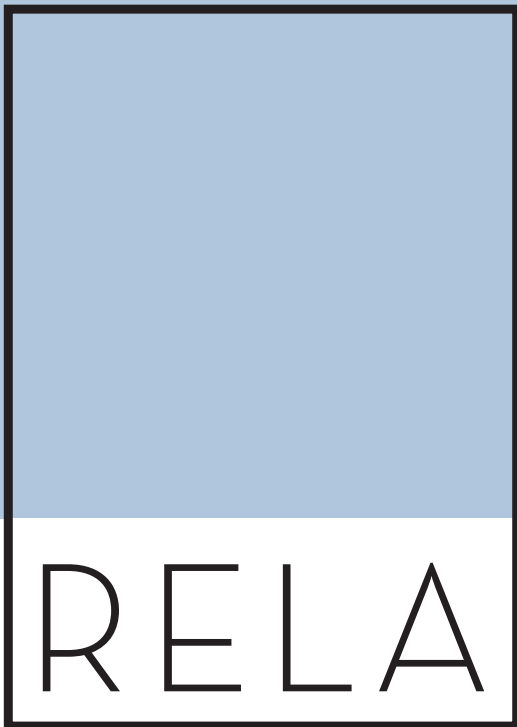# CRITICAL INFORMATION LITERACY: ADULT LEARNING AND COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES

RELA

RELA

European Journal for Research
on the Education and Learning of Adults

Volume 11, No. 1, February 2020

European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults – RELA

VOLUME 11   NUMBER 1   FEBRUARY 2020

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Editorial: The changing landscapes of literacy and adult education

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Literacy, numeracy and language learning has always had a central place in adult education theory and practice. Over the various historical moments and contexts, its meaning, uses and importance have been changing considerably. It is difficult, therefore, to build a consistent and complete road map to literacy and adult education that takes into account every trend, theoretical approach and practical experience. However, it is important to consider the importance of Paulo Freire's work that started in the early 1960s in Northeast Brazil (Freire, 1965). His work calls attention to educational-political processes as being central for adults to regain their voices as citizens in the fight against oppression (Freire, 1997). It seems that in a number of societies and particularly during the 60s and the 70s, literacy was key to social change and a matter of social justice. Literacies, therefore, provide us with a lens for understanding the world.

Literacies are without question inter-connected with a number of structural conditions and inequalities, including social class, gender, ethnicity and especially with lack of power so these issues are frequently analysed within literacies studies and its connections to social inclusion and exclusion. For example, women globally have been a key group who have been oppressed in relation to literacy, numeracy and language learning. Because literacies are complex, nations try to tackle it using a wide range of approaches or methods, precisely because of its basic importance, not only for citizens, but also for social, cultural and economic national systems. Literacies can be an integrating issue in public policies and a way of increasing social inclusion. Literacy studies, once strong in community adult education, have branched out to include new forms of literacies such as language literacy (with migrants), health literacy, digital literacy and workplace literacy.

There have also been, in the last decades, various understandings of adult literacies. For example, functional approaches focus on the citizens' uses of literacy and numeracy in every day-life activities. For some time such approaches seemed innovative and were linked, in many countries, with systems of recognition of prior learning. Other ways of

conceptualizing literacies are derived from critical and social literacy practices approaches that seek to locate learning in the context of wider structures of inequality. Fundamental to these approaches is the need for literacy practitioners to distance themselves from the framing of literacy learning simply as an individual difficulty that derives from some current, or past, personal problem or circumstance. This is because viewing literacy, numeracy and language learning as a process of individuals acquiring skills, and adult literacies teaching as responding to individual need, can reinforce a deficit model of the learner and a remedial view of adult literacy provision (see Tett, Hamilton & Crowther, 2012). New research and practice has also shown that it is more appropriate to talk about literacies as plural, rather than singular. This approach, known as the New Literacy Studies (as in Barton 2007; Street & Lefstein, 2008), has been at the forefront in undermining the discourse of deficit because it grounds literacies in real peoples' lives and starts from the local, everyday experience of literacy in particular communities of practice. This means that there are different literacy practices in different domains of social life, such as education, religion, workplaces, families, community activities. These change over time and different literacies are supported and shaped by the institutions and social relationships that people are part of and do not transfer easily across contexts. The new literacy studies dispenses with the idea that there is a single literacy that can be unproblematically taken for granted, rather we have to think in pluralistic terms about the variety of literacies that are used in different contexts in order to make literacies practices meaningful to people.

Social, economic, political and cultural changes in society have also been determining the emergence of different perspectives on literacies. Society's evolution, scientific and technological progresses, the increase of opportunities in education and a mass higher education system in many national contexts, for example, create new areas of human knowledge and implicate a reassessment of the very meanings of literacy. However, as Camilla Addey (2018) points out, there is the danger of a single story being told about literacy and numeracy as a result of international standardised tests such as the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), or the Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP), a household assessment that measure literacy skills in developing countries. These assessments tell a particular story of literacy as numbers (see Hamilton et al, 2015) that can lead to narrow educational policies and incomplete learning practices.

These changing dynamics imply that there are many ways of conceptualising literacies so, in this RELA thematic issue, we direct attention to today's landscapes of literacy and adult education. We ask what are the major trends in the field today? Are there new theoretical and practical approaches that deserve a closer look from the research community? Are "old" theories and practices still being used or becoming visible again, both in research and in public discourses? What is the relationship between lifelong learning and studies of literacy, numeracy or language learning?

This issue comprises eight articles from Austria, Canada, Germany, South Africa, Sweden and the UK and they range from small-scale local, in-depth, qualitative studies to large-scale quantitative studies of a whole country. We begin with the most locally focused research, which is entitled 'Relationship with Literacy: a longitudinal perspective on the literacy practices and learning of young people without a diploma'. In it Virginie Thériault and Rachel Bélisle explore the temporal dimension of the relationship with literacy in the lives of two young people without a secondary school diploma. They find that 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.

In 'Adult literacies from the perspective of practitioners and their learners: a case study from the north of England' Gwyneth Allatt's research reveals a wide range of ways in which literacy is understood by practitioners and learners, compared with a much narrower conceptualisation in current policy. She argues that teachers' and learners' perspectives reinforce the notion that literacy is not a fixed concept, but that its meanings and uses vary according to time and context. In contrast, the policy environment that emphasizes employability and economic outcomes, creates challenges for teachers and learners to maintain their own perspectives in relation to what literacy constitutes and what is important in adult literacy education.

Robert Walldén, in his article 'Interconnected literacy practices: exploring classroom work with literature in adult second language education', explores literacy practices in adult intermediate second language instruction, involving two teachers and their diverse student groups over four weeks of work with literature. He found that there was a strong orientation towards meaning making, which was scaffolded by the teachers directing attention to language, style and narrative structure. Thus, different kinds of literacy practices were interconnected. The participant teachers did not prioritise the practices of critical text analysis, but Walldén shows how the students used their diverse experiences and knowledge to read both 'with' and 'against' the grain of the text.

In the fourth article titled 'Critical information literacy: Adult learning and community perspectives' Catherine J. Irving considers the evolution of information literacy as a distinct area of inquiry and instruction in libraries and the development of critical approaches. She argues that such approaches help interrogate how information access and control affect literacy goals and people's democratic right to information. She points out that information literacy that is grounded in social justice goals can be strengthened through the collaboration of librarians with other adult educators, community development practitioners, social service providers and activists.

The next three articles are all focused on changes that have occurred across their respective countries. First, Zamalotshwa Thusi and Anne Harley provide a case study of '"Political literacy" in South Africa' based in Freedom Park, a township outside Johannesburg, drawing on research conducted in 2018. They use 'political literacy', as conceived by Paulo Freire, as a theoretical lens through which to consider non-formal education in the changing context of South Africa. They consider the influence of Freire's thinking in the black consciousness (BC) movement in South Africa during the 1970s and then contrast this with a current BC-aligned non-formal education intervention. They found that, in contrast to the ways in which Freire was used in the BC movement in the anti-apartheid struggle, this 'political class' leaned towards what Freire termed the authoritarian left.

The article that follows, by Irene Cennamo, Monika Kastner and Peter Schlögl focuses on Austria. Entitled 'Signposts of change in the landscape of adult basic education in Austria: a telling case' it traces the current shift to politically motivated interventions in adult basic education. Their methodologically triangulated case study unveils a unique spirit of empowerment and emancipation amongst practitioners but finds that this spirit is at risk because of a strong tendency towards impact orientation in terms of employability and upskilling. Policies favour: standardisation; technocracy over expertise; narrowing the curriculum; teaching superseding facilitating; and are against research and development. In order to preserve the tradition of empowerment within adult basic education, the authors emphasise the importance of raising the informed and critical voices of practitioners.

Maren Elfert and Jude Walker's focus is on Canada and their article, entitled 'The Rise and Fall of Adult Literacy: Policy Lessons from Canada', explores adult literacy infrastructure in two phases from the 1970s up until the launch of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) in 1994; and subsequently the story of IALS and changes occurring up until around 2005. They draw on theories of policy formation, and recent and previous research, including interviews with key stakeholders, to argue that mainstreaming literacy has failed and explore the reasons for this failure. They conclude that only a robust infrastructure can survive the vicissitudes of governments and bureaucracies. It is also needed to avoid the constant reinventing of the wheel in educational policy-making that can be avoided when literacy is mainstreamed.

The final article in this thematic issue is 'Low literacy in Germany: Results from the second German literacy survey' by Anke Grotlüschen, Klaus Buddeberg, Gregor Dutz, Lisanne Heilmann and Christopher Stammer. These authors briefly discuss the state of literacy research in large-scale surveys and offer some critical viewpoints. Next, they present the results of the two LEO surveys from 2010 and 2018 and identify that the 2018 survey reports on the literacy *practices* of low-literate adults in order to show if adults compensate for their low-literacy by performing non-written practices more often. The authors provide information about the composition of the low-literate adult population in Germany (aged 18–64 years) and show that written practices can be partly substituted by oral practices or can be managed with assistance. However, they point out that, because digital practices and the use of complex computer interfaces will become more and more important, this partial exclusion is problematic. Overall the survey results show that whilst reading and writing are crucial health literacy, financial literacy and so forth need to be embedded into these practices and this has implications for current stereotypes about adults who have low-literacy.

All these articles make visible the changing policy context with its emphasis on standardisation and the narrowing of the curriculum away from emancipation and towards functional skills. However, they have also shown that practitioners have resisted this conceptualisation and instead have emphasised the importance of developing criticality in citizens in the fight against oppression. So to some extent 'old' theories and practices are becoming visible again through the examination of political literacy but new theories are also being developed such as the temporal dimension of literacy, information literacy, theories of policy formation. These articles also go against the trend of telling a single story about literacy, numeracy and language learning by presenting a diversity of practices and contexts that show the variety of literacies that are meaningful to people. For the future, the research presented here shows the importance for education providers and policy makers of retaining robust infrastructures for both literacies and lifelong learning as well as their potentials for developing holistic learning practices.

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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—Anaïs (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' 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.

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 remerged 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 (Filhon, 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
Contexts	Contextual information and conditions in different domains of life.
Ingredients	Artefacts, people, institutions or organisations, literacy practices, past experiences, and present and future projects.
Sequences	Periods during which there is a change in ingredients.
Drivers	Elements that initiate change in ingredients.
Turning points	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: 2nd year of secondary school in mathematics, and 4th 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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Adult literacies from the perspective of practitioners and their learners: a case study from the north of England

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Abstract

This article is based on qualitative research with adult literacy practitioners and learners in the north of England. I draw on interview and focus group data to identify their perspectives on adult literacies and compare these with the understandings of literacy on which current policy-making for adult literacy in England is based. The research revealed a wide range of ways in which literacy is understood in practice, compared with a much narrower conceptualisation in current policy. The article concludes that teachers' and learners' perspectives on adult literacies reinforce the notion that literacy is not a fixed concept, but that its meanings and uses vary according to time and context. It argues, however, that a policy environment based on an understanding of literacy which emphasizes employability and economic outcomes creates challenges for teachers and learners to maintain their own perspectives in relation to what literacy constitutes and what is important in adult literacy education.

Keywords: Adult literacy; literacies; policy; practice

Introduction

It has been suggested that the variety of ways in which literacy is understood has been a major focus in recent literature on adult literacy (Duckworth & Ade-Ojo, 2016) and indeed, the comment that 'Definitions of what it means to be literate are always shifting' (Crowther, Hamilton & Tett, 2001, p.1) is supported by the many theories and viewpoints that have been expressed. Research in the field has included a series of analyses of the ways in which literacy is understood in education policy and by various international surveys on adult literacy. However, far less consideration has been given to the views of literacy teachers and adult literacy learners about what literacy is and what it means to be literate. With this in mind, and drawing on research with adult literacy practitioners and

some of their learners in the north of England, this article explores teachers' and learners' perspectives on literacy. It compares these understandings of literacy with those on which current policy-making for adult literacy in England is based and highlights tensions between some of the ways in which literacy is conceptualised. The article concludes that teachers' and learners' perceptions in relation to adult literacies reinforce the notion that literacy is not a fixed concept, but that its meanings and uses vary according to time and context. It argues, however, that a policy environment based on an understanding of literacy which emphasizes employability and economic outcomes creates challenges for teachers and learners to maintain their own perspectives in relation to what literacy constitutes and what is important in adult literacy education.

Background

A review of previous research in the field reveals a range of ways in which literacy is conceptualised and how these understandings have changed over time. These varied viewpoints include the perception of literacy as a universal set of decontextualized technical skills with a focus on the reading or writing of paper-based, formal texts (Bartlett, 2008; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; St. Clair, 2012). This is contrasted in the literature with 'sociocultural' perspectives on literacy (Perry, 2012, p. 50) which include the social practice understanding of literacy as a collection of practices that vary according to social context, rather than existing as one 'single phenomenon'(Post, 2016, p. 756). Among these sociocultural perspectives on literacy is the theory of 'multiple literacies' which, although sharing much common ground with the social practice viewpoint differs through its emphasis on 'multimodality' and the notion of what constitutes 'text'. Such a perspective has been linked with digital literacies; Cope and Kalantzis (2009), for instance, argue that developments in electronic communication, such as texting and email have resulted in the emergence of new literacies. 'Critical literacy' meanwhile, places greater emphasis on issues of power and agency and the way literacy can be used for empowerment (Perry, 2012). The comment that 'Literacy in the real world has become much more than making sense of written words on a page' (Parr & Campbell, 2012, p. 562) reflects the breadth of these perspectives on literacy.

The view of literacy as a set of fixed skills, described as an 'autonomous' model of literacy by Street (1995) and sometimes presented as a 'traditional' approach to understanding literacy (Duckworth & Ade-Ojo, 2016) has been thoroughly critiqued, being criticised particularly for leading to a 'deficit' view of literacy, which sees it as something lacking in illiterate people. The argument is made that approaches to literacy learning which are based on the acquisition of skills reinforce this 'deficit' model (Crowther & Tett, 2011). It is also suggested that much policy making in the UK is based on such understandings of literacy, and that large-scale international surveys such as the OECD's International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) in the 1990s and its more recent Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) also have their basis in such a model (Bartlett, 2008; Boudard & Jones, 2003; Edwards, Ivanic & Manion, 2009; Oughton, 2018). Further criticism has been levied against policy perceptions of literacy which understand it in terms of its ability to bring about economic success and global competitiveness (Tett, 2014). This is echoed in debates about the notion of 'functional literacy'. Burgess and Hamilton for instance, describe how the concept shifts from referring to literacy in real contexts, enabling people to have 'a fuller and more creative life' with 'access to their own culture' (2011, p. 3) to become associated with employability and the benefits of literacy to the economy. They identify the negative

implications of this for literacy education and for policy making, arguing that this narrow perspective on literacy creates a 'marked impoverishment of the discourse' underpinning adult literacy education (ibid., p. 13). Hamilton and Pitt (2011) suggest that 'functional' literacy is aligned with a 'human resource' model in which literacy is understood as 'a commodity to be exchanged in the global market place' (Hamilton, 2012, p. 170). This discourse of functionalism in relation to literacy has also been linked to a neoliberal agenda as a result of the way it links literacy with employability and economic issues (Allatt & Tett, 2019; Duckworth & Brzeski, 2015; Hamilton & Pitt, 2011).

Researchers in adult literacies have called for policy and practice in adult literacy education to move away from a narrow skills-based perception of literacy which links literacy development primarily to economic prosperity and employability issues, advocating sociocultural perspectives instead (including Black & Yasukawa, 2011). Reder (2009, p. 47) for example, argues for a social practice perspective to be used in both policy and practice for adult education along with the replacement of measures of literacy proficiency with 'literacy practice measures' which recognise the social contexts in which literacy is used. Within the context of these debates my own study considers the views of adult literacies practitioners and learners with regard to the meanings and purposes of literacy, and compares their perspectives to those on which current policy is based.

The policy context for adult literacy education in England

The ways in which literacy has been defined and understood within previous adult literacy policies in England, such as the 'Skills for Life' initiative launched in 2001 (Hamilton & Hillier, 2006) and the Functional Skills qualifications which replaced it in 2012 (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010) have been the focus of a series of analyses (Burgess & Hamilton, 2011; Hamilton, 2012; Taylor, 2008). In these policy analyses a 'traditional' view of literacy emphasizing reading and writing within formal, paper-based texts has been identified. Literacy is defined by standards and rules and is understood primarily as a collection of cognitive and technical skills that a learner needs to acquire. Little consideration is given to the social context in which literacy is used and therefore policy approaches to literacy are often aligned to an autonomous model (Street, 1995). Through dominant discourses relating to employability, economic prosperity and vocational issues, literacy is seen as a means to individual and national prosperity by enabling people to gain and maintain employment and to contribute to national economic success and competitiveness; a 'human capital model of literacy according to Hamilton (2012) which is also linked to a neoliberal policy agenda 'that equates literacy with employment and earnings' (Hamilton & Pitt, 2011, p. 600).

Studies of adult literacy policy in other countries, including Australia, Canada and New Zealand, have revealed similar perspectives on literacy to those identified in English policy. Discourses of 'crisis', and the media's role in promoting this, deficit and the linking of literacy to national and individual economic prospects are recurring themes. Walker and Rubenson (2014), for instance, in their study of the influence of the media in Canada on public perceptions of literacy describe how it is presented as a 'national crisis' (ibid., p. 144) and how low levels of literacy are personified as an 'enemy' to be defeated as well as an issue of 'national shame' (ibid., p. 158). There are echoes here of the discourse surrounding the introduction of the Skills for Life strategy in England, which was introduced with grim statistics about levels of illiteracy in the country and the implications of this for the national economy (Hamilton & Pitt, 2011). The strategy was

publicised in a high profile media campaign that used 'gremlins', that is, cartoon characters that 'taunted the less literate into adult education', as a metaphorical representation of literacy difficulties (Kendall & McGrath, 2014, p. 59). In Australia, Black and Yasukawa (2011) report a similar discourse of crisis around adult literacy and numeracy in which the media played a significant role. They show how dominant discourses around literacy advocate literacy education which will lead to benefits to the economy and increased productivity on a national level and better employment prospects for the individual. Similar concerns emerge from literacy and language policy analysis in New Zealand, where Hunter identifies deficit discourses and a focus on the needs of employers and the labour market, alongside an assessment strategy which measures literacy as 'a range of de-contextualised skills' (2012, p. 306). However, her study also highlights the difference between policy perceptions and those forming the basis of practice, in that the employers in her workplace are more concerned with the use of language and literacy in the context of the workplace, that is, as the 'social practices of the workplace' (ibid.); In contrast, Scottish policy for adult literacy education is recognised for its social practice perception of literacy, although the extent to which this is put into practice in adult literacies education has been questioned (Ackland, 2013). Differences between policy perceptions of literacy and those of practitioners enacting policy are among the issues considered later in this paper.

