

## Relationship with Literacy: a longitudinal perspective on the literacy practices and learning of young people without a diploma

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### Abstract

*This article explores the temporal dimension of the ‘rapport à l’écrit’ (relationship with literacy) in the lives of two young people—Anais (aged 19) and Zachary (aged 22)—without a secondary school diploma. The article draws on data taken from a mixed-methods longitudinal study looking at young people’s transitions in Québec (Canada). Process Analysis is used as an analytical framework. The results suggest that young people without a secondary school diploma do not necessarily have a difficult or negative relationship with literacy. By focusing on the relationship with literacy and its evolution over time, it is possible to put emphasis on young people’s positive investment in a number of literacy practices and not be limited to school practices alone. Our findings confirm the relevance of exploring the temporal dimension of the relationship with literacy for policy makers, researchers, and educators.*

**Keywords:** Literacy learning; literacy practices; mixed-methods longitudinal study; relationship with literacy; young people

### Introduction

Existing research recognises that leaving secondary school without a diploma can have an impact on various aspects of life such as access to subsequent education opportunities, physical and mental health, numeracy and literacy levels, and income (Bynner & Joshi, 2002; Cieslik & Simpson, 2015). Nowadays, transitions to adulthood are generally understood as being multifaceted and marked by precarity and individualisation (Salva-



Mut, Quintana-Murci & Desmarais, 2015). Evidence also suggests that young people who have interrupted their studies before obtaining a secondary school diploma experience precarity more intensely during that transition (Côté & Bynner, 2008). Precarity, a feeling of insecurity and unpredictability, can affect diverse domains of life beyond employment: mental and physical health, housing, social relationships, etc. (Bourdon & Bélisle, 2015; Supeno & Bourdon, 2013; Thériault, 2016; Turmel, 2017). For these young people, the lengthening of the transition to adulthood might be punctuated by their participation in several short-term social and vocational integration programmes, temporary low-paid and sometimes risky jobs, repeated attempts at returning to education, and periods of being ‘Not in Education, Employment, or Training’ (NEET) (Côté & Bynner, 2008).

Data collected as part of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), indicate that compared to their peers with higher education levels, young people aged 16 to 24 without a secondary school diploma in Québec (Canada) do not generally attain Level 3 in literacy, numeracy and Problem Solving in Technology-Rich Environments (Nanhou & Desrosiers 2019). Yet, some of these youths will engage in diverse everyday literacy practices (Bélisle, 2008; Smith & Wright, 2015; Thériault & Bélisle, 2012; Thériault, 2016) while being in various literate environments where it will be possible for them to learn about literacies and gain new skills and knowledge (Easton, 2014). Bélisle, Roy, and Mottais (2019, p. 89, our translation) describe literate environments as ‘environments where literacy is ubiquitous and where social relations are often structured by literacy, with reading and writing practices running through them and/or made possible by them.’

Previous research has established that literacy learning is a process that occurs across a wide variety of domains of life (e.g. Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000) and throughout the life course; from early childhood (Ferreiro, 1979) to older age (e.g. Hall & Harker, 2018), in formal education contexts, but also in family settings, at work (voluntary or paid), in interaction with professionals (doctors, psychologist, social workers, etc.), or as part of everyday life activities (health, DIY, gardening, sports, personal finances, and so on). Before literacy is formally taught to children, they have already been exposed to literacy practices in different literate environments (e.g. public libraries), some more dynamic than others (Hanemann & Krolak, 2017). Those literate environments can play a role in the process of socialisation to literacy and the development of dispositions (i.e. attitudes, feelings, and preferences) towards it (Bélisle, 2007; Bélisle, Roy, & Mottais, 2019). During the transition to adulthood, literate environments that favour socialisation to literacy could be particularly important in supporting young people without a diploma to reach their educational, personal and professional goals.

The process of socialisation to literacy occurs across the life-course and contributes to a person’s ‘*rapport à l’écrit*’ (henceforth, relationship with literacy) (Bélisle, 2006; Besse, 1995). This concept has been mainly used in francophone countries to explore literacy teaching (*didactique*) with young people (e.g. Barré-de Miniac, 2000; Chartrand & Prince, 2009) and adult literacy education (e.g. Besse, 1995; Desmarais, 2006). It refers to the ever-evolving relationship—over time, across different contexts, and in interaction with various individuals, groups and institutions—with literacy that includes reading, writing, the use of multimodal artefacts, and other relations with the written world (Bélisle, 2006).

