Voice of Practice:

Building Knowledge in Adult Literacy

Wendy Seys

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Education

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts (Educational Studies) at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

June 2017

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: Wendy Seys

Entitled: Voice of Practice: Building Knowledge in Adult Literacy

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (Educational Studies)

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

Signed by the final examining committee:

_____ Chair
M. D'Amico

_____ Examiner
H. Attarian

_____ Examiner
A. Cleghorn

_____ Supervisor
A. Hamalian

Approved by _____
Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

_____2017 _____
Dean of Faculty

ABSTRACT

Voice of Practice:

Building Knowledge in Adult Literacy

Wendy Seys

There is no single entry point, body of knowledge, or certification that prepares or qualifies someone to work in the field of adult literacy in the non-formal setting. Practitioners enter the field with a rich variety of education and experience, and cultivate knowledge in their practice; however, this knowledge (and voice) is notably absent from the "official" knowledge. In order to address the identified gap, this exploratory qualitative research study aims to understand the experiences of literacy practitioners who work in the community-based sector in building knowledge for their practice. Further, it aims to explore how the collective knowledge and voice of literacy practitioners can be reflected in the "official" knowledge base, and in the policy-making process. This study is based on narratives from six practitioners who work in the non-formal adult literacy field in Quebec. The themes that emerged from the interviews speak to community, connection and creativity. These are key elements to bridging gaps between theory and practice. Emerging themes from the interviews are presented in detail, and used as the basis for recommendations and future directions.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my colleagues who work in the field of adult literacy, whose dedication, creativity and knowledge are, too often, unrecognized. Thank you for sharing your wisdom and your stories with me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to the human element of Concordia University's Department of Education, my professors and colleagues, for their support, encouragement, guidance and wisdom.

Thank you to Professor Arpi Hamalian for being the first person on the other side of the gate that made me feel like my voice was worth hearing; for encouraging me to do what is right for me; and for gentle the reminders that 'the best thesis is a completed one'!

Thank you to Professor Hourig Attarian for the opportunities to deepen my reflection, for tea and engaging conversations, and for reminding me to never lose hope.

Thank you to Professor Ailie Cleghorn for providing an environment where I could explore and expand my perspective on literacy.

Thank you to my family and friends, who cheered from the sidelines, brought food, made tea, and shared their Internet so that I could focus on my studies. And for tolerating me – I know it seemed like I'd never finish my 'school stuff'!

A special thanks to my mom for supporting me unconditionally throughout this chapter of life's journey, and for believing in me always.

Key Terms

The following terms are used in this research study:

- **Autonomous Community Action (ACA)** is defined in Part III of the Quebec's Cadre de reference. The criteria includes:

  The 4 criteria of a Community Organization:
  1. To be an incorporated non-profit (provincial or federal);
  2. To be rooted in a community;
  3. To maintain a participatory and democratic culture;
  4. To be free to self-determine mission, orientations, approaches and practices.

  The 4 additional criteria for Autonomous Community Action Organizations:
  1. To have been created at the initiative of community members;
  2. To have a mission that aims at social transformation;
  3. To promote active citizenship and integrated approaches to problems;
  4. To be governed by a Board that is independent from the public sector.

  (Centre for Community Organizations, 2017).

  The participants in this study work for literacy organizations that respect the ACA criteria.

- **Adult learner/learner/student** are used interchangeably in this study, based on the fact that there is no term that is preferred or agreed upon or used by students/learners or practitioners.

- The **Literacy Field** has been studied as a distinct field within adult education. In this study, the literacy field is focused on community-based organizations that deliver literacy services to English-speaking adults in Quebec.

- **Literacy practitioner** refers to someone who works in the **Literacy and Essential Skills (LES)** workforce. The term includes paid (full-time or part-time) individuals who work in the field of adult literacy in some or all of the following areas: instruction, teaching, facilitation, volunteer training, coordination, administration,

evaluation, reporting, curriculum development, outreach and public education (CLLN, 2013).

- **Community-based** is used interchangeably with non-formal in this study. Community-based literacy organizations provide literacy services outside of a formal academic system.
- **Literacy Quebec (LQ)** (formerly Literacy Volunteers of Quebec, LVQ) is a provincial organization and network that connects, supports and represents 13 community-based literacy organizations that provide literacy services to English-speaking adults in Quebec (Literacy Quebec, 2017).
- **Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur (MEES)** is the ministry that funds adult literacy initiatives in Québec (Note: Until 2015, community education initiatives were funded under the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, MELS).
- The **Programme d'action communautaire sur le terrain d'éducation (PACTE)** is a programme within MEES through which 182 autonomous community action (ACA) organizations are recognized and funded. The groups include organizations involved in literacy, drop-out prevention, school reintegration and continuing education.
- Le **Regroupement des groupes populaires en alphabétisation du Québec (RGPAQ)** représente 80 groupes membres répartis à travers le Québec. Ces groupes travaillent à l'amélioration des conditions de vie des personnes peu alphabétisées par le biais de l'apprentissage de la lecture, de l'écriture et du calcul. Il s'agit d'une

approche qui se nomme "alphabétisation conscientisante" ou "alphabétisation populaire" (RGPAQ, 2017).

Table of Contents

Voice of Practice:

Building Knowledge in Adult Literacy

Introduction

As research confirms, there is no single entry point, body of knowledge, or certification that prepares or qualifies someone for a career in the adult literacy field (CLLN, 2013). On the positive side, this gives practitioners the flexibility and creativity to meet a diverse range of adult literacy needs. On the negative side, it has led to criticism about an unqualified workforce. Literacy practitioners cultivate a rich body of knowledge; however, this knowledge (and voice) is notably absent from the "official" knowledge.

Practitioners, the majority of whom are women, enter the field of adult literacy with a rich variety of education, work and life experience. Many juggle part-time, temporary or seasonal jobs that offer low pay and little opportunity for advancement. Most perform multiple roles, including: instructor, grant writer, administrator, public speaker and curriculum developer. In order to build the skills and knowledge needed, many practitioners seek mentors, join and/or create networks, participate in apprenticeships and professional development, collaborate with colleagues, and learn from the volunteers and students with whom they work. Knowledge is generated through social interaction and grounded in practice.

Background

My lived experience in the literacy field since 1989 includes both paid and volunteer work at a national, provincial and local level. I entered the field at a time when there was increased attention to the issue of adult literacy in Canada, following the release of the 1987 Southam Study "Broken Words: Why Five Million Canadians are Illiterate" (Calamai, 1987), the creation of the National Literacy Secretariat (1987) and International Literacy Year (1990).

When I chose to return to university to study adult education, my unsuccessful attempt to enroll in Concordia's MA in Educational Studies was an experience that confirmed for me the existence of a divide between "official" knowledge and knowledge that did **not** count. The knowledge that I had built over twenty-five years in the non-formal education sector did not grant me passage through the academic gatekeeper.

My experience navigating the divide between non-formal and formal education solidified my interest in examining the experiences of literacy practitioners in building knowledge in and for their practice, and exploring how to bridge gaps between theory and practice.

Statement of the Problem

The adult literacy field has been described as an invisible field (Quigley, 1999, 2001, 2006; Merriam & Brockett, 1997). The discourse on adult literacy situates students and practitioners alike in a deficit model. Despite a strong practitioner knowledge base, academic literature and policy does not reflect the voice and expertise of practitioners who work in the community-based sector.

Purpose of the Research Study

In order to address the identified gap, I conducted an exploratory qualitative research study to understand the experiences of literacy practitioners who work in the community-based sector in building knowledge for their practice. Within that context, this study aims to identify how the collective knowledge and voice of literacy practitioners can be reflected in the "official" knowledge base, and in the policy-making process.

Research Questions

1. What are the experiences of adult literacy practitioners who work in the community-based sector in building knowledge for their practice?

2. How can practitioner knowledge and academic research intersect to inform practice and influence policy?

Chapter 1. Literature Review

Introduction

In this chapter, I establish the context of the literacy field in which practitioners build knowledge. Philosophical foundations; concepts and definitions of literacy; historical factors and policy directions interplay to create a complex field of practice. After establishing the context of the field, I present a portrait of practitioners and the ways in which they build knowledge for their practice.

First, I examine the following philosophical foundations that have shaped adult education, including literacy: humanistic; pragmatic idealism; economistic; and popular education. Second, I examine the literacy landscape, including: evolving definitions and concepts of literacy; an overview of the history and policy of the Canadian and Quebec literacy field; and a portrait of the Canadian Literacy and Essential Skills (LES) workforce. Third, I examine literature that describes how practitioners build knowledge including: research in practice, communities of practice, and practitioner inquiry.

I conclude with a summary of how literacy practitioners navigate gaps created by tensions between philosophical foundations and a lack of a cohesive overarching policy, in order to build a knowledge base that aligns with their beliefs about the purpose of literacy education, and reflects their authentic voice.

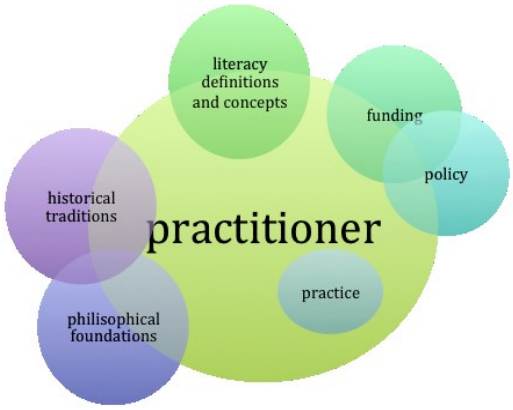

Figure 1. Influences on practice

Philosophical Foundations

Philosophical frameworks provide a context for understanding adult education. Elements of humanistic, economistic, pragmatic idealism and popular education approaches provide a lens through which to view the evolution of adult literacy in Canada.

Humanistic. One philosophical approach to adult education that is evident in the history of adult education in Canada is based on humanism. A humanistic approach emphasizes autonomy of the individual, freedom and dignity (Spencer, 2006). This approach looks at the whole person and appreciates the individual as capable of achieving his or her full potential as a human being, including work, in the community and with family (Selman et al., 1998). Merriam and Brockett write that the early examples of adult education were grounded in the spirit of "friends teaching friends" (Merriam and Brockett, 1997, p. 265). There are many examples from Canada's literacy landscape that embrace a humanistic approach, such as Frontier College's labourer-teacher program, and Laubach Literacy of Canada's Each One Teach One philosophy.

Pragmatic idealism. The term lifelong learning entered the mainstream of policy discourse in the 1970s, with a brief period of humanistic tradition led by UNESCO. Torres (2013) describes pragmatic idealism as paradigm that emerged internationally. This model emphasizes the concept of lifelong learning and is reflected in the 1972 Faure Commission Report, or *Learning to Be.* Education is viewed as "a right and a good that individuals cannot renounce" (Torres, 2013, p.18). Pragmatic idealism stems from a deficit model, and views education as a way to repair the deficits of learning. This paradigm recognizes that adult education occurs in a variety of settings throughout life, including clubs, trade unions and community organizations. The idea of a learning society is a critical premise of a knowledge society, in which knowledge, labour and capital play significant complementary roles.

Economistic. An integrated international global economy has impacted adult education policy and programming and been a driver behind the economistic focus of current literacy policy in Canada.

Globalization was a term first used in 1985 by Theodore Levitt, who described changes in global economics that affected production, consumption and investment (Torres, 2013). The blurring of national boundaries and the erosion of trade barriers had taken place since the Bretton Woods conference in 1944; however, it was the scale of globalization that became significant in the 1980s. By the late 1980s, economicaly-driven policies, supported by the OECD, the World Bank and the European Union dominated policy and contributed to the challenge of addressing human capital.

Neoliberalism is the economic model behind globalization. Building on theoretical contributions of classical economists, it is "an economic doctrine that sees the market as the most effective way of determining production and satisfying people's needs" (Stromquist, 2002, p. 24). Policy prescriptives emphasized within neoliberalism include: deregulation, privatization and liberalization. The combined effect is to "reduce the power of the state to intervene in the economy and related facets of collective life" (Stromquist, 2002, p. 26).

Neoliberalism brings with it the challenge of building human capital. Human capital is based on the view that humans are repositories of knowledge, skills and qualities that are considered capital. Whereas human resources are useful to production because of what they *do*, human capital is something that one *owns*, and that ownership is valuable for the individual and for society (Bouchard, 2006). Governments and international lending institutions invest in building knowledge that has value to the economy, at the expense of investing in education that is not seen as marketable.

The following aspects are integral to a neoliberal agenda: the policy of 'user pays'; a belief that government support for adult education should be for economic purposes and therefore focused on training for work; and, that adults who are deemed lacking 'functional' or 'employability' skills should be targeted for training (Bowl, 2014, p. 2). Torres (2013) argues that modernization and human-capital theories link the importance of adult education, particularly literacy, to economic growth and modernization. A literate workforce increases productivity, and reduces the cost of technical training and professional education. Education "is a means of selecting the most able individuals enhancing their occupational mobility in the economic active population" (Torres, 2013, p.16).

Popular education. Popular education, rooted in the work of Brazilian educator and activist Paulo Freire views education as integral to the process of social transformation. Popular education is rooted in, and responds to specific needs of a given community; grounded in the experience of the student; and aims to achieve with critical consciousness, empowerment, and ultimately, liberation (Freire, 1970/2000).

Critical consciousness and teaching through dialogue are concepts that are integral to Freire's view of education as a process of social transformation. Critical consciousness, or "conscientizacao" implies teaching for understanding the world critically. For Freire, "having a critical consciousness means that we have seen through the ideological fog of false consciousness – the myths, theories, and rationales – the oppressors have constructed to confuse and indoctrinate dominated groups" (Gutek, 2014, p. 427).

Freire refutes the banking model of education in which teachers deposit knowledge, and students merely receive that knowledge. In contrast to the banking model, Freire views education as a dialogical learning process, in which the teacher and the student have a horizontal

relationship (Torres, 2013). “Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication, there can be no true education” (Freire, 1994, p. 73-74).

Popular education is a model that is often reflected in the work of community-based literacy organizations. In Quebec, literacy organizations that deliver services in French, and are members of the umbrella group RGPAQ, are linked by their common approach to popular education. These organizations often deliver literacy training within the context of small group settings. In contrast, many of the organizations that deliver literacy services in English in Quebec deliver one-on-one tutoring in the tradition of American literacy pioneer, Frank Laubach. Laubach also recognized a connection between education and marginalization: “You think it is a pity that they cannot read, but the real tragedy is that they have no voice in public affairs, they never vote, they are never represented in any conference, they are the silent victims, mutely submitting in every age” (Collins, 1996, p. 6).

In summary, the evolution of adult education in Canada, as elsewhere, is nestled within broader societal contexts. The philosophical foundations outlined in this section have shaped adult education in Canada. The current economistic emphasis on literacy as a skill for economic growth, referred to in the literacy field as “get Bob a job”, overshadows a humanistic approach. The next section focuses on the literacy field.