Returning to England, the Skills for Life initiative, though seen by some as the most significant piece of policy-making in adult literacy education (Ade-Ojo & Duckworth, 2017) came to an end in 2012, to be replaced by a suite of 'Functional Skills' qualifications. Since then there has been little significant policy-making for adult literacy provision in the country. Adult literacy receives some mention in a number of policy documents aimed at the post-16 sector more generally, rather than being the subject of policy-making in its own right. Current policy appears to be focused more on younger people leaving school without minimum grades in English and mathematics (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015) than on provision for older learners. At present, however, funding for free tuition continues for some adults, with a focus on provision intended for certain groups of learners, such as the unemployed, 18 to 21 year olds, the homeless and people in prison (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2014). Requirements of funding mean that in many cases adult literacy programmes must lead to accreditation (such as learners achieving qualifications such as Functional Skills, for instance). Other learners are job-seekers, mandated by the Job Centres, who are required to attend classes and improve their employability skills in order to receive financial benefits (Job Seekers Allowance). Failure to attend classes can result in benefits being withheld, a practice often referred to as 'sanctions'(GOV.UK) and training providers receive 'payment by results' according successful achievement of 'job outcomes', that is, learners finding and maintaining work (Carter & Whitworth, 2017, p. 806). Teachers' views on the implications of both these situations for the breadth of the curriculum they can offer and their autonomy with regard to what they can teach are addressed later in this paper.

Where policy exists for adult literacy education in England, it presents similar understandings of literacy to those identified in the earlier Skills for Life and Functional Skills documents. Analysis of current policy documents, for instance, reveals a view of literacy as a set of skills in reading and writing that are essential for a person's work and every-day life that can be measured in levels and stages and are suggestive of a traditional and autonomous approach to literacy (Street, 1995). No consideration is given to creative writing, reading for pleasure or learning for its own sake. Repeated references to 'good' literacy (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2014, p. 4) imply that some

aspects or forms of literacy are viewed by policy-makers as being better than others, while discourses relating to the economy, functionality and employability are identifiable through the use of financial and economic terminology, including *returns, drivers, market, investment, earnings, performance, sustainability, outcomes,* and even *Net Present Value* in policy documents. (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2014, p. 2). In addition, repetition of terms such as *work, employment* and *employers* strengthens the employability discourse (ibid., p. 4.) while discussion of *skills, operating, personal efficacy, measurement* and *levels* (ibid., p. 2) further emphasizes the discourse of functionalism. Although there is also some acknowledgement that literacy may relate to wider issues, such as an individual's self-confidence, social mobility and health, the focus on functionalism and employability is dominant in current as well as previous policy for adult literacy education in England.

Methodology

This article draws on research undertaken with adult literacy practitioners and learners between 2014 and 2016 in West and South Yorkshire, two counties in the north of England. Seventeen teachers of adult literacy were interviewed by telephone about their views on literacy and literacy education and additional face-to-face interviews were later held with four of these teachers to explore their perceptions in greater depth. The practitioners interviewed worked in a range of educational settings, including further education colleges, local education authority provision and private training providers. Although they were all teachers, they described their roles somewhat differently, and their job titles included 'curriculum leader', 'curriculum manager', 'Functional Skills teacher' and 'English tutor'. They ranged in experience from being relative newcomers, having taught in adult literacy for less than one year at the time of the interviews, to a number of practitioners who had been working in the field for twenty years. The interview sample also featured a trainee teacher undertaking a teaching practice placement in a college. Most of the interview participants were female, with only two male practitioners amongst the interviewees and their ages varied from the early 20s to the 56 to 65 age group. The majority of participants were aged between 45 and 55. Their highest qualifications ranged from first degree to doctorate, with some having additional specialist qualifications for teachers of adult literacy.

Two focus groups were also held with two of the teachers and some of their learners, the first of which took place in a private training organization operating from a village community centre. Members of this group were developing their literacy through creative writing, in a class they attended for personal reasons (enjoyment, social, personal challenge, for instance). They were not working towards a qualification. There were four learners present, initially, although two chose to leave shortly after the discussion began. The second focus group was held in a local education authority adult learning centre in inner city location where the learners were studying on a Functional Skills English course. This group included four members, two of whom were ESOL learners. Two of the learners had joined the class in order to gain qualifications to allow them to progress onto other courses of study. One member of the group was re-training after a long period of time working in one industry and another was there mainly to improve her English language. The groups' teachers were present in each and contributed a little to the discussions, although the opinions given were mostly those of the learners.

The sample of participants for the interviews and focus groups was small and by no means an attempt to generalise. However, I believe that the research provides a valuable

insight into practitioners' and learners' understandings of literacy. Details of participants are provided in Tables 1 and 2. All have been given pseudonyms.

Table 1: Interview participants

Pseudonym	Organisation type	Length of experience	Full-time, part-time or voluntary	Age group	Face-to-face
Carol	FE (further education) college	12 years	Part-time	36-45	
Catherine	FE college	6 months	Voluntary	56-65	
Clare	Training provider (LEA)	4 years	Full-time	26-35	
Debbie	FE college	5 years	Full-time	45-55	✓
Donna	Adult education college	11 years	Part-time	36-45	
Faye	Training provider	9 months	Part-time	45-55	
Felicity	Adult education college	8 years	Full-time	45-55	
Heather	FE college	9 years	Full-time	36-45	
Jane	Training provider	2 years	Part-time	45-55	
Joe	Training provider (LEA)	4 years	Full-time	21-25	
John	Training provider	12 years	Full-time	36-45	
Lucy	FE college	20 years	Full-time	56-65	
Mary	Training provider	12 years	Full-time	45-55	✓
Moira	Further education college	12 years	Full-time	45-55	
Pauline	Training provider (LEA)	20 years	Full-time	45-55	✓
Sarah	Private training provider	5 years	Part-time	56-65	✓
Sonia	Training provider	1 year	Part-time	45-55	

Table 2: Focus group participants

Group	Pseudonym	Learner or teacher	Age group	English as first language
1	Julie	Learner	45-55	Yes
1	Jess	Learner	26-35	Yes
1	Sarah	Tutor	56-65	Yes
2	Martin	Learner	45-55	Yes
2	Zara	Learner	26-35	No
2	Eli	Learner	21-25	Yes
2	Daniel	Learner	21-25	No
2	Mary	Tutor	45-55	Yes

Group 1 = private training provider; Group 2 = Local Education Authority (LEA) training provider

Teachers' perspectives on adult literacies

In the interviews teachers were asked about their views on what constituted literacy, why adults needed to be literate and what they thought a literate adult should be able to do. I also asked them about the policies governing literacy provision in their organisations and gave them the opportunity to add any additional comments they wished to make. Their responses provided insight into their perceptions of what literacy is and what they felt the purposes of adult literacy education to be. Some of their responses reflected an 'autonomous' understanding of literacy (Street, 1995) in their focus on 'skills' and in the way they described literacy according to 'levels'. For instance:

> I think adults should have a minimum level 1 because that will enable them to put things like basic letters together and fill in the necessary forms for everyday life. (Clare)

> They should be able to write at level 2 and to be able to read at level 2. (Moira)

Meanwhile, Joe's comments suggested he too viewed literacy as a skill to be learned in a series of stages:

> There's different levels to being literate, technically you need to be able to write at a basic level … to be able to pick up a pen and write words… when you're able to use sentences, use punctuation, use grammar, but to have some idea of the meaning and the background behind the text, that comes in at a higher level.

When asked what they thought literate adults should be able to do, practitioners included writing, reading, speaking and listening. Although they all mentioned reading, this carried differences in meaning, with some interview participants referring to 'basic' reading such as 'reading timetables or instructions' (Jane). As John put it:

> Being able to read simple straightforward texts is one of the minimal skills I think a literate adult should have.

However, most participants understood reading as more than a basic ability, feeling that being literate involved the ability to read more deeply and critically. According to Heather:

> I think they should be able not just to read for information but be able to pick up on inference.

Felicity's comments echoed this view:

> It's … being able to read between the lines, what's maybe an underlying message. Is someone trying to persuade you about something in their advertising? Being able to be critical I suppose. Knowing exactly what something is saying maybe not just in the written words but what's implied as well.

Reading for pleasure also featured in some practitioners' responses. Sarah, for instance, described how one of her learners discovered this:

> She thought she wasn't a reader and she'd got an idea of what a reader was from school … but then she discovered she could just read for fun, for her own pleasure. That it wasn't for anyone else's benefit … it opened up a whole new world for her really.

Teachers' views on reading for pleasure were mixed however, with Mary feeling that it was a 'luxury because of the time involved', echoing perhaps the views of a participant in Kendall and McGrath's study of further education teachers' perceptions of reading for whom it was 'solitary, private and individualised activity' needing space from 'the distractions of work or family' (2014, p. 67).

Interview participants also had differing views about writing, although all identified it as an aspect of being literate. Some responses gave neat, legible handwriting with correct spelling and grammar as being the most important features of writing (Debbie). For these participants then, literacy's purpose was largely functional, and this was particularly apparent in the discussion of the writing of formal letters and Curriculum Vitae along with the completion of forms. They did not all share this viewpoint, however. Sarah, for example, who was keen to promote self-expression and creativity in her literacy classes, said it was about more than 'just filling in a form'; a view shared by Felicity: 'It's about enjoyment as well … a means of self-expression.'

The range of different understandings of literacy held by participants extended further when some explained that being literate also meant being numerate. As Lucy put it: So much of effective literacy requires numeracy as well and, similarly, Pauline felt that:

> Literate is not just having a good command of English and communication. It's also about being literate in things like your maths and ICT (Pauline).

A recurring theme in relation to literacy was communication, and for Pauline this meant:

> The speaking and listening skills to be able to talk to a variety of people … it's about social skills and being able to understand what is appropriate when communicating with people.

For most of the practitioners interviewed, literacy's communicative function also included digital communication. The use of computers, the Internet, emailing and texting were recurring features amongst their responses. According to Stordy (2015, p. 456) 'Digital literacies have transformed what it means to be literate and to experience literacy' and this comment is reflected in many of the responses given by the teachers interviewed. Sarah's opinion that, 'Literacy also now includes being able to use IT and digital technology' was typical of the views expressed, as was Pauline's comment that; 'Nearly everything now is done online and that is a really important part of being literate.' Mary also acknowledged that:

> Things change … like technology. That's a completely different kind of literacy, like Facebook and texting.

There was still some preference for traditional media, however. Debbie, speaking more about her personal preferences, for instance, acknowledged that:

> I still like to touch and feel a book. I don't get the same enjoyment from reading something off a screen.

Literacy was also linked to benefits to the individual such as autonomy, independence and empowerment without which, according to Carol, a person would be 'disadvantaged … in dealing with authorities'. An adult's self-confidence was another recurring theme, as were issues to do with social participation and inclusion. For Lucy, being literate was about getting 'the most out of life and participation in society' while Catherine felt that an adult who was not literate 'could well lead an isolated life.' Notions of equity featured

in the responses too, identified by Mary and Jane as the ability to participate and to have the same choices and opportunities as other people. Improving children's life chances was also mentioned by a number of the teachers interviewed, including Pauline:

> It helps benefit the next generation because … if parents are literate then their children have got more chance of being helped at home and moving on in life as well.

Alongside reading, writing and other specific aspects of literacy, 'functioning' on an everyday basis featured regularly in participants' responses. This involved a range of contexts for which adults needed literacy, including the home and family, health care, work place and job-hunting, travel and transport. For some participants this was about 'managing', for others it went a little further to 'being in control of one's life' (Carol) or 'being able to run their own affairs' (Debbie). Some teachers interviewed linked the functional aspects of literacy firmly to an adult's ability to find and maintain employment, the writing of CVS and letters of application along with the completion of forms being mentioned on a number of occasions. John's view, for instance, was that:

> It's to improve employment prospects really … That's one of the main reasons for being literate.

However, practitioners' views on the relationship between literacy and employability varied considerably. Sarah, for example, said that:

> I don't think it's just about work actually. A lot of people come here because they have to … pressure from the Job Centre ... but for some people in the class their reasons for coming are very different. I think it's more about being amongst people who are in a similar position to them socially, as well as being literate and about gaining confidence generally …

Some questioned perceptions of literacy that focused predominantly on employability, believing literacy to be about more than this:

> It's not just about the skills and abilities an adult should have … should people be trained up just to do the jobs they do? (Donna)

In some cases, the employability and vocational focus of the national and institutional policy environments within which practitioners were working (deleted for anonymity) had caused them some frustration and the feeling that it led to a restricted or impoverished curriculum which focused on preparing learners for employment and achieving qualifications. This left little capacity for reading and writing for pleasure or for the benefits of learning purely for its own sake. Jane, for instance, explained how this meant that her organisation did not have 'much room … for people who just come along because they want to learn a bit.' Pauline shared her frustration, adding that in her place of work they had at one time been able to provide courses which helped learners to 'grow in their confidence and in themselves' without the requirement to achieve a qualification, but that now 'all our learners have to achieve a formal exam.' The resulting need to 'teach to the exam' (Debbie) as it was perceived by some of the practitioners, was a further source of frustration and viewed as detrimental to the breadth of the adult literacy curriculum. Felicity felt particularly strongly about this:

> It's not just about passing an exam …I feel we're in danger of losing the love of literature, the love of writing … we are having to just drill it in.

Carol's opinion was that adult literacy policy which was concerned primarily with employment and qualifications was affecting the overall character of literacy education, causing it to be far more driven by the syllabus and shaped much less by the specific interests of learners. In her view, this had resulted in the subject being 'vocationalised'. For some teachers, the frustration they experienced when faced with the 'pressures of achievement' (Mary), end examinations and employability concerns led them to find ways of working which meant that they could maintain their own and also their learners' values in relation to what is important in adult literacy, while still working within the required policy and funding frameworks. Felicity, for example, described how, despite the pressures of time and examinations, she endeavoured to include some study of literature and creative writing in her adult literacy classes so that they were not based purely on employability and preparation for examinations. Other teachers explained how they encouraged their learners to become involved in non-work based activities outside the classroom that allowed them to make use of their literacy learning. Sarah, especially, was keen to celebrate learners' achievements in these contexts, recalling, for instance, how one member of her literacy class had developed so much self-confidence, both as a reader and inter-personally, as a result of attending literacy classes that she had started volunteering as a 'Reading Friend' at her local school, supporting and encouraging pupils' reading. Another member of Sarah's class had published some of her creative writing in the local press.

During the interviews with practitioners, data had been collected regarding their ages, highest qualifications, length of time in practice, type of educational organisation in which they worked and whether they worked full-time, part-time or in a voluntary capacity. These data were gathered in case they were of significance during the analysis process. Most of these participant characteristics did not appear to influenced their views on literacy, however, bearing in mind that the sample was not of a sufficient size to present a definitive argument about this. One observation however (although not a generalisation due to the small sample size) is that there is a link between institution type and practitioners' perceptions regarding the influence of policy on the adult literacy curriculum. As explained earlier in the paper, participants were drawn from a range of organisations, including colleges of further education, an adult education college, private training organisations, local education authority provision and an educational charity. Those from the further education colleges and local education authority training providers described the most restrictions on their practice and they expressed greater concerns about the target-driven nature of policy and its emphasis on the achievement of qualifications, along with what they see as the resulting loss of focus on the needs of individual learners. In the case of some of the practitioners from training providers, their learners were job seekers for whom the payment of Job Seekers Allowance depended on their attending classes. These practitioners subsequently faced the additional challenge of the detrimental impact of government policy for job seekers on learner motivation in the classroom. The teachers from the adult education college and the educational charity, meanwhile, described greater flexibility regarding the content of their classes.

Learners' perspectives

Focus group discussions with two groups of adult literacy learners provided the opportunity to explore with them their perspectives on literacy and literacy education. With both groups I started the discussion by asking the learners what 'literacy' meant to them and then allowed the conversation to develop. To an extent, the learners' perceptions

reflected those of their teachers in that there was some acknowledgement of the role of literacy in everyday functioning, though only very limited mention of employability. Only one learner (Daniel) linked his literacy learning to an improvement in his job prospects, though others acknowledged the benefits of their literacy development in allowing them to, as Martin put it, 'get on' in life. As with the teachers interviewed, literacy seemed to have a range of different meanings and purposes to the learners in the focus groups. The benefits for their children were one aspect of being literate mentioned by some of the learners. Zara, for example, felt that, 'It's very important because I have kids at school, to help them with their homework'.

When the discussion moved on to what a literate adult should be able to do, most of the learners mentioned writing in some form. For some, it involved the physical activity of writing, including the 'joined-up writing' with which Eli seemed particularly concerned:

> Eli: I can't write joined up writing.
>
> Gwyneth: And do you think that's important?
>
> Eli: Oh yeah.

This was also important to Martin who felt his use of only capital letters in his writing and 'no joined up writing or anything like that' was an issue. Some of the learners evidently associated being literate with vocabulary and spelling and this was of concern to Martin, in particular, who in the past had needed to find alternative ways of expressing his ideas:

> Instead of using the word I'd like to use, like big words, by abbreviating everything. It makes the same sense but doesn't look professional.

'Big words' clearly carried greater value for him, as did the need for his writing to look 'professional'. It was interesting, however, that he did not recognise that there was anything skilful about his ability to find different approaches within his writing. His views, along with Eli's focus on 'joined up' writing, suggest the influence of an autonomous view of literacy perhaps lingering from the learners' schooling, where the focus is on literacy as a set of rules and skills. Although none of the learners mentioned punctuation, for Julie, literacy did mean 'reading, writing, grammar and things'. She went on to describe her creative writing though, and how important this was to her. She had begun writing creatively for her own pleasure initially, inspired by dreams and by books she had read. However, she explained how she enjoyed sharing her writing with her friends and classmates and also that some of her stories had recently been published locally. 'I just like it when people like them.' Literacy was evidently not solely an individual activity for Julie, but also a social pursuit.

Communication in general was a recurring feature of the focus group discussions, and the ability to express oneself came in to this, while listening was also an aspect of literacy for some learners:

> Jess: We need to be able to listen as well as put our own discussion forward.
>
> Julie: Other people's opinions matter as well, to listen to what they're saying and what they think.

As with the teachers interviewed, there was some acknowledgement of a link between literacy and maths in one of the focus groups. Martin mentioned 'trouble with mathematics' when outlining what literacy meant to him and Zara also made this link, adding that without literacy:

> How are you going to do the maths? If we don't understand what we are reading, then we are not going to resolve the problem.

Meanwhile, everyone in the focus groups identified a link between literacy and digital technologies. Jess made a typical comment, for instance, I think they're probably on a par, aren't they, computers and literacy.' That the learners were increasing their confidence in digital environments was apparent in both groups. Some of the learners said that they had never used a computer until they began to attend literacy classes, but explained how they were now able to type and format a range of documents and also carry out research using the Internet. Others described how they could now post contributions to blogs and participate in social media. Texting was also discussed and all members of the group agreed that these activities counted as literacy even though they used a digital format rather than being print-based. In one group, however, the benefits of reading electronic against paper-based texts were debated at length and, as like the teachers, some learners still valued the latter. As Julie put it: 'You can't beat a book.'

The development of confidence through literacy was a further theme in the focus group discussions. Jess felt particularly strongly about this, describing how participating in adult literacy classes had led to her finding her 'voice'. It had given her 'confidence to speak' and made her feel 'empowered'. She explained how this confidence had allowed her to play a more active role in her community by volunteering as a 'Reading Friend' at her child's school, supporting the pupils in their reading.

Discussion

A comparison of practitioners' and learners' perspectives suggests some common ground between them regarding the nature and purposes of literacy and of literacy education. They shared similar views, for example, about the centrality to literacy of writing and reading and communication in general, including speaking and social interaction. In some teachers' and learners' responses there is perhaps a suggestion of an 'autonomous' view of literacy in the identification of measurable skills in reading, writing and there may also be an understanding of literacy as 'schooled' (Street & Street, 1995) as seen in Martin and Eli's comments about 'joined-up writing' for instance.