The aim of this article is to explore the temporal dimension of the relationship with literacy in order to improve our understanding of the process by which individuals, particularly young people without a diploma, engage with literacies over time and across contexts. A better understanding of the process by which the relationship with literacy is

shaped and evolves could help teachers and educators to adjust and connect with the unique realities of the young people they work with. Regarding policy makers, the concept of relationship with literacy can support the work around the development of dynamic literate environments that could reinvigorate literacy practices, and contribute to maintaining and improving literacy competences (Bélisle, 2007; Bélisle, Roy, & Mottais, 2019).

We first provide an overview of three studies that have explored the temporal dimension of literacy practices in young people's lives. In order to further our understanding of relationship with literacy as a process, we use Process Analysis as our analytical framework. A brief overview of the study, its context and methodology, is then provided. The findings section focuses on two young people in Québec (Canada): Anaïs and Zachary. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings for three groups of stakeholders: practitioners in adult education, policy makers, and researchers.

### Exploring literacies over and across time

The temporal dimension of literacy learning and practices tends to be primarily associated with school contexts; their time structures and institutional temporal expectations with regard to learning within pre-established periods of time (Burgess, 2010; Compton-Lilly, 2013). Our literature review revealed that few studies have looked at the temporal dimension of literacies in the lives of young people who have interrupted their schooling before obtaining a secondary school diploma. Some authors have looked at the evolution of children's and young people's relationship with literacy over time drawing on diachronic data, but focusing on the participants' experiences at school or in community settings (Sefton-Green & Rowsell, 2015; Tusting, 2010). Retrospective methods, such as biographical and narratives methods or life-story interviews (e.g. Desmarais, 2006; Hall & Harker, 2018) are used rather than planned longitudinal research designs, as is also the case in the field of adult education more broadly (e.g. Pita Castro, 2015). We have identified three studies that have collected longitudinal data about the temporal dimension of literacy learning and practices, although in very different ways.

Compton-Lilly (2013) studied the topic of literacy learning and identity over time. For ten years, she researched seven students and their families from the North East of the USA. Her description of the 'literate trajectory' (Compton-Lilly, 2013, p. 401) of a young African-American man named Jermaine, who experienced difficulties with reading throughout his school career, shows how additional support managed to improve his reading over a short period, but as his difficulties reemerged he adopted a 'struggling reader' identity—saying things like: 'I don't like reading. It's not me' (ibid., p. 404). Compton-Lilly does not document his out-of-school literacy practices, but she observes that Jermaine's experiences at school 'were bound within fixed irreversible sequences' (2013, p. 405), for example, passing a test or attending a summer school did not help him to progress.

This impression of stagnation or of being 'stuck' in time was also expressed by young people in a study conducted by Cieslik and Simpson (2006, p. 222) that explored the impact of 'poor basic skills' on young people's identities, transitions to adulthood and life opportunities. The participants (n= 55), aged 20 to 30, were from North East England and attended 'basic skills' classes in a community college or at their workplace in 2003. The authors explain that some participants had developed complex coping strategies in order to avoid reading and writing at work or at home (Simpson & Cieslik, 2007). For instance, some were dependent on their social network (e.g. partner, co-workers, and

parents) for support. Others felt that they had to improve their literacy and numeracy skills in order to access more secure or interesting positions. Cieslik and Simpson (2015) highlight that it was not their lack of skills or specific literacy practices that restrained the young people's professional and personal progress, but rather the emotions that these can provoke, such as feelings of shame and inadequacy. Compton-Lilly (2013, p. 404) also notes that family and teachers can reinforce negative feelings in relation to literacy. Both studies highlight the roles that others, in different domains, such as family and work, can play in the development of a young person's relationship with literacy.

Barton, Ivanič, Appleby, Hodge and Tusting (2007) conducted a study in North West England that looked at a broad range of domains of life and focused on people's learning over time and space. It included 134 learners attending literacy, numeracy, English as a second or foreign language or information and communications technology courses in formal and non-formal settings. The study was longitudinal as 50 participants, including some young people, were interviewed on several occasions over periods ranging from six months to four years. A framework for understanding people's life and learning emerged from their study that includes four aspects: personal history, current practices and identities, present circumstances and events, and imagined future (ibid.). They use overlaid line graphs to visually illustrate how a person's different 'careers' (e.g. work, family, health, and leisure learning) are interrelated. For example, taking part in a leisure activity might reinvigorate certain literacy practices and skills. Barton and his colleagues also draw on concepts that relate to life-course theory such as transitions, turbulences, and critical points. In their study, transitions include events such as shifting from one job to another, moving from education to work, or leaving the family home. They point out that social relationships (help received, networking, caring responsibilities, etc.) were central to most of the transitions discussed with the participants. The idea of transitions coming at the 'right time' in people's lives was mentioned by some, emphasising the temporal dimension of learning and literacies.