The Literacy Field

This section examines the evolution of the concept of literacy, the literacy landscape in Canada and Quebec, and the practitioners who work in the field of literacy.

What is literacy? There is no single or static answer to the question ‘What is literacy?’ The definition of literacy is complex and evolving, and is shaped within philosophical frameworks in the context of social, economic, and cultural factors. Researchers, academics,

international organizations and agencies, and governments have contributed to the understanding of literacy. Adults with low literacy and practitioners also define literacy, however, these definitions are notably absent from the academic literature.

According to Street (2001), the traditional concept of literacy as "the ability to read and write" is an autonomous model that situates literacy in the individual person, rather than in society. Within this model, literacy is a skill that translates to employment, mobility and economic gain. The view of literacy as a singular, autonomous and context-free skill is challenged by Street's ideological view that literacy is constructed and enacted in social and political contexts, and subject to implications of differing power relationships (Purcell-Gates, 2008).

According to Gee (2008), the autonomous model obscures the multiple ways in which literacy involves power relationships among people. No literacy is politically neutral; rather, it is a social concept, shaped by history, politics and constructed in power relationships. Inherent in the ideological view is the notion that some literacies provide access to power and material wealth, and some literacies are viewed as deficient.

Whose literacy counts? Inherent in the ideological model of literacy is the notion that literacy is not neutral, it is shaped by history, politics, and culture. Some forms of literacy are privileged over others. Balanoff and Chambers (2005) raise the questions: "What counts as literacy?" and "What counts as text?" (p. 18) in the context of Inuinnaqtun literacies in the North West Territories. Although many adults in the community speak several languages and possess knowledge and skills, they are considered to have low levels of literacy according to the autonomous model of literacy that has dominated Canada's literacy policy. Balanoff and Chambers (2005) view this autonomous definition of literacy as narrow and impoverished. In a

culture where knowledge is often passed on orally, mainstream literacy has not recognized the importance and complexities of orality and traditional literacies. Additionally, this autonomous view that attributes literacy to individuals ignores the view of literacy as a social practice. Balanoff and Chambers (2005) conclude that "if 'literacy' is viewed as a social practice that takes into account culture and local context, and is shaped by history" and if 'text' is a set of symbols that includes visual, oral and gestural modalities, then the Elders in this community are literate (p. 18). 'What counts as literacy?' and 'according to whom?' are questions that must remain at the forefront of literacy practice if we hope to address the real needs identified by adults in literacy programs.

The concept and definition of literacy has been described and defined in academic literature; a series of international literacy surveys has also examined the practice of literacy and driven literacy policy. The 1994 *International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)* and the 2003 Adult *Literacy and Lifeskills Survey (ALLS),* defined literacy as "the ability to use printed and written information in society – to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential" (OECD, 2005). In the 2012 *Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies* (PIAAC), literacy is defined as "understanding, evaluating, using and engaging with written texts to participate in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential" (OECD, 2016). PIAAC builds on previous international surveys and measures the following skills and competencies: literacy, numeracy, and problem solving in technology-rich environments (TRE) (Essential Skills Ontario, 2013).

A definition of literacy defined by someone who has lived experience with low literacy is notably absent from academic literature as well as policy. The following is a voice of experience:

> I worked mostly in restaurants during my teen years and my early twenties but I could never spell the word 'restaurant'. I had a child and I was a single parent…I could read and I could write but not well enough to get the jobs that I needed to break through the poverty and through the isolation. So I defined 'functional illiteracy' as not being able to do the things that I wanted to do. And I want it defined by the individuals who struggle with this issue in a way that they need to define it for themselves. I don't want a mass definition for the term 'illiterate'. And, in fact, I don't want the terms 'illiterate' or 'functional illiterate'. They're very negative (Robin Silverman, Literacy 2000 Conference, 1990).

The definitions of literacy presented in this section, while not exhaustive, illustrate the complex, contested and evolving concept of literacy. There is no single definition of literacy used in the field of adult literacy in Canada. Although the definition of literacy has evolved, text literacy continues to be privileged over other literacies (e.g. oral, visual). The next section describes historical and policy evolution in Canada and Quebec, underscoring the complexities of the literacy field.

Canadian policy. This section describes the evolution of literacy policy in Canada. Welton notes "Canada has one of the most illustrious, experimental, and innovative traditions of adult education in the world." (Welton, 2013, p.19). Despite this rich tradition, the OECD claims that there is "a lack of any consistent adult-related policy in Canada" resulting in the fact that the special needs of adults are neglected; there is no sense of system of adult education, and adult education is vulnerable to instability in government (Elfert & Rubenson, 2013, p. 238).

Canada's lack of cohesive adult education policy can be attributed to several factors, including Canada's constitutional arrangements. The 1867 British North America Act stipulates that education for youth is a provincial matter, while the federal government has a role in adult education related to occupational training, colleges and universities, and literacy (Elfert & Rubenson, 2013). Kennedy (2013) argues for the need to "overcome our jurisdictional issues and departmental silos to create a culture of learning."

Other factors that contribute to the lack of a cohesive adult education system include: a wide range of types of training; a variety of purposes for education; and fundamental philosophical and ideological differences within the field of adult education (Selman et al., 1998).

Just as Canada has been criticized for its lack of a cohesive adult education policy, it is not surprisingly, also criticized for its lack of literacy policy. As reported in 2011 by the National Adult Literacy Agency, "Despite [Canada's] well-deserved reputation for research excellence in the field of literacy, Canada lacks anything that could be considered a cohesive, coherent, or systematic policy approach to adult literacy" (Quigley, 2013, p. 82).

The 1967 Adult Occupational Training Act, legislation that launched adult basic education programs, marked the entrance of the federal government into literacy. The 1987 *Southam Study "Broken Words: Why Five Million Canadians are Illiterate*" (Calamai, 1987) sparked a concerted response to the report that 1 in 4 Canadian adults was functionally illiterate. Federal and provincial resources were committed to 'eradicating' illiteracy, like a plague. In 1987, the Secretary of State launched the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS), marking an era of remarkable growth in the field of literacy research, training, curriculum development, and professional development, until it was dismantled in 2006. According to St. Clair (2016), "the philosophy of the unit was strongly community-based despite its location within the Federal government" (p. 231).

Current federal literacy policy represents a departure from the historical and philosophical traditions of adult education in Canada as a movement to foster democracy and social justice. Federal literacy policy and funding, administered through the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES), emphasizes development of skills for the workforce. The policy

identifies literacy and essential skills "needed for work, learning and life", noting that these skills are the "foundation for learning all other skills" (Government of Canada, 2013). The nine essential skills include: reading, writing, document use, numeracy, computer use, thinking, oral communication, working with others, and continuous learning (Government of Canada, 2013).

Although many adult learners participate in literacy training to acquire or improve the skills they need to find jobs, maintain jobs, and retrain for new jobs, these are not their sole reasons for participating in literacy training. A 2001 research study asked adults inquiring about literacy programs why they were enrolling, and found that 88% cited "personal and social well-being" as their first goal, while only 35% gave "job-related" as their first goal (Quigley, 2013, p. 90).

In contrast to the federal policy emphasis on literacy as a skill for the economy, Quebec's adult education policy recognizes literacy as a human right, and as having application to a wide spectrum of activities throughout life.

Quebec policy. This section addresses the evolution of Quebec's adult education policy, including adult literacy.

Adult education policy in Quebec has similarly been shaped by factors facing other provinces and countries, including globalization, demographics, economics and technology. In Quebec, prior to the "Quiet Revolution", as signaled by the election of the Liberals under Jean Lesage in 1960, control of most aspects of education fell within the scope of the Roman Catholic Church, and focused on the training of the elite (Selman, 1998). The introduction of "public" education was one of the changes attributable to the "Quiet Revolution" and can be traced to the recommendations of the Parent Commission. These recommendations led to the establishment of

the Quebec Ministry of Education (MÉQ) in 1964, and formed the philosophical orientation for education in Quebec (Heft, 2007).

In the 1960s and 1970s, access to formal adult education was broadened. There was an emphasis on permitting adults to upgrade or complete their formal schooling. The establishment of the Direction générale de l'éducation des adultes (DGÉA) was an effort to address the high school dropout rate (Heft, 2007). Initiatives in the non-formal sector of education also developed in the 1970s, following the MÉQs decision to fund a program for popular education for adults through trade unions, co-operatives and the voluntary sector (Selman, 1998).

In the 1980s, the Parti Québécois appointed the Jean Commission, under the leadership of Michèle Jean, to study the vocational and socio-cultural aspects of education. The Jean Report proposed "organizing the entire education system around the principle of lifelong learning" (Selman, 1998, p. 85). Following a period of economic depression, however, these recommendations were tabled in favour of the policy statement and action plan, *Continuing Education Program, Policy Statement and Plan of Action*. This statement established Quebec's educational policy as "dictated more by economic than educational concerns (Selman, 1998, p. 86), a policy that continued until the mid 1990s.

After returning to power in 1994, the Parti Québecois undertook public consultations, the Estates General on Education, to review the Quebec education system, including adult education. Almost 30 years after the Parent Commission, the Estates General called for the primordial importance of drafting government policy on lifelong learning (Selman, 1998). Major issues facing Quebec at this time included: poverty and unemployment; the changing world of work due to international markets and technology; changing demographics that reflected an aging

population, increased immigration and urban-rural tensions; and reduced government spending and reduction of social programs to reduce debt and deficit (Selman, 1998).

In 2002, the process of developing the current policy on adult education culminated in *Learning throughout life: Government policy of adult education and continuing education and training*. The policy centers on four orientations that form the basis of the action plan:

1. To provide basic education for adults
2. To maintain and continually upgrade adults' competencies
3. To acknowledge prior learning and competencies through official recognition
4. To remove obstacles to access and retention (Gouvernement du Québec, 2002, p. 6).

The policy is premised on the principles of the Hamburg Declaration, tabled at the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education held in July 1997, asserting "The right to education is a universal right of all people" and "human-centred development and a participatory society based on the full respect of human rights will lead to sustainable and equitable development" (Heft, 2007, p. 113). It addresses literacy as a catalyst for participation for all, including the unreached and excluded (UNESCO, 1997).

The philosophical underpinnings of the adult education policy in Quebec as evident in the Parent Commission, the Jean Commission, and the current Quebec policy reflect a humanistic foundation. The current Quebec policy addresses adult education as a continuum of lifelong learning from basic education to the need to prepare people for participation in the labour market. It acknowledges the needs of all, including those lacking basic education and/or literacy, and includes specific populations such as immigrants and workers.

The current policy recognizes the importance of community-based education:

> Many adults with little schooling prefer to learn through action and through involvement in social action rather than enroll in an educational institution. Over the years, independent community action groups (community-based education) have developed invaluable expertise and original training practices, especially in literacy training (Gouvernement du Québec, 2002, p. 29).

Popular education delivered by community-based groups has had a long tradition in Quebec. It has been recognized and funded, initially under the *Programme de soutien à l'éducation populaire autonome (PSEPA)* and the *Programme de soutien à l'alphabétisation populaire autonome (PSAPA)* (Heft, 2007), and since 2003 through the *Programme d'action communautaire sur le terrain d'éducation (PACTE),* within the Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur (MEES). PACTE was initiated as part of *L'action communautaire*: *une contribution essentielle à l'éxercise de la citoyenneté et au développement social du Québec* (Gouvernement du Québec, 2009). Non-profit organizations funded under this program are required to demonstrate the principles of autonomous community action, including: a social mission that targets social transformation, and a demonstration of associative and democratic life in the community (Gouvernement du Québec, 2009, p. 2). This recognition and support of popular education in the current adult education policy reflects the paradigm of popular education in the tradition of Paulo Freire.

In conclusion, Quebec's adult education policy has strong roots in a humanistic approach, while recognizing the needs of workforce training for individuals and for the economy. The policy recognizes the important contributions of the non-formal sector in delivering literacy services, and embraces popular education.

This section established the context of the literacy field; the next section presents a portrait of the people who work in the literacy field.

The Literacy and Essential Skills (LES) workforce. This section presents a portrait of the Literacy and Essential Skills (LES) workforce in Canada. The data from this national study will later be compared to the data gathered from participants in this research study.

In 2013, the Canadian Literacy and Learning Network (CLLN) released the results of its national labour market study, The Realities of Working in the Literacy and Essential Skills Field: An Occupational Profile of the Literacy and Essential Skills Workforce in Canada. The study focuses on the paid workforce (estimated at about 3,000 people, 86% of whom are women) in the LES field who perform a range of duties including: instruction, teaching, volunteer training, coordination, administration, evaluation, reporting, curriculum development, outreach and public education (CLLN, 2013). Knowledge, skills, educational background, and working conditions were explored.

The report recognizes that the LES workforce is well educated, dedicated, and possesses high psychological capital and strong LES-related knowledge and skills. It highlights the fact that practitioners work in situations of uncertainty due to precarious job markets, wide-ranging salaries, and limited access to benefits. Challenges facing the current field include the impending retirement of practitioners, and a high turnover rate, both of which impact on recruitment, retention and stability of the LES system.

In terms of the profile of organizations that deliver LES across Canada, community-based LES agencies (32%), colleges and universities (20%) and school boards (12%) are the predominant delivery agencies in Canada. Small group (82%) and one-to-one (72%) are the most common modes of delivery, and most groups report using multiple modes of delivery. Main client groups served include people with low literacy (28%), the precariously employed (23%), immigrants (17%) and Aboriginal persons (13%).

In terms of workforce demographics 95% of practitioners reported having a post-secondary qualification (75% have a bachelor's degree and 24% have a master's degree). 86% of practitioners are women; 71% of practitioners are 45 years (and over) and 38% are 55 year (and over) (CLLN, 2013, p. 14).

The vast majority (90%) of practitioners entered the literacy field from outside, including areas of Recreation, Counseling and K-12 Education. The top 3 reasons for entering the field include: "doing an intrinsically rewarding job, helping others, and enabling people to participate in society more" (CLLN, 2013, p. 14).

In terms of working conditions, the average hours worked per week paid are 30.8; the average overtime, both paid and unpaid is 4.4 hours per week, and the average unpaid volunteer hours worked by literacy practitioners is 3.6 hours per week. Calculations indicate that annual volunteer contribution of time by literacy workers is 113,022 hours (CLLN, 2013, p. 18). The average annual gross earning is $44,000. The average time worked is 10.5 months per year, and 46% of practitioners work in temporary jobs, while 46% work part-time.

As indicated in the survey, 82% of workers report being satisfied with their job overall, despite the fact that 60% of respondents reported being dissatisfied with the lack of pension and extended medical benefits, and the short-term nature of the job. Quigley notes that most literacy practitioners give a lot of volunteer time, and often work part-time for low pay. Most practitioners "give" because they believe in the power of the printed word (Quigley, 2006, p. 12).

The report makes recommendations to recognize, stabilize, and mobilize a sustainable literacy and essentials skills field: 1) Investigate models of professionalization; 2) Identify supports and enablers to increase access to high quality professional development; 3) Explore and identify succession strategies and pathways into the field; 4) Identify and recommend human

resource strategies to support consistent working conditions across regions and organizational types (CLLN, 2013, p. 6).