A shared understanding is also apparent in teachers' and learners' perceptions of the functional aspects of literacy. Some of the teachers, for example, linked literacy with functioning on a day-to-day basis, in contexts such as the home, the work place, public transport and health care. While in learners' responses this was more implied rather than explicit (there were no specific references to actions such as reading timetables or letters from their children's schools, shopping and so on in their response, for instance) there was an overall sense of literacy allowing them to 'get on' in life. Some participants also linked literacy to employability, though this was given far less consideration by the learners than the teachers.

However, most interview and focus group participants shared a broader understanding of what constitutes literacy. The use of digital technologies as a fundamental aspect, for example, was recognised by teachers and learners alike and there was also some agreement about the link between literacy and numeracy. Regarding wider

aspects of literacy and the benefits of being literate, practitioners' perceptions included a variety of issues, such as social participation, empowerment, independence, personal confidence, the development of identity and benefits to family life and children's life chances. Although learners' views were perhaps less wide-ranging than those of their teachers, they also mentioned the benefits to their families and communities, improved self-confidence, greater independence and more social participation. Additionally, some teachers and learners related creativity to literacy, alongside reading and writing purely for pleasure. The learners' varying reasons for developing their literacy reflect the findings of a study of a social practice approach to numeracy in the USA which recognises that adult learners' motivations may go beyond the 'functional' to include personal satisfaction and fulfilment (Oughton, 2018). There are also similarities with earlier work in England which identified enjoyment, personal satisfaction, engagement and helping their children amongst learners' motivations for studying numeracy (Swain, 2005).

Overall, there were more shared perceptions of literacy than differences of opinion amongst teachers' and learner's responses. Generally, the traditional 'autonomous' approach to literacy identified by Street (1995) though suggested by some participants' responses, featured far less than a broad understanding of literacy which encompasses, not only skills, employability and functioning in everyday life, but also literacy's role in self-development, social participation and recreation. Some participants were keen to preserve those elements of literacy they saw as more traditional, relating to paper-based texts and handwriting, for instance, but all still accepted the importance of digital literacy to an extent. Although there was some talk of employability and functioning in every-day life, discourses of employability, economic success and functionalism, along with 'autonomous' approaches to literacy feature far more prominently in policy than they do in practitioners' and learners' understandings of literacy. For most of the research participants, literacy was about much more than the skills needed to 'operate' in daily life and work (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010).

Conclusion

This article contributes to the field of adult literacies by considering the perspectives of teachers and learners, which have been under represented in recent times. Although based on a relatively small sample of participants, and therefore, not an attempt to generalise, the data discussed here illustrate the variety of ways in which literacy is understood in practice, ranging from the ability to read and write in a 'basic' way, to creative writing, reading for pleasure and communicating with others in social or digital contexts. Although there are some subtle differences in perceptions held by learners and practitioners, on the whole, there is a shared understanding that literacy is about more than the human capital and employability model on which, it is argued, recent policy-making is based (Duckworth & Ade-Ojo, 2017; Hamilton, 2012; Hamilton & Pitt, 2011). Learners' and teachers' perspectives on literacy and literacy education reinforce the notion that literacy is not a fixed concept, rather that it has differing meanings, purposes and benefits according to context. However, the implications of an economic and employment based understanding of literacy as identified in recent policy are seen in practitioners' frustration at the constraining effects on their practice which result from the demands of employability-focused curricula, examinations and the need for learners to achieve qualifications. The challenge for adult literacies practitioners, then, is to continue to deliver a curriculum which accommodates learners who wish to develop their literacy

for reasons other than work and day-to-day 'functioning' within a policy context concerned with employability and economic outcomes.

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Interconnected literacy practices: exploring classroom work with literature in adult second language education

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Abstract

Previously, there has been little research conducted on how teachers and adult second language learners negotiate the challenge of reading authentic novels in the target language. This qualitative classroom study explores literacy practices in adult intermediate second language instruction, involving two teachers and their diverse student groups over four weeks of work with literature. The material has been generated during weekly book discussions, through observations, voice recordings and the collection of texts and other teaching materials. The result shows a strong orientation towards meaning-making, which was scaffolded by the teachers directing attention to language, style and narrative structure. Thus, different kinds of literacy practices were interconnected. Although practices of critical text analysis were not prioritised by the participant teachers, it is shown how the students used their diverse experiences and knowledge to read both 'with' and 'against' the grain of the text. Implications for teaching and steering documents are discussed.

Keywords: Adult education, critical literacy, second language instruction, reader-response, teaching literature

Introduction

In this article, I explore classroom work with literature which involves two teachers and their students within adult second language education. Previous research has shown the potential for language development in reading literature (Krashen, 1985, 2013; Mason, 2013; Yousefi & Biria, 2018), how literature can play a part in transforming the perspective of adult learners (Mezirow, 1996; Janks, 2010; Jarvis, 2012; King, 2000; see also Hoggan, 2016; Taylor & Cranton, 2013) and in in reclaiming radical perspectives on learning and citizenship (Gouthro & Holloway, 2013). There are also studies on the reading of literature in contexts where adults study language and literature out of interest

(Carroli, 2011; Saal & Dowell, 2014). However, there is little research on how literacy practices are shaped in diverse groups of migrants primarily studying the second language out of necessity and who have little previous experience of reading novels in the target language.

While issues of emancipation and critical literacy have often been foregrounded in research on adult education (discussed in Ackland, 2014; Galloway, 2015), a broader perspective of literacy practices is used in the present study. I will explore how two novels are used, analysed, criticised and made meaningful in municipal adult education, through teacher-supported and teacher-directed interaction.

In an article based on the same material (Walldén, 2019), I highlight how one of the participating teachers, Anita, used language-focused discussions to direct attention to characteristics of the protagonist of novel. In the present article, I draw upon a larger part of the material, exploring two classroom works with literature in their entirety.

The purpose of the study is to explore literacy practices during classroom work with literature in intermediate adult second language education. The following questions are asked: What range of literacy practices can be seen during the classroom work? How can the relationship between these practices be understood? And what priorities in instruction and learning do the literacy practices reflect?

Exploring literacy practices

The analytical framework employed in this study is based on Freebody and Luke's families of literacy practices (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke & Freebody, 1999), enabling the study of a wide range of literacy practices where reading is seen as a social and situated activity rather than a generic skill (e.g. Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Canning, 2013; Gee, 1990; Street, 1984, 1995). The more specific categories of *meaning-making*, *text use*, *text analysis* and *code breaking* have, inspired by literacy and reader-response theories, been formulated in dialogue with the material generated during this study (see Table 1 and below).

Table 1: Literacy practices (reworked from Luke & Freebody, 1999)

Meaning-making practices: understanding the text	Text user practices: using the text for different goals and purposes
• Understanding words, expressions and figurative language in the text as well as reconstructing the plot • Understanding the novel on a more abstract level: themes motifs, symbols etc. • Describing, evaluating, judging and relating to the characters • Making connections to personal experience, prior knowledge and other texts	• Using the book to get information, for example about language, culture and society • Using the book in a way which is highly valued in the educational context

Text analyst practices: objectifying the text	Code breaker practices
• Expressing personal opinions about the text • Analysing and evaluating the text as a literary piece of art and craftmanship • Examining and criticising representations of people and cultures	• Decoding the technology of written language: reading direction, the relationship between letters and sounds, the alphabet etc. • Decoding conventions for presenting texts, such as orthography and visual organisation

Freebody and Luke view these as non-sequential practices which rely upon each other (Luke & Freebody, 1999). Therefore, the relationship between these practices will be explored. This is something which has not been sufficiently attended to in other models outlining different 'stances' to texts (cf. Langer, 1995/2017; Lee, 2013; Leland, Ociepka, & Kuonen, 2012).

The practices of *meaning-making* are a broad family, comprising reconstructing the plot as well as describing, evaluating and relating to the characters. Jarvis (2012) has discussed how lifelike qualities of fiction can transform adult learners' perspectives by invoking empathy. Meaning-making also involves making connections to the adult learners' prior knowledge and experiences (e.g. Mezirow, 1991, 1996). A potential meaning-making category which was not prioritised in the studied classroom works is understanding the novels on a more abstract or symbolic level, with attention to features such as themes and motifs (e.g. Lee, 2013). Practices of *text use* involve using the text for purposes outside the text, for example, learning about language or culture. These can be seen as instances of *efferent* reading, using the texts as containers of information rather than for enjoyment or other aesthetic purposes (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 24). Such reductive use of literature is often criticised from a second language perspective (e.g. Carroli, 2011, p. 9-13). However. Freebody and Luke (1990) have also highlighted how texts are used to achieve institutional goals. The adult second language learners are not merely facing a language barrier; they also need to learn how literature is studied and talked about in the cultural context of Swedish adult municipal education. Therefore, the kind of text use prioritised by the teachers will be discussed.

As for *text analysis*, Freebody and Luke have stressed the sociopolitical dimension of literacy: how representations in texts could be shaped by power relations (e.g. Freire, 1974; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Gee, 1990; Janks, 2010; Leland et al., 2012; Street, 1984). In multicultural and heterogenous groups of adult students, such as those participating in the present study, it is reasonable to assume that the students have knowledge, experiences and values which may position them to read either with or against the 'grain of the text' (Janks, 2010, p. 185; Jarvis, 2012, p. 496-497). In addition, text analysis can involve objectifying the text, by directing attention to aspects such as language and narrative structure, or by giving personal opinions on the novel (e.g. Langer, 1995/2017, p. 41-42; Lee, 2013, p. 144-145). From a second language perspective, Carroli (2011, p. 24-25) has emphasised the potential for connecting grammatical features to literary style. Finally, *code breaker* practices concern understanding and making use of the technology of written language such as orthography and the visual organisation of text.

Literacy practices in the course syllabus and the national curriculum

While text analytical practices are often advocated in research on literacy education, particularly in relation to adult learners, this perspective is not foregrounded in the syllabus of Swedish as a Second Language in basic adult education (Skolverket, 2017). It closely resembles the syllabus for compulsory schooling, which has been noted as lacking a critical sociopolitical perspective on literacy (Liberg, Wiksten Folkeryd & af Geijerstam, 2012). Regarding fiction, it is stated that teaching based on literature should be directed towards the 'message, linguistic features and typical structure' and 'how literary texts can be structured by introduction, course of events and conclusion' (Skolverket, 2017, my translations). There are also many wordings in the syllabus relating to linguistic skills which literature could be used to promote, such as vocabulary, morphology and syntax. In the assessment criteria, 'comprehension' is foregrounded, relating mostly to meaning-making practices. Overall, critical stances do not seem to be required. However, in the national curriculum, there are goals conducive to the advancement of critical reflection and transformational learning (cf. Mezirow, 2003) such as promoting the possibilities for 'democratic participation' and fostering the ability to 'critically evaluate and judge what she or he sees, hears or reads' (Skolverket, 2012, my translations). Given the absence of similar wordings in the syllabus, combined with the lack of dedicated training for teachers in adult municipal education (discussed in Fejes, 2019), critical capabilities are less likely to be prioritised in teaching.

Method and material

This section describes the participants, material, methods and ethical considerations of the study.

Participants and background information

The study involves two teachers and their respective groups of second language learners. The relevant course is Swedish as a second language in basic municipal adult education (see Skolverket, n.d., 2017). As the course is normally a progression from initial Swedish Tuition for Immigrants, the linguistic level will be referred to as intermediate. Generally, the course is studied to qualify for more advanced courses required for university studies conducted in Swedish.

For ethical reasons (see further below), no specific information was collected about the students' backgrounds and previous reading experiences. However, it can generally be stated that the student groups are heterogenous in terms of home country, first language, age, educational background and proficiency in the target language. According to the teachers, their experiences of reading literature in any language vary widely. Most of them are female. The two teachers participating in the study, Anita and Eva, have worked as teachers for close to 30 and 15 years respectively, almost exclusively within municipal adult education. Anita has a teaching degree for upper secondary school, for the teaching of Swedish and history, while Eva has a degree for teaching Swedish, English and social studies in primary school. As adult learning is sidelined in Swedish teacher training (discussed in Fejes, 2019), the teachers have mainly developed their teaching of adults through experience. However, both have completed additional education for teaching Swedish as a second language. Teaching this subject to adult learners has been their focus during the last decade.

Generation of material, ethical considerations and analysis

The material of this study was generated over two months through observations, voice recordings (50 hours) and collected teaching materials. The work with literature in both classes lasted for about four weeks, and the data was mostly collected during weekly discussions where parts of the novels were followed up. The recommendations of the Swedish Research Council (2017) have been observed. Consequently, I carefully described the nature and purpose of the research—making appropriate allowances for the students' expected level of proficiency in Swedish—before collecting written consent from both the teachers and the students. The names of the students and the teachers used in the article are pseudonyms.

The voice recordings were transcribed (around 200 A4 pages) and coded according to the analytical framework previously described. This entailed reading the transcripts through, giving attention to the specified practices of meaning-making, text use, text analysis and code breaking, while referencing the texts the communication was based upon. The interactions were translated from Swedish to English, with Swedish expressions, words or morphemes in italics when deemed necessary. Some characteristics of learner language have been preserved, such as omitted words and other issues of syntax. In the transcripts, 'T' denotes the teacher and 'S' the student (if they are not named). Also, parentheses denote unsure transcriptions while '(x)' replaces words impossible to decode from the recordings. Finally, capital letters are used for metacomments.

Novels and activities during the classroom work

Below follows a brief description of the novels used in the classroom work (see Table 2). The Swedish titles are in brackets.

Table 2: Novels used in classroom work

	Anita's classroom work	**Eva's classroom work**
Novel	*Soft in the Head* [*Eftermiddagarna med Margueritte*] by Marie-Sabine Roger. Original French title: *La tête en friche*.	*The Braid* [*Flätan*] by Laetitia Colombani. Original French title: *La tresse*.
Brief plot description	The barely literate protagonist and narrator, Germain, meets and befriends the elderly and retired academic Margueritte. She inspires and supports him to learn to read, while he reflects on his troubled upbringing and how he relates to his friends and his girlfriend.	Three female protagonists in different parts of the world struggle against different problems. Smita, a Dalit woman in India, wants a better life for her daughter. Giulia, a young woman in Italy, notices that the family business is on the brink of bankruptcy. Sarah, a career-climbing lawyer in Canada, is diagnosed with cancer. A connection between them is shown.
Features of the narrative	First person narration, disjointed chronology, plot is less clear	Third person narration, free indirect style, driven by a clear plot

Given the intermediate level of the course, and the fact that literature is not generally focused on the basic level Swedish Tuition for Immigrants (see Skolverket, 2019), it can be assumed to be a challenge for them to read an authentic novel in the target language.

As evident from Table 2, Anita worked with *Soft in the Head* while Eva worked with *The Braid*. Both are French novels, translated to Swedish. Features of the narratives relevant for the coming analyses are highlighted. Though the plot seems quite clear in *The Braid* (Colombani, 2017), as the three characters must face turns of fortune in dramatic sequences of events, the plot is less obvious in the chronologically disjointed and more sedate *Soft in the Head* (Roger, 2013). However, there is a similarity in how the stories are narrated: when first person, or free indirect style third person, narration is used, the perspective of the writer and the perspective of the characters tend to collapse (e.g. Lodge, 2011, p. 43-44). While this study focuses on classroom work with two novels, the teachers also use other texts, both fictional and non-fictional, when teaching the course.

During the book discussions, the teacher Anita emphasised the feel-good nature of *Soft in the Head*, while her colleague Eva suggested that the stories in *The Braid* could promote discussion. Both teachers also pointed out the novels' value for both language development and a pleasurable reading experience. The analyses in the present study will be oriented towards interaction qualities rather than qualities which can be attributed to the novels themselves.

Results

In this section, I explore the range of literacy practices during the classroom work with the novels and how these practices relate to each other.

Using the novels

The analysis will start by investigating instances of text user practice, where the text is used for learning about language, culture or society.

Learning about language

Learning about language is a prominent focus in the classroom work led by Anita. Aside from devoting weekly time for the discussion of a part of *Soft in the Head*, ample time is also reserved for communication about words and expressions in the book. In one recurring activity, the teacher hands out pieces of paper with different words and expressions which the students, seated in groups, are asked to explain. Previously, the same words and expressions had been handed out in a document serving as 'reading support', which also included questions about the text and its characters. The orientation towards using the text for learning about language is clearest when the meanings of the words and expressions are not discussed in the context of the book. One such example is the word *snor*, which has a range of homonymic meanings. One student maintains that it means 'pinch', while another says *snora*, which means 'having a runny nose', while laughing. Further, the teacher adds that it may mean 'wrapping' or 'twine'. The focus in such an instance is clearly on the meaning of words in a more general sense than on meanings in the text.

However, in many cases during this classroom work, the meanings of words and expressions are indeed connected to the text, as in the short excerpts below.

T: Occur, how can we explain that word?
S: Happen. /.../
T: And this is a Margueritte-word, isn't it? It's a Margueritte-word. It's a formal verb.
[…]
T: And here we have Germain and we have learnt by now that he talks very informally and uses a lot of colloquial language. And 'to <u>kip down</u>' is a colloquial expression for 'to sleep'. He wants to know where she lives and where she sleeps.

The teacher points to the stylistic value of words used by the characters in the book through the connection of informal language to the protagonist, Germain, and formal language to the retired academic/researcher he befriends. The unlikely friendship between these characters is at the core of the story, and later analyses will show that the attention to questions of language also contributes to a practice of meaning-making.

Activities designed primarily to bring attention to the words and expressions in the book are more rarely observed during the classroom work led by Eva and based on *The Braid*. One exception occurs towards the end of the classroom work, where the students, during a group discussion, are required to come up with three words and expressions they have learnt. As the connections to the text are brief or non-existent, these kinds of interactions can be considered as an orientation towards using the novel to learn about language. In most cases, though, attention to language tends to promote making meaning from the text. It also plays a part in text analytical practices, something will be explored in later sections.

Learning about culture

A clear instance of text user practice occurs when the teacher and the students discuss what can be learnt from the books. Anita's students mainly reported learning about words and expressions as the takeaway from *Soft in the Head*, which was also the case for the students reading *The Braid* with Eva. However, students in the latter group also revealed that they learnt about culture:

> Siham: And Smita just so I think it's so interesting. /…/ I don't know about it and this culture and everything. It is so interesting for me to read about. I didn't even know about Dalits or those five names that ladder. If you are rich then it is good; if you are poor or if you are Dalit you are worth, yes, less than nothing. I didn't know anything about that. It's just from this book.

The excerpt above is from a group discussion arising from a written question about which character the students liked the most. Instead of evaluating the character, the student, Siham, highlights the information given about India, Dalits and the caste hierarchy ('five names that ladder'). In the open-ended whole class discussions about *The Braid* (see coming sections), there are also several instances of the students asking about things which baffle them in Sweden. Two quite lengthy discussions concern the ban on physical punishment of children in Sweden—relating to a sequence in the book when one of the characters, Smita, lashes out against the daughter—and the Swedish use of nation-wide identity numbers, a topic which evolved unexpectedly from a discussion about religion and discrimination. Thus, the students were given considerable power to 'make use' of the book by steering the discussion to topics of interest outside of the text.

Making meaning of the novels

This part focuses on practices relating to making meaning of the novels. It should be stated at the onset that much of the interactions revolved around reconstructing the plot of the books. This was promoted, for example, by the 'reading support' questions handed out by Anita and discussed during the lessons, and by tasks relating to writing summaries and explaining quotes from the book in the classroom work led by Eva. Since the purpose of the study is to explore the range of literacy practices in the classroom works, I have chosen to focus on other meaning-making approaches to the text which often also involved reconstructing a plot.

Understanding language and culture and relating to previous knowledge

The primary focus during Eva's teaching, at least during the first two weekly sessions of classroom work, is on open-ended whole class discussions. The point of departure for these discussions is a laminated bookmark describing ways to engage with the text, many of which can be seen as metacognitive reading strategies (e.g. Jiménez-Taracido, Martinez, & Chauvie, 2019; Reichenberg, 2014). They involve highlighting new and interesting ideas in the book, things needing clarification, and words which the student wants to have explained. It also involves connecting the book to lived experiences and making predictions. Each student is to bring one such example to the group, which gives them considerable freedom in how to contribute. It is quite common for the students to ask for explanations of words, as in the example below.