Taken together, and like others drawing on a literacy as social practice perspective (Barton & Hamilton, 2012), these studies support the idea that literacy should not be understood as a set of individual skills solely acquired in school. The three studies provide important insights into the role of time and of others in the development or hindering of literacy learning and practices. Overall, there seems to be some evidence to indicate that literacies were central to the participants' perceptions of stagnation or progression in life. In the studies reviewed, time is recognised as an important dimension as the participants' learning and literacy practices generally evolved over time and were not seen as being fixed. However, there remain several aspects of the temporal dimension of young people's relationship with literacy during their transition to adulthood about which relatively little is known. The concept of relationship with literacy combined with the Process Analysis framework can shed new light on this intricate process.

### Relationship with Literacy

The concept of *rapport à l'écrit* or *rapport à l'écriture* has no precise equivalents in English. It originates from psychoanalysis and sociology and considers the evolution, over time and across different domains of life, of the representations, habits, feelings, skills, social practices, and other aspects of literacy. The concept is used in the fields of *didactique* (didactics) and adult lifelong learning. Studies in both fields are interested in the ways in which people enter the 'written world', signifying how they have been socialised to reading and writing and how they continue to learn and use literacies across

their lifetimes. Following Ferreiro (1979), Besse (1995) considers that the relationship with literacy is a process that starts before children learn the alphabet, or other linguistic codes. For example, when children scribble on a piece of paper, they are already starting to build their relationship with literacy. Besse's work (1995) with adults in a *situation d'illettrisme* (situation of functional illiteracy) has been influential in the field of adult education in Québec (Bélisle, 2006; Desmarais, 2006). Besse's concept of the relationship with literacy includes three main groups of dimensions: affective, cognitive and relational/sociological. In Besse's initial work, the relational and sociological dimensions were not as developed as the two other groups. In the 1990s, French historians (e.g. Chartier, 1993) and sociologists (e.g. Lahire, 1993) further researched writing as a form of social and cultural practice, and improved our understanding of the relational and sociological dimensions of the relationship with literacy. From the body of work on didactics, we retain the idea of *investissement dans l'écriture* (investment in writing) (Barré-de Miniac, 2000) that can be positive, negative or neutral. Investment is different from performance, as it refers to the effort, pleasure, and curiosity present when involved in literacy practices.

The relationship with literacy is an ever-evolving process influenced by all domains of life (e.g. family, school, and work) and by societal expectations regarding reading and writing (Fihon, 2014). It includes a person's dispositions towards literacy, and, according to Lahire (1998), different dispositions can be activated in different contexts and periods. It is therefore possible to speak of the plurality of the relationship with literacy (Bélisle, 2006).

## Process Analysis

In this article, we propose to add another dimension to the concept of relationship with literacy: the temporal one. To do so, we draw on 'Process Analysis' and its five categories presented in Table 1 (Bidart & Brochier, 2010; Longo, Mendez & Tchobanian, 2010; Mercier & Oiry, 2010; Pérocheau & Correia, 2010). The relationship with literacy is a process, and, accordingly, it is important to look at the contexts where it evolves and its main ingredients. Process Analysis also draws our attention to identifiable sequences during the process, drivers (*moteurs*) that encourage the use of literacy practices or that support certain attitudes toward literacy, and possible turning points (*bifurcations*) in the relationship with literacy.

Table 1: Brief overview of the Process analysis's categories

Process analysis's categories	Comprising elements
<b>Contexts</b>	Contextual information and conditions in different domains of life.
<b>Ingredients</b>	Artefacts, people, institutions or organisations, literacy practices, past experiences, and present and future projects.
<b>Sequences</b>	Periods during which there is a change in ingredients.
<b>Drivers</b>	Elements that initiate change in ingredients.
<b>Turning points</b>	Intense period of change.

Contexts are what surround a process in different domains of life. It involves making a broader description of research participants' life situations. The term 'ingredients' is an explicit culinary analogy and includes elements such as artefacts, people (e.g. family,

friends, partners, teachers, and other professionals), institutions or organisations, literacy practices, past experiences that might influence the present, and present and future projects. Sequences are periods, short or long, with variable levels of intensity, during which ingredients change or are reorganised in a different manner. Biographical events are crucial here, especially those characterised by a substantial change in perspective observed from the person's own point of view or from those of significant others around them. Drivers are what trigger a process, meaning a change of ingredients and the way they are articulated. Pérocheau and Correia (2010) identify four types of process drivers: programmatic, evolutionary, dialectic, and teleological. Programmatic drivers are typical to the life cycle, for example, the development of self-identity during adolescence. Evolutionary drivers are characterised by social or structural changes that introduce new practices such as the expansion of the Internet. Dialectic drivers emerge from tensions between two ingredients, for example, a construction worker who considers that writing is solely related to desk jobs, but now has to produce a written report at work. Teleological drivers are initiated by a person's values, what is important to them. Finally, turning points are intense periods of biographical rearrangement that completely change the orientation of a biography.