An invisible field. Merriam and Brockett (1997) describe the "unacknowledged side of practice" in which practitioners are invisible for who they are (women, older people, ethnic minorities) or what they do (community-based education, popular education, community activists), or both, and argue that we need to challenge the white, middle-class monopoly of adult education's "official" knowledge as the sole knowledge base (Merriam & Brockett, 1997, p. 259). Quigley describes the centuries-old "legacy of deficit perspective", a viewpoint that adults with low literacy need 'to be fixed', a view that extends to the practitioners who work with them (Quigley, 2013).

The 2013 CLLN study highlights the strengths and challenges facing the LES workforce in Canada. It reaffirms research done by Quigley (1999, 2001, 2006) and Merriam & Brockett (1997) that describes adult literacy as a marginalized field. The CLLN study also refutes some of the Discourse around adult literacy practitioners. For example, Quigley notes that the deficit model centers on the proposition of an unqualified workforce, however, the CLLN study identifies an educated workforce. It also points to other strengths of the field (dedicated, high psychological capacity, strong LES knowledge base). The CLLN study is important because it provides the field with data that reaffirms its strengths and identifies areas that need to be improved in order to strengthen the field in order to alter the prevailing discourse about practitioners.

Working in the 'invisible field' has a positive side. It is where practitioners, often working under the radar, find creative ways to reach those who have fallen through the cracks: inmates who want the tools to make better choices in life; people with intellectual challenges that

have been 'written off' by society; parents who want to help their children; young people who want to pass the driver's license test; and people who want to find and/or keep jobs.

Voice and Knowledge

Voice. Analyzing voice in educational discourse is prominent in literature on anthropology and education. As a concept, voice can be viewed in a number of different ways, including:

> 1) as the actual discourse to work with in ethnographies of education; 2) as a heuristic to investigate the ways in which different educational actors make sense of school life; 3) as a problem to make oneself heard; 4) as a methodological tool for empowerment, and 5) as a vision of education and society (Juffermans & Van Der Aa, 2013).

Simply stated, voice is the capacity to make oneself heard. According to Hymes, voice unites two kinds of freedom: "freedom to have one's voice heard" and "freedom to develop a voice worth hearing" (Collins, 2013). The expression "giving voice" originated from feminist and other liberation movements, and is often associated with qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The expression refers to empowering people who have not traditionally been heard, or had the opportunity to have their stories told. When the story is told through the researcher, not by the participants themselves, it is important to be aware of the ethical issues inherent in giving voice to others, especially those in vulnerable situations.

Voice is connected to the concept of discourse. Whereas discourse involves language and conversation, "big D" Discourse involves place, props (things), values and identifications, as well as language (Collins, 2013). Gee distinguishes discourse from the "big D" Discourses, acknowledging the issue of "recognition for any form or group belonging or social identity" (Collins, 2013, p. 206). In order to be acknowledged as a member of a group ("who") engaged in activities of the group ("what"), recognition from some individual or collective other is required.

The struggle for voice in adult literacy. The struggle over whose voice should be heard, and what knowledge should be honoured is a prevailing theme in the field of adult literacy. While the voice of literacy practitioners is audible within the community, it is notably silent in academic literature and in the policy-making process. A disconnect exits between the discourse and the knowledge base of practitioners. Quigley writes about the struggle for voice in adult literacy, noting that throughout time, people have been separated from knowledge that has been deemed "official knowledge" (Quigley, 2001, p. 81). Adult students and practitioners alike have experientially lived knowledge, but it is "typically understood that knowledge of real worth is the codified knowledge found in approved texts" (Quigley, 2001, p. 81). Those with the least official knowledge are those without voice, and without power.

Quigley presents two perspectives that have shaped the Discourse on adult literacy: a popular perspective and a political perspective. The popular perspective portrays adults with low literacy as "victims in need of rescue" and the political perspective portrays illiteracy as "a burden on the public economy and an inherent threat to social order" (Quigley, 1999, p. 253). The impact creates a legacy of literacy research that has "given the field of adult literacy education a stigmatized population, which by extension has also helped create a marginalized field of practice" (Quigley, 1999, p. 254).

Knowledge. Plato distinguished knowledge from belief: knowledge concerns fact and can be either true or false, whereas belief is open to interpretation (Thomas & Seely Brown, 2011). Until the latter part of the twentieth century, knowledge was regarded as static, easily transmitted, and was used to shape education (Thomas & Seely Brown, 2011, p. 91).

Thomas and Seely Brown (2011) describe the difference between learning and being taught, noting that "the 20th century education system is built on the assumption that teaching is

necessary for learning to occur" (p. 32). According to Thomas and Seely Brown (2011), explicit knowledge is "content that is easily identified, articulated, transferred and testable" (p. 74). This kind of knowledge is transferrable: You teach. I learn.

Thomas and Seely Brown (2011) recognize a fundamental flaw in this transfer of knowledge model: "that what we know will remain unchanged long enough to make it worth transferring" (p. 39). In a rapidly changing world, content and context is constantly evolving. Thomas and Seely Brown (2011) recognize a different kind of knowledge, referred to as tacit knowledge:

> which grows through personal experience and experimentation, is not transferrable – you can't teach it to me, though I can still learn it. The reason for the difference is that learning through tacit knowledge happens not only in the brain but also in the body, through all our senses. It is an experiential process as well as a cognitive process. It is not about being taught knowledge; it is about absorbing it (p. 77).

People learn "through their interactions and participation with others in fluid relationships that are the result of shared interest and opportunity" (Thomas & Seely Brown, 2011, p. 50).

Whose knowledge counts? The issue of what and whose knowledge counts is predominant in adult literacy discourse. Despite the rich history of the social reformist and non-formal education, the professional tradition dominates the production and ownership of official knowledge in the field of adult literacy. Selman writes that the "history of the field…is increasingly becoming two histories, that of institutionalized, professionalized adult education" that emerged in the 1950s, and a "popular education movement which is of the people and an instrument of spiritual, cultural, social and political change" (Welton, 2013, p. 197). The ideological divide between a "social reformist tradition" and a "professional tradition" has created a tension that continues in adult literacy (Quigley, 1997, p. 8).

Veeman (2003) writes about her experience of returning to doctoral studies after working in the field of adult education for over twenty years: “Whatever I had accomplished in the literacy field did not count as a credential on this side of the divide” (p. 5).

Bridging the divide. This section presents some ways that literacy practitioners build knowledge. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) note that the split between academic research and action research has narrowed. Collaborative and action research have the potential to bridge the divide between research and practice in the field of adult literacy. Action research builds on what is fundamental in the qualitative approach, in that people can be active in shaping and changing the world as they go about their daily lives (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 244).

Research in practice. Quigley explores research in practice in the field of adult literacy. Action research has generally been considered in the context of education to be research “carried out by practitioners with a view to improving their professional practice and understanding their practice better” (Quigley, 1999, p. 258). Quigley states that throughout history, “adult literacy education has been defined, described, researched and effectively controlled by external entities” and argues that research in practice is a way for literacy practitioners and learners to produce their own knowledge, and gain a voice (Quigley, 1999, p. 253). Quigley argues for a space for the voices of practitioners and learners in the creation of a third counter-hegemony against the pervasive political and popular perspective, a perspective that does not adopt a deficit concept of learners (Quigley, 1999, p. 254).

Participatory research has been criticized as “experimentation without control groups” and has been referred to as “applied idiosyncratically to activities not conducted primarily to advance knowledge but rather to promote community development” (Quigley, 1997, p. 10).

Communities of practice. St. Clair (2007) explores research in adult literacy as a community of practice. He begins with the premise that increased research activity in adult literacy is a good thing, and argues that research co-created by researchers and practitioners offers benefits: practice decisions can be made in an informed way; theorization can become more sophisticated when it is connected to practice (St. Clair, 2007).

St. Clair draws on Wenger's communities of practice model of learning, defining a community of practice as a "group of people who could do something, and the way one learned to do the same thing is through participation in the group, initially on the fringes and later as a full member" (St. Clair, 2007, p. 52). This model is intuitive and social in the way it builds and transfers knowledge, similar to an apprenticeship. In essence, the skills of the individual have the potential to become part of the combined knowledge of the community of practice.

The "communities of practice" model is premised on three elements: mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire (St. Clair, 2007, p. 54). Mutual engagement is the sense of being involved with a group of like-minded people. Joint enterprise is a shared goal, which arises out of the process of negotiation and creates mutual accountability. A shared repertoire consists of a range of routines, words, symbols, stories and ways of doing things that become part of practice over time.

Communities of practice are not exempt from issues of power and control. They can exclude or marginalize members; they can be conservative and focus on preserving the status quo, and can overlook the "wisdom of the periphery" (St. Clair, 2007, p. 55).

St. Clair analyzed the research produced by the National Literacy Secretariat in terms of a matrix that reviewed six categories (systematic approach, cumulative approach, contribution, immediate impact, general impact, and research preparation) in order to understand how an

underdeveloped area of the literacy research community could be strengthened (St. Clair, 2007, p. 60). Based on his findings, he argues that mutual engagement is not entirely inclusive which leads to missed opportunities for mutual learning. He concludes that the enhancement of research capacity must take into account the fact that social relationships matter profoundly and that research is the "accumulation of work by a community of scholars and practitioners" (St. Clair, 2007, p. 63). He argues that a research community of practice requires that researchers not only interact with each other, but also with practitioners. St. Clair emphasizes the importance of ensuring that methodological diversity be nurtured in the context of mutual respect and awareness "to support a shared repertoire of knowledge-building strategies" (St. Clair, 2007, p. 64). He argues that it is important to develop research capacity that emphasizes the relationships between people rather than the conventional approach to enhancing methodological expertise.

Practitioner inquiry. Practitioner inquiry is an approach that counters the deficit model that literacy practitioners have deficiencies that need to be remedied and is based on the belief that practitioners should have a role in defining what they need to know. In this approach, practitioners pose the problems to be considered and conduct field-based inquiry into daily practice (Lytle, Belzer & Reumann, 1992). Similar to the communities of practice and research in practice models, practitioner inquiry assumes that practitioners can contribute to both individual professional development and also have the potential to enhance the wider knowledge base of the field (Lytle et al., 1992, p. 5).

Thomas and Seely Brown (2011) state that inquiry produces a "stockpile of experience" that is a powerful technique for learning. In inquiry, questions are not related to what one knows but "What are the things we don't know?" (p. 83). Thomas and Seely Brown (2011) state that

asking questions is an act of imagination. Hunches, intuition, and gut feeling, otherwise known as "tacit understanding", play a key role in shaping the process of inquiry (p. 83).

Summary: Navigating the Gaps

Tension between philosophical foundations, purposes of adult education, definitions of literacy and the lack of an overarching adult education policy in Canada create gaps. Spencer writes that adult educators look for "spaces" to work in, gaps created by contradictions in policy, independent funding, and the work of volunteers (Spencer, 2006, p. 97).

Bowl (2014) recognizes that educators, practitioners and researchers have been affected by policy pressures and examines how they manage and respond to contradictions between their values and the demands placed upon them through accommodation and resistance. Bowl defines personal agency as "a process of engagement with a context in which practitioners – influenced by their experiences, beliefs and aspirations – interact with the external demands made upon them" (Bowl, 2014, p. 117).

Within the context of the current Canadian policy focus on literacy as a skill for the workforce, practitioners navigate spaces in order to meet the broad range of needs identified by adult learners, through practice that aligns with their own personal philosophical foundations. Lack of funds, and a narrow policy focus that restricts the types of activities eligible for government support, make it increasingly difficult to navigate the gaps.

Chapter 2. Methodology and Profiles of the Participants

This chapter describes the methodology of the research study and presents the profiles of the participants.

Introduction

The literature review describes literacy practitioners as positioned within a deficit model in the educational discourse. There is a gap in the literature in the area of knowledge creation as it relates to literacy practitioners who work in the community-based sector. In order to address this gap, I conducted a qualitative research study to understand the experiences of literacy practitioners in building knowledge for their practice. I chose a qualitative approach in order to understand the experiences of people in a social context, specifically, the experiences of adult literacy practitioners in building knowledge in their field. Aligned with the interpretivist paradigm, I used methods that supported "interacting with people in their social contexts and talking with them about their perceptions" (Glesne, 2011, p. 8). Therefore, I used interviews to collect narratives about the experiences of literacy practitioners building knowledge in and for their work. I also documented my experiences as a literacy practitioner building knowledge in the field, and kept a reflective journal of my thoughts and reactions while engaging in the research and interview process.

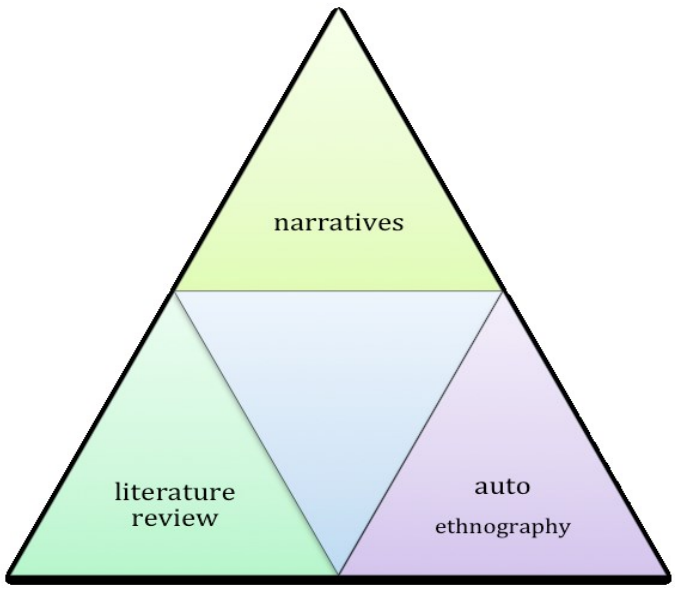

Figure 2. Data triangulation

Timeline.

PHASE	Jan '16	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun-Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan '17	Feb	Mar	Apr
Literature Review	x	x	x						x	x	x	x			
Research Proposal		x	x	x											
Proposal Hearing				x											
Ethics Clearance					x										
Participant Selection					x		x								
Pilot study							x								
Data Collection								x	x	x	x	x			
Data Transcription								x	x	x	x	x			
Data Analysis								x	x	x	x	x	x		
Member Checking													X		
Thesis Outline										x					
Write/Revise/Edit											x	x	x	x	x

Table 1. Timeline for thesis: Voice of Practice: Building Knowledge in Adult Literacy

Preparation for this study started during the winter of 2016. The research proposal was submitted to the MA Committee of the Educational Studies Program of the Department of Education at Concordia University, and was approved in April 2016. The proposal was then submitted to Concordia University's Human Research Ethics Committee (UHREC) and was approved in May 2016. Participant selection took place from May-September 2016.

A pilot interview was conducted in August 2016 after which the interview questions were modified to ensure clarity and resonance. The interviews were conducted between September 2016 and January 2017. Transcription and analysis was ongoing between September 2016 and January 2017.