> Amina: I don't understand what 'tons of' [*tonvis*] means. /…/
> T: We read the whole sentence. Everywhere the ground is dirty. Rivers, bodies of water and fields are polluted with <u>tons</u> of faeces. /…/ One thousand kilos equals one ton, right? And '<u>tons of</u>' [*tonvis*] what could we mean by that? When you add *vis*. Several tons, yes. We don't know exactly <u>how</u> many but <u>many</u> tons we can say. Exactly. <u>Tons</u> of faeces.
> Omar: You get sad when you read about Smita.
> T: You get <u>very</u> sad when you read about Smita. Ugh, you really do. You can almost <u>smell</u> it when you read, can't you?

This interaction involves the general meaning of 'ton' as well as the significance of the suffix *vis*, in this case meaning 'many' or 'several' of the root morpheme. Moreover, the excerpt comprises affect-laden reconstructing of the environment of one of the stories and the strife of the protagonist of the same story. Thus, the attention to words and expressions promotes a meaning-making practice. The teacher asking which page the word appears on, and thereby bringing attention to the literary context of the words, is likely a contributing factor.

Some of the words the students ask about have more to do with understanding the different cultures represented in the book than understanding the Swedish language. For example, the students enquire about the meaning of 'Dalit woman', 'Ashkenazi' and 'cannoli'. Many students seem to be most interested in Smita's story of how she seeks to escape her fate as a Dalit. Some of the students use their own knowledge and experiences in their contributions to these whole class talks. For example, one student explains the meaning of the Indian name Nagarajan: 'snake' and 'king'. The below excerpt is part of a longer discussion, where one of the students', Milad's, knowledge and experiences are recognised as a resource by the teacher for making sense of the caste-system in India.

> S: What does outcaste [*kastlös*] mean?
> Milad: I think they really live outside the system. In India there is in their religion even though it is forbidden for today in the law. But still there are outcaste [*kastlösa*] people. /…/ Dalits they don't work for money they work for food. Only gets food.
> T: Look, you already know lots about this. Much more than I know.
> Milad: But I have lived in Pakistan so.
> T: You have lived in Pakistan. Ok, then you know about this. Well, then we got to benefit from your knowledge.

Later, Milad also chooses to contribute with a 'connection' where he elaborates what he perceives as a caste system in Pakistan, which is also a part of a meaning-making practice. Another student, Samer, relates to descriptions of olive-fields as part of Giulia's story in the book, having worked in similar ones himself. Nadja instead relates to Sarah, the career-oriented lawyer in the story, who wonders if her doctor expects her to '[sell] the children on e-Bay' when he asks her to be 'easier on the gas':

> Nadja: So funny the expressions she uses but at the same time it was sad and realistic. A lot for those who have children and then I had a question how often we ask ourselves how would my life become if I didn't have children. Perhaps, I could do some (career) or maybe I could have extra hobby or maybe I could-
> Samer: Extra money. LAUGHING

The three very different stories in the book, as well as the open-ended nature of the discussions, leave generous room for different experiences, knowledges and kinds of engagements for making meaning of the text and contributing to the discussion.

Negotiating figurative language

The weekly book discussions in Anita's class are organised differently, partly of the students reviewing the 'reading support' and discussing difficult points. As previously noted, this 'reading support' includes words and expressions chosen by the teacher. After these discussions, the teacher regularly asks the students if they need additional help. In the excerpt below, a student is puzzled by a figurative expression.

> Maria: One more expression. To act heavy-handedly [*att gå på ullstrumporna*].
> T: Tell me which page.
> Maria: Page 116
> T: Ok. Here, Germain talks about that he, you know, hasn't been all that well brought up. He hasn't ever had any parents who talks with him and discussed and explained why you should do this or that. And then he says, 'So I always act heavy-handedly.'
> Naima: He means he won't show consideration for other feelings or I don't care.
> T: That he gets a bit clumsy. A bit clumsy. He doesn't really have that finesse. He means well. When Francine is so sad because she has been left, then he tries in a very clumsy way to comfort her.

Germain is the protagonist, and likewise narrator, of the book, and the meanings co-constructed by the teacher and the students serve both to describe and explain the

character. It should be noted that *gå på i ullstrumporna*—literally, 'keep going in wool stockings'—is neither a common expression nor transparent; rather, it is an idiom which may not be readily understood by many native speakers of Swedish. If seen as a piece of information about language, the expression holds little instrumental value. Instead, the orientation towards knowledge about language promotes a practice of meaning-making.

Figurative language is also touched upon in the discussions about *The Braid*. Sometimes the students themselves ask questions about its use, and in other cases it appears in written questions to be discussed in groups. The following is one such example: 'The butterfly in the stomach had transformed into a crab. Why is she feeling like that?' In a whole class follow-up, it is discussed how this wording suggests an important change of fortune in Smita's story. The teacher also uses the concepts of 'simile' and 'metaphor' as metalinguistic terms to explain instances of figurative language, as exemplified below during a whole class follow-up discussion about a character's aversion to water.

> Samer: Yes, he describes it as a churchyard. It means that the water has taken something from him. Maybe he lost a family. It surely means that someone died there.
> T: So, he makes a simile with the water with a churchyard. We could also call it a metaphor, that he paints the picture that the water is like a churchyard, so we understand that someone has <u>died</u>. Maybe someone who had been close to him we don't know.

In all these instances, attention to the figurative language contributes to the reconstruction of parts of the plot or important information about the characters. Thus, the orientation is towards meaning-making rather than the analysis of figurative language as a feature of literary style.

Describing, explaining, judging and relating to characters

The discussions about *Soft in the Head* are heavily oriented towards the two central characters and the language they use. The below excerpt is from a group discussion, where a written question positions the students to talk about 'which character they would like to be'.

> Akram: And I agree with you. I believe he has something sickness or something not good in his personality. Correct? Like he talks about something that sometimes when you sound like a child. Like a child.
> Masoud: Yes, yes.
> Akram: And he is maybe 40 or 45 years old. So sometimes he talks like children /.../
> Naima: Yes, and the words he uses that still seem a bit cool for him, I don't know what, but that way in which he speaks about women too that was really mean. /.../
> Maria: But he speaks about details, but I thought it wasn't bad
> Naima: Oh yes it was, it was a bit not in a nice way somehow.

The students seem perplexed by the protagonist and narrator of the book. Akram confirms that he 'talks like children' and may suffer from 'something sickness', while Naima and Maria do not quite seem to agree on how to judge the character: whether he is 'mean' in the way he talks about women or just a bit too 'detail[ed]'. The comments likely refer to the narrator's casual description of sexual encounters in the text. The orientation towards describing and judging the character as part of a meaning-making practice is clear.

Later, in whole class discussion, the students also raise difficulties they have with the narrator's way of telling the story:

> Maria: I don't know, it is the way he writes as they say. He starts saying
> something and then he loses the thread, and then he jumps again and again.
> So, he tells something, then he jumps again.

Several students voice such frustrations with the narrative style, which appears to make the practice of meaning-making more challenging. The teacher, however, encourages the students to pay attention to how the protagonist/narrator, as well as his language and way of telling the story, changes throughout the book:

> T: I'm not going to spoil what happens in this book, but I can at least say
> that Germain will change a lot during this book. Keep this in mind when you
> talk about how he narrates. Will it change later in the book? Is his language
> going to change?

Unlike Eva, Anita takes a firm position on the text by outlining features worthy of note. This might serve to scaffold the students' ability to make meaning of a book which is not driven by a clear plot. It is also evident that the questions of language in the book are attributed to the protagonist rather than to the author of the book. In a sense, this limits the possibilities for practices of text analysis.

Also during the work with *The Braid*, the interaction is oriented towards judging the characters. One such occurrence is during a whole class discussion when one of the students asks why Sarah, one of the three central female characters in the book, did not tell anyone, not even her daughter, about her chest pains. Jorje answers as follows:

> Jorje: I think Sarah lives in self-denial.
> T: Self-denial yes.
> Jorje: Self-denial all the time. And on the last row about on page 62, the last
> sentence says, 'as long as you don't talk about it, it doesn't exist'.
> T: Right.
> Jorje: It summarises Sarah very well, I think.

These exchanges about the characters are initiated by the students, but the teacher also directs discussions to the characters through written and spoken questions. For example, about halfway through the classroom work, the teacher asks the students how they would describe the characters. One student, Nadja, suggests that Sarah is 'careerist', which the teacher affirms, while other students suggest 'ambitious' and 'industrious'. As in the discussions about *Soft in the Head*, there is not always a consensus on how the characters should be judged. In one instance, the teacher questions one student's opinion that Giulia, the young Italian woman in *The Braid*, should 'cool down' and not 'get carried away by her feelings' towards the mysterious Sikh she meets. Furthermore, there are different opinions regarding Smita's husband's indisposition to her radical plans: Is it a sensible 'realist stance', argued by Veronika in a whole class discussion or did he, as Milad stated in a written reflection, 'hide his courage in the ground'?

The orientation towards explaining and judging characters is also affirmed through both teachers' asking about the characters' development, or their arcs, at the very end of the classroom works. The following excerpt is from a concluding whole class discussion about *Soft in the Head*.

> Akram: It was expressive in the end also. He could express himself expressively.
> T: Yes, he found it easier to express himself. What do you say about a person who finds it easy to express himself? Can you find a good adjective?
> Akram: We only know that word cult, cultured?
> T: Cultured. Yes, that is when you have sort of slightly more intellectual interests. But it might be so, I put a small question mark here, that Germain is an <u>eloquent</u> person. An <u>eloquent</u> person. Who finds it easier to express himself through speech. And about Germain, he has at least become more eloquent by the end of the book than he was when we met him, hasn't he? Because in the beginning of the book, he found it really difficult to put his thoughts and feelings into words. And this has become easier for him by the end.

As previously indicated, Anita more frequently directs the discussions by taking stances on the text. In the above excerpt, she reformulates the student's attempt to judge the character, and elaborates the character development she perceives. However, Eva also concludes with discussions on how the characters develop throughout the story, building on summaries of the characters the students had written earlier during the classroom work. They also build on a final set of written questions where the students are asked, among other things, to compare the three women's 'fighting spirit' in addition to comparing some of the male characters. One of students, Pablo, argues that all of the women are fighting against patriarchal structures:

> Pablo: I think there is a similarity that all of them fight against a patriarchal society. Like Smita fights against the patriarchal society in India where women can't (x x). And Giulia fights the kind of society because she goes against the family when she starts that affair with the man from another culture. And last there is Sarah she fights against this kind of patriarchal system in work.

The literacy practices, which are actively shaped by the teachers, are strongly oriented towards understanding and evaluating the characters. Even if the teachers refrain from introducing concepts for the discussion of meanings in the book on a more abstract level, it is clear that the interactions revolve around what could be described as central themes in the book, such as learning throughout life, unexpected friendships and conflicts between individuals and society.

Analysing the novels

While much of the interaction is oriented towards meaning-making, in the broad understanding of the word taken in the present study, there are also instances when the teachers, or the students, take a more objectifying and critical stance on the novels.

Explaining narrative structure

From the previous section, it is clear that some of the students struggle with the way *Soft in the Head* is narrated. During one of the early book discussions, the teacher brings attention to how it employs disjointed chronology:

T: I think many of the novels you've been working with have had a <u>chronological</u> plot. Do you understand? This direction. /…/ <u>Chronos</u> in Greek mythology, that's the god of time. So chronological it's about time. To start with what happens first. And then we move forwards. Some of you, you remember that we worked with The Emperor of Portugallia. How did it start?
S: When she was born.
T: Klara-Fina was born. Then she was a <u>child</u> and then she was <u>young</u> and then she was a young adult, she left her parents she went to town etc. So, we started back in time and went forwards. /…/ And you start with reading novels like that. They have a pretty simple composition. But now we <u>get</u> to where they <u>disrupt</u> the chronology, where they jump a bit back and forth. Maybe we get some flashbacks. We start a little bit now in this part of the course. Then more will come in the next part and it's about practicing reading more challenging texts.

The teacher draws an arrow facing right on the whiteboard, representing 'chronological plot', and she erases sections of this arrow as she explains the notion of 'disrupted chronology' in texts. Thus, she introduces a metalanguage for analysing plot structure, while also drawing upon prior classroom work with literature to clarify the concepts. As some of the students initially seem frustrated by the narrator jumping from one thing to another, the teacher's explanation, and orientation towards text analysis, may aid the students in approaching the text's puzzling, disrupted chronology.

Narrative structure is also addressed in the interaction during the work with *The Braid*. One of the students, Samer, expresses that he noted lots of 'predictions' because he wanted to skip sections to know what happen next in Smita's story:

Samer: And I used lots of P [predictions] after every section I wanted to know more /…/ When for example /…/ [the] writer talks [about Smita] just one section and then Giulia starts. But this I want to know what will happen. I was thinking to go directly to Smita. LAUGHING /.../
T: Terrific to hear that you are curious and want to know what happens. Because that's also what the writers want: for us to get curious. It becomes like cliffhangers; you call it that in English. /…/ Do we have a good word for that in Swedish? I don't think we do; we use that word in Swedish. That is, the author intentionally stops telling when it is most exciting. So that you sort of, just like in our series they finish the same way, don't they, so we want to go on to the next episode and see what happens.

The teacher is delighted by Samer's interest in the story. She takes the opportunity to introduce the metalinguistic term of 'cliffhanger' to describe the narrative, with a reference to how television dramas are typically structured. There are several instances when *The Braid* is compared to films; for example, during a group discussion one of the written questions is if there is any particular 'scene' which the students remember. Also, during a concluding whole class discussion, one student makes the argument that it would work well as a movie. The teacher then also draws attention to the fact that the author is a screenwriter, a piece of information found on in the paratext on the back cover. Such interactions serve to objectify the text, indicating a practice of text analysis.

Criticising representations

During an early whole class discussion, one of the students points to the French writer's nationality, and how she chooses to represent the different cultures in the novel:

> Naser: I didn't read everything, but I have one thing here. Because Laetitia she is French woman.
> T: You mean the author Laetitia.
> Naser: Yes, I think [that] her perspective on India poor and women they don't have rights and many things. This comes [as the] first thing in the story all the time. But there is another side /.../ We talk about the people there. Think that they are poor, they don't have life, they just, yes, all the time. There are also feelings, there are also more sides. /.../ But there is no happiness [in the story].

While the student struggles to formulate abstract thoughts, it is apparent that he perceives a one-sided representation of India in the book. On a similar note, although in a much earlier discussion, one student argued that Italy is represented in a 'clichéd' way in Giulia's story. These are examples of students using previous experiences and knowledge to resist representations by the author, thus reading 'against the grain' (Janks, 2010). Another of the students, however, defends the author's choices by pointing out how the three different stories and characters contribute to the overall plot:

> Nadja: She has this woman with this story to compare them with the others. So also not everyone in Canada is like Sarah. Not everyone in Italy is like Giulia. But she chose that one, that one, that one just to compare them because there's a big difference so we can see that difference.

The teacher also defends the book with reference to narrative structure: that stories must build on struggle and 'conflicts which needs to be solved'. But she also encourages criticising the text, including how the author may represent different people and cultures in ways which are 'a bit stereotyped and clichéd'. However, she rarely actively positions the students to take such a stance. Thus, this orientation towards text analysis is mainly initiated by the students.

Expressing opinions about the book

Towards the end of the classroom work, the students are expected to express their thoughts about the novel through written and spoken questions. Below, a group of students are discussing what they thought about the end of *The Braid*.

> Lin: I thought the ending of the book was fun. (Finally) all the women could solve their problems themselves. /.../ They have [been] brave. They fought hard as they could. Maybe they want to think that I can solve all problems. I think that is good and gives me many-
> Jorje: Strength.
> Lin: Yes, strength.

Lin appears to find the ending, where the female protagonists have solved their respective problems, satisfying and empowering. Jorje, however, later more critically asserts that the ending felt 'a bit simple' and 'like a story for small children'.

Anita, in a whole class discussion, also asks the students about their reading experience after finishing the book. The discussions mostly revolved around how the

protagonist, and his language, changed throughout the book (see previous analyses and below) but one of the students makes a remark about the writer:

> Mira: Well, even if the writer made us boring in the beginning but he
> showed how you can change or how can change one's life.

The wording 'made us boring' (likely intending to express 'bored us') echoes the initial frustration some students felt about reading an idiosyncratically told narrative. The student also seems to perceive a message in the book, which is repeated during a subsequent group discussion when they are required to express 'what [they] think the writer want to say with the novel':

> Akram: You can educate yourself. It doesn't matter which year. /…/
> Naima: That someone can change your life and you can change you can
> always be better, and it [is] never too late.
> Abdul: We can also say that one person can do a lot. A person can do a lot
> change life for other person.

The perceived message here, evoking the protagonist's change under the benevolent guidance of Margueritte, is well aligned to the position taken by the teacher during the classroom work. Overall, it is evident that the varied stances on *The Braid* are not seen in the discussions about *Soft in the Head*. While it could be related differences between the teachers and/or the student groups, it seems likely that the books themselves play an important part: the range of stories, environments and character arcs to either criticise or empathise with is quite different.

Describing the language of the novels

As previously indicated, much attention is paid to the language of the novels. After having completed *Soft in the Head*, the students were faced with the task of discussing the language used in the book as part of during a concluding written examination on the book. This is followed up during a subsequent lesson.

> Omar: Well I think that [in] this novel the language was varied.
> T: <u>Varied</u> language. Yes, what's your idea about that?
> Omar: Sometimes Germain talks like slang language and there lots of bad
> words like fuck and the like. (You don't want to write that here.)
> LAUGHTER And sometimes like formal language like when Margueritte is
> talking. Yes, well I answered that it was a varied language.
> T: Oh, but it certainly is. And you also bring attention to something
> important, that different characters express themselves differently. The
> language mirrors their personality in a way. And then, when you say that
> Germain expresses himself in the beginning of the book. Does anything
> happen with his way of expressing himself?
> Omar: It improves after he starts to read when Margueritte (teaches him).

The views Omar expresses about the language in the novel is well in line with the stance the teacher has modelled previously during the classroom work: linguistic style is connected to understanding and explaining the characters. The classroom work with *The Braid* concludes with a similar discussion:

> Zara: I think it is Sarah it is difficult to understand. Here I think the writer
> just thinks that Sarah is a lawyer and it is on a high level. She has studied a
> lot. /…/ For me Smita /…/ is not difficult since I know the culture from
> India, and I know religion and everything. So that's why it's easier.
> John: Here among us Smita is more difficult.
> T: You found it more difficult.
> John: Yes, there are many words which are religion.
> T: The words related to religion; you found those difficult. Yes, right. /…/
> The knowledge you already bring with you when you read something is
> really important, isn't it? The prior knowledge you have.

Zara attributes the questions of language to character, just as Anita and her students did, but she also points out how the language relates to the different cultures and social environments in the three stories. And the students indeed seem to have different opinions about the language depending on prior knowledge and experience, which the teacher reflects upon in her concluding remark. This attention to language serves as a means to objectifying and analysing the text. However, just as in Anita's class, it is evident that the students, as well as the teacher, do not talk about language primarily in terms of literary style, but in terms of how the language facilitates or frustrates comprehension of the text. In a way, the analytical practices perceived here are largely put into the service of meaning-making.

Breaking the code

Since the study was conducted among intermediate second language learners, I did not expect instances where code breaking is explicitly discussed. However, during a whole class discussion about *The Braid*, one student enquires about the meaning of 'Deshnoke' and 'Karminata'. The teacher points out how the capital letters indicate that these words are names, and thus refers to conventions of orthography.

During another of the group discussions, Eva requires the students to examine paragraphing and reported speech in the book—conventions of writing which had previously been a focus of instruction. The students make the following remarks on how indentation and blank-line paragraphing is sometimes mixed:

> Siham: Everything is mixed but if you read about Smita it is not mixed as
> much I think.
> Jorje: Yes, you are right. /…/ I believe it is a graphical [method] to also tell
> about the different characters. It is also a kind of communication you could
> say. Maybe Sarah also lives more complicated so the text could appear [so]
> as well.