Process Analysis shares some similarities with Barton and colleagues' (2007) concepts of transitions, turbulences, and critical points. Yet, Process Analysis' categories offer a more systematic and comprehensive framework to use in order to understand the evolution of relationships with literacy.

## Overview of the study

The data analysed for the purpose of this paper is taken from a longitudinal study that was comprised of five waves of data collection with young people who all had French as their first language in Québec, Canada. The project used a mixed-methods design and received ethical approval from the education and social sciences research ethics committee at the Université de Sherbrooke (Bourdon & Bélisle, 2008). Throughout the article, we use pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of the participants and of the members of their social networks. The study took place between 2006 and 2011 in collaboration with community-based organisations for young people.

At the time of the first wave, none of the 45 participants, aged between 18 and 24 years old, had a secondary school diploma and they were all experiencing precarity in one or several aspects of their lives. The young people in the study were receiving financial benefits from the Québec social assistance programme and were participating in a social and professional integration programme.

In the first wave (W1, 2006-2007) 45 young people participated in the study, in the second (W2, 2007-2008) there were 37, in the third (W3, 2008-2009), 29, the fourth (W4, 2009- 2010) counted 14 young people, and finally, in the fifth (W5, 2010-2011), there were only 8 participants. As far as possible, the young people were interviewed by the same interviewer over the years.

The study used social networks and life-course research tools (Bourdon & Bélisle, 2008): socio-demographic questionnaires, social network inventories (i.e. lists of people, their role and significance, in different domains of life), generators of significant events and semi-structured interviews. For each research interview, the participants were asked to select one significant event following which they felt changed in some way from their point of view and from those of others. This approach was used to identify potential transitions in young people's lives. The interview questions explicitly addressed literacies

during the selected significant event, as well as in the young people's lives in general. However, depending on the interviewer, there was considerable variation in the quantity and quality of the information collected on the topic.

The interviews were transcribed, uploaded into NVivo software, and analysed using a thematic analysis approach. For each interview, an overview of the content covered (*fiches synthèse*) was produced by members of the research team. The present article draws on data taken from the overviews and semi-structured interviews. From the 45 participants, we initially identified 28 potential young people who had taken part in a minimum of three waves of data collection. To document the evolution of their relationship with literacy, we looked at the interview overviews and ran text queries in NVivo. We analysed the content coded under three specific codes: '*Lecture, écriture, chansons, dessins*' (Reading, writing, songs, drawings), '*Écrit*' (Literacy) and '*Pensée, images, musique*' (Thoughts, images, music). This technique allowed us to have a detailed overview of what the participants had to say about reading, writing and other semiotic modes during the interviews.

From these 28 participants, we have selected two young people—Anaïs and Zachary—in order to offer a deeper analysis of the evolution of their relationship with literacy. We chose these two participants because they talked about their literacy practices during each interview over the course of the study. The research team met Anaïs on four occasions (W1, W2, W3, and W4) and Zachary on three (W1, W2, and W3). We selected Anaïs and Zachary because they went through some similar experiences and there are some parallels between their literacy practices (e.g. song lyrics). These resemblances facilitated the comparison of their respective relationship with literacy and our analysis of the important ingredients present in the process. Their profiles are representative in terms of the significant events discussed such as breakups and the death of people close to them, two types of events frequently mentioned by other participants.

## Results

In the following results sections, we first trace Anaïs's and Zachary's contexts and then analyse the evolution of their respective relationship with literacy. After, we draw on the Process Analysis framework to highlight the transversal elements present in both cases and further our analysis of their relationship with literacy.

### *Anaïs's and Zachary's Contexts*

During the first wave of data collection, Anaïs was aged 19 and Zachary was 22. Both had difficult relationships with their families and had experienced the care system.

Anaïs had received assistance from an additional needs support teacher in primary school and was placed in a special education pathway in secondary school where she experienced bullying. She did not like special education because of the unruly behaviour of other pupils and the lack of individualised support. Her reported level of formal education in 2006 was: 2<sup>nd</sup> year of secondary school in mathematics, and 4<sup>th</sup> year of secondary school in French and English. In W1, W3 and W4, she wanted to enrol in a distance-learning programme at an adult education centre in order to obtain her secondary school diploma. She explained that attending school in person would be 'almost like a nightmare' for her. She gathered information in W4 but the project did not materialise and remained uncertain.