There were challenges to the timeline, especially in finding opportunities to schedule interviews. This is worth noting because it is indicative of the constraints literacy practitioners face juggling multiple priorities with limited resources of time and funding, a constraint that has implications for building and sharing knowledge.

Although my preference was to schedule the interviews as soon as I had ethics clearance, May is a critical time for those who work as literacy practitioners for community-based

organizations in Quebec. Myself, and my colleagues write grant applications in May each year to secure funding through PACTE for the future year's operations. It was, therefore not feasible to schedule interviews during this time. Many literacy councils close and/or lay off staff over the summer months, due to funding. Therefore, I was also not able to schedule interviews over the summer months. While I was committed to face-to-face interviews, one interview was conducted by telephone, out of necessity to get the interviews completed.

Another consideration with the timeline was to schedule interviews as much as possible to coincide with existing face-to face-meetings, to avoid costly and time-consuming travel to different regions of Quebec to conduct interviews. There are increasingly fewer opportunities for members of Literacy Quebec (LQ) to meet, due to limited funding. In September 2016, there was an opportunity for members to attend the LQ Annual General Meeting (AGM) and professional development sessions. Although this was a logical time to schedule interviews, a full agenda made it possible to conduct only one interview during this time.

Health situations, vacations, workload, and poor driving conditions were factors that impacted the timeline of the interview schedule. Some interviews were re-scheduled several times.

Participant selection: sample. Due to the small sample size, purposeful sampling was used to select participants. The sample consists of:

- Five literacy practitioners who work in the community-based sector in Quebec.
- One participant who has less than two years of experience in the literacy field; four participants who have ten or more years of experience in the literacy field.
- Three participants work in a rural setting and two works in an urban setting.

Participant selection: process. The process to identify and select participants consisted of the following steps:

- I sent a letter to Executive Directors/Coordinators of community-based literacy councils that are members of Literacy Quebec (LQ) inviting them to participate. I outlined the purpose of the study, and provided a description of the process.
- I selected participants based on demographic data to build a sample that reflected a variety of length of experience in the field, and a variety of urban/rural settings.
- I provided a written consent form to the participants in order to obtain consent to use their first name and interview data. Consent was received from all participants to use their first names.

Although information about the study was introduced in writing, I reviewed the following information verbally with each participant before the interview: a brief overview of the thesis topic and research questions; an explanation of the interview process; the consent form.

Setting. The interviews were conducted in a variety of settings, the location agreed upon with each of the participants. Settings included: a meeting room in a hotel, participants' homes, and at the office of the literacy council. Interviews took place in different regions of Quebec, including: Montreal, Lennoxville, and Greenfield Park. One interview took place via telephone with a participant in Quebec City.

Data collection. I prepared a list of questions, and piloted them with a former colleague to ensure that they were clear and relevant to the purpose of the study. I modified my initial interview questions as a result of feedback from the pilot.

I gathered data from one round of face-to-face semi-structured interviews with five Coordinators/Executive Directors of community-based literacy councils in Quebec. The interview ranged in time from 37 to 112 minutes. The interviews consisted of 10 open-ended questions, with prompts as needed (Appendix). The interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed to ensure a careful record of the data. After each interview, I transcribed the recorded data and sent a digital audio recording of the interview and the transcription to the participants within two weeks after the interview. Each participant was invited to edit and approve the transcription.

I reflected on the same questions that I had posed in the interviews, in order to document my own experience as a literacy practitioner as part of the data. I also kept a reflective journal in order to record my reactions and perceptions related to the interview process. I also kept notes about each interview, so that I could begin to see themes emerging as I conducted interviews.

Data analysis. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) describe data analysis as the process of systematically searching and arranging the materials (transcripts, videos, photos, documents) that are accumulated to be able to arrive at findings. Data interpretation refers to developing ideas about the findings and relating them to the literature and to broader concerns and concepts. In qualitative research, the methods of data analysis are important because the results emerge from the researcher's interpretation; therefore, analyses need to be systematic to support valid research conclusions (Lauer, 2006).

After all of the interviews were completed, I reviewed the data and compiled a list of the emerging themes. I colour coded the themes, and then assembled the themes across all of the interviews in order to analyze and interpret the findings. Themes that emerged during the data analysis will be presented in the Chapter 3.

Role of the researcher. Glesne (2011) describes backyard research as research taking place in your own institution or agency and advises that one enter into backyard research fully aware of the potential difficulties, which may include: confusion about what role you are playing (i.e. colleague or researcher), preformed assumptions, and expectations. Although I did not conduct this research in the agency where I am employed as the Executive Director, I conducted it within a broader community of practitioners across the province of Quebec, and interviewed people who work for organizations similar to where I work, in similar capacities. So, although the research wasn't conducted in my own backyard, it was within my community of practice.

I stated my role as researcher in the letter of invitation to potential participants to avoid confusion from the outset. I avoided using leading questions, declared my potential biases and anticipated findings with my research supervisor. By keeping a reflective journal, I aimed to be aware of how my personal history was being engaged in the research study.

I experienced mixed emotions about doing backyard research. Although I was motivated and excited to explore the experiences of other practitioners, I was also apprehensive. First, I was concerned about objectivity. I wondered if I was too connected to the subject matter to be able to step out of my role as practitioner and look at the emerging themes objectively. *Would my subjectivity be an impediment to the research?*

I was concerned about 'getting it right'. I felt the weight of sharing other's stories, and reflecting them accurately and respectfully. It needed to be their voice, and not mine.

I recognized that I had preformed assumptions about the literacy field and the people who work in it. *What if, despite the fact that I have worked in this field for more than twenty-five years, I got it wrong? What if the data contradicted what I believed to be true? How would I handle that? What would the impact be on my thesis? On my work?*

I also felt a lack of confidence in my ability as a researcher: *What if I couldn't separate my role as researcher from practitioner? What if I was not a good interviewer? What if my data-recording device didn't work properly?* (I used two devices to ensure a back-up if one failed).

There was also a point after I had started my interviews that I wondered if individual interviews were the right way to go. During a coffee break at an LQ meeting, several of my colleagues were talking together, and sharing information about programs and projects that they had undertaken in their work. Informally, plans were made between individuals to follow up with each other to learn more about different aspects of the information that was being shared. Later in the day, we had a group visit to an Art Hive in St. Henri; I was struck by the dialogue, reflections and ideas being exchanged amongst members about how the work linked to literacy. I wished I could have recorded this rich and spontaneous exchange, and questioned whether I should have used a different approach to gather the data. In the end, I recognized that as a practitioner, I could share this observation as part of my own story.

Profiles of the Participants

Name of Participant	Age	Educational Background	Number of years working in the literacy field	Number of years working in current position	Full/Part-time	Urban/ rural
Kathy	62	Fine Arts	12	Not working in field now	Full time	Rural
Marilee	Born 1947	Anthropology	25	25	Full-time	Rural
Ruth	53	Sciences; Latin Studies; Education	11	11	Part-time	Urban
Joanna	30	Early Childhood Education; Sociology	1.5	1.5	Full-time	Rural
Cathy	59	Nursing, teaching	17	17	Full-time	Urban
Wendy	52	Political Science and English; Educational Studies	28	16	Part-time	Rural

Table 2. Participants' education, age, number of years of working in the literacy field, number of years in current position, full or part-time, setting of work.

The profiles of the participants are listed in the order of the interviews. I have used first names with permission. The participants all work in Quebec in the community-based adult literacy sector, for organizations that are funded through PACTE. The community-based literacy councils are autonomous community action groups, separate entities from the school boards. In the 1980s and 90s when most of the literacy councils in Quebec were formed, they were initiated through school board projects, in recognition of the need for non-formal literacy learning in their communities. Some of the literacy councils in Quebec occupy office space in a school or adult education centre today; however, many councils have offices located elsewhere in the community (i.e. office buildings, apartments, houses). Some of the councils collaborate with the school boards on a variety of projects based on local needs and interests.

Kathy. Kathy worked as the Executive Director of a literacy council in the Eastern Townships from 2002-2014. She has an educational background in the arts.

At the age of 50, Kathy was looking to re-enter the workforce after having done home schooling, when the previous Executive Director of the council approached her about doing a project for the council. It was an outreach project to partner with an adult learning centre, and to participate in organizing an authors' festival. Kathy was introduced to the community-based literacy work of this organization through her participation in this. When the Executive Director at the time left the position just less than a year later, Kathy stepped into the position.

Kathy describes her entry in the position as a learning process. There was no formal training for the position. She relied on a combination of previous life skills, tacit knowledge, and good listening and research skills. Kathy describes a variety of ways in which she built knowledge for the position over time, including observation, talking with adult learners and

volunteers, and tapping into and critically examining existing academic and practitioner research as a way to build knowledge in and for her practice.

Kathy reflects on challenges and opportunities facing practitioners in building knowledge. She underscores the importance of relying on tacit knowledge and creativity to allow different ways of looking at problems and challenges, and less reliance on formal ways of looking at literacy.

Marilee. Marilee, born in 1947, is the Executive Director of a community-based literacy council in Western Quebec. Marilee works on a part-time basis for the council, less than 28-hours per week. Marilee has been involved in literacy and with the council since 1992.

Marilee has an education background in anthropology and had done environmental community development projects prior to her entry into the literacy field in 1992. The Executive Director of the council at the time (when the council was still connected to the protestant school board) was looking for someone to do some community outreach projects, to recruit students and volunteers for the council. Marilee shared the job with a friend and enjoyed the experience. She describes her entry into the field as 'happenstance': the school board had decided to hire a coordinator for the council, instead of having an employee of the school board dedicate two days per week to council work.

In the first year after the council left the school board office, Marilee worked out of a room in her house and coordinated the work of the council by telephone, on a party line that had four families, including teenagers. Marilee describes relying on other literacy councils for training and support in the early years, as well as the provincial (Literacy Quebec) and national (Laubach Literacy of Canada) literacy organizations for support, especially in the area of tutor training. In addition to working for a literacy council, Marilee has volunteered on the Board of

Directors of Literacy Quebec in a variety of positions, and for Laubach Literacy of Canada (now defunct), as a director, and also as a provincial chairperson for Quebec.

Ruth. Ruth, 53, works as the Executive Director of a community-based literacy organization on the South Shore. Ruth has been employed as the Executive Director since 2008. Ruth works on a permanent and part-time basis. Ruth grew up in this community where she works. Her mother was very active in community initiatives, and also on the school board, providing a positive and powerful role model of community action and volunteering for Ruth.

Ruth was on maternity leave when she saw an ad in a local paper advertising a position to work for a 'reading council' and her interest was sparked immediately. She decided to apply and was hired because the council's Board thought her approach to education was 'fresh', and aligned with the direction they wanted the council to pursue.

Ruth has a varied and extensive academic background. Initially, she studied in the fields of math and science, and decided while pursing a Ph.D. that the kind of tunnel vision work required in the high-level sciences did not suit her need to work with a community of people. Ruth also has a degree in Latin Studies and spent time living in Colombia, where she met her husband and started a family. Ruth's experience there confirmed that non-formal learning with a community of people was effective and inspiring to her. One of the things that Ruth did enjoy about her studies in the sciences was teaching; as a Teaching Assistant, she often taught science classes and labs to students in undergraduate science classes. She then spent a year at McGill University where she obtained a teaching certificate, and then taught in the youth and adult sectors. She enjoyed working with adults, and felt that there was a latitude that allowed her to practice a philosophy of teaching that aligned with her belief that we are all teachers, and we are all learners.

Ruth continues to partner with the formal sector on various projects. Ruth has served as a director on the Boards of several provincial literacy organizations.

Joanna. Joanna, 30, works as the Executive Director of a community-based literacy organization in the Eastern Townships. Joanna has worked in this position for approximately eighteen months. She works full-time for the council on a permanent basis.

Joanna studied Early Childhood Education at the CEGEP level. After completing a Bachelor degree in Sociology at Bishop's University in Lennoxville, Joanna chose to remain in the Townships. Joanna recognized that lack of community was an issue in Lennoxville, and that the area had some significant needs that were not being addressed: a high unemployment rate, high suicide rate, high teen pregnancy rate, and high school dropout rate. Based on these identified needs, and her view that formal educational institutions had remained separate from the community, like a 'bubble', Joanna wanted to be involved in solutions to these identified needs.

This led her to initiate a project called *Tierra del Fuego*, which she describes as an alternative educational resource centre. It is based on a skill-share model that matches people based on shared interests. The project aimed to create a sustainable community, and had an emphasis on food security.

Joanna describes getting involved in literacy as a 'total accident'. She had experience from her previous community work and a network of partners and contacts in the community. After having completed just over one year with the council, Joanna is learning to navigate the work of the council in a way that feels right for her and for the adult learners and community partners with whom she works.

Cathy. Cathy, 59, works as the Executive Director of a community-based literacy organization in Quebec City. Cathy has been in the position since 2000, and works 30 hours per week, year round.

Cathy's educational background and experience is in the field of nursing. She practiced as a paediatric nurse and clinical nurse manager for several years, before arriving in Quebec from London, England in 1987. She also holds a post-graduate teaching certificate; she taught ESL when first arriving in Canada.

Cathy first volunteered with the literacy organization where she works, and later served on the Board of Directors. She assumed the position of Executive Director, in a temporary (2-month) capacity, and was then hired for the job.

As Executive Director, Cathy is responsible for the management of the council. Cathy oversees a number of programs including an essential skills program to assist students who are in vocational programs at the adult education centre, a Lifelong Learning program for seniors, and family literacy programs. Cathy is currently the President of the Board of Directors of a provincial literacy organization.

I am 52 years old and work as the Executive Director of a community-based literacy council in the Montérégie Est. I began working and volunteering in the field of adult literacy in 1989, and have worked in my current position since 2000. I work part-time throughout the year, with the exception of a 6-week office closure in the summer.

My undergraduate studies are in English and Political Science, and I am currently enrolled in Concordia University's gradate program in Educational Studies.

Chapter 3. Presentation of Findings

Introduction

Chapter 2 presented the methodology and profiles of the participants in the study. This chapter presents and analyzes the findings from the interview data organized by emerging themes.

According to Glesne (2011), "writing gives form to the researcher's clumps of carefully analyzed and organized data." (p. 218). There are many ways to go about the task of writing:

> It perhaps matters so some – but needs no resolution – whether the researcher's construction is more like that of an architect, proceeding from a vision embodied in a plan, or like that of a painter, whose vision emerges over time from intuition, sense, and feeling (Glesne, 2011, p. 218).

This chapter is combination of plan and intuition that felt right to me, as a way to organize and balance the data, to present our experiences working in the field of adult literacy, and to consider how they are reflected in the literature. First, I present the narrative of the participants I interviewed, organized by theme. Next, I reflect on my own experiences, drawn from journal notes written throughout the interview process, and add my own narrative to the themes, as applicable. I conclude with a brief review of whether, and how, our lived experiences align with the literature.