Interestingly, Jorje argues that conventions for the visual organisation of text are used to express differences between the characters. Thus, what could have seemed like a simple instance of text use for rehearsing knowledge about paragraphing interacts with both meaning-making and text analytical practices. It affirms the strong orientation towards describing and explaining characters in the book which has been previously discussed.

Discussion and Conclusion

The exploration of literacy practices during the classroom work has shown that attention to words and expressions, linguistic style, analysis of narrative structure, as well as some code breaking practices, were employed in the of meaning-making. It indicates that the overriding priority in working with literature was to understand, and scaffold understanding, of the novels. This seems aligned with the syllabus, which requires the teacher to assess the students' comprehension.

Some differences were noted in the studied classroom works. The interaction during Eva's work with *The Braid* showed the value of opening up the discussions for the students' diverse experiences. During the meaning-making and text analytical practices, there were examples of reading both with and against the grain of the text (cf. Janks, 2010). This seemed to enrich the range of literacy practices to not only involve relating emphathetically to experiences and characters in the novel but also taking more critical stances on the text. In addition, it enabled students to make contributions of knowledge. Anita's leading the discussion in a more authoritative fashion, based on her own 'didactic reading' of *Soft in the Head*, could be attributed to teaching style. On the other hand, the difference observed could also depend on the book itself. Lacking the clear plot and diverse characters present in *The Braid*, Anita's firmer position on *Soft in the Head* served to stimulate discussions and scaffold the students' process of meaning-making. A more critical stance to the novel could have involved bringing attention to how middle-class values of language, reading and 'being cultured' were reproduced in the book.

Overall, the kinds of text use promoted during the studied classroom works were the use of novels in learning about language and engaging in practices of discussing the characters. In addition to discussing the language of the novel in relation to its characters, I believe it would have been possible to discuss features such as language, voice, and narrative perspective as matters of literary and narrative style (cf. Carroli, 2011. p. 24-25). This could have led to a deeper appreciation of how meaning-making relates to the author's conscious choices.

Theoretical models which highlight different stances to texts rarely explore how different literacy practices relate to each other when employed in teaching (cf. Langer, 1995/2017; Lee, 2013; Leland et al., 2012). These models also tend to downplay the work teachers and second language learners may need to do with the language of the novels. My operationalisation of Freebody and Luke's framework (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke & Freebody, 1999) in the present study can serve as a model for bringing more attention to these aspects. An interesting question for further research is how students' participation in literacy practices relates to their backgrounds and previous frames of reference for studying and using literature in educational institutions (e.g. Mezirow, 1991). This could not be explored in the present study, as such data was not collected.

A major implication for teaching is that a necessary focus on language and meaning-making in no way rules out attention to text analysis; rather, meaning-making may benefit from and build upon text analysis. Similarly, shared ambitions between teachers the students to 'use' the novels for language development can promote engagement with characters and plot rather than reduce the reading to purposes outside the text. The study also shows the value of making room for diverse learners' experiences to critically interrogate representations in books. To further promote adult second learners' opportunities to engage in critical literacy practices—and ensure that such participation is not restricted to students who already have developed this capability through prior experiences—the application of critical literacy could be more actively modelled and encouraged by the teachers and the materials used in instruction. To stimulate such

teaching practices, it would appear necessary to remedy the absence of critical literacy perspectives in the syllabus—along with the lack of dedicated teacher training for meeting the needs and experiences of adult second language learners.

Acknowledgements

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Critical information literacy: Adult learning and community perspectives

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Abstract

This article considers the evolution of information literacy as a distinct area of inquiry and instruction in libraries. The influence of critical and feminist pedagogies is paramount for the development of critical approaches to understanding an information landscape that is highly politicized. The definition and practice of information literacy will be described, followed by an exploration of critical approaches that help interrogate how information access and control affect these literacy goals and people's democratic right to information. Information literacy that is grounded in social justice goals can be strengthened through the collaboration of librarians with other adult educators, community development practitioners, social service providers and activists.

Keywords: Critical literacies; information activism; information literacy; libraries

Introduction

This century is often referred to the *information age* to highlight the transformation of information access brought about by technological changes in the past few decades, as well as the implications for the role of information in development and people's social and economic inclusion in their countries (OECD, 2000). Information literacy enables people to seek and make use of this information to perform tasks or to create new knowledge (Behrens, 1994; Webber & Johnston, 2000). However, there are numerous concerns and tensions at play. This transformation has alternately been celebrated by the proclamation that the world's knowledge can be accessed through a mobile phone, and critiqued regarding corporate control of people's personal data and erosion of trust of the credibility of what appears on daily newsfeeds and social media platforms (Zuboff, 2019).

Within community development practice, the transformation is variously framed with catchphrases such as K4D (knowledge for development), knowledge translation or mobilization—terms that often appear to represent knowledge as a commodity that can be transferred to marginalized communities in need (Narayanaswamy, 2017). This needs-based approach very much resembles the concerns raised by new literacies scholars who argue that such deficit mindsets disempower learners (Tett, Hamilton & Crowther, 2012).

Librarians have a central role to play in developing and promoting information literacy as people learn how to navigate the complex information landscape (Lankes, 2016). Libraries exist within most formal education institutions providing training and individual assistance to students, educators and researchers. Public libraries, community libraries and resource centres have much to contribute to supporting multiple literacies at the community level. They are well situated to be key partners in the creation of literate environments - as articulated by UNESCO - because they are located within communities to support people in their daily lives (Shrestha & Krolak, 2015).

There is some ambiguity regarding librarians' roles as educators explicitly within their profession, or a tendency to focus on interaction with technology (Sanford & Clover, 2016). Yet, the pedagogical processes librarians engage in as part of information literacy instruction has become more clearly articulated and theorized in recent years. Amidst library critiques that standard instruction is too caught up in technology and basic skill development, critical library studies—informed by Freirean and feminist theorists—have evolved to create space for a more radical questioning of knowledge and power (Accardi, 2013; Pagowsky & McElroy, 2016). In my mind, it is precisely this questioning of power that makes critical information literacy a part of the multiple literacies and new literacies discussion (Duckworth & Tett, 2019).

This article considers the evolution of information literacy as a distinct area of inquiry and instruction with an emphasis on the influence of critical and feminist pedagogies. My focus here is to draw upon the literature in critical library studies to survey the changing trends in information access and literacy, as well as reflect on my own work in a library specializing in adult education and community development. From 2016-2018, I conducted a small research project to examine the changing role of libraries and the information issues faced by community development practitioners primarily from the Global South, through a series of five group discussions (Wadsworth, 2011) with participants attending education programs at the Coady Institute (Irving, 2018). That research has deepened my interest and understanding of information literacy and the importance of critical approaches. Therefore, this article examines how restrictions on information access and control affect (undermine) literacy goals and people's democratic right to information, and considers the opportunities for collaboration in strengthening critical literacy, citizen participation, politicized learning and new knowledge creation. I see this as an area of shared interest among adult educators, community practitioners and library workers.

Background

My own interest in this topic has evolved over the past few decades through my work at the Marie Michael Library, a small specialized library supporting the educational activities of the Coady International Institute in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada. Most of the participants in the education programs are community development practitioners from countries of the Global South and Indigenous communities in Canada. The participants come from a wide range of educational backgrounds and library experiences. Many have described first-hand experience of libraries reflecting colonialist values and

procedures that appear exclusionist through such actions as tightly controlled access and devaluing local knowledge (Adams, 2019; see also Blair & Wong, 2017; Durrani, 2014). We have worked over the years to develop services grounded in the philosophy of emancipatory adult education that is also in keeping with the historical roots of our library and institution (Adams, 2019; Irving & Adams, 2012). We have also been involved directly in offering courses on information literacy, information activism, independent research support, as well as working with participants interested in creating their own libraries and resource centres.

When information literacy as a term gained more common usage in the 1990s, I was encouraged that this would mean adult education theories were coming to the forefront. I was soon to be disappointed, as this was also the time of burgeoning technological developments which overtook the field, reasserting a pressure to transfer specific technical skills in short time frames that thwarted questioning, experiential knowing, criticality and creativity (Pagowsky & McElroy, 2016). The growth of critical library studies in the past two decades has, for me, finally brought together the insights from critical and feminist pedagogies and theories of power and knowledge that I understood from my other activities in adult education (English & Irving, 2015). In recent years, I have also been revisiting the evolving role of libraries and resource centres in community practice. This article draws from the literature review I conducted for that research (Irving, 2017; 2018).

Information Literacy: Definitions and Issues

Information literacy describes the ability of people to find, assess and utilize the information they need to achieve their goals, whether that may be to write a research paper, solve a problem at work, learn a new hobby, or organize a protest (see Behrens, 1994; IFLA, 2019). Further, it can include a person's ability to comprehend when new information is needed (Behrens, 1994). While the term has existed in library literature since the 1970s, the recognition of information literacy as a competency with measurable skills grew more widespread as library professionals strove to position themselves within the broader evolution of education in the late twentieth century (Behrens, 1994).

There are numerous standards and evaluative criteria developed by library associations around the world for determining a learner's information literacy attainment. Most share core elements of the information seeking journey of a learner, as noted above, starting from recognizing the need for new information, developing the ability to search for and assess the source and reliability of the material, and the capacity to comprehend and utilize that information in the creation of new knowledge. For example, in the United Kingdom, The Society of College, National and University Libraries' "Seven Pillars of Information Literacy" is one such model that itemizes these steps that encompasses both searching skill attainment and understanding (SCONUL, 2011). The SCONUL model, and similar measurement tools from other countries bring with them debates regarding the objectives of information literacy instruction, which points to the importance of examining the pedagogical processes involved as a distinct field of research (Webber & Johnston, 2000).

The instrumentalist ways that information literacy training is often conducted and assessed in this context raises concerns of prioritizing surface level skill development that assesses specific, measurable skills (Harris, 2010; Webber & Johnston, 2000). This has effects not only on the literacy learner, but on the instructor as well as this pressure for standardization can making the library profession itself overly standardized (Elmborg,

2016). Campbell (2008) notes that the goals and instruction methods for information literacy are primarily articulated in academic settings, while in the broader world information is highly contextual to cultures who may integrate local or indigenous knowledges. I think those who are grappling with the ripple effects of the standardization push can learn from the work of the literacy researchers, grounded in community contexts, who have critiqued the impact of literacy frameworks. Their calls to resist their disempowering effects are important for understanding how literacies should reflect and support people's lives rather than dictating to them what they need to know (Duckworth & Tett, 2019; Tett, Hamilton & Crowther, 2012).

Knowledge and Power

Access to information alone is insufficient to foster engaged, active citizenship, and there is a growing awareness of the importance of examining the sources of information and issues of power in knowledge creation and dissemination that go far beyond standard academic criteria of determining credible sources. This examination probes the deeper biases that privilege some forms of knowledge over others.

Freire's (1970) theories grapple directly with knowledge - how it is created, whose knowledge is validated, and who is excluded. Freire challenges the monopolizing power of "intellectuals" calling upon them to share that power (Arnowitz, 1993). This critique continues to be expressed in community development practice. Eversole (2015) states: 'The narrow definition of knowledge as *professional expertise* puts the emphasis on the type of knowledge that poor communities are likely to lack while overlooking the kinds of knowledge that these communities are likely to have' (p. 90). Eversole also notes that the ways valid knowledge is created reflects western methods that fails to recognize local knowledge as real knowledge. The work of Indigenous researchers (see Battiste, 2013; Smith, 2012) has an important role to play in further developing our understanding of the cultural influences of how we see and share knowledge, and the implications for information literacy work. This is an opportunity for further contextualizing and renewing the decolonizing potential of Freirean approaches (Giroux, 1993). Duckworth and Tett's (2019) application of Freirean culture circles is also helpful for identifying the ways creativity can be used by learners to examine their lives and experiences.

Critical Information Literacy

Freire's (1970) liberating praxis proposes breaking the dichotomy of expert knowledge and people's knowledge by engaging people 'in the dialectical and political act of knowing' (McLaren & da Silva, 1993, p. 54) to challenge the banking methods of education that impose a one-way flow of information from the oppressors to the oppressed. Sharing the theoretical framing of critical pedagogy, critical information literacy (see Elmborg, 2006) engages in critiques of mainstream knowledge production and provision, looking at power and control over information. Elmborg calls upon librarians to reflect on their roles as educators, noting the parallel between Freire's critique of top-down banking education and treating a library as an "information bank" (p. 193). Both reflect uncritical practices of information dissemination that do not engage people actively.

Librarians can do more to act 'as facilitators in human knowledge construction' (Lor & Britz, 2010, p. 664) that counteracts the one-way flow of information. This awareness is heightened by issues, particularly in the context of the Internet, that include:

Proliferation of propaganda and fake news in online platforms; restrictions or financial barriers to access information (paywalls, digital rights management); and overwhelming amounts of information that can be hard to sift through for relevance (see also Narayanaswamy, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). Such challenges are concerns for those engaged in the related field of "civic literacy" (Morden, Prest, Hilderman & Anderson, 2019) since political awareness and democratic participation require analysis of news media in a variety of forms that exists in 'a challenging information environment which includes a wealth of unvetted information and potentially malevolent forces online deliberately sowing confusion and even anger' (p. 8).

The Reflective Librarian

The learning process should be significant not only for the participants, but also for librarians in terms of self-reflection in their own bias and positioning in exercising power through knowledge; as well as gaining the skill and confidence as educators interested in promoting the information literacy skills in others (Elmborg, 2006). Critical and post-structural theories are useful to understand the political nature of librarianship and confront stereotypical views that librarians are unbiased providers of information. This self-reflection can then strengthen librarians' potential to participate more fully in collective learning and community building (Riedler & Eryaman, 2010). In the experience of my colleagues and myself, we have further noted the potential of creating friendly, alternative, nonhierarchical spaces within educational settings where students can express uncertainties and ask questions they may be fearful to raise in classrooms.

Applying a critical lens extends beyond the daily practices within the library, as Harris (2010) encourages us to re-examine the assessment standards for information literacy competency, to look for openings to resist the restrictive nature of those standards. One such "loophole" in the ACRL standards refers to issue of values, meaning how information may influence a person's values or beliefs. Harris adds, however, there has been little documented evidence that library instructors have taken on the issue of a learner's values. In response, Harris considers the role of critical pedagogical methods of dialogue and critical reflection for both the student and instructor. A feminist reframing of the standards similarly can provide openings to examine the social context to challenge multiple forms of oppression that may be hidden (Accardi, 2013).

Knowledge translation

"Knowledge translation" is a term commonly heard in academic and policy-level arenas describing the process of making information more easily understandable, accessible and usable in the general population (Bennett & Jessani, 2011). I think this is an area that could be explored further to support knowledge mobilization within community organizations and groups, beyond the disempowering one-way flow from experts to communities (Narayansaswamy, 2017).

Activities that intentionally track the flow of information in community practice can help identify the many unlikely places where information may reside, or that could be built upon. One useful model from an academic context that I have used is adapted from Gustafson's (2017) work describing information in terms of ecosystems and lifecycles. The process Gustafson describes helps researchers understand their own participation in creation through a hierarchical scholarly publishing framework. This approach can foster discussions through which people gain an understanding of the myriad contexts (political,

historical, social, economic) that affect the creation of information and the ways they themselves understand and use it. I see this process can useful particularly in contexts where people do not necessarily see their work directly in terms of knowledge creation and sharing.

In my group discussions with community development practitioners (Irving, 2018), many spoke of the frustrations of not having access to current, locally relevant information. They described the informal channels through networks and friends they relied on to share reports, and reflected on the information that resided in their organizations' file cabinets or hard drives when project evaluation reports were shared with donors but went no further. Deeper discussions among groups revealed numerous challenges in accessing public information, and strategies employed to share scarce information resources or translate research into formats useful for people in their communities.

Information literacy is affected by what information is accessible to the person who is seeking it. Advocacy for free and equitable access to information is an integrally related issue of concern to socially engaged librarians (Lankes, 2016). High profile news stories of state-level propaganda, spin, news media manipulation, or surveillance of people's online activities (Zuboff, 2019) are now creating growing challenges to keeping the understanding and practice of information literacy current. In the public sphere, examples abound of systematized exclusion, such as Smythe's (2016) research demonstrating the practices of exclusion evidenced in government websites whereby optimistic proclamations of open government are undermined by bureaucratic literacies that obfuscate information. Given the evolving, convoluted information character of information systems, literacy instruction can benefit from renewal as a way to support learners to navigate these systems.

Amidst the challenges, it is worth remembering that digital spaces remain vital spaces for learning and participation. Crowther and Mackie's (2015) study of citizens' information seeking patterns during the Scottish independence referendum note the importance of Internet sources to assist in political decision-making and democratic participation. When barriers to accessing information for public participation are unacknowledged, this becomes a human rights issue, as Neuman (2016) identifies numerous persistent barriers (such as literacy, mobility, time burdens) that women, particularly in the Global South, are facing.

Finding spaces for co-learning

Within the field of information studies, as noted earlier, most of the research and writing on critical information literacy instruction is situated within formal higher education settings focused on the information skill development of university students. In this context, librarians speak to a range of methods used in classroom instruction to help students develop the critical awareness of power issues and biases embedded within the wide range of sources available to them. These library-based educators also speak to the frustrations they face within the academy that appears not to value the importance of this skill development process. Instruction is often short-changed through brief in-class demonstrations or "one-off" workshops. It is often out of such frustrations that creative alternatives have emerged (see Accardi, Drabinski & Kumbier, 2010; Pagowsky & McElroy, 2016). Several cases in Pagowsky & McElroy's (2016) collection describe the use of methods adopted from critical and feminist pedagogy for group learning settings, and may play with standard library instruction methods, including integrating popular culture and other strategies tailored to the learners' interests. Community-based

information literacy programs may find useful inspirations from other literacy projects employing such locally grounded activities such as drawing upon learners' knowledge and culture of football (Player, 2013), or using creative expression through art and story writing (Duckworth & Tett, 2019).

Community adult educators would also recognize the challenges faced by critical information literacy educators who complain of institutional contexts that passively or actively undermine these critical learning spaces. This situation calls for a rethinking of the relationships between librarians and students in group and individual learning activities, confronting hierarchies of knowledge, using lived experiences as starting standpoints, and fostering co-operative learning environments (Accardi, Drabinski & Kumbier, 2010).

Assumptions that information literacy is primarily a matter of helping people learn to become comfortable with new technology is also a limiting factor, and requires reflection on the part of library-based educators to understand people's contexts, priorities and resistances to learning in order to avoid replicating the very instructional methods that subordinate people's own knowledge and experience. Instructive lessons can be learned from other areas of technology-based adult education experiences. Eubanks (2011) reflects on her own evolution in thinking and teaching with regards to computer instruction with marginalized women. She realized the women's resistances to learning came not from ignorance—as is often assumed—but from the daily injustices they faced in a society that appears to be controlled by technology. Such controls were visible through their experiences working in tedious data entry jobs, or sitting in a government office where their case workers appeared to let the computer decide whether or not they were eligible for assistance. Shifting the classroom experience from technical training to a dialogical process enabled the women to understand the power relationships behind the forces that seemed to be controlling their lives.

I have observed at times that writings on critical pedagogy embody a directly oppositional tone of traditional (passive) versus critical (active). From my own experience, the standard library practice of the "reference interview" (Veal, 2000) can be reframed as a dialogic process of engaging a person into discussion and deeper questioning, thereby making use of and expanding upon the tools already at our disposal. These dialogic exchanges have not only helped me work with participants to identify useful sources of information, but have also provided a space for them to articulate and validate their own experiential knowledge of the topic, and to dig deeper to explore the root causes of the issues they want to address.