From one wave to another, Anaïs encountered multiple events related to breakups (W1 and W4) and betrayals (W2 and W3); she had four different partners and lived with two of them respectively. After breaking up with her partners in W1 and W4, she had suicidal thoughts. The size of her social network across the four waves is relatively small (average of 8.5 people) compared to other young people in the study (average of 19.8 in W1) (Bourdon et al., 2009). Her network also decreased over time from ten people in W1 to six people in W4. Anaïs used health and social services during periods of crisis, but did not seem to have any significant adults from older age groups in her social network.

Over the three years that he took part in the study, Zachary returned into formal education twice, moved in with his girlfriend, and maintained that relationship over W2 and W3. Zachary had a larger social network (average of 13.3 people), which increased a little over the three waves. He also developed trusting relationships with professionals such as a social worker and educators working for the community-based organisation where the research team first met him.

As a child, Zachary was physically abused. He struggled with his parents' divorce while he was in the first year of secondary school and started taking drugs at a young age. Zachary experienced homelessness, went to prison, and stayed with his mother and her partner until she passed away. In W1, he mentioned that he had had momentary suicidal thoughts before his mother's death. In W2 and W3, he stopped taking drugs due to his girlfriend's positive influence.

Zachary left secondary school in the third year to work in a restaurant in order to help his mother financially. In W2, he enrolled in a *Formation générale des adultes* (Adult General Education) programme situated in a community-based organisation where teachers from the local adult education centre were providing support. It is important to mention that in Québec, a large part of Adult General Education is based on individual work using learning guides; an approach called '*enseignement modulaire individualisé*' (individualised modular teaching, Mercier & Longo, 2017). This teaching approach allows adults to move at their own pace by relying on the availability of a teacher in the classroom. In the distance-learning programme, if students have questions or require additional support, they can meet with a teacher in person at their local education centre, or contact one by phone or email. The exams, however, are always taken in person at an adult education centre. Zachary found the pace too fast, thought that the teachers were not supportive enough, and did not understand what he had to do with the learning guides. Consequently, he decided to interrupt his studies. In W3, still at the same organisation, Zachary enrolled on a vocational training course that focused on the restoration of electronic equipment. He enjoyed the support offered by the teaching staff and thought that they were more approachable. He particularly liked one of the technicians who had practical experience in the field. Zachary was proud of learning how to mount circuit boards.

### *The Evolution of Anaïs's Relationship with Literacy*

Over the course of the four waves, Anaïs mentioned several literacy artefacts. Based on our analysis, we note that she had a positive investment in writing (Barré-de Miniac, 2000).

In 2007 (W1), Anaïs referred to a three-year sequence, ongoing at the time of the interview, during which she often thought of her former boyfriend Derek. They had been together for two years, and Anaïs hoped that they could rekindle their relationship. She mentioned that before being in a relationship with Derek, she read a lot and wrote poems. Their breakup played as a driver that revived her interest in reading. She considered



reading as a hobby that allowed her not to feel alone. She particularly enjoyed Stephen King's books. She also listened to heavy metal music and liked to pay attention to the song lyrics. She was writing a lot, as it helped her to unwind and she would often add eerie and dark drawings alongside her writing.

In 2008 (W2), Anaïs was in a relationship with a new boyfriend, Loic. He had cheated on her, but she was ready to forgive him. She was still reading Stephen King's books as well as Agatha Christie's crime novels and the Harry Potter book series. In addition, Anaïs reported taking notes in order to remember the tasks that she had to do as part of her new job on a farm. Anaïs continued to draw, an activity that she had been doing since childhood and that her father had inspired.

In 2009 (W3), she broke up with Loic because he had emptied her bank account. Anaïs regretted sharing her bank details with him, especially as she knew that he was taking drugs. She said that she would never be fooled again. Following those events, Anaïs started drawing, which she had stopped for a period at Loic's request. She was not reading and writing a lot at the time of this third interview, but rather enjoyed doing outdoor activities such as walking and fishing.

With her new partner, Yannick, she used e-mail and needed to talk to him about the fact that he had shared some of her messages with friends, which made her uneasy. She explained that Yannick's behaviour was due to his age (he was younger than Anaïs) and that he had not understood the scope of such actions. It seems possible that Anaïs was going through a turning point in the evolution of her relationship with literacy, linked, in particular, to the development of social media and digital technologies (i.e. evolutionary driver). A certain tension (i.e. dialectical driver) is also apparent because Anaïs was not able to share her personal literacy practices with Loic and Yannick.