Themes

The following themes emerged from the interview data:

1. Life before literacy
    a. Education
    b. Experience

2. Entering the field
    a. Happenstance
    b. Jump right in
    c. Describing our work

3. Describing our knowledge
    a. Explicit knowledge
    b. Tacit knowledge

4. Building knowledge
    a. Learning by doing
    b. Dialogue
    c. Learning from students
    d. Building community, not silos
    e. Asking questions
    f. Engaging with research

5. Creativity

6. Changes over time

7. Sharing knowledge

8. Challenges

Life before literacy. Participants in this study describe a wide variety of educational backgrounds, work and life experiences that have influenced their practice in the field of adult literacy.

Education. In terms of education, the participants studied in the following areas: Fine Arts, Anthropology, Sociology, Nursing, Education, Early Childhood Education, and Physical Sciences and Latin Studies.

Three of the five participants describe aspects of their formal education that influenced their practice in the field of literacy.

Ruth first studied Physical Sciences, and continued to a graduate level:

> I did a science program. I graduated from the Math Faculty. I did everything there, I started in chemical engineering, I did physics, I did chemistry, and like I say, the math program had a degree that would bring all those things together, it was called Math, Chemistry and Physics.

Ruth says that studying in the sciences required a certain kind of "tunnel vision type of work" that did not suit her; this experience led Ruth to reject aspects of formal education that she felt lacked humanity:

> When I think of that time that I studied in the sciences at McGill, for me that's a model of what **not** to do, and not to put anybody ever through that…for me, if I could just look at life and that part of my life, that was what you don't do with education…it's competitive, it's bound on results, it's rushed, and it's stressed…and for what? For what?

When Ruth studied in the sciences, she had the opportunity to teach, and she says: "I loved the teaching." That experience led Ruth to pursue teaching: "I just had this feeling like, wait a minute…where's the humanity? So I went back to McGill and I did a teaching certificate."

Ruth also studied Latin Studies, and describes how she realized the value of learning together when she was in this program: "So when I was in that arts program, I saw that we did things together, I was with a group of people that helped each other, a lot, and that by helping each other, taking away that competitive edge was a really wonderful part of that program."

Joanna studied Early Childhood Education at a CEGEP and Sociology at university. About Sociology, she says:

> We can build on knowledge, we are a learning species. You know, so we can gather information to build new ideas, or to build new knowledge…it's our capacity to learn that makes us different. And so that kind of put me on this trail, and gave me more intentions of what I was really looking for.

She states: "Sociology gave you the critical tools to look at how we think, act and feel about things… but it also allowed us to identify what the problems were in society."

Cathy has an educational background in nursing; she has a BSc in Health and Psychology and a post-graduate teaching certificate. Cathy worked as paediatric nurse and clinical nurse manager for several years. She says that "previous teaching experience was helpful" to her literacy work, and that she had experience with volunteers from her work in the hospital.

I studied Political Science and English Literature at university. As I learned in hindsight, I was hired for my first job in the field of literacy, as National Development Officer for Laubach Literacy of Canada, because I had a degree. I was chosen over a candidate who had relevant experience in the community. As I look back, that was the beginning of my realization that academic learning was valued over lived experience:

> I reflect on my entry into the literacy field as a banking model of education. I was hired because I was a teachable blank slate, with a degree from a recognized formal institution. In hindsight, it seems incongruous that a non-formal organization guided by the philosophy of Each One Teach One (EOTO) would use a formal measure to hire.

Experience. All of the participants noted life experience that they brought to their work in the literacy field. In the interviews, participants share life experiences that shaped their philosophical foundations and influenced their practice in the field of literacy.

Kathy states: "I was 50 years old, so I had a lot of life experience and done quite a large variety of different types of jobs. I'd travelled a lot, I'd lived in different places, I'd had a family, I'd done home schooling." Kathy talks about her experience homeschooling: "…I had read a lot of books on home schooling, alternative learning. So I already knew that…there were good reasons why school didn't work for everybody, regardless of their learning abilities. So, I came in with a very alternative approach."

Marilee recalls an experience that helped her develop empathy for adults struggling with language:

> I think like most fluent readers, I had no concept of it being a problem, to not be able to read. When I went to college, I took a third year abroad and went to Mexico to finish my four years. I had taken Spanish in high school and I took Spanish in Mexico and I realized that there is this whole, understanding of language that I hadn't learned about that's called grammar. So I had to learn grammar and a second language at the same time. So it was quite difficult, but in using it and studying, I did manage to grasp it...so that gave me some appreciation of the difficulties that a person could have in learning a language.

Marilee also recounts an experience with a friend who homeschooled her six children, and describes that one of the boys "had a real late interest in reading" who was motivated to learn to read at the age of twelve years old "so he could follow the baseball stats". Like his siblings, he went on to lead a productive and successful life. Marilee reflects: "…but that to me was such a clear demonstration of the learning differences that people have. And it doesn't have anything to do with smarts or abilities or anything… just give them the tools when they are ready to do it." She reminds herself of this experience when "people drop in at the front door: My son is in grade one and he still can't read, what am I going to do?"

Ruth speaks of several influences that shaped her philosophical foundations about education and literacy, including: her mother, her studies, teaching experience, and time spent living in Colombia.

Ruth's mother was dedicated to community service and committed to the public school system, and was a powerful role model for Ruth:

> That's what I saw growing up. I saw this amazing, amazing force of working for the community, in that age, you know back in that time which was the 60's and 70's. There were a lot of women who did untold hours of community service. The volunteer sector here was very strong with the Anglophone community.

Although Ruth pursued teaching, she says that there were aspects of teaching in a formal classroom setting that did not align with her beliefs about education. She questioned ways of doing things: "I always thought there was another way…they [school administration] would say okay, this is the way we do things, and I would say 'why'?…I don't really see it, I don't get it…" When Ruth was teaching children who had learning difficulties, she questioned and rejected a system that forced children to achieve standards: "...there was something there that, I'm understanding it better now in hindsight, just from a gut level, there was something jarring about

the experience, there was something kind of like…Noooo!" and "I don't know how to express it any other way. We're missing something."

Ruth spent time in Colombia, where she got married and had two children. She lived in a rural area, where people had few material resources and had to be creative in order to survive. She reflects on how this experience changed her outlook on education:

> So I'm not exaggerating when I say that that was the big shift that I needed to see that our educational system is built on a premise, on premises, about people. I needed to see something different about people, to see how arbitrary so many of our structures and organizations and the way that we tell each other it's got to be, to see how arbitrary that is, right.

Ruth talks about aspects of her experience that she brought to her work as a literacy practitioner:

> …what they [the Board] liked about me was I had worked in many other community organizations… the cultural side, and the educational side. They thought that that would bring the reading council more naturally into contact with other community and educational groups, like the school board and the schools, and the cultural side, and the immigrants.

Joanna describes the impetus for an earlier project that she initiated in the community, "my post-Soc project…was very much borne out of my rejection of institutional education":

> …we came up with a project called Tierra del Fuego, and what that is was an alternative educational resource centre, and trading post. What that meant, and what that tried to offer was this idea that not everybody learns in the same way, not everybody is going to learn facing a teacher and listening to a lecture. They're going to need to have hands-on experiences. So it was based on a skill share model.

Joanna reflects on the connection between Tierra del Fuego and essential skills, and the idea of bringing people together to learn around shared interests:

> The link was made when I realized that what we were actually doing at Tierra del Fuego, it was this notion of essential skills…we were literally going back to the basics. We were saying 'How can you grow your own food?' 'How can you learn how to make your own bread?'…learn how to read a recipe, learn how to cook, learn how to share, learn how to you know, recycle…learn how to learn.

> …so the tagline was always 'uniting people in shared interests.' And so you could have people from all political backgrounds, all religious creeds, but they were interested in gardening. They were interested in learning how to garden, or they were interested in arts and crafts, and the interest became the equalizer, and from there they were coming to build on those essentials skills related to those interests.

I reflect on the experiences that have influenced my practice. I was hired for my first job in the field of literacy when I was 24 years old, so the experience I brought to my current literacy work is other literacy experience. Having worked for Laubach Literacy of Canada between 1989-2000, I had an opportunity to travel to communities across Canada to engage in community-based literacy work, and develop my own perspective on literacy issues. I met amazing people, students and volunteers, who shared their stories with me. I recognized that there wasn't one method or one solution that could be applied to every community, or to every learner.

Entering the field. Participants in this study describe their experiences entering the field, their orientation to the job, and their work.

Happenstance. None of the participants in the study had a deliberate plan to work in the field of literacy; in fact, many weren't aware that community-based literacy councils existed. A common theme that emerged is that practitioners got involved in adult literacy by 'happenstance'. Some entered the field by doing project work on a temporary or part-time basis; others were recruited based on their past work experiences and approaches to community development. In some instances, paid and volunteer work intersects.

Kathy talks about being ready to return to the workforce. The Executive Director of the council at the time, whom she knew, was looking to hire someone to work on a project. Kathy was introduced to the literacy council when she was contracted for a project; she describes: "The project was an outreach project to partner with the adult and learning center in town, and I also

assisted her [the previous Executive Director] to do the authors' festival." When that Executive Director left, Kathy was hired for the position.

Marilee says that the Executive Director at that time was looking for someone to do an outreach project to reach volunteers and students from the community: "... my friend and I shared a job, we were that unconfident about our abilities…we did outreach, and it was lots of fun and it was really kind of exciting to get involved in the field." That initial project led to later working as the Coordinator: "It was by happenstance...her [the Executive Director] position was only two days a week managing the volunteer literacy group, and the rest, the other three days of the week was doing school board work."

Ruth was looking to get back into the workforce after maternity leave:

> I saw this little ad for looking for somebody to work at a literacy council. At the South Shore Reading Council. I'd never heard of this, and I thought a reading council. What's that?! That sounds amazing. So I went to talk to a few people and look at what is this field? What could this be about? And I thought gee that's amazing, people do this. So I thought yeah definitely, I'm gonna apply for this.

She was surprised to find out that a non-formal literacy organization existed in her community: "There's something 'sur le terrain d'éducation'…I like that idea of there being a field around education that wasn't a school, where you could do something different, right? Something alternate could be happening."

Joanna echoed what others have described about getting involved in adult literacy: "By total accident." and "I fell into literacy." Joanna was looking to remain in the community where she had attended university, and find work that aligned with her values and beliefs:

> …everybody sent me the job ad for this place, I had built a network…basically everyone knew I was looking for a job, but that also I wasn't going to take any job…everybody sent me this job application and I looked, and I read the job requirement, and I said…I have taught myself how to do everything on this job description, and this is, I guess I am a Coordinator, I can do this.

Similar to Ruth's experience, Joanna was hired based on past experience that was perceived as beneficial to the council: "they [the Board] explained why they hired me, and that what they wanted me to do, was related to my previous work...that they saw the same links I saw."

Cathy also talks about getting into the literacy field "by accident!" When describing what that experience was like for her, Cathy says:

> Completely different from any other work I'd done over the years. When I arrived in Quebec, I couldn't speak French; therefore, nursing was out of the question. I used my teaching degree to my advantage and started teaching ESL. Then volunteered at QCRC, eventually joined the Board of Directors. I actually took the Executive Director position in a temporary capacity (2 months) to fill in for the person who left; my real job had slowed due to the end of the spring session, and was then offered the job.

My experience entering the field of adult literacy is similarly serendipitous. I never had a grand plan to be a literacy practitioner. I had no knowledge of literacy issues, or community-based literacy organizations when I first got involved in the field. My first interest in literacy was as volunteer tutor:

> It was 1988. I had recently moved from Toronto to rural Quebec, and was feeling culture shock and homesick. I saw an ad in the local weekly newspaper 'Le Guide', looking for volunteer tutors for the Townshippers' Reading Council. I thought that volunteering might be a way to get to know my new community. I called, and was placed on a list for the next tutor-training workshop. In the meantime, also in 'Le Guide', I saw a job posting for Laubach Literacy of Canada, looking for a National Development Officer. It sounded interesting and I decided to apply.

Jump right in. Many of the participants describe the orientation and training for the role of Coordinator/Executive Director as brief or non-existent. They talk about having to 'jump right in'.

Kathy remembers: "…aside from the 10 months that I'd been observing…no, no training, no training whatsoever." About her first year on the job, Kathy says: "I had to really jump in and try to keep things rolling…" and "I listened…that was a skill I had to use the first year, just listen

to what's going on and try to understand." Kathy talks about how examining the previous work of the council was helpful to her:

> … the first real training, I mean that in itself was just experiential learning, right? the thing that helped me the most was that summer, when we closed down for the summer, I read every document; there were like four boxes of every document that had existed with the organization since 1980, so I read anything I thought would be information for me. So, I read all the previous grants, projects everything they tried, all the results, whether they failed or whether they succeeded. This was the best education I got was to try and understand, I needed to understand what the organization was, what had been its' goals in the past, how those had evolved, to know where it was at the time I was there and where it could go. That was really useful for me.

Marilee talks about her entry into the field, when she was hired to do an outreach project: "…we jumped right in to: so how do you convince people who can't read to undertake to learn to read?"

Marilee describes that her orientation involved reading a lot of documents and asking for help from other literacy organizations. Her first task was to gather documents: "I went down to her [the Executive Director's] office at the school board one afternoon for training, and to pick up the boxes of paper piles, and… take them home and, then the council was now officed in Shawville."

> I depended a lot on the Laubach series of books and the structure that existed for...assessing students and intaking students and training tutors... Yeah, the structure was basically there and it just developed along, but at the beginning a lot of it was dependent on the trainers that would come from Laubach organizations. Laubach Literacy of Canada was a real big support. We didn't have our own trainers, and so I just knew that if I put the word out that someone would come, miraculously enough, as I realize now.

Marilee also describes opportunities to travel and participate in workshops as a helpful orientation:

> ...at the beginning, I think the first week that I worked in the 90s; there was a Laubach Literacy of Canada conference at McMaster University in Hamilton. I was really impressed. It was a lot of learning that happened in that sort of a context. People from all over giving workshops and talking about their situations, from across Canada.

Ruth describes her introduction to the job of Coordinator, and how she 'jumped right in'. She attended an event hosted by the literacy council in 2007 where there were many volunteers and learners, from different backgrounds, cultures, and "…you just see all that together, in this first event that I went to, and I thought, yeah...there's something good for us to work with here. So then, I started working…really started working hard."

Joanna recounts that paperwork and documents were transferred to her in a binder that had been organized by the former Executive Director: "policies, procedures, bylaws…there's a lot of the written, you know, it's this paperwork." Joanna says:

> I think ultimately, the way the transfer of knowledge would have been best is that I should have shadowed [the former Executive Director] for 6 months, or a year. I should have been her assistant or been working, starting to develop the other activities, while watching what she was doing…

On navigating the job: "The first thing I did was put myself out there. I basically, I had come in with a previous network, so what I did was, I contacted organizations that I already knew about…"

Cathy had prior knowledge of the organization because she had volunteered there in several capacities; however:

> There wasn't really an introduction or orientation, as the staff person had just left. The Board of Directors helped where they could. The fact that I was president at the time helped too as I was aware of what was going on. There was no admin assistant or other permanent staff. There was a part-time family literacy person who had extensive knowledge of the literacy field and she filled in a lot of blanks for me. I had a baptism of fire as I had to do the PSAPA report and had only been with QCRC a few weeks.

