	✓
11	Gemma	Educator	English	Community	✓	✓
12	Ava	Educator	English	Community	✓	✓

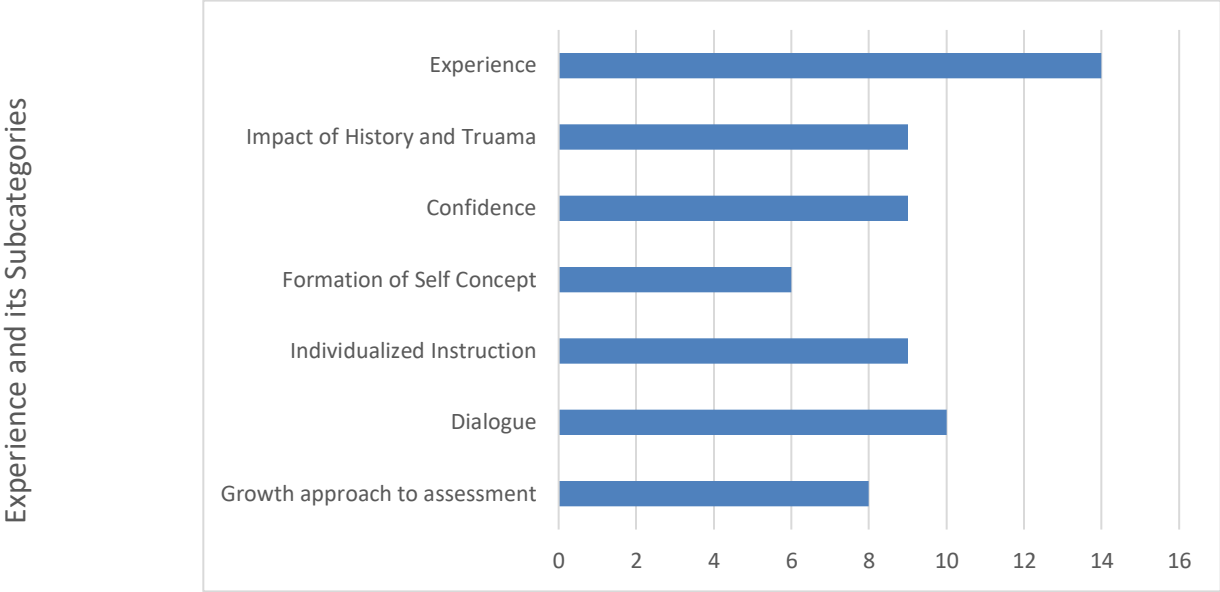
**Table 2, The Organization of Codes into Conceptual Categories**

Table 2

The Organization of Codes into Conceptual Categories

Categories	Codes
Experience-based Orientation	History + Trauma History + Trauma + Gender + Culture Self-concept Confidence (also includes self-esteem) Individualized instruction = One-size-does-not fit all+ individualized learning + learning plans +goals+ flexibility Growth + Progress
Cognitive Orientation	Memory + Empathy Communicative process = Information Processing + communication process Reading + Writing + Financial Literacy + Oral Literacy + Digital Literacy+ Embedded skills= Numeracy + ASL + digital literacy + financial literacy + oral literacy + critical thinking standardized assessments = content vs skill vs task self-directed learning = Self-directed learning + learner centered learning+ learner led
Social Orientation	Social function = function + social participation + social interactions + social engagement Social Isolation (includes social exclusion) Power dynamics (includes critical thinking) Peer Interactions = Group work + group discussion + peer interaction + class discussion + class trips Community Engagement = Community participation + community organization + community participation + community+ collective work + cooperative approaches + community of learners

**Chart 2, The Proportion of Participants Who Discussed the Significance of Experience to the Learning Process and Subcategories**

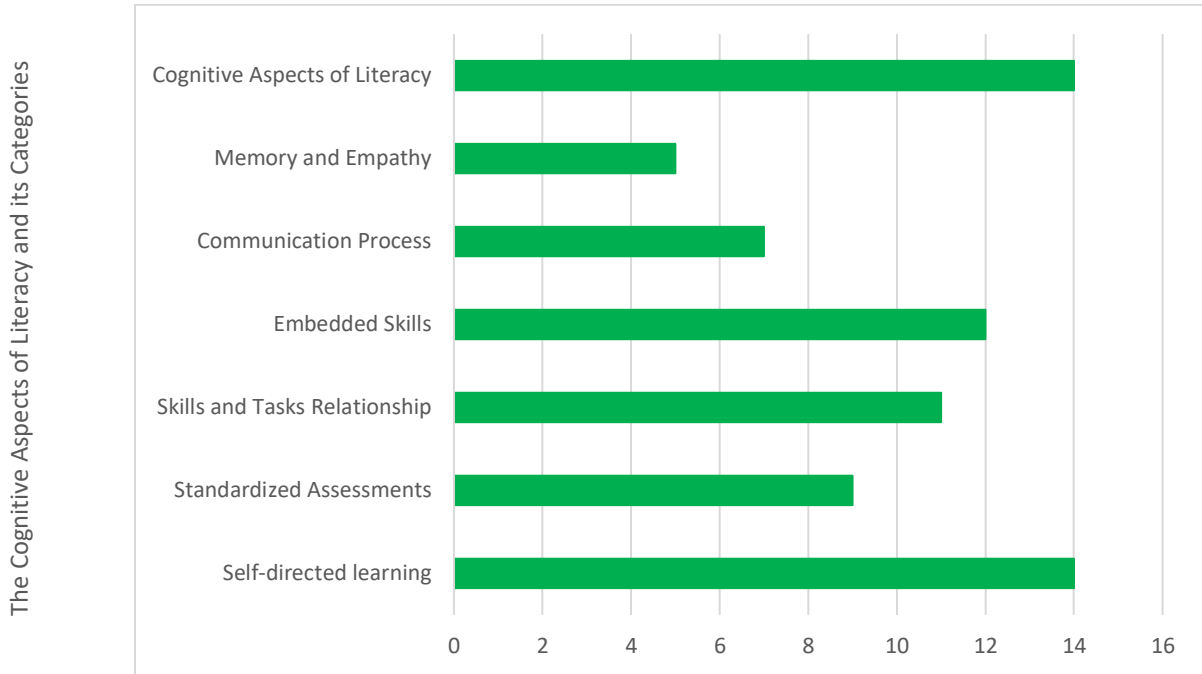


Number of Participants that made reference to Experience and Subcategories

### Chart 3, The Proportion of Participants Who Discussed the Significance of Literacy as a Cognitive Process and Subcategories

Chart 3

The Proportion of Participants Who Discussed the Significance of Literacy as a Cognitive Process and Subcategories



The Number of Participants that Made Reference to the Category and the Subcategories

### Chart 4, The Proportion of Participants Who Discussed the Significance of Literacy as a Social Practice and Subcategories

Chart 4

The Proportion of Participants Who Discussed the Significance of Literacy as a Social Practice and Subcategories

The Number of Participants that Made Reference to this Category and Subcategories