In 2010 (W4), Anaïs explained that she had had an argument with Yannick regarding his flirtatious conversations with other women on MSN (messaging website). This eventually led to their breakup. Digital literacies are yet again embodying betrayal and allowed Yannick 'to play behind my [Anaïs] back'. Following these events, Anaïs isolated herself. She did not consult her social media accounts, did not look at her inbox, and did not engage in any form of personal writing. Talking about this period, Anaïs said 'It's as if I didn't exist anymore, basically. I stayed at home, and then I gave no news. It was fine just like that'. She was later diagnosed with depression and received professional support. Anaïs did not have the impetus to read or write about her condition; she preferred to talk about it. She noticed that she had neglected some of her hobbies over that challenging sequence. Anaïs said: 'I'm beginning to find myself back as I was before; going outside, drawing, reading, playing music, you know, going back to my hobbies that I used to love, finally'. She started playing the guitar and bought the book 'Guitar for Dummies'. She also read books about drawing techniques. She was also interested in a book called 'Necronomicon', a book alluded to in heavy metal culture, she explained:

They call it "the book of the dead". It's like black magic rituals, [...] but I don't really think that it works, these things. It's based on the satanic bible. [...] I find it a little weird [...] I read it just for fun, to see what's in there. Because so many people told me about it or in horror films, you know, you hear about it. (W4)

For the first time, she talked about social interactions around her reading practices. It can thus be suggested that Anaïs was experiencing yet another turning point in the evolution of her relationship with literacy. She did not feel lonely anymore, due to her reading practices, but she also had friends and acquaintances with whom she shared a common interest in gothic literature. On this matter, Anaïs said:

It brings me a lot of new knowledge. It brings me ideas for my drawings and black metal song lyrics as well. [...] “Necronomicon” - it really helps me. You know, there are many sentences, you know, names of devils that you can use, or things like that. Otherwise, the other things are more for my personal knowledge, because sometimes I like to argue with other people. But when you don’t know a lot... and then I argued about facts, religions, and [...] that's when I searched for information. (W4)

Anaïs also liked to learn about different cultures, ways of thinking, and religions. She had also developed an interest in historical events such as the Second World War. One of her friends seemed to play an important role in this new turn: ‘Bob, he knows a lot about history and things like that. If I have a question about something in a book, I know that he's going to know about it.’ The end of Anaïs’s sequence of depression had an impact on her relationship with literacy. From reading and writing to unwind and vent her frustrations, she then started to engage in literacy practices that allowed her to broaden her knowledge and engage in discussions with other people. She found in Bob a kind of mentor that she did not have in secondary school. As mentioned above, Anaïs wanted to enrol in a distance-learning programme at the adult education centre. She maintained that project over the course of the study and mentioned it during three interviews. This suggests that her relationship with literacy did not act as an impediment, on the contrary, Anaïs did not feel intimidated by the reading and writing involved in achieving that aim.

### *The Evolution of Zachary’s Relationship with Literacy*

Each time the research team met Zachary, he mentioned various literacy artefacts. Using Barré-de Miniac’s terminology (2000), it is possible to interpret Zachary’s investment in writing as positive.

In 2007 (W1), the significant event that Zachary decided to discuss in the interview was the death of his mother. In relation to this event, he referred to a document that a medical doctor had given him after confirming the death of his mother. Zachary described the document as follows: ‘The doctor gave me a small book. I read it after her death. What’s mourning? The feelings of hatred, denial and all that. Afterwards, I’ve experienced these changes.’

Zachary reported writing on a daily basis; a practice that he started as a child following the advice of a teacher. He explained: ‘We could see bruises on my body; my father was beating me up. Then, I was told: “Write, it’ll take your hatred away”, [...] it liberates me a little.’ One day, Zachary would like to write a book about his life story. Yet, he said that ‘I’ll do it when I know how to write properly [...] I write the way I hear the words’. Zachary quickly adopted MSN messaging, but by the time of the interview, he did not have access to the Internet and did not use this mode of communication anymore. Zachary liked all things medieval such as Merlin the wizard. He was also reading a book called ‘Faust’ (no author mentioned) that he had bought for CAN\$2 at a flea market. He did not like it: ‘There’s no passion in there. There’s no suspense there.’ Conversely, he had read a book about a criminal motorcycle club and found it very interesting.