I identify with the 'jump in' orientation. When I was offered the position of National Development Officer, it was contingent upon one condition. Since, I lacked the necessary education and experience for the job, I was asked to work for one month without pay, and do some on-the-job learning:

> I met with and talked to people who had experience in the field, I read lots of documents, I travelled to Ontario to observe my first tutor training workshop at the Barrie Literacy Council; participated as volunteer in a tutor training workshop at McGill; and gave my first presentations at a tutor training workshop in Cornwall, Ontario two weeks later. I quickly learned that people assumed I had a lot of experience in the field because I told other people's stories…until I had my own.

Describing our work. Literacy practitioners perform many different functions in community-based organizations, and describe their jobs from a variety of perspectives.

Kathy refers to "grant writing, research, computers, finances and people skills" when describing aspects of her work.

Marilee describes the work as "varied and scattered":

> In our organization, the Executive Director does everything from bill paying and book-keeping to assessing and intake of students and matching them with tutors, and recruiting volunteers and setting up training and answering tutors' questions: "Is it okay that my student had a bad day and cried the whole time, and so we had a discussion instead of a lesson, am I still a tutor?"...to helping people develop learning programs for the students to suit them, to keep them engaged...

Ruth talks about organizing theatre productions, and peer tutoring programs and bringing people together.

Joanna identifies as a 'community organizer': "I'm not a literacy practitioner in a traditional sense…I think after all of these years, I've come to recognize myself as a community organizer". She describes how she engages in her work: "I listen, I synthesize, I come up with an understanding, I make a link to something, I see if we have the service for it, or if we could use the service for it, and then I ask a question, a question that helps the person go deeper…"

Cathy describes a variety of tasks, noting that it does not represent a complete list:

> A large percentage is administration, board meetings, and community partner meetings. Recruiting, hiring, training and managing volunteers. Ensuring financial and legal responsibilities are met. Office management and supervision of staff and contracted employees. Training board members. Promotion of QCRC's services and programmes. Tutor/student pairing. Website management. Programme planning, strategic planning.

> Reporting to government or funding agencies. Funding applications. And anything else that needs doing…

I identify with the broad range of tasks described by the participants. My job over time has led to many interesting experiences:

> I once wore a superhero cape and flew through a crowd of children at a Sears store in Pointe Claire, with cartoonist Ben Wicks, at his book launch of 'Born to Read'. I organized a recognition ceremony for literacy students from all over Canada at a literacy conference in Ottawa, presided over by the Governor General. I regularly visit a federal prison as part of the Yamaska Literacy Council's prison literacy program.

There is no typical day in my work. There are mounds of paperwork to deal with, meetings to organize and attend; sometimes I just need to put it all aside and make a pot of coffee, or steep some tea, when a volunteer or student walks through the door and needs to talk.

Describing our knowledge. Participants in the study talk about knowledge, and identify explicit and tacit knowledge in their work.

Explicit Knowledge. Several participants refer to explicit information related to their work: historical information about their organization; information about literacy; international surveys; funding and policy guidelines. It is often referred to as "mounds of paper" or "stacks of documents".

Kathy questions the transfer of explicit knowledge:

> I think that that mode of passing on information, explicit information in that sort of document style, you know we have webinars, all kinds of styles now that people are experimenting with and ways of sharing information and building knowledge, but it's, you know, the amount of information and knowledge is becoming almost too much for individuals, I think, to make them more effective in their jobs. I don't know. I have to question it.

Ruth questions the transfer of explicit knowledge in the classroom:

> … schools…they're not any more the silos of content. The entire Library of Congress is right there [points to a laptop]…there's the content. So what is the classroom, and the teacher, and the learning environment for? Now, I would say it's for developing these

> empathetic things that only humans can do with other humans…start developing these empathetic skills, these collaboration skills, these cooperation skills, cause those are gonna be the things that build another type of industry.

In my experience, the evolving literacy landscape requires that practitioners keep up to date with facts and research. On the one hand technology has made it easier to access information; on the other hand, the lack of infrastructure and lack of new research has created gaps that make it a challenge to acquire the explicit knowledge.

Tacit knowledge. Identified as 'gut feeling', one of the themes that emerged from the interview data is that practitioners have and/or develop knowledge based on intuition to guide their work.

Kathy says, "I came to the job at 50 years old… so for me it was my tacit knowledge that I brought to it…learned through experience and time and how I learn specifically, that I was able to give to it." She says:

> I think everyone has something to bring to literacy. That's it, you know, so… the knowledge that people bring to it, it's always useful…I learned so much from every different person. I think there is too much reliance on formal ways of looking at literacy and I think…it would be useful to rely a little bit more on our own tacit knowledge that we've brought to it.

Ruth talks about an 'other way' of teaching and learning that she has embraced in her work in the community-based sector:

> I guess what I do when I go to the school for the peer tutoring, we're going to promote that other way, that way we've learned is so critical and so valuable, and right. It just feels right, and we're going to promote that when we meet with educators, and take pride, you know, really take pride in what we do because it's a, I think it gets down to the fundamentals. When I think about how things are going to be for our kids, the main skills that they need have to do with learning to adapt, learning to work with people, learning to listen, learning to understand what's kind of, intuitively what's going on; it's not going to be that step-by-step corporate sort of structure.

> It's going to be that grouping, that way of using that kaleidoscope of human abilities, difficulties, differences…that's where there's going to be something happening and that's a different core value…it's a different kind of intelligence.

Ruth talks about reframing learning:

> …classrooms are starting to flip, we're starting to hear about it…maybe we're not there together for the purpose that we were...remember Charlie Brown? That was the educational model: Sit in your desk, shut up while I 'wah wah wah'. Then the bell rings and then you do your homework. Well, we're starting to see that the rug can easily be pulled out from that one.

Ruth describes teaching from a different perspective:

> There are many skills, vital survival skills that are not brought forth in school, that are not talked about much in school, and they're not trained, and that I think we can train, I think we can re-learn learning, looking at learning from the point of view of well-being, from the point of view of, you know, like support, community, meaning, and just reframe the whole thing.

Ruth states: "I just know that for our spiritual development or for our human sustainability, you know, we've gotta look at that invisible…marginal as a richness."

Joanna talks about learning to listen to her intuition and draw on her instinct:

> I have to say I had to stop trying to leap when I got this job. Like, I leapt and I leapt all of last year, trying to wear this hat, and then I realized…**No**!…because every time I tried to make the decision as an Executive Director, I made the wrong decision. Every time I made the decision as Joanna, as me…I was making the right decision, my instincts were right…because I was listening to the people, not to the system.
>
> Well, I think if I were to sum up how I've done it, it's instinct. Though I'm somebody who is thinking all the time, I go with my gut…it's my gut that ultimately decides, and no you can't transfer that to somebody else. You could only role model and that's another thing that I try to do here.

Cathy talks about 'people skills': "I drew extensively on my 'people' skills; also, the fact that I was used to managing teams of people and individuals was valuable. For example, tutor/student pairing, volunteer management, hiring volunteers…"

Building knowledge. Participants in this study describe how they build knowledge in and for their practice**.**

Learning by doing. Kathy talks about her early experience in the field, and how she learned about adult learning by working with learners: "…2 or 3 times a week I went in there, and I watched the group, I observed and I helped, I assisted and I worked directly with the learners."

Joanna describes herself: "…on a grass roots perspective, I'm an experimental community developer, so everything I do is an experiment." And "…basically, I try things out." She talks about learning alongside the volunteers:

> So, all the volunteers that have come in, my job was basically…so learn with me, you know, so make the mistakes with me and that's how we're going to learn…and we'll talk about, through discussion and brainstorming. Then we'll come to conclusions, and then we'll try something out, then we'll go for it.

Cathy talks about learning on the job: "I learned as I went along. The first year, I kept copious notes in a great big notebook. Mostly, it was situations that I had to learn about as tutoring was running along on its own trajectory." Also, Cathy says: "The variety of work and learning opportunities is incredible. I've learned so much from doing the job."

Although I had some training and orientation, a lot of my learning was figuring it out as I went along. Making and learning from mistakes, being open to feedback, and cross-pollination of ideas with other practitioners, sometimes by chance, sometimes by seeking out opportunities.

Dialogue. Some participants describe building knowledge by engaging in dialogue.

Kathy describes having different people to bounce ideas off, creative people who had logical ways of thinking to bounce ideas off, and students and tutors: "There was a couple of tutors who were very good reference people, students also. We had a lot of students that year…I

got a very good picture of kinds of people from our community who might be coming in. So that was good, there was activity going that I could learn from."

Joanna describes how she asks questions and engages in dialogue:

> I ask 'How are you feeling?' 'Are you having a good time?…those kinds of questions, but also 'What do you want to do?', 'How do you want to learn'? Anybody, whether it's a volunteer or a learner who comes in here, I spend at least an hour, probably minimum with them, and we hash out what it is they're looking for, because even matching the learner with the tutor requires character chemistry…and you can only get that through a live in-person dialogue.

In my own practice, I routinely engage in dialogue with colleagues from the French literacy organization in my community.

> Although we have the same mandate and the same funding source, we approach service delivery in different ways. One of the main differences between our approaches is that like most of the English service providers, we deliver mostly one-to-one tutoring, whereas the French groups have a facilitator with a small group. Part of the reason is geography; we cover a larger area with a scattered population, whereas they have a more concentrated population. Another reason is that the English groups in Quebec are historically rooted in Laubach's Each One Teach One philosophy; the French literacy organizations are rooted in popular education, and the small groups form a basis for social transformation. In the end, we both work with people facing similar experiences, and we can learn a lot from dialogue with each other. We've combined resources to engage in projects together, and sometimes we 'borrow' ideas from each other.

Learning from students. Some participants identify learning from the students as invaluable to building their knowledge.

Kathy says:

> On one hand, with literacy you have the 'so-called experts' and people who are supposed to know what they are doing and then you have the people who are the learners, and there's a bit of a gap there. For me, it was much more like, I'm sitting facing a learner and I was learning…all those pre-conceived ideas about who a learner is, just…out the door.

Marilee describes how she learns from students and tutors:

> [tutors and students] share feedback on their lessons and their students and what their struggle and problem are, and how they deal with it…we have a couple of teenagers with

> autism, and boy I was scared to match them up, but both of their tutors just love them to death and they're...it's that lifelong learning essential skills thing...on so many levels…

Ruth talks about Each One Teach One, a philosophy that is prevalent in community-based literacy:

> ...Each One Teach One, the two learning together, that model in the same way, it's a different understanding, you know, of what we're doing here, that helps to keep in our minds, we need each other…

Joanna describes learning and teaching as a reciprocal process:

> …the Each One Teach One model, which is…everyone teach, one person teaches and the other person learns…that relationship is interchangeable. I can teach you how to bake bread, but you can teach me how to read or write down the recipe, for example.

She talks about how she applies what she learns from students to her work:

> I was blessed because, there's this man named "Bob", he came in in the first three weeks of me being here, and he was illiterate, and he had tried in so many other places, to get help but it never worked. And, it was actually after spending time with him and trying to be his tutor, where I got to experience what it was really like to be a tutor, and it allowed me to identify what the needs were, but it also allowed me to better view how we're going to do things. Like this [points to a poster]…this is a public announcement, but we're going to make a calendar that's only image-based, we're going to create logos that are related to our activities, so that people, like "Bob", know that okay, Friday is arts and crafts, for example. I could only know to do that because I'm listening to "Bob", and what are his needs, you know, and asking him questions, and again, listening most of the time.

I was matched with a student for the first time at the same time that I started working in the field. It was a learning experience I won't ever forget:

> I had spent hours preparing for out first lesson, before really knowing much about my student or what she wanted to get out of the lessons. It took a while to get to know her and figure out what worked for her before she felt that she was making progress. I grew to see that she didn't fit the picture I first had of someone who couldn't read. She was resilient, and found ways to navigate her own life with limited reading skills. I learned so much from working with her.

Students continue to anchor my practice in the field of literacy.

Building communities not silos. The concept of 'community' emerged as an overarching theme in the interviews. The concept of community is used to describes situations in which people learn together, regardless of ability, rejecting the idea of dividing people into silos. Community is used to describe how the literacy council is rooted in the community, and responds to the needs of that community.

Kathy talks about building community, making connections as part of her first project with the council: "the idea behind the project was to basically bridge the community, make bridges, create bridges to the community, with families who had educational needs of one type or another." She describes the goal of the project as "trying to broaden our understanding of the local community, who the people are, who the families are, what their experiences are..."

Ruth talks about breaking downs silos and building communities, by recognizing that people have a need for help, and a need to help: "What I find about silo-ing and separating people is that you lose that richness...so, there's got to be a way, a formula, for connecting people that need to help and that need to be helped…and we've seen it in action, we've seen that it's more than the sum of its parts, right? It's more." Ruth talks about silos:

> When there is somebody who needs help, then there is somebody who needs to help. There's a reciprocity about humanity that is perfectly fine-tuned. So, let's say you have the person with Down Syndrome, right, then you've got this loving person who just needs to feel useful and loved…you see this is where I see that volunteers are gold, for building a real, functioning society, where you make those connections between…the need to be helped is not greater than the need to help.
>
> It's really amazing to see in other societies, where they don't have some of the problems that we've created, that are created out of our separations, and the way that we manage to label and divide people…where even if you have Down Syndrome, you're still gonna shell those peas, you're still going to be part of the group activity for survival. I mean, you wanna eat, you're gonna…you're still part of the community.

> So where else do you get that kind of contact and the kind of mixing up of people?...that helping and helped kind of blended into each other, which is more, that I feel is stronger than, you know, the top pulling up the bottom kind of thing…

Ruth develops learning activities and programs that build community:

> And I brought in that philosophy of Each One Teach One that every single one of them [the students] is going to have a tutor, and those tutors are going to be volunteers from the community…every day we had a different person in to help, to speak to the group, we had a kind of a cafeteria going, like we always had people bringing snacks and coffee and you know, but I thought that was just part of the way you would do a classroom for adults…you'd have a fridge, and you'd have lunch together…so we always had people helping with that, and a lot of activity around the group, and it was amazing.

Joanna talks about the lack of community as a motivation for starting Tierra del Fuego: "One of the biggest problems I saw was the lack of community…that everything was existing in silos…so for me, community actually meant building bridges between individuals within a context." Joanna talks about community in relation to her literacy work:

> [Literacy in Action] does one on one tutoring, but we're also bringing in a community-building approach to addressing literacy skills and seeing it almost like a team building thing, so my job is also, when volunteers come in, and they say they want to help, and then I have to sit with them and say well, is it that you want to be a tutor? or that you want to be involved?

Joanna describes trust as a key element in building community: "I have to build trust with the community, not only the partners or other non-profit organizations, I have to build trust with the learners, I have to build trust with the volunteers, I have to build trust with the funders."