Whose Information? Issues in Access and New Knowledge Creation

Inclusive education and community participation requires inclusive information access. Information literacy is closely linked with the right to information, and whose knowledge is represented or excluded. Literacy is undermined when the information people need for learning and social action is not available to them. As noted earlier, critical information literacy helps to expose the privileging of dominant perspectives and silencing of marginalized voices, and supports learners to draw upon and theorize their own knowledge and experience. This critique then highlights the gaps where learners and communities can mobilize to ensure their own knowledge is documented and shared.

The International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) has an advocacy branch, Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) that promotes the roles of libraries in supporting citizen engagement by campaigning against

threats to this freedom such as censorship and state surveillance. IFLA's Internet Manifesto acknowledges that information is now available to remote communities but those communities need support in accessing and making use of it. IFLA (2013) describes opportunities for libraries to assist people to create and share information. Increased transparency and openness of public information has the potential to increase civic participation. This access also requires the role of organizations and facilitators to assist people navigating the public information chains. IFLA has also produced a policy toolkit to assist librarians to lobby government to reduce barriers to public internet access.

At times there is a reticence among librarians to be politically active in policy discussions on these issues, due to a prevailing assumption of the profession's neutrality and "risk aversion" (Trosow, 2014, p. 24). Vocally claiming libraries as important players in democracy is not a neutral stance (Trosow, 2014). This is an area where collaboration with other community actors is important for solidarity building. Civic literacy educators have relevant experiences working with communities in critiquing misinformation, scrutinizing government statistics and supporting the creation of locally grounded and culturally relevant information as a counter-narrative to the dominant neoliberal discourse.

While it is an important skill for citizens to be able to seek and assess information to participate in society, western education systems that prioritize education goals that focus on employment preparation can undermine citizen education goals (Battista, 2012). Even employment focused instruction that relies on academic database search skills are only relevant within a university context that people will not have access to when they graduate (Battista, 2012).

Another threat to access is a result of the increased pressures of underfunding in the face of increasing costs. This situation is contributing to the rise of "shadow libraries" particularly in middle and low income countries who are facing harsh funding restrictions as state funding fails to meet the increasing demands in the education sector (Karaganis, 2018). Shadow libraries refer to the creative (often illegal) solutions students and faculty are compelled to devise to circumvent the barriers faced from high costs and copyright laws in order to obtain the literature they need to pursue their academic work (Karaganis, 2018). Trosow (2014) describes the growing "commodification" (p. 17) and enclosure of information, arguing that we should 'frame information services as an essential component of the public sphere' (p. 22). The cutbacks faced by libraries in many sectors threaten the preservation of the free, community learning spaces that are so valued by proponents of civic participation. The somewhat understated role of a librarian as an educator in the community, may contribute to the vulnerability libraries face against neoliberal economic agendas that see libraries as recreational spaces that can be cut in austere economic times (Sanford & Clover, 2016). At the same time, libraries are informally filling the gap for other areas of social care provision when social services are reduced or eliminated (Finch, 2019).

Two examples of persistent marginalization

I will briefly touch upon two library-led initiatives that are raising awareness on peoples whose are underrepresented, and the efforts that are being taken to address them.

Increasing access to information relates to form as well as content. According to statistics cited by the World Blind Union, under 10% of written material is reproduced in formats that are accessible to people with visual disabilities (Accessible Books Consortium, 2019). The implications for literacy are profound when people are denied access to information in ways they can be used. The Marrakesh Treaty declares that

copyright laws should not form an impediment to efforts to produce audio books, Braille transcriptions and other accessible formats (WIPO, 2016).

In Canada, many sectors, including libraries, are examining the implications of the Truth and Reconciliation process to redress generations of exploitation and abuse of Indigenous peoples. initial steps are underway to reconceptualize the structure and practices of libraries that integrate Indigenous peoples' knowledges and interests. This process of decolonizing library practice includes examining the content, description and arrangement of library collections, training library staff and increasing Indigenous representation, ensuring the preservation and promotion of Indigenous knowledge, and creating a mechanism by which libraries can learn from each other in achieving these shared goals (Canadian Federation of Library Associations, 2017).

Community research

Source authority (see Hoyer & MacDonald, 2014) is the process of determining the relevance and reliability of an information source. However, much of the information created in development practice does not always reflect the standard measures of authority, where people are more interested in the relevance and usefulness for their purposes (Hoyer & MacDonald, 2014). This is an example of the gap I have observed between the academic focus of most information literacy instruction and the lived reality of community practitioners and activists for whom academic, peer-reviewed research is either inaccessible or seen to be irrelevant for their local context and clientele. In order to shift the focus from translation of expert knowledge to communities, more work is needed to support active community-led translation of relevant research, and more engaged co-creation. One model I have found useful from the development sector is the work of the Barefoot Collective in South Africa. They bring together participants representing a range of experiences from different development organizations to write collectively in writeshops to produce guides for civil society practitioners (see barefootguide.org). Their interest is to provide useful, readable guides that frame analysis and methods in a story-based format (Reeler, 2017).

Co-creation is an area where I see that adult educators have a valuable contribution to make. In their *Community Engagement* guide Shaw and Crowther (2017) refer to the specific act of providing "counter-information" and the role of the educator in supporting community activists. A useful method they describe is critical discourse analysis, noting:

> In the current communication age, the significance of 'textual' messages which we are continually bombarded with, has multiplied. Yet our capacity to decode these messages is often assumed rather than explored educationally. The power of these forms of communication is that they can influence our outlook precisely because we give them little thought (p. 42).

As I have noted throughout this article, the contributions of critical and poststructural social theories have helped deepen the understanding of the political power of information, and the roles and responsibilities of different players working in the information ecosystem (Gustafson, 2017). It is not enough to critique other sources of information. At the community-level, I see how thinking of information as an ecosystem can help citizens understand their own various positions as creators, translators and users of information in work and life since people often do not recognize this process of inquiry they may already be engaged in as research (Stoecker, 2012). Understanding research as something we all can do can help us demystify the process and develop methods that are practical and reliable for our own goals.

Discussion

What ways can adult educators collaborate with librarians for critical literacy, citizen participation, politicized learning and new knowledge creation? Librarians who are committed to social justice are continually inspired by the critical educational practices and theories that has transformed adult education. Information literacy is a shared endeavour, and needs to evolve and keep pace with the evolution/revolution in the creation and use of information we are now experiencing. However, as I noted earlier, much of the theory and methods of information literacy in the literature are predominantly focused on academic settings, as the concepts are not as well articulated in community settings (Campbell, 2008). Furthermore, those academic spaces are often, frustratingly, reproducing the neoliberal dynamics of economics, technocratic measurements and shrinking space that progressive and radical educators are attempting to resist. Public and community libraries are active places of co-learning though they may not use the same language as their university-based counterparts. There is much more work to be done to raise awareness of learning and new knowledge creation that occurs with the support of public and community libraries, as well as the potential for strengthening collaboration with educators and activists.

I echo Webber and Johnston's (2000) call for more awareness raising and active research on information literacy as a pedagogical process. Librarians are encouraged to study the assessment standards they must work with to find spaces for criticality, as in the example Harris (2010) provides in probing more deeply the meaning of values when librarians and learners critically explore new information together, as well as Accardi's (2013) feminist framing. These are useful starting points to find spaces for resistance within existing frameworks. There could be more ongoing learning from the community-grounded approaches in new literacy studies who have relevant experiences in scrutinizing and re-envisioning literacy frameworks. In the face of restricting spaces for learning and critical inquiry, librarians and adult educators could do more to work together to preserve critical learning spaces and to document the innovative practices that have been created.

Information literacy, beyond improving a person's ability to access and utilize existing information, also helps learners critique misinformation, identify gaps and act on opportunities to create locally grounded and culturally relevant information. Libraries working with development organizations have a key role to play in promoting community-based knowledge to challenge the control of research by experts driven by "evidence-based" agendas, and to create knowledge that is useful and accessible for people. Community groups, educators and librarians can explore new ways to document and theorize voices that are currently missing, including the expansion and deepening of decolonizing approaches. Where this new knowledge is created and shared also raises the issue of openly and freely accessible platforms so that community-based knowledge is available to all. Librarians, adult educators, community development workers and activists all have roles to play in information literacy learning, research and practice.

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'Political literacy' in South Africa

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Abstract

Research over the last few decades has supported the contention that 'there are different literacy practices in different domains of social life ....[and] these change over time' (Hamilton, Tett, & Crowther, 2012, p.3). In this article, we use 'political literacy', as conceived by Paulo Freire, as a theoretical lens through which to consider non-formal education in the changing context of South Africa. After considering the influence of Freire's thinking in the black consciousness (BC) movement in South Africa during the 1970s, we consider a current BC-aligned non-formal education intervention in Freedom Park, a township outside Johannesburg, drawing on research conducted in 2018. This used snowball sampling and qualitative data collection methods, including observation of a 'political class' currently run in the community. We found that, in contrast to ways in which Freire was used in the BC movement in the anti-Apartheid struggle, the 'political class' leaned towards what Freire termed the authoritarian left.

Keywords: Authoritarian left, Paulo Freire, political illiteracy, political literacy, South Africa

Introduction

In 1968, Paulo Freire published what was to become his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (published in English in 1970). The book had a profound effect globally, including in South Africa. Whilst he was living in Geneva and working for the World Council of Churches, Freire says that he was frequently visited by 'intellectuals, teachers, students, religious, blacks, whites from South Africa' (Freire, 2014, p.134), who wanted

to talk to him about his work, and its implications for the South African context. However, it was primarily through his writing that Freire's thinking profoundly affected a wide range of individuals and organisations in the 1970s and 1980s.

Freire and 'political literacy'

Freire specifically used the term 'political literacy' in an essay probably written in the early 1970s (but published in *The politics of education* in 1985). In the essay, he outlines a number of his key ideas – that education is never neutral, but either domesticating or liberating; that education for freedom involves reflecting on reality/experience, in order to become more conscious of why things are the way they are ('conscientisation'), and then act on them to change reality.

Freire contrasts political literacy with political illiteracy: 'a political illiterate – regardless of whether she or he knows how to read and write – is one who has an ingenuous perception of humanity in its relationships with the world… One of the political illiterate's tendencies is to escape concrete reality… by losing himself or herself in abstract visions of the world' (1985, p. 103).

Political literacy thus requires that both the educator and the learner play a particular role:

> At the very moment when she or he begins the process, the educator must be prepared to die as the exclusive educator of the learners. She or he cannot be an educator for freedom if she or he only substitutes the content of another educational practice for a bourgeois practice and thus preserves the form of that practice (1985, p. 105).

Freire specifically contrasts what is required of 'political literacy' with Stalinism, in which 'through an education that contradicts its real socialist objectives…educators instil political illiteracy by making thought antidialectical' (p. 106). 'Political literacy' also requires that the future not be foreclosed with certainty. Freire is deeply critical of promises that 'once the transformation of the bourgeois society is achieved, a "new world" will be automatically created. In truth, the new world does not surface in this way' (p. 106).

'Political literacy' in South Africa in the 1970s: Biko and the BCM

Freire's work was being spread within South Africa from the late 1960s, and profoundly influenced the Black Consciousness movement (BCM) (Hadfield, 2017; Magaziner, 2010); a contemporary, Bennie Khoapa, argues that 'it was Paulo Freire who made a lasting philosophical impression on Steve Biko' (Khoapa, 2008, p.1).

Biko approached Anne Hope, who had met Freire whilst he was at Harvard, (Hadfield, 2017) and told her that they had heard she knew Freire, and they wanted to learn more (Hadfield, 2017; Magaziner, 2010). Thus from May 1972, Hope held four week-long workshops with fifteen activists from five different regions (Magaziner, 2010; Hadfield, 2017). Between the sessions, the activists went out to do community-based research ('listening surveys'). They met with Hope every month; but progress was very slow – whilst many Freirean 'codes' were created, very little literacy was ever done. For the activists, though, the purpose of the process was conscientisation (Magaziner, 2010):

> Conscientisation is a process whereby individuals or groups living within a given social and political setting are made aware of their situation… 'conscientization' implies a desire

to engage people in an emancipatory process in an attempt to free them from a situation of bondage (Biko quoted in Nekhwevha, 2002, p.137).

The BC activists involved were clear that their role was not to tell people what to think – as one of them said, 'we did not say, look, we have come to teach you about Black Consciousness' (quoted in Magaziner, 2010, p. 130). Their role was slow, methodical work to help people analyse their reality, reflect on this, and then act. 'Our idea was not party political, our idea was conscientization of society' (quoted in Magaziner, 2010, p. 131). They thus rejected what they saw as the indoctrination of people by political parties (ibid.). 'Imposing doctrine from above could create mass consciousness… but doing so was antithetical to the dialogic, reflective processes implicit in conscientization' (ibid.).

Many of the BC projects were halted with the banning of BC organisations and individuals in 1977; but by then, although his work was banned, Freire was being drawn on heavily way beyond the BCM, by the student movement, the worker movement, the Churches, and the radical education and adult education movements. He also influenced the United Democratic Front (UDF), which emerged in the 1980s (though less so the more formal liberation movements such as the ANC and PAC).

Ironically, even as his works were unbanned in the early 1990s, Freire's influence in South Africa waned fairly rapidly. This was something Freire himself noted and was highly critical of:

> Today, I fear that some men and women… who sought me out in those days, may now be among those who have allowed themselves to be tamed by a certain high-sounding neoliberal discourse… The competent run things and make a profit, and create wealth that, at the right moment, will 'trickle down' to the have-nots more or less equitably. The discourse upon and in favor of social justice no longer has meaning... Among these persons are to be found those who declare …that what we need today is a *neutral* education, heart and soul devoted to the technical training of the labor force. (Freire, 2014, pp.135-6).

South Africa after 1994

For many South Africans democracy has not delivered, as the country has undergone a fundamentally neoliberal shift, accompanied by the simultaneous practices and processes of de-nationalisation and re-nationalisation (Hart, 2013). This is exactly what Biko predicted might happen as long ago as 1977:

> This is one country where it would be possible to create a capitalist black society, if whites were intelligent, if the nationalists were intelligent. And that capitalist black society, black middle class would be very effective....South Africa could succeed in putting across to the world a pretty convincing, integrated picture, with still seventy percent of the population being underdogs (Biko, 2008, pp. 41-42).

In this respect, of course, South Africa is not unique; as Gibson (2011) asserts, 'Post-apartheid South Africa has become much the same as other parts of Africa, where the mass of people experience the daily anti-humanism and economic authoritarianism of structural adjustment and its political enforcement' (p. 105). The process has been met with a sense of betrayal and with resistance, with some 2 million people involved in protests in the country every year since 2008 (Plaut & Holden, 2013). In this context, there has been a recent resurgence in interest in Freire.

The story of Freedom Park - a story of displacement, resistance, poverty, and political conflict - is in many respects a useful case study of post-Apartheid South Africa. Situated

some 30-40 km from the centre of Johannesburg, Freedom Park came into existence in the early 1990s, as the result of a 'land invasion' by people hoping for a place of their own in the run up to the first democratic elections (Hoag, 2009). It is now a semi-informal township with a combination of informal shacks, Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) houses[1] as well as bonded houses (Centre for Education Rights and Transformation [CERT], 2010).

In 2018, one of the authors (Zama Thusi) undertook research in Freedom Park towards a Masters' degree in adult education (Thusi, 2018), supervised by the other author (Anne Harley). Both of us have been deeply influenced by Freire for decades. In her research, Zama specifically wanted to look at any current projects that were Freirean-inspired; and a Freirean-inspired Community Literacy and Numeracy Group (CLING) Project, initiated by the Education Policy Consortium (EPC) together with the Centre for Education Rights and Transformation (CERT) at the University of Johannesburg, had been formally launched in Freedom Park in 2009. It apparently faced a number of issues, including tensions arising from different political affiliations (Baatjes, 2016). Zama chose to focus her research on the Freedom Park CLING, including the 'political classes' which had apparently morphed out of the project.

The research used snowball sampling to access learners and facilitators who took part in the CLING Project as well as CLING Steering Committee members and members of *Abahlali baseFreedom Park* ('Dwellers / Residents of Freedom Park'), a community organising committee established in 2011.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal ethics committee, as was informed consent from all parties concerned (CERT, Abahlali, the Steering Committee, the facilitators, the adult learners, and the community activists). All participants were aware that they were free to withdraw should they wish to. Participants were also assured of anonymity, and all names have been changed and in certain instances certain personal information has been removed.

Six men and six women were involved in the larger study, ranging in age from late 20s to 70s, and all were unemployed. Some were amongst the first to move to the area, whilst others moved much later. They are from different areas within Freedom Park. Nine of the participants were involved in CLING – one as the co-ordinator; five as facilitators; and three as adult learners. Of these, two were involved in Abahlali, three in the BC-aligned Socialist Part of Azania (SOPA)[2], and two in the political classes. Of the three not involved in CLING, all were members of Abahlali, and one was also involved in SOPA and the political classes.

The research revealed precisely the larger story of post-Apartheid South Africa. People spoke of moving to the area in the early 1990s, at the dawn of democracy, to begin a new life: 'We told ourselves that this (securing land) was going to be our freedom' (Phaks[3]).

Christopher maintains that they were evicted daily by the police and would come back each morning to erect plastic houses that would later be demolished. He was only finally able to move into his RDP house in 2014. Sarah, an Abahlali member, does not yet have a house: 'I stay in people's backyards. I keep being moved, being moved, being moved. When the landlord tells you they are building rooms you have to move your shack with your children'.

Much of the displacement has been the work of the state, particularly at local government level, often violent; and it has been matched with on-going resistance as 'the municipality police removed us and took our shacks but then we would resist and fight'

(Christopher); 'Bebesisusa sibuyele. Basisuse sibuyele (They would remove us and we would go back, and they would remove us and we would go back)' (Velaphi).

From fairly early on, one of the strategies used to resist the government was blocking main roads that abut the settlement. According to Velaphi, 'we started protesting, we closed the freeways and everything'.

Throughout its existence, then, there has been a struggle for the right to remain, and for a house; but the settlement's story also echoes a wider story of growing corruption. According to Gladys, who is also a member of Abahlali and a backyard dweller:

> I registered for a house in 2010 but young children, who registered for the houses as late as 2014, now have their own houses. These old ladies (pointing at the two elderly ladies, about 75 years old or so, who were there) have been on the list since 1996 and still do not have houses. (Gladys)

Gladys believes that she and her mother had been cheated on their RDP because 'one girl at the Housing Department told me that my mother's house had become available, but she still does not have a house …to date. They sell them'. Indeed, many residents believe that there has been corruption in the allocation process, and many see this as specifically politically motivated:

> When the houses were distributed, only eight SOPA members got houses because the ANC claimed to have led the fight and the councillor was theirs so there was nothing we could do. (Phaks)

Christopher confirmed this:

> We won that development, but the people who are in charge are not SOPA, they are ANC. When the houses were allocated, abantu (people) that were involved in the occupation and fought for the land were not allocated. Abantu (people) that were allocated abantu be-ANC (are ANC people)... yet our people, including old age people, were excluded in the process. (Christopher)

The community organising group, Abahlali, have demanded a forensic investigation into the allocation of houses.

Although Freedom Park residents have won the right to remain, many still live in homemade shacks. There is one part of Freedom Park that is called Ekuhluphekeni ('place of poverty'); but indeed the socio-economic situation of the entire settlement is dire, with high levels of unemployment. Most families depend on social grants (CLING Project, n.d.). Many of the residents in the area lack basic services like water and toilets, having to use, for example, portable toilets at a local church.

'Political literacy' in South Africa in the current period: The Freedom Park political classes

Zama's research revealed that there was considerable unevenness in terms of the extent to which the CLING project reflected a Freirean influence – whilst it was very clear that it was intended to be Freirean, and was informed by Freirean ideas, in terms of its implementation, there was in fact little evidence of this. She also found that there was a lack of clarity about the exact status of the project after funding for the project formally ended in 2011, but according to at least some of those from Freedom Park who were involved in the CLING project (including the CLING co-ordinator, Christopher, and two

of the CLING facilitators, Khule and Phaks), the project has morphed into a new non-formal educational project, the 'political class'.