In W2, Zachary entered a new sequence that involved quitting drugs and cutting down on alcohol. He also started a relationship with a young woman named Sophie who he quickly moved in with. Sophie was pregnant for a few months and this led Zachary to reconnect with his father. After Sophie’s miscarriage, Zachary’s relationship with his father soured again. With a few friends, Zachary created an amateur hip-hop band in which he was the lead singer and wrote song lyrics: ‘I have one [song] about my grandmother. I have one about my mother, and another about my father. [About] my life

in general. I have one about love. I have another about my girlfriend. That's it so far.' He said that he had stopped writing after his mother's death, but Sophie encouraged him to get back to it and she also supported him with his hip-hop band project. Sophie wrote poems and they were often exchanging small notes as part of their daily life together. Zachary did not own a computer and always wrote with a pencil. In W2, he did not mention any writing practices related to his return to formal education.

In 2009 (W3), while attending a vocational training course that also included subjects such as French, English and mathematics, Zachary said that he had to read and write more regularly. He referred, in particular, to the handouts given to him by teachers. Zachary acknowledged that this course required sustained effort, but that he had adequate support to succeed:

there are some [students] who are not coming in every morning, but they are very clever, they are good, and there are others like me who are here every morning, but I find it challenging, I'm struggling, but that's it, they [the teachers] teach you, whatever your problem might be, they try to solve it. (W3)

He continued to write in order to 'empty my head'. Over that period, he still wrote song lyrics and felt that it helped him to improve his French. Between W2 and W3, Zachary experienced a turning point with regard to music that was reflected in a change of music style and of song lyrics. As mentioned earlier, initially he was singing and writing hip-hop songs (W2), but now was involved in folk and pop rock. He noticed here a link with his father, with whom his relationship had improved in W3, who also sang country music songs. He sang songs to his fellow classmates; they enjoyed it and acknowledged Zachary's talent. He experienced a boost in his self-confidence that seemed directly related to the empathetic support of those around him. This sympathy seemed new to Zachary and was still felt as something relatively fragile, especially given his persistent learning difficulties.

In W3, Zachary's literacy practices overlapped two domains of life: leisure and school. In the leisure domain, Zachary recognised himself as a talented writer and was recognised as such by people around him (e.g. Sophie and his friends). This confidence helped him to persevere in school, a domain where he did not feel self-assured because of his learning difficulties. There was an apparent tension between his personal literacy practices and those practised at school, and this could be interpreted as a form of dialectic driver that Zachary used to his advantage. Starting a vocational training course was a major turning point for him, that he shared with Sophie as she also returned to school at that time. Zachary looked to the future in a different manner; he was proud and he felt supported.

### *The temporal dimension of young people's relationship with literacy*

In this section we return to the main elements of the Process Analysis framework (i.e. contexts, ingredients, sequences, drivers, and turning points) (Pérocheau & Correia, 2010) to further our analysis of Anaïs's and Zachary's relationship with literacy.

Both Anaïs's and Zachary's contexts were deeply marked by precarity that affected their different domains of life. The insecurity affecting their housing, health, employment, access to education, and social relationships is illustrative of the lived contexts of other young people in the study. Despite the fact that they did not have a secondary school diploma and had learning difficulties, Anaïs and Zachary both had rich and diversified literacy practices. They both had a positive investment in writing (Barré-de Miniac, 2000), meaning that they engaged willingly and positively with some literacies. Anaïs

and Zachary had disrupted educational journeys, but the idea of ‘irreversibility’ present in Compton-Lilly’s study (2013) does not seem to apply to their cases. This might be due to the fact that access to social services and adult education is comparatively easier in Québec than it is in the USA, England, or France.

The last time the research team met with both participants, they had just exited difficult sequences (e.g. Anaïs’s struggles with depression and Zachary’s drugs use) and were both in a better place in their lives to learn in formal or informal contexts. Timing seemed important, for instance, Zachary’s second attempt at returning to formal education in a vocational training course had happened at the ‘right time’ in his life (Barton et al., 2007).

The most influential ingredients in the evolving relationship with literacy for both participants were the other people initiating or present during literacy practices. For example, Bob had a positive influence on Anaïs’ literacy practices by supporting her while she was reading about new topics. Zachary had many positive interactions with others around and about his literacy practices. It seems that these two young people did not let themselves be defined as ‘struggling readers’ or writers (Compton-Lilly, 2013), and positively engaged with literacy practices in their personal lives. In contrary to the participants in Simpson and Cieslik’s (2007) study, Anaïs and Zachary did not seem to be dependent on their social network to deal with literacies in their everyday lives.

The most common drivers were dialectic in nature, meaning that tensions between ingredients triggered turning points. Zachary’s sharing of personal writing practices (i.e. song lyrics) with classmates while also experiencing difficulties in that same educational context could be the beginning of a dialectic driver. However, our analysis does not allow us to see any major turning point in Zachary’s relationship with literacy yet. His song writing practices have developed his self-confidence and he seemed motivated to engage with school literacy practices as part of a vocational training programme, something that had previously seemed unreachable in general education.