Cathy talks about the importance of being linked to community in order to respond to its unique needs: "Good team members, informed and willing community partners. Up-to-date knowledge about my community, how it works, who are the key players." Having a well-informed and supportive board made up from members of the community helps both the Quebec City Reading Council (QCRC) and its community. Partnerships have been key for QCRC. It's helped the organization grow and develop and I hope it will continue to grow and develop."

Asking questions. Several of the participants in the study talk about asking questions as a way of building or deepening their understanding of their practice.

Marilee questions international literacy surveys, that focus on level 3 (on a scale of 1-5) as a minimum threshold needed to function in today's society: "from my point of view...from the student's point of view, how can we say that you have to be at level 3?" Reflecting on why some people find the literacy statistics difficult to believe: "that's partly why, maybe why the public is not convinced with these dire statistics. They just don't ring true…"

Ruth puts forth a question for consideration:

> Yeah, it's not about us. It's about finding a sustainable way…And I guess that's what somebody like…if you look at Thich Nhat Hanh or Dalai Lama…they're asking: Is it true? Is it really good?…Is it healing? So let's give it an experiment. Let's see, is it true? So, ah…that could be a good question.

In my own experience, asking questions continues to be critical. Some questions are practical: *Who is doing what? Where? Why? Can it apply to my work? How?* Some questions require deep reflection through a critical lens: *What do I believe are the purposes of literacy education, and how does this impact my practice? How do issues of power play out in my practice? Whose voices are privileged over others? Are we telling only one story?*

Engaging with research. Practitioners talk about their experiences engaging with research in their practice.

Kathy talks about where she looks for research: "I got a lot of information online*"* and notes some of the sources: "NALD [National Adult Literacy Database] and a lot of…organizations from other places, not so much from Quebec. I really looked much wider, and I signed up for all the newsletters…" In terms of the type of research: "…things that would have been written by previous practitioners, other councils, the international perspective on adult

literacy, government documents...you find references from good sources and you continue to use those until you find other ones…"

Marilee describes her interactions with research: it was mostly, "come by chance". She refers to a blog that raises critical questions about the interpretation of the international data: "but now I'm conflicted. So that's what research does for you?" She talks about identifying sources of information that offer summaries or key points of the international surveys: "so when PIAAC [Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies] was done, I was like now I'll just wait for it to sift down to make some sense."

Cathy talks about relying "heavily on e-documents rather than the traditional printed binders that oft adorned our office shelves." In discussing her experience with research, Cathy states: 'I choose what I think is relevant to our community and our clients." Cathy discusses the kinds of research she looks at: "Current trends. Innovative ideas, I use LQ and Volunteer Canada's websites a lot…I try and get a synopsis of the objective and outcomes if I can do that." She examines materials produced by 'literacy organizations, other practitioners" and uses it if and how it meets her needs: "Often we don't use it. It generally depends upon what it is and if it will be of significant benefit to our community or clients." Cathy notes the impact of research on her practice: "Big impacts have been: the federal government's essential skills for the workplace programme; McGill University's literature on ageing and the effects on our brains led to development of the Lifelong Learning programme."

Popular education is a model that is often used in adult literacy programs. Two participants in this study identify Paulo Freire as having an influence on their practice:

Kathy said that when she entered the field "the first book I read was Paulo Freire".

Joanna reflects on community, empowerment and Paulo Freire:

> We need to be able to empower the local community to be able to sustain itself, including ourselves. So, that's how I got into what you might see as adult education, because it was based off of the lived experience of individuals, that, and facilitating the exchange of it. And that if education…what's the Paulo Freire quote, you know…"Education doesn't transform the world, education changes people, and people change the world."

Participants in this study talk about doing their research as part of their practice:

Kathy states: "I think it's part of the learning curve of practitioners to have to do projects and create things, it's part of the learning, building the knowledge base, but is it useful to others? I think it can be, but I think it's actually more useful to the practitioners themselves." She talks about her approach:

> My approach was to take what existed and work with it for a little while and tweak it… as I began to formulate an image of the organization and understand the history and what we've been doing, and where we could go with that, then I started to take a more active role in creating the strategies for the future.

Joanna, in hearing about LIA:

> Literacy in Action…what is it? and immediately, when I saw it was about comprehension and was about how you understand something, and I saw the diversity in the name, so like, whether it's food literacy, health literacy, eco literacy…it was directly linked to again, my previous purpose in life, which was bringing theory to practice, right?

Joanna talks about engaging in a family literacy project as a way to conduct research:

> I could only be helpful in their further steps with Mother Goose, by running one myself, because then I can see what the real obstacles are, and that's again bringing theory in to practice, literacy in action. If I have a conceptual idea, I have to confront it in reality in order see if it works or not, or if it's the right answer, 'cause it might not be.

For me, this thesis is my research in practice, a theme that I revisit in the conclusion of my thesis.

Creativity. Participants in this study talk about creativity in their practice.

Kathy talks about the importance of cultivating creativity: "You need also to give space to your own creativity." She also refers to creativity as a way to find solutions: "…every aspect just

on a day to day, in the working with others, in the broader sense of the word…let's just mix up how we're looking at this problem and allow another way of looking at it."

Ruth uses theatre as a creative process to practise literacy skills:

> We did have big activities with multicultural groups, and we had a lot of things going on, like our theatre things and our events that we have every year…literacy is THE coolest thing, because it's everything, you know…it's not just sitting with a book, we know that. It's what it takes to have a function with learning in your life, you know. And that touches everything. So you need places to practise… one of the first things I got onto was theatre…there's creating, but there's thinking through the whole story and all the roles that people play, and so much of literacy is in that cooperative, creative sort of an activity. You know, it involves all the things…coding and then decoding, it's getting things down into words, which is really hard when you deal with the low level learner, but then getting the words into what do they mean and how does it convey, and what does that make the people feel.

In my experience, creativity often comes from necessity. Creativity is a big part of the job, sometimes as a result of having to find solutions to meet several needs with few resources. One of the realities of working with adults for whom the formal education system did not meet their needs, is to find paths to learning that work for them. There is no roadmap for this kind of work. What works for some, doesn't work for others. Persistence and creativity are critical.

Changes over time. Participants in this study talk about how the way they build knowledge for their practice has changed or evolved.

Kathy identifies a shift from looking outward for information, towards focusing on the local community:

> I think it changed in the sense that I was very reliant at the beginning on other people and information I could easily find, and LVQ [Literacy Volunteers of Quebec]... I spent a lot of time going to those meetings and listening up with what was going on and that was a huge learning curve for me, being involved with the provincial group, but as time went on…I started to focus more on the community, more on the immediate scene and I could sense that the knowledge that I needed to build was more local…it was more happening here, it was not happening there, out there…I really focused more on the immediate situation, and what was available to me, to work with.

Marilee talks about how technology has changed the way she builds knowledge over time. She notes that initially she went to workshops, meetings and conferences; now technology has replaced a lot of that, noting that there are a "lot of webinars…they've kind of worked the kinks out of them, and they are free and you can usually get the course materials."

Sharing knowledge. Participants in this study talk about their experiences in sharing knowledge as part of their work.

Joanna talks about one of her first experiences in literacy, working with a Mother Goose family literacy program; although she didn't know details of the program, she had prior knowledge of community development in other contexts: "I've been doing these things in different capacities for years, so I know it works." And:

> I think role modeling is a big part of it, in terms of sharing knowledge. It's like the question is 'what knowledge?' And, I think that if we're going to go from the perspective that everybody has something to share and everybody has knowledge and everybody carries their own experience, and it's what's defined them for who they are in that moment, it's how do you bring out their knowledge. So how do I share my knowledge? It's by finding out what knowledge the people at the table have with them and see if it relates to why I'm in that room…
>
> And for me that's a huge thing about sharing knowledge, and I think it's one of the powers of social media these days in that it's very visual, we live in a very visual culture now, and it's the videos that are transmitting the knowledge now and it's because…you don't have to read the words, you have to absorb the scene. If you're going to be watching something you can choose not to hear it, but if you have to see it, if you see it…it's only with the eyes open that we'll be able to do something about things that we want to change.

Cathy talks about building and sharing knowledge as a reciprocal process: "It's a two-way street for sure for us in a small city; we can combine our knowledge and resources to benefit the clients from several organizations." She talks about some of her strategies:

> A lot of sharing and borrowing of resources. LQ's Executive Director and the LQ workshops. Community partner meetings. Educational reviews. Volunteer Canada's

> website. Webinars. Literacy blogs. A lot on online information is out there and easy to access. And, I ask questions if I don't know what to do in a particular situation.

Cathy recognizes the importance of sharing knowledge: "Our partners also offer training sessions on various subjects and I try to ensure that a staff person from QCRC attends and brings back information…I think too, it's important that the knowledge base is not restricted to one staff person."

In my experience, sharing resources and knowledge, is practical and necessary to avoid 'reinventing the wheel', especially as resources become increasingly scarce. When I think of Marilee's comment's about her early literacy work, I recall the richness of the opportunities to network, the creation of Knowledge Centres, the Literacy Secretariat, and meetings with Senator Joyce Fairbairn, the Minister for Literacy, who met with people in communities across Canada and spoke with them about their challenges with literacy.

As described by Kathy, I also feel that I learn something from every practitioner. It is refreshing to me when new practitioners enter the field, to have their perspective and fresh ideas to enrich the field.

Challenges. Participants in this study identify challenges in building knowledge in and for their practice. Time and money are identified frequently as challenges.

Kathy acknowledges that the vast amount of information and the lack of time are challenges: "There is just so much research out there, and you have to assimilate it or you have to at least try to understand it and then, you know, chuck it or use it."

Marilee notes that online learning has "not really replaced, or it's not really doing a great job." She describes some challenges of online learning:

> There has been 15 minutes worth of questions accepted, but for people that are slow drip learners or something like me, I don't think of the question until the next day or

> something, but they're usually pretty open to carrying on the discussion, but often times the other parts of the job just kind of sweep that all away and that becomes that pile of papers there...and you might access it later on, but the real challenge is to synthesize it and share it with the tutors.

Marilee also talks about the challenge of "validating our approach":

> I think the biggest challenge is to communicate the delivery of service model that we have and convince people that it is a good thing. That's something that's niggling in my mind when we talk about formal vs. informal education. It kind of ah…irritates me that the school system is now aiming at 'one-on-one individualized teaching' with never a nod to people who have been doing it for decades.

Marilee notes that opportunities to attend conferences and workshops no longer exist: "Many of the organizations have folded, and so there are just not those opportunities." Marilee refers to the funding cuts: "There's not the funds for those of us that are around." Also related to the federal cuts to literacy, Marilee refers to the challenge of building knowledge brought about by the closure of a clearinghouse for research and resources used by literacy practitioners, Copian (formerly known as the National Adult Literacy Database, NALD): "I really miss the database…they chucked that, when it was the perfect logical thing for the age." Marilee says there is "nobody gathering and sifting and organizing."

Cathy states: "funding and budget are always going to be an issue." She identifies challenges:

> Time and money. Sometimes, it would be advantageous to go to a conference in another province or country, but the financial means is not there with the funding and it's not always easy to be away from the office. In the ideal world, we would have regular symposiums and conferences each year, just like other professional groups.

The challenges of limited time and money expressed by the participants in the interviews resonate with me. The current federal policy (and funding) emphasis on literacy as a skill for the workplace, and the quiet dismantling of the Pan-Canadian literacy infrastructure, has had significant and detrimental impact on the field.

Marilee raises an issues that resonates deeply with me, when she speaks about 'validating our approach', and the lack of recognition and/or respect for the non-formal sector. This is a challenge that I have encountered throughout my years of practice and has driven my interest in this topic as part of my graduate studies.

I attended a literacy institute a few years ago. After one presentation, the presenter returned to our discussion group and said, "Before we start, I hope no one here works with volunteers." I understood this to mean that literacy instruction should be the sole domain of 'properly trained professionals', not volunteers who are assumed to be untrained and ineffective. I had encountered this attitude before:

> I wanted to scream that trained professionals had years to teach people who struggle with literacy, and yet so many leave the school system not being able to read. More of the same isn't the answer; open your mind to different approaches! Thankfully, someone stood up at the plenary at the end of the day and suggested that we think more broadly about 'learning spaces'. I then decided I would return for the second day of the session.

This experience was a confirmation for me that there existed an arbitrary and unhelpful divide between formal and non-formal literacy practice, and set me on a path to understand why. I found graduate programs for 'trained teachers', but little choice for those with non-traditional education backgrounds. Eventually, I applied to Concordia's MA in Educational Studies. My application was rejected. I couldn't understand how 25 years of experience in adult education did not make me a candidate to study adult education? *If this program isn't for people like me, who is it for?* Eventually, I was granted entrance as an independent student, subject to approval based on my performance. This experience with the academic gatekeeper remains important to my learning journey, and in hindsight, set me on course for this thesis topic.

Summary

The voices and narratives of the participants in this study are unique; woven together, they create overarching themes of: community, connection and creativity.

In returning to the literature review, practitioners' description of their practice aligns with a humanistic approach. The stories underscore how policy and funding impact their practice. Participants describe how the federal cuts have negatively impacted their work and created gaps.

In terms of provincial literacy policy, participants describe their work as rooted in the community, aligning with principles of autonomous community action that underpins the funding their organizations receive through PACTE. The interview data supports the findings of the 2013 CLLN study, and provides narrative that enrich the findings, especially in Quebec, which had an under-representative response rate from practitioners (CLLN, 2013, p.9).

Conclusions

When I decided to return to formal studies, I was often asked: *Why?* or *Why now? Do you want to be a 'teacher'? Are you looking for a new job? Will you get a salary increase?* The simple answer to these questions is, and always was, no. I wanted to look at the work I love from a different angle, to reflect on my practice, and to search for resolution to issues that had dogged me over time.

One of the issues that I have encountered in different guises is the perception by some that knowledge based on lived experience is inferior to that deemed 'official knowledge'. *Whose voice is heard? Whose knowledge counts?* And ultimately, *Whose voice is silenced?* Stemming from what I perceived to be an artificial and detrimental divide, I was interested in exploring ways to create spaces where multiple voices and diverse knowledge are reflected and respected.

Studying while working has certainly had its challenges. I understand now that I couldn't have done one without the other. I felt constantly pulled between studying and working, yet know that when they came together (or collided!), those were moments when theory and practice were inseparable. For me, this thesis has been my way to engage deeply in my own practice, reflect on what I have learned while studying at Concordia, and put it into action.

I share one final story that speaks to my experience:

> While writing this thesis, I obtained a grant to carry out a project for the organization where I work: "Training for Action: Developing a Volunteer Workforce". It presented an opportunity to rethink and redesign how we prepare volunteers for their important role as literacy tutors. I knew from having taken some courses in the Ed Tech program, that bringing students with expertise from that program could benefit our work at the council; it could also provide practical experience for the students. YLC [Yamaska Literacy Council] welcomed a team of amazing students, a dedicated professor, and an intern to contribute to the project.
>
> Three Concordia Ed Tech students, all of whom work in the education field, drove out to YLC's office in the Eastern Townships on a snowy Saturday morning, to meet with some

> volunteer tutors to gather information for our project, which was serving as a case study for their course. An amazing exchange occurred. Some tutors said that they appreciated having a fresh perspective on our work. One of the students acknowledged the fact that volunteers were giving their time and expertise to help people read. A volunteer talked about the fact that it was the organization's humanistic approach to literacy that made her decide to volunteer. Together we wondered if developing a 'community of practice' might be a solution…it seemed that the themes I was addressing in my thesis were playing out in my real work.
>
> This is why I chose to return to school – to create bridges between formal and non-formal education, between theory and practice.

Addressing my Research Questions

1. What are the experiences of adult literacy practitioners who work in the community-based sector in building knowledge for their practice?

2. How can practitioner knowledge and academic research intersect to inform practice and influence policy?

In terms of the first research question, the qualitative data in this study provides insight into the experiences of the sample interviewed. The data gathered from the participants in this study supports some of the findings in the literature and provides narrative to give voice to the lived experiences of practitioners in building knowledge. This study confirms that practitioners have a wide range of educational background and life experience, often enter the literacy field by happenstance, and embrace an educational philosophy that aligns with a humanistic approach to education. The study supports the idea that practitioners build and share the knowledge for their practice in many ways, some of which are described in the literature.

In terms of the second research question, this study raises as many questions as it answers. Ultimately, I think bridges will be built and gaps will close one connection at a time. I return to the data from the interviews. The themes that emerged from the interviews speak to

community, connection and creativity; these are elements that I believe are key to bridging gaps between theory and practice. My experience is one example.

Implications and Benefits

It is my hope that this study:

1. Contributes to the knowledge about the practices of literacy practitioners in building knowledge in and for their practice.
2. Guides practitioners who are new to the field of adult literacy in developing their own knowledge and contributing to a wider base of knowledge.
3. Acknowledges the contributions of practitioners to a rich body of knowledge.
4. Offers a concrete example of bridging research and practice in adult literacy.

I am the obvious beneficiary from having engaged in this research. I am reminded of Kathy's comment: "I think it's part of the learning curve of practitioners to have to do projects and create things, it's part of the learning, building the knowledge base, but is it useful to others? I think it can be, but I think it's actually more useful to the practitioners themselves." In terms of benefits for practitioners, my hope is that this study inspires others to reflect on their own practice, and look for ways of building knowledge within a community that includes and values research and practice, in ways that make sense to them.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is that the participants are all from the same segment of the literacy field, practicing in community-based English literacy organizations in Quebec. The study does not include:

1. Practitioners who work in the French sector in Quebec, where there are significant differences from the English sector in terms of approaches to literacy and methods of service delivery.
2. Practitioners who work in the formal sector, such as teachers who work in adult education centres throughout Quebec.
3. Practitioners outside of Quebec, who are impacted by policy and funding structures that are different than in Quebec.

Future Directions and Recommendations

This study can be a starting point for further research about literacy practitioners. A logical starting point is to examine the experiences of practitioners that were not included in this study, as noted in the previous section. Given that the sample selected for this study reflects the age demographic of practitioners identified in the 2013 CLLN study, many practitioners will retire from the field in the next decade. I believe it would be worthwhile to investigate in a timely manner ways to share their knowledge of the field with incoming and less experienced practitioners.

Based on my own experiences in engaging with my studies and this research in particular, I think there are exciting and worthwhile opportunities to explore and bridge gaps between theory and practice, in order to create new learning spaces that do not separate knowledge into silos. Some concrete steps might include:

1. Encourage formal education institutions to revisit their admission requirements to acknowledge applicants who have experience in non-formal education. *Is prior learning recognized by in Concordia's Education Department admissions process? Why or why not? How?*

2. Encourage post-secondary institutions to offer a course(s)/program focused on non-formal learning; include practitioners from the non-formal sector to present their approaches and share experiences.
3. Encourage Internship Coordinators at post-secondary institutions to reach out to non-formal organizations to provide internships, placements, and/or case studies for Education students. There are rich opportunities throughout Quebec in non-formal learning: literacy councils; women's centres; community learning centres; associations for persons with learning or intellectual disabilities; seniors residences. All of these have umbrella groups that could be contacted to identify networks.
4. Encourage community-based literacy organizations to contact post-secondary institutions to find out about internship programs, co-op placements, or other opportunities that provide practical and relevant experience for students and further the objectives of the literacy organization.
5. Encourage practitioners to investigate and pursue practical opportunities to share and build their knowledge together. Some examples have emerged in this research study, and might include building a community of practice. Given identified constraints of human and financial resources, this might be best accomplished through a funded project.

In addition to future studies about literacy practitioners, an obvious and important future direction for me, is to conduct a research study to explore the experiences of unpaid volunteer practitioners, and adults with low literacy, in building knowledge in their lives.

The Challenges Ahead

There were times during my studies when I wondered if I was studying a field that would no longer exist in the near future. The Canadian literacy field faces significant challenges in light of the quiet dismantling of the Pan-Canadian literacy infrastructure, a direct result of the 2014 federal cuts to literacy under the Harper government. As a practitioner in the field, I hope for a shift from the emphasis on 'getting Bob a job', to a more humanistic policy under the current Liberal government; there is currently no evidence of such a shift.

Although the Quebec literacy field has been indirectly impacted by the cuts to the federal literacy budget, participants in this study work for community organizations that are funded for their mission as autonomous community action groups. In terms of Quebec's literacy landscape, there is a recent sign of hope. In December 2016, the Quebec Minister of Education announced an increase of nine million recurrent dollars to the budget that funds community literacy groups in Quebec (Plante, 2016). At the time of writing, budget increases have trickled down to the grass-roots organizations, and fueled hope for practitioners that our work may continue, or expand.

Practitioners continue to find ways to make a difference, to navigate the gaps within and between policies, and align their practice with their own beliefs about the purpose of adult education. Allan Quigley states:

> Literacy for what purpose, as decided by whom, and for whose benefit?" One can also ask: "What is the purpose of my program now?" "What was it when it first began?" "What model would be best if we are to be truly authentic, effective, literacy educators into the 21st century? (Ontario Literacy Coalition, 2013, p. 54).

In a field facing significant challenges, I reflect on the need to keep hope: "As long as I fight, I am moved by hope; and if I fight with hope, then I can wait" (Freire, 1994, p. 73).

References

Balanoff, H., & Chambers, C. (2005). Do my literacies count as literacy? *Literacies, 6,* 18-20.

Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. (2007). Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Bouchard, P. (2006). Human capital and the knowledge economy. In Fenwick, T., Nesbit, T., Spencer, B. (Eds.), *Contexts of adult education: Canadian perspectives*. (pp. 164-172). Toronto, ON: Thompson, Educational Publishing.

Bowl, M. (2014). *Adult education in changing times: Policies, philosophies and professionalism*. London, UK: National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education.

Calamai, Peter. (1987). *Broken words: Why five million Canadians are illiterate*. The Southam Literacy Report: A Special Southam Survey.

Canadian Literacy and Learning Network. (2013). The realities of working in the literacy and essential skills field: An occupational profile of the literacy and essential skills workforce in Canada. Retrieved from http://lesworkforce.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Final-Report1.pdf

Collins, M. (1996). *The first twenty-five years: Laubach literacy in Canada*. Saint John, NB: Laubach Literacy of Canada. (pp. 5-9).

Collins, J. (2013). Voice, schooling, inequality, and scale. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, *44*(2), 205-210.

Centre for Community Organizations (COCo). (2014). Retrieved from http://coco-net.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Definitions-OC-OCA-EPA.pdf

Elfert, M., and Rubenson, K. (2013). Adult education policies in Canada: Skills without humanity. In Nesbit, T., Brigham, S.M., Taber, N., Gibb, T. (Eds.), *Building on critical*

traditions: Adult education and learning in Canada. (pp. 238-247). Toronto, ON: Thompson, Educational Publishing.

Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* (30th anniversary edition). New York: Continuum. (original work published 1970).

Gee, J. (2008). Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses. New York: Routledge.

Glesne, C. (2011). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction.* Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.

Gouvernement du Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation. (2002). Learning throughout life: Government policy on adult education and continuing education and training. Quebec, QC: Gouvernement du Québec.

Gouvernement du Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport. (2009). *Programme d'action communautaire sur le terrain d'éducation (PACTE)*. Québec, QC: Gouvernement du Québec.

Government of Canada, Employment and Social Development Canada (2013). Retrieved from http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/jobs/les/index.shtml

Gutek, G.L. (2014). *Philosophical, ideological, and theoretical perspectives on education*. Boston: Pearson.

Heft, R. (2007). Evolution through outreach and participation: a history of the Quebec Association for Adult Learning. (2nd edition). Montreal, QC: QAAL.

Juffermans, K., Van Der Aa, J. (2013). Introduction to the special issue: Analyzing voice in educational discourse. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, *44*(2), 112-123.

Kennedy, Lindsay. (2013). How literacy has evolved in Canada. *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved from

http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/lindsay-l-kennedy/international-literacy-day-_b_3860200.html

Lauer, P. (2006). An education research primer: How to understand, evaluate and use it. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Boss Inc.

Literacy Quebec (LQ). (2017). Retrieved from http://www.literacyquebec.org/

Lytle, S., Belzer, A., Reumann, R. (1992). Developing the Professional Workforce for Adult Literacy Education. Paper presented at the National Center on Adult Literacy Policy, Washington, DC.

Merriam, B., Brockett, R.G. (1997). *The profession and practice of adult education: An introduction.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Boss Inc.

Ontario Literacy Coalition. (2009) *Beyond the Book: Learning from our history.* ON: Ontario Literacy Coalition. Retrieved from http://www.essentialskillsontario.ca/essential-skills/skills-history

Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, Human Resources Development Canada. (2005). *Adult Literacy and Life Skills (ALL) Survey.*

Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2016). Survey of adult skills (PIAAC). Retrieved from http://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/

Plante, C. (2016, December 2). Quebec announces $20 million for literacy. Retrieved from http://montrealgazette.com/news/quebec/quebec-announces-20-million-for-literacy

Programme d'action communautaire sur le terrain d'éducation (PACTE). (2017). Retrieved from http://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/organismes-communautaires/organismes-communautaires/programme-daction-communautaire-pacte/

Purcell-Gates, V. (Ed.). (2008). Complicating the complex. In V. Purcell-Gates (Ed.). *Cultural practices of literacy: Case studies of language, literacy, social practice and power.* (pp.1-23), New York: Routledge.

Quigley, A. (1997). The role of research in the practice of adult education. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, (73),* 3-22.

Quigley, A. (1999). Naming our world, claiming our knowledge: Research-in-practice in adult literacy programs. *The Alberta Journal of Educational Research*. *45*(3), 253-262.

Quigley, A. (2001). Defining Reality: The struggle for voice in adult literacy education. In Taylor. M., *Adult literacy now.* Toronto, ON: Irwin Publishing.

Quigley, A. (2006). Building professional pride in literacy: A dialogical guide to professional development for practitioners of adult literacy and basic education. Malabar, FLA: Krieger Publishing Company.

Quigley, A. (2013). Learning from landmarks. In Nesbit, T., Brigham, S.M., Taber, N., Gibb, T. (Eds.), *Building on critical traditions: Adult education and learning in Canada*. (pp. 82-92). Toronto, ON: Thompson Educational Publishing.

Regroupement des groupes populaires en alphabétisation du Québec (RGPAQ). (2017). Retrieved from http://www.rgpaq.qc.ca/

Selman, G., Selman, M., Cooke, M., Dampier, P. (1998). *The foundation of adult education in Canada*. (2nd edition). Toronto, ON: Thompson Educational Publishing.

Silverman, R. (1990). Excerpt from Literacy 2000 Conference.

Spencer, B. (2006). *The purposes of adult education: A short introduction*. (2nd edition). Toronto, ON: Thompson Educational Publishing.

St. Clair, R. (2007). Approaching Canadian adult literacy research as a community of practice: Implications and Possibilities. *The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education. 20*(1), 50-67.

St. Clair, R. (2016). Plus ça change – The failure of PIAAC to drive evidence-based policy in Canada. DOI 10.1007.s40955-016-0070-0

Street, B. (Ed.). (1993). *Cross-cultural approaches to literacy*. London, England: Cambridge University Press.

Street, B. (Ed.). (2001). Literacy and development: Ethnographic perspectives. (pp. 1-26) London: Routledge.

Stromquist, N. (2002). The twinning of ideas and material conditions: Globalization, neoliberalism, and postmodernism. Education in a globalized world: The connectivity of *economic power, technology and knowledge*. (pp. 19-37) New York Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Thomas, D., Seely Brown, J. (2011). A new culture of learning: Cultivating the imagination for a world of constant change. Createspace Independent Publishing.

Torres, C., (2013). *Political sociology of adult education.* Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.

United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organizations, Institute for Education. (1997). *The hamburg declaration: The agenda for the future.* Hamburg, Germany: UNESCO.

Veeman, N. (2003). A view from the other side of the great divide: Personal reflections on practice and academic research. *Literacies, 1,* 5-6.

Welton, M. (2013). Unearthing Canada's hidden past: A short history of adult education. Toronto, ON: Thompson Publishing.

Welton, M. (2013). A bird's eye view of Canadian adult education history. In Nesbit, T., Brigham, S.M., Taber, N., Gibb, T. (Eds.), *Building on critical traditions: Adult education and learning in Canada*. (pp. 19-38). Toronto, ON: Thompson Educational Publishing.

Appendix

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

---

1. Can you tell me about your background? (i.e. education, work and life experience, interests?)
2. Can you tell me how you entered the field of adult literacy? What was that experience like for you?

   Probe: What was the introduction like? Were there things you had learned from previous experience that helped you when you entered the field? Was training /orientation provided? Were there gaps in your knowledge? Describe.
3. Can you describe to me your current work as a literacy practitioner?

   Probe: **What** do you do? What do you need to know to be able to do your job? How did/do you know/learn what to do in your job? Has it evolved? How?
4. Can you tell me **how** you build the knowledge you need for your literacy practice?

   Probe: How did you learn to do what you do? (i.e. Self-study, Workshops, Formal courses, Webinars, Feedback/input from participants, Other, Mentors)
5. Has the way in which you build knowledge for your practice changed over time?

   Probe: Can you describe how it has changed? In what ways? Why?
6. In your experience, is knowledge shared?

   Probe: How? With whom? Who shares knowledge with you? With whom do you share knowledge?
7. What has your been your experience with research in/for your practice?

Probe: Do you look at research? What kind of research do you look at? Can you give examples? (i.e. practice based, academic? Grey research? What sources? Academic journals, literacy organizations, other practitioners, etc.) How do you use it? How does it impact your practice? Do you produce research? (what kinds, do you share it)

8. What challenges do you face building knowledge you need for your practice?
9. What conditions and/or factors foster and support you to build knowledge for your practice?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience as a literacy practitioner?