There is no clear story of how the political classes came into being, or who started them. However, according to Christopher, they are facilitated mostly by 'members of the political organisation…the Socialist Party of Azania, which is people that belong to the Black Consciousness'.

Phaks is very involved in the political classes, arguing that they are where 'political', 'real' education happens because:

> We learn about burning political issues. When the subject is on the land for example, we all go and read on what has to go into the discussion. The teachings are dependent on what is burning at the time; some topics get carried over. (Phaks)

Velaphi, a member of Abahlali, who was also involved in the classes, contends that the political classes are important because:

> In the Friday classes we teach people about umzabalazo womuntu omnyama (the struggle of the black person). There are people who are knowledgeable about the whole notion of black power so they teach that. You see, the government of the day is teaching lies, so in these classes we correct those lies. They (the ANC) are now adopting the concept of Black Consciousness as their own, we go back to what it is, what it means, we help them separate the truth from lies. (Velaphi)

> This Friday we will discuss State Capture. What is our understanding of state capture, how does it impact our life as ordinary people. So we discuss different issues and concepts like socialism, capitalism, understanding of the state, power, power relations between genders. Things like that we call political education, black consciousness, what is Pan-Africanism, what is Marxism, different ideologies and theories that are prevalent and developed politically and the economy how it is going? What is this market economy that is being talked about? What is Marxist economy? So we engage with different concepts. (Christopher)

Zama first heard about the 'political classes' during a march by the community whilst she was conceptualising her study. They told her that people who had been involved in the CLING Project were running 'political classes', and we agreed that it would be useful to observe a class to try to establish its relationship to the CLING, and whether it might have been influenced by the Freirean intent of the project as a whole.

The class observation was the final research method used in the study. By this point, it was clear that the classes were an important current adult learning experience in the community. It also seemed clear that in-depth data and 'hands-on' experience of the issues that were discussed and how they were discussed could only be obtained through actually observing the class.

Khule had been a CLING facilitator (and had participated in facilitator training) and is also a member of Abahlali. He had been part of the transect walk and the facilitator focus group, and had also been interviewed. Khule had invited Zama to the political class so she could get a sense of what happens in these classes. Thus, in September 2018, Zama observed and recorded one of the classes[4]. Below we present her extensive observational notes, in order to allow us to analyse the interactions in detail and theorise this through Freire:

> The lesson was held in one of the classrooms at Freedom Park Primary School. Khule waited at the door, it seemed to me hopeful of more participants. He then stood in front of the class and waited for everybody to take their seats and settle down. I got the impression this is not something he had anticipated; I think he was in fact waiting at the door for

someone else, he hoped someone else would come and when they did not he had to take the lead.

The group started off with eight people, but once others came there were ten people. They were mostly young, the youngest being around fifteen or sixteen (Carla), but with two elderly women (pensioners around seventy years or so). There were only three men, including the facilitator. The two elderly women did not talk much, not to the facilitator nor to the other members of the group. The discussion was predominantly in English for the benefit of Carla and Cleo (who are both 'coloured') with some isiZulu and a bit of Sesotho. Cleo spoke a bit of isiZulu and Sesotho. Cleo and Carla, I learned later, were Freedom Park residents. Cleo is also a member of Abahlali (the community organising committee). I was not sure if Carla was simply accompanying Cleo, but from her later engagements, it seemed she was really enjoying the class. The rest of the group, like Muzi (who joined in later, but seemed like a regular member), really struggled to speak English but continued nonetheless. The facilitator (Khule) spoke both English and isiZulu.

Khule started off by asking the 'learners' if they remembered what they had to research as the subject for the day's discussion. They did not seem to remember, so he isolated those that were not present and therefore could not know what was to be researched, and paid attention to those that were present in the previous session. Zoleka remembered that they were supposed to do research on socialism. Khule then reiterated that socialism was indeed the subject that was meant to be discussed for the day. The interaction was that of a teacher and his students.

He asked them to share what their research had discovered socialism to be. Carla responded that socialism has to do with the social media where one says what they want to say without fear. Cleo said it referred to the system where the means of resources are shared. The facilitator then said he had looked up the word in the dictionary, and proceeded to read out the dictionary meaning. He read, 'socialism is a political and economic theory advocating that land, transport, natural resources and the chief industry should be owned and managed by the state'. He asked if everybody understood that meaning. Cleo asked for the definition to be repeated. He repeated it and said that according to his understanding this means that the land in which they live should not be owned by anyone, but it has to work for everybody who lives in it. The economy should also belong to the people, and the people should suggest how they want it to work. When it came to industries, he continued, like Devland (the industrial area across the Golden Highway from Freedom Park), they must support the people; the profit that Devland makes on the land must be shared amongst them as the people living in the surrounding area. That would be how the system of socialism would work; the state would be us, with 'us' being the people. Nobody will have the power over the money but the people.

Cleo raised the issue of state capture[5] and asked how the people will own resources in view of the events around state capture and how the minority is taking hold of the state. Sonto (who had been sitting quietly and minding her own business) argued that the state could not be all of us, but only a few of us; even though they are part of us, how do we ensure that once they have power it does not corrupt them? She asked how the sharing of resources would work, because not so long ago teachers went to courses to learn to teach in an outcomes-based manner, but what they did was to teach the same way as they had always taught because that is the only way they knew how to teach - in an authoritarian manner. Her question, she said, had to do with people doing the same thing which they had seen work, as opposed to embracing a new concept.

At this point Cleo suggested that they change the seating arrangement and form a circle such that the facilitator is not the one dominating as this was supposed to be a discussion. At that point we moved to the front of the class where the facilitator had been standing and sat in a circle. Cleo continued to say she feels as if the class is dominated by three people only; the facilitator concurred and said he also did not want to dominate the discussions.

After a lot of shuffling and chair dragging, Cleo responded that what they could do to address the issue of power corrupting people, is that they could all decide to have a co-operative and run it in the socialist manner; everyone would work for the same salary. So, she continued, it cannot be true that people could ever be part of the state because the state is on another level and they are the majority at the bottom. The facilitator, who was now part of the circle, urged the class to talk and said he did not want this to be a conversation between himself and Cleo but a discussion amongst all of them. He continued to remind them that they had agreed to do research on socialism and BCM (Black Consciousness Movement). He, however, did not do his research on BCM and will only do it next week. He then thought to stick with the definition that he had found in the dictionary and work with it to gauge how much they understood socialism. He reminded them to take things seriously so that whenever people were asked to do research on a certain topic, they did that (i.e. disciplining them).

Muzi said he understood socialism to be inclusive no matter what, from the means of production to everything, everything must be shared, 'Such that there is nothing for anybody…all of us we are equal and we equally share everything'. He was therefore not sure how socialism worked when it came to defence and security services; would they also belong to the state? The facilitator asked the group to respond. Cleo asked Muzi to elaborate. Muzi said what he was saying was that, as mentioned, socialism is about sharing everything, means of production, loss, profits, everything gets to be shared; what he failed to understand was where soldiers and security services like policemen, fitted under socialism.

Muzi commented that at the core of socialism there was Black Consciousness, therefore they should have started the discussion with a brief recap of Black Consciousness because that would have reminded them that they are the same by identity and as people. That discussion would have reminded them that when you are black, by nature you are a socialist, because as black people sharing is in our nature… Muzi went on to say socialism is therefore not easily accepted by capitalists; when one speaks about socialism 'the capitalist will kill you because you will be pulling meat out of their mouths'.

Carla said her understanding of socialism was that it focused on people that have money; how was it going to be possible to make people on social media change this and make the world see that they also wanted security and food. Cleo said to help Carla understand, she was going to go back to the 'poisonous' definition of the dictionary about the land belonging to the state. She said socialism was on a different level and there was socialism as a government system, and socialism on the social media level. The socialism as a government system is thus totally different from what Carla was saying, in that it did not focus on people who have money and is totally against maximisation of profits. She then reiterated the need to go back and do research because clearly they did not do it.

Muzi had a question and wanted to know why, if socialism was such a good thing, it was only practised by a few countries. The facilitator responded that it was because people do not want 'us' and 'we' but want 'I'. For example, it is better for people to say, 'this is my phone', and not 'this is our phone'. He said people hated socialism because of greed.

Sonto had a question about how they were to curb the need to discriminate which is in all of them. Solo (a member of Abahlali) apologised for being late, and said it was only then that he got back from work. Solo said there was a need to return ubuntu to the people. He said that the root of the problem was that as a nation they had essentially taken over other people's cultures and were now failing because what they were now doing was foreign to them. Muzi said the language had been central to the 'colonisers' fight. They fought through dividing the black nation with (or through) language. At this point I had to leave as it was getting dark.

Whilst, as discussed, the research as a whole and the class observation in particular did not intend to specifically look at the issue of 'political literacy' as Freire understands it, this (and his notion of the 'authoritarian left') is something that both authors are interested in, and have been discussing together for some time. Our experiences of both Apartheid and post-Apartheid South Africa are very different (one of us being black, and one of us being white), but we were both involved, in different ways, in the anti-Apartheid struggle and have always considered ourselves politically 'left' whilst being deeply sceptical of party politics. We are both also involved in a project to record Freire's legacy in our country, including the ways in which the BCM drew on and used Freire's ideas. We thus wanted to think through how this particular class compared to those run by the BCM in the 1970s, using the lens of 'political literacy'. Whilst clearly this is a single class, and our claims must thus necessarily be very tentative, we would argue that using it as a case study is helpful in teasing out what Freire meant by 'political literacy', and the usefulness of this concept in current times.

Freire and the pitfalls of political education

Right from the start, Freire was clear that there is a fundamental and critical difference between the kind of political literacy he was advocating for, and what he variously described as authoritarian left or Stalinist education. In an interview in 1973, Freire critiqued the revolutionary 'avant-garde' who fall into 'bureaucratic authoritarianism': 'In smothering the people's capacity for conscious action, they would transform those people into simple objects to be manipulated' (1985, p. 161). Freire argued that the problem was that the revolutionary leader/educator saw themselves as 'exclusive owners of the truth' (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 112). Rather s/he needed to 'reject giving the solution and… be honest. Say first, I don't know; and secondly, if I did know I would not tell you…' (ibid., p.127).

Freire frequently pointed to the disjuncture between what revolutionary leaders say, and what they actually do (Freire, 1985, 1997, 2014; Horton & Freire, 1990), 'a certain contradiction between the speech of a revolutionary and his or her practice' (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 217). He felt that this was often the result of an inability or unwillingness to trust the masses:

> Insofar as they keep within themselves the myth of the natural incapacity of the masses, their tendency is one of mistrust, of refusing dialogue with those masses, and of holding to the idea that they are the only educators of the masses. (1985, p. 163)

In contrast to this, the democratic educator cannot avoid 'insisting on the critical capacity, curiosity, and autonomy of the learner' (Freire, 1998, p. 33). The distrust in the thinking of the people leads to an emphasis on content: 'It is precisely the authoritarian, magical comprehension of content that characterizes the "vanguardist" leaderships, for whom men's and women's awareness is an empty "space" waiting for content' (2014, p.105):

> They feel they belong to a special group in society… which 'owns' critical awareness as a 'datum'. They feel as if they were already liberated, or invulnerable to domination, so that their sole task is to *teach* and *liberate* others. Hence their almost religious care – their all but mystical devotion – but their intransigence, too, when it comes to dealing with content, their certitude with regard to what ought to be taught, what ought to be transmitted. Their conviction is that the fundamental thing is to teach, to transmit, what ought to be taught. (2014, p.105)

For Freire, this happens in the classroom, in the trade union, and in the slum, where it is 'imperative to "fill" the "empty" consciousness that, according to this individual, the workers [or shackdwellers] do not have' (2014, p. 106). An emphasis on content is also sometimes at the expense of action – which is, after all, the point: 'reflection alone is not enough for the process of liberation. We need praxis or, in other words, we need to transform the reality in which we find ourselves' (Davis & Freire, 1980, p. 59); and this must be communal, not individual. The emphasis on content can also lead to the reification of 'the text', something about which Freire is particularly rude:

> Intellectuals who memorize everything, reading for hours on end, slaves to the text, fearful of taking a risk, speaking as if they were reciting from memory, fail to make any concrete connections between what they read and what is happening in the world, the country, or the local community. They repeat what has been read with precision but rarely teach anything of personal value. They speak correctly about dialectical thought but think mechanistically. (Freire, 1998, p. 34)

Reifying the text is thus about emphasising content, but specifically content which conforms to 'the party line', that which the educator/revolutionary leader knows and the learner/follower does not know. It is thus disconnected from their lives – and hence ahistorical and decontextualized.

'Political literacy', by contrast, is rooted in context and history, something which is essential because 'theory is always becoming…knowledge always is becoming. That is, if the act of knowing has historicity, then today's knowledge about something is not necessarily the same tomorrow. Knowledge is changed to the extent that reality also moves and changes. Then theory also does the same' (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 110).

This means, as discussed above, that the future is open-ended. Over time, Freire became increasingly critical not only of those who had the answers, but those who promised a given future. He felt it was important to 'make the popular classes more aware of the problematic nature of the *future'* (1997, p. 79) – socialism will not come simply because it is announced. 'The truth is that the future is created by us, through transformation of the *present'* (1997, p. 79).

As discussed above, this transformation requires action, and it has to be practical: 'I don't believe in the kind of education that works in favor of humanity. That is, it does not exist in "humanity". It is an abstraction. Humanity for me is Mary, Peter, John, very concrete' (Horton & Freire, 1990, pp. 100-101).

The Freedom Park political classes and Freire's 'political literacy'

In thinking about the 'political class' in Freedom Park, we can see a number of the issues Freire raises in connection with 'political literacy'. One of these is the issue of content. In the class, the facilitator began by reminding the learners that they were supposed to have done research on socialism – socialism, then, as a topic of content, was intended to be the basis of discussion (rather than, for example, what was going on in Freedom Park, or even previous discussions). After asking them to talk about what they had found out in their research, the two English-speaking learners responded – either of which response (although very different) could have been a useful basis for discussion. But instead, Khule immediately turns to the 'text', in this case, the dictionary definition. After re-reading this, when Cleo asks that it be repeated, Khule explains it to the class – i.e., he is the one who 'knows'.

What follows is a fascinating discussion, led by Cleo and Sonto. Both immediately refer to actually existing reality as they perceive it – state capture, the problem of authoritarian teachers. But what both are trying to do is to express their frank scepticism that any state – socialist or otherwise – would actually act in the way that the theory of socialism (as portrayed by Khule) suggests. They are raising two possible problems – that a state may be derailed by 'capture' by a small group (i.e. become corrupt); and that the state is not, ever, actually everyone (i.e. it consists only of a small number of representatives). Cleo's answer to this conundrum is to bypass the state, and create actually existing practical socialism within the community – a co-operative.

By this point, the classroom geography has shifted a bit – what had been Khule at the front of the class (much like the 'banking' model of education Freire was so critical of) is now a circle of chairs, to encourage discussion. Khule makes the point of this explicit: he urges the class to talk, saying that he did not want this to be a conversation between himself and Cleo but a discussion amongst all of them. However, at this very point, he then reminds them what the 'real' topic of conversation is – i.e. that they had agreed to do research on socialism and BCM (Black Consciousness Movement) (by asking 'old members who knew' or searching the internet on their cell phones if they could). He takes them back to the pre-defined content; and suggests they stick with the definition that he had found in the dictionary and work with it to gauge how much they understood socialism – this with a suggestion that not doing the research (i.e. sticking with the content) suggests that people are not taking things seriously.

Another 'learner', Muzi, now takes the floor for a fairly long period – partly, he is asking a question (essentially about who controls the security forces – a really important point, given the history of Freedom Park!), but partly he is bringing in the other pre-set topic of the day, Black Consciousness. He argues that since socialism and Black Consciousness are so integrally entwined, they should have started the discussion with a brief recap of Black Consciousness - that discussion would have reminded them that when you are black, by nature you are a socialist, 'because as black people sharing is in our nature'. Muzi is here arguing that understanding socialism requires starting from an understanding of what it means to be black – he is, like Cleo and Sonto, trying to grapple with an abstract concept by relating it to lived experience, in this case, the lived experience of being black.

Muzi also expresses some scepticism about the possible socialist future. He suggests that the capitalists are not likely to give up easily, and thus the struggle will be a long one; and then (a bit later) he asks why, if socialism is such a good thing, so few countries have adopted it.

After Muzi raises his concern about a potentially violent future, there is an interesting exchange between Cleo and Carla. Carla is still clearly confused about what socialism actually is, conflating it with social media – despite Khule's definition and explanation. It is Cleo who now helps her, precisely by starting with Carla's very first contribution to the class – that which was ignored by Khule in favour of 'the text'.

This discussion allows an opening for a critique, by Sonto, of the earlier argument made by Muzi, that socialism is an inherent part of what it means to be black – she is disputing this, by arguing that everyone has an innate need to discriminate – she wants to explore how socialism might be possible, given her analysis of human nature. This question is immediately dealt with by Solo (a member of Abahlali), who draws on the African cultural concept of 'ubuntu' – by arguing for a return to 'ubuntu', he is arguing (as Muzi does) that socialism is somehow an innate part of being African, one which other people's cultures have displaced.

What we see in the class are thus a number of the traits that Freire expressed concern about in 'left' education. Despite the evident will of the learners to engage and explore the concept of socialism by relating it to their context, the facilitator (possibly because of his lack of confidence, or his lack of experience (although he was a trained CLING facilitator), or an inability to reflect and theorise his own practice), whilst encouraging the 'learners' to enter into a dialogue, in fact shuts this down to reaffirm 'the line' (as set down in his text – the dictionary definition). There is a disjuncture between what he says and what he actually does. He is not prepared to say 'I don't know', much less to refuse to say what he knows. His intention is to transmit that which the 'learners' need to know. This echoes Freire's argument about:

> the certitude, always, of the authoritarian, the dogmatist, who knows what the popular classes know, and knows what they need even without talking to them. At the same time, what the popular classes already know, in function of their practice in the interwoven events of their everyday lives, is so 'irrelevant', so 'disarticulate', that it makes no sense to authoritarian persons. What makes sense to them is what comes from their readings, and what they write in their books and articles. It is what they already know about the knowledge that seems basic and indispensable to them, and which, in the form of content, must be 'deposited' in the 'empty consciousness' of the popular classes (2014, p. 106).

By using the definition as the starting point – 'socialism is a political and economic theory advocating that land, transport, natural resources and the chief industry should be owned and managed by the state' - socialism becomes abstracted, ahistorical and decontextualized. This is in stark contrast with Freire's requirement that conscientisation begin with lived experience. In this class, there is very little evidence of starting with the experience of people, much less their thinking; and (although this may have happened after Zama left), no evidence of moving towards any kind of action – the only concrete action proposed (after the reflection on the very possibility of a truly socialist state) is completely ignored, in favour of returning to the 'line'.

It could be argued, with some justification, that this, single (part of a) class might be atypical of the 'usual' political classes in Freedom Park. But, as we have discussed above, in what people involved have said about the political classes, some of the same key tendencies are evident – that of an emphasis on content, on text, over the lived experience of ordinary people in Freedom Park; and that of a dichotomy between 'those who know' and 'those who have to be taught'. When Christopher speaks of 'Ama-issues akhona (dominant issues) get to be discussed in these classes. Like this Friday we will discuss State Capture. What is our understanding of state capture, how does it impact our life as ordinary people?', he speaks of it as a macro issue impacting on ordinary lives, rather than something emerging organically from the lived experience of people in Freedom Park – despite the fact that corruption, as we have seen, is such a dominant discourse and experience in Freedom Park. As Khule somewhat poignantly says, 'each time there are new people and this requires that the facilitator Ntate Mabasa starts all over again and starts with black consciousness'.

We can also see a stark contrast between this project and the BC project of the early 1970s, in the overtly party political nature of the classes, and conscious teaching of BC. According to Khule, ANC members are not part of these classes 'since most of our problems are created by the ANC . . . the party of black people which is oppressing other black people'. He argued that the discussions in the class would expose the ANC members as they may have to speak ill of their organisation. He also said of the 'political classes' that:

> They teach us about being black. They tell us to be proud of being black …These classes have taught me to have pride in my being black and to refuse to be treated as a sub-human.

Whilst this clearly links with Freire's notion of dehumanisation, it also presents Khule with a dilemma, in that he recognises his oppressor as potentially also black. In this sense, Khule seemed to be struggling to reconcile the analysis he was learning in the class (to be proud of being black, and reject the dehumanisation of racist oppression) with what he was actually experiencing in the community (i.e. black people acting as oppressors or sub-oppressors).

Conclusion

Hamilton et al. (2012) argue that 'literacy is socially constructed and cannot be seen outside of the powerful interests and forces that seek to fix it in particular ways' (p. 2); and that it 'only has meaning within a particular context of social practice' (p. 3). In this article, we have considered two BC-related projects in very different historical contexts – that of Apartheid and post-Apartheid South Africa. We argue that left education also needs to be carefully considered in terms of 'powerful interests and forces', and the particular context within which it takes place; and that, if it is to be truly emancipatory, it needs to be located within the 'old' theory of Freire's 'political literacy'.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Freedom Park folks for sharing their stories and inviting Zama to the political class.

Notes

[1] A house that was built as part of a government-funded social housing project. Named RDP after the Reconstruction and Development Programme of the African National Congress (ANC) government policy in terms of which such housing was made possible.
[2] SOPA was founded in 1998, when a group of Black Consciousness stalwarts broke away from the Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO). SOPA participated in a number of national general elections, but did not achieve sufficient numbers for representation in the national parliament. In the 2014 elections, SOPA agreed not to stand independently, but to support a new party, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF).
[3] Not his real name. All names have been changed. The interviews were conducted in 2018 by Zama Thusi.
[4] Zama made extensive notes during the observation, as far as possible verbatim.
[5] South Africa recently underwent a period of 'state capture', in which particular individuals and companies exercised undue influence over the government, including the then president. This process is currently under investigation by a Commission of Enquiry.

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Signposts of change in the landscape of adult basic education in Austria: a telling case

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Abstract

Drawing on a strongly grassroots and expertise-supported development in the field of adult basic education in Austria, this paper traces the current shift to politically motivated interventions. The article is based on a methodologically triangulated case study based on interviews (part 1), review of theory (part 2), and document analysis (part 3). It unveils a unique spirit of empowerment and emancipation in Austrian adult basic education. This spirit currently seems to be at risk. The authors identified five signposts of a changing landscape showing a strong tendency towards impact orientation in terms of employability and upskilling: (1) Standardisation and one of its unintended consequences (2) Technocracy over expertise (3) Narrowing the curriculum (4) Teaching supersedes facilitating (5) Research and development – disliked. In order to preserve the tradition within the framework of adult basic education, the authors emphasise the importance of raising informed and critical voices.

Keywords: Adult basic education; Bildung: case study Austria; critical-emancipatory andragogy; traditions and discontinuities

Introduction

Adult basic education (ABE) in Austria has a history of almost thirty years. It started in Vienna with a pilot project at the *Floridsdorf Volkshochschule* (adult education centre). Basic education courses for German speaking adults were developed and offered from

1990 to 1995.[1] Within this pilot project, basic education for adults was conceptualised in a broad sense, based on andragogical principles (i.a. learner-centeredness), and facilitation of adult learning was clearly guided by the core *Volkshochschulen* principle of emancipation (Brugger, Doberer-Bey & Zepke, 1997, p. 37-52). When referring to this field of Adult Education in theory and practice in Austria, the term *Basisbildung für Erwachsene* (basic education for adults) became widely acknowledged, in line with a broad and general understanding of *Bildung*.

This contribution presents a national case study, comprising an inventory focusing on the genesis and development in terms of theory and practice of ABE in Austria from past to present. This reconstructive approach was based on a triangulation of three research methods: qualitative interviews (part 1), examination of core theories (part 2) and document analysis (part 3).[2] For the first part, two Austrian pioneers and promoters of ABE were interviewed on their significant personal experiences and profession-related theoretical concepts. Their work represents the baseline of the Austrian conception of ABE. In the second part, an examination of foundational concepts corresponding with this baseline was conducted. This literature review outlines core theories (philosophical, educational, and sociological) and provides the theoretical frame foundational to the Austrian expertise. For the third part, a chronological-systematizing analysis of all publications and studies related to ABE in Austria (until 2017) was undertaken. This analysis portrays phases of national development and discourse concerning educational practice and policy, and regarding scientific perceptions and contributions. Recent developments are discussed in the section on the *signposts of change*.

When looking back, a consistent and constant appearance of ABE comes to light. It represents, as outlined in the following three parts, a *spirit* of empowerment: learner-centeredness, lifeworld-orientation, life-deep, life-wide learning, social inclusion, and a *spirit* of emancipation: individual and collective transformation with the desired goal of social change through adult (basic) education. Currently, this *spirit* seems to be at risk because of severe disruptions, which have been rendered visible. These policy-driven and politically motivated ruptures seem to weaken practice-driven grassroots approaches, conventions and quality standards. They seem to fit within the bigger picture: there are strong indications pointing towards a *narrowed frame* and another European country joins the tellers of a *single story*, reducing ABE to employability and upskilling. Therefore, this contribution aims at telling a different story, the original one: A compelling and strong hi*story* of quality development in Austrian ABE and about its mission to serve the learners' wellbeing, tackle educational disadvantage, and promote emancipation and social justice through ABE. The following part is dedicated to the beginning of this story.

Part 1: Back to the roots of ABE in Austria

This section presents findings from e-mail interviews conducted in 2016 with Elisabeth Brugger and Antje Doberer-Bey, both pioneers and promoters of basic education for adults in Austria, who developed and realised the Viennese pilot project (Brugger et al., 1997). Treml (2005, p. 21) noted that pedagogical ideas cannot be observed directly and therefore he claimed: *What is not written in the texts does not exist.*[3] Subsequently, these narrations, following the oral history approach, aimed at identifying significant personal experiences and profession-related theoretical concepts. Interview questions were framed according to the *episodic interview* (Flick, 2007, p. 238ff.). A written interview enables profound remembering and reflecting and it allows communicative validation in a dialogical form (Schiek, 2014, p. 380-383). Narrative analysis focusing on events and

self-presentation (Flick, 2007, p. 436-442) was applied.[4] The main points of the interviews can be outlined as follows:

- *... reducing inequality and promoting autonomy:* At a young age, Brugger[5] came to the conclusion that school should promote *gifts, individuality, curiosity, thinking and learning; as a consequence, I thought, pedagogy and teachers' attitude had to be changed, and sufficient foundations and accesses to knowledge had to be provided for all* (EB: 2). She chose teacher training because she was convinced that *education, knowledge transfer, thinking and learning are valuable vehicles for changing society, reducing inequality and promoting autonomy and justice, if they take place in an appropriate way* (EB: 1). At the teacher training institute in Meran/o (Italy), she encountered a critical and open-minded climate *as a result of the 1968 movement*, a *rather progressive view of the world*, where ideas from the progressive education movement were taught (EB: 16). Working as a primary school teacher, she realized that *with support and encouragement, learning was easier* (EB: 3). Her studies at Austrian universities enabled various formative encounters: She got to know education initiatives (district work) in Berlin (EB: 4), and in southern Italy she researched basic education in community projects (EB: 5).

- *... a person's value does not depend on their level of education:* Doberer-Bey[6] emphasized the importance of personal experiences for her pedagogical/andragogical attitude and ideas – even before *the theoretical positions and the reading* (ADB: 1). She reflected on her childhood in South America, where shortly after her birth Corina, a young indigenous woman, joined her family as a domestic worker: *she lived with us and stayed until I reached adulthood.* Corina could only attend school on an irregular basis and had to make her own living from the age of twelve. *What has this experience taught me? That a person's value does not depend on their level of education.* (ADB: 1) At the same time, it sensitised her to the fact that *the possibilities of shaping one's own life depend on educational opportunities, and social allocation in a society takes place via economic status and educational opportunities* (ADB: 3). Later, she experienced this in her own life: Her parents, who had been academically educated themselves, could not afford her higher education due to health problems. So, she worked as a secretary in South America, later also in Germany and experienced *the (social) narrowness, the limited possibilities, also as a woman* (ADB: 4). With the help of friends of her family, she managed to initiate change: *when I left, letters of application to the university and to a student dormitory were drawn up* (ADB: 5). *It was the confidence in my abilities and the right amount of support that opened the way for me.* (ADB: 6) Her academic education at German universities was clearly influenced by the 1968 movement, i.e. participating in political debate or organising seminars autonomously (ADB: 7-8).

- *Back to professional roots – crossed paths:* After a few years as a teacher and in further teacher training, Brugger decided to focus entirely on adult education in the early 1980s. For many years, until her retirement, she was Pedagogical Director of the *Volkshochschulen* umbrella association (EB: 19). In the post-war years, many *Volkshochschulen* offered courses in orthography (EB: 6, 23). However, she recognized a different need: On the one hand, help was needed in filling out course registration forms; on the other hand, older residents and those with a migration background were often unable to participate in the written documentation of her oral history project. As a consequence, coaching and

German reading and writing courses were offered (EB: 6). This marked the beginning of her professional development with regard to basic education for adults, which included networking activities with *Volkshochschulen* in Germany and involvement in academic debate: i.e., contributing to an international comparative study (Lichtner, 1988), or absorbing concepts and initiatives in Great Britain (EB: 7-9). In 1987, she worked as a teaching assistant at Teachers College at Columbia University in NYC, where she became acquainted with Mezirow, who showed interest in Brugger's Viennese oral history project (EB: 9-10). She was familiar with Mezirow's theoretical concept because of Brookfield's 'Developing Critical Thinkers', which she drew on for a comparative analysis of Gramsci and Freire in the context of a critical examination of the role of pedagogy and teachers (EB: 14-15). Thus, Brugger brought the Transformative Learning Theory to Austria (i.a. Marsick & Finger, 1994) and referred to the concept in the documentation of the pilot project, where she used Mezirow's 'perspective transformation' as a heuristic concept for explaining participants' decision to enrol (Brugger et al., 1997, p. 104-106). Having become acquainted with ABE in the USA, she realised the usefulness of computers (i.e. typeface, professional world/occupations), everyday documents (forms, advertisements, announcements, package inserts etc.), and numeracy (EB: 10). Doberer-Bey taught Spanish at an Austrian university, where she gained access to *foreign language growth*, a method developed in Vienna, with authentic materials anchored in the everyday lives of the learners: *This approach was formative for many years of language teaching, and also important as a background to my literacy work.* (ADB: 11). Brugger and Doberer-Bey finally met at an event of the *Volkshochschulen* on political education with reference to South America. Doberer-Bey co-organized this event and, in this context, became acquainted with the works of Freire and Boal (ADB: 12). Brugger and Doberer-Bey discovered a shared understanding of *Bildung* and of adult (basic) education, against the background of traditional education and the school system (EB: 20, ADB: 16). Brugger won her colleague over for the implementation of the pilot project (EB: 20). Planning the pilot project, Brugger pointed out that *it was about enabling the participants to take part confidently in social life with the help of written expression* (EB: 21). In the words of Doberer-Bey: *The offer has to hit the very heart of people's being.* (ADB: 14) This outlines an understanding of education as lifeworld-oriented and aiming at empowerment and (potentially) emancipation. The question whether power relations are examined critically in ABE was seen differently: With regard to the pilot project, Brugger pointed out that this claim would have been set too high, because it was preconditional with regard to the participants' *background knowledge* and their *ability to reflect and analyse* (EB: 21). Doberer-Bey looked at the adult educators' professional development and claimed *awareness* that *these power relations exist, that they take effect, mostly at the expense of the weakest [...]. There has to be awareness in order not to blame learners for their 'weakness', their 'failure', if the expected progress is not shown.* (ADB: 24)

Is there an Austrian ABE tradition?

The pilot project ended in 1995 due to cancellation of funding. Doberer-Bey pushed ahead on a project-by-project basis. By the end of the 1990s, she cooperated with colleagues in three major cities (Linz, Salzburg, and Graz), and joint projects *shaped ongoing*

developments (ADB: 25; Doberer-Bey, 2016). This *imprint* is still visible in the relevant documents issued by the Federal Ministry of Education (ADB: 23), an observation which holds true up until 2018 (see discussion of *signposts*). It is probably due to Austria's smallness that over the years a common line has been developed and set as a binding national standard through negotiation processes between leading experts and policy makers, culminating in the national programme Initiative Erwachsenenbildung/*Adult Education Initiative* (IEB), providing ABE (and, as a second area, lower secondary education) from 2012 on. This standard has many authors and is the result of many years of professional work. Nevertheless, Brugger's and Doberer-Bey's pedagogical and andragogical ideas and expertise led to the pilot project. These primary roots and its spirit laid down the foundations of ABE in Austria.

A pivotal trajectory of this foundational work is empowerment through learner-centeredness in terms of recognising and building on participants' abilities and needs. This leads to didactical approaches based on learners' previous knowledge, experiences, interests and lifeworld (Nuissl, 2010) and asks for a learning culture of appreciation and recognition (Fleming, 2016). This corresponds with the depiction and notion of learners as 'competent comrades' (Belzer & Pickard, 2015) and contributes to raising and recognising the learners' voices. This root also draws on a life-deep and life-wide understanding of adult (basic) education, an extensive understanding of literacies and a holistic notion of *Bildung*, understood as transformations of basic figures of self- and world-relationship, as formulated by Kokemohr (2007). In their broad conception of ABE, Brugger and Doberer-Bey stand in a tradition of education as outlined in part 2. Findings based on qualitative interviews with adult educators and learners in ABE in Austria showed preconditions for and effects of transformation in terms of personal development and social inclusion (Kastner, 2011). Critical-emancipatory concepts and theories contributed to this core foundation in terms of illuminating and questioning power structures (Freire, 1973) aiming at humanisation and democratisation. The Transformative Learning Theory offers an integrated approach of promoting and understanding individual and collective transformation in ABE with regard to (self-)empowerment, emancipation and – ultimately – social change (Brugger et al., 1997, p. 104-106; Kastner, Motschilnig & Cennamo, 2018; King & Heuer, 2009; Tett, 2018; Wright, Cranton & Quigley, 2007).

The following part paints a picture of the *Zeitgeist* for the significant personal experiences and profession-related theoretical concepts of Brugger and Doberer-Bey, and outlines the theoretical frame of reference for the baseline of ABE in Austria.

Part 2: A theoretical frame of reference for the Austrian case

Referring to Brugger's and Doberer-Bey's pedagogical/andragogical concepts (based on the interviews), the following section outlines selected core theories related with the very beginning of ABE in Austrian in a reconstructive way.

- ***Lebenswelt – a significant concept:*** The concept of the *Lebenswelt/lifeworld* shines through past and present pedagogical learning theories in many variations (Göhlich, Wulf & Zirfas, 2014). In Husserl's philosophical phenomenology (1970) and Schütz's social phenomenology (1974), *Lebenswelt* is concerned with the recording of subjective everyday world(s) or worlds of experience. These are culturally shaped worlds of meaning grounded in every experience, understanding and interpretation of the given environment. Drawing on Lewin's *field*-concept,

life space thus proves to be a *performative* reality (Deinet, 2014, p. 8). The subject in the phenomenological perspective is a *product-producer* of life and social reality (Meyer-Drawe, 2000, p. 103). Socialisation theories from Mead via Goffman to Bourdieu and Habermas advocate the assumption that socialisation processes occur through (life-deep and life-wide) explanations with which subjects make the world significant to themselves (Honig & Behnken, 2012, p. 12). Bourdieu (1982) created a vivid concept for the interaction between subject and environment with the notion of *habitus* (p. 171-173). In this concept, the sense of an increased sensitivity for the integration of learning and educational processes in cultural, economic and social contexts is strengthened, without ignoring the *single* subject's perspective. Habermas' (1981, 1988) concept of the world we live in (and work in) also refers to an intersubjectively constructed *sedimented rule knowledge* (Habermas, 1988, p. 348). In a certain sense, the *life world* represents the inner perspective, but is integrated into social systems (outer perspective). Thus, *life worlds* are never completely *free of power and domination* (Habermas, 1981, p. 40); they are literally *colonized* by mediation instances such as money, media, and power (p. 476). According to Habermas, a *free space* for an *equal* communication – where power is certainly present but reflected by all parties – is the *yardstick for the degree of emancipation of a society* (Boeser & Schnebel, 2013, p. 56). This *free space* may only be achieved in the reflexive justification of a joint *communicative space* according to Habermas. *Lebenswelt* provides a foundation for the broad and general understanding of *Bildung* in ABE, and *Lebensweltorientierung* (Arnold, 2010, p. 185) represents a core principle of adult education. As described in part 1, *Lebenswelt* has significant meaning in the personal experiences and professional activities of Brugger and Doberer-Bey.

- ***The dialogue – a Denkfigur/figure of thought:*** *Dialogue* is a pivotal *Denkfigur* in Habermas' critical theory and Freire's description of dialogue as a source of liberating educational work (Schreiner, Mette, Oesselmann & Kinkelbur, 2007, p. 23). *Dialogue* does not mean a dialogue between isolated subjects, but is in its basic structure already a *political, communal, collective educational process* in which those in dialogue address their common action and reflection to transform and *humanize* the world (ibid., p. 10). In a *free* (communicative) *space*, where narratives and experiences are exchanged, moments of reciprocal empowerment may emerge. The latter happens by reflecting power structures and social inequalities (e.g. gender, ethnicity, social class). Liberating empowerment, which does not intend to *domesticate* learners through education, is a prerequisite for appreciative and emancipatory adult (basic) education. This conception points beyond researching learners in their living environments and focuses on interactive and social learning and transformation processes. The (Austrian) *roots*, as shown above, were inspired by the socio-critical spirit not to act exclusively formatively, but to enable transformation of learners, professionals and society. Contrasting the mainstream discourse of economisation of education, this concept aims at personal and collective change regarding patterns of action, thought and world meanings and critical perception of the self and the significant-others (Von Felden, Schäffter & Schicke, 2014, p. 71). *Dialogue* thus entails major potential for transformation and social justice.

- ***(Multiple and situated) literacies*** **in the Austrian approach:** Freire's pedagogical activities were a source of inspiration for the Austrian approach to ABE (Doberer-Bey, Hrubesch & Rath, 2013, p. 218) as well as for the *New Literacy Studies* (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic, 2000; Tett, Hamilton & Crowther,

2012). A critical revision and expansion of literacy is a mutual endeavour understanding literacies as a social practice. Problematically, according to Bourdieu, the exclusivity of the *legitimate language* in Western epistemologies as the dominant perspective of *literality* is focused on the idea of proficiency in reading and writing as a sufficient precondition for educational advancement and political participation (Grotlüschen, 2012, p. 61-69). Social and economic inequalities would thus simply be ignored and the consequences of discourses on domination and power individualized (Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1996). The questioning of such misinterpretations is pivotal for critical-emancipatory approaches: Freire claims that pedagogy is never neutral (Schreiner et al., 2007, p. 33-34). According to this understanding, 'multiple literacies' (Street, 2003, p. 79) are crucial. Regarding knowledge production, the New Literacy Studies asked how socially sensitive research is possible at all with a Western, dominant, and normative regulative. As an attempt to respond, 'a conceptual apparatus' for research purposes and professional practice was developed. This provides for a distinction between 'literacy practices' and 'literacy events' (ibid.). *Literacy practices* narrow the view to the (formative) learning of cultural techniques. The term *literacy event* refers to situated learning in the *Lebenswelt*, based on experiences (bodily, emotional and spiritual). This idea of holistic learning is represented in various learning theories, where learning is conceptualised as an *incidental* moment (Grotlüschen, 2015, p. 232; Künkler, 2011). A literacy *event* refers to the holistic and physical grasping of 'Reading the Word and the World' (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Subsequently, *holistic* learning experiences may promote empowering learning processes; and learners may turn from subaltern subjects into sovereign (Gramsci, 1949) and liberated subjects