We can see that even if Anaïs and Zachary had some similar literacy practices, their dispositions, gendered socialisation and other personal characteristics, are all peculiar factors that shaped their relationship with literacy over time. For instance, Zachary had a positive investment in writing and used literacies to ‘pull himself out’ of whatever bothered him, or to express his overwhelming anger or happiness. Anaïs also had a positive investment in writing but she used literacies to be with others, at first with fictional characters, and then with actual people in W4.

## Discussion and conclusion

Our results suggest that adults with low levels of literacy competencies do not necessarily have a difficult or negative relationship with literacy. By focusing on the relationship with literacy and its evolution over time, we are able to put emphasis on these adults’ positive investment in a number of literacy practices and not be limited to school practices alone. The results also indicate that the evolution of the relationship with literacy can be a slow process, especially if a person has had negative educational experiences that might have left important emotional scars. Over the years and across contexts (e.g. informal to formal education settings), possible reconciliations with certain types of literacies and improvement of competencies can take place (Desmarais, 2006).

These findings reinforce the importance for educators to learn about and to draw on learners’ lives and existing literacy practices (Appleby & Barton, 2008). Our findings support the idea that different domains of life, or ‘careers’ (Barton et al., 2007), are

interrelated in the evolution of the relationship with literacy. It is possible to observe tensions, movements and overlaps between literacy practices across domains. Practitioners in the field of adult education could draw on the concept of relationship with literacy and its four dimensions (cognitive, affective, social/relational, and temporal) to recognise everyday literacy practices and adjust their activities that involve more formal literacy practices in educational contexts.

In its advice on maintaining and improving literacy competencies across the adult population in Québec, the *Conseil supérieur de l'éducation* (CSE, 2013), an advisory body to the Minister of Education and Higher Education, suggests looking at adult literacy from two viewpoints. The first is to work with PIAAC data to improve literacy skills in formal settings, and the second is to pay more attention to the relationship with literacy of adults with lower levels of literacy skills and to provide them with more opportunities to read and write in dynamic literate environments. This second recommendation offers an alternative to the current and dominant policies in OECD countries that focus on PIAAC results, skills and employability.

In the Québec context, the *Direction de l'éducation des adultes et de l'action communautaire*, the branch of the Education Ministry dedicated to adult and community education, is interested in the implementation of literate environments that would involve different stakeholders in a community (adult education centres, public libraries, community-based organisations, etc.). Those dynamic literate environments could allow adults, especially those without a secondary school diploma, to maintain or reinvigorate their literacy practices so that they can meet the challenges posed by societies' ever-evolving landscapes of literacies (Bélisle, Roy, & Mottais, 2019). Our results confirm that young people without a diploma engage in diverse literacy practices in their everyday lives, but these practices are often not included in political agenda about literacy (ibid.).

The cases of Anaïs and Zachary are also of interest for researchers as they show the plurality and variations in people's literacy practices and their evolution over time. Based on our findings, we argue that it would be difficult to represent such evolution using a linear visual representation as it includes a succession and overlapping of elements: contexts, ingredients, sequences, drivers, and turning points. Our analysis shows the relevance of exploring the temporal dimension of the relationship with literacy. We also notice that even if the participants' contexts shared some similarities (e.g. precarity and academic difficulties) they intertwined various elements in unique manners (Mercier and Oiry, 2010). We found that Process Analysis allowed us to explore the complexity of relationship with literacy in more depth. Although studies using retrospective methods are relevant and generally more affordable than longitudinal research, they rely on participants' memory and current concerns at the time of the interview that often play a role in shaping their narrative. Meeting participants once a year as part of a longitudinal study also involves retrospective work that would pose the same type of challenges. However, because of the recurring nature of the biographical and processual methods used as part of a longitudinal study, participants can become familiar with some of the research tools (e.g. social network inventory) and they allow researchers to identify recurrences over time. Yet, everyday literacy practices are often micro practices that can remain invisible to the participants. This is why ethnographic research is so valuable in looking at literacies from a sociocultural point of view. We would therefore encourage the introduction of some ethnographic methods in longitudinal and biographical studies to look at relationship with literacy.

To conclude, the transition to adulthood is a key period in a young person's life and it can be marked by precarity and challenging sequences for those who do not have a diploma. Looking at the relationship with literacy in periods of transition can shed light

on the network of support, the resources available, the emotional dimensions related to literacy practices; components that can all make a difference in a successful (or unsuccessful) return to education or fulfilment of other personal and professional goals in a young people's life.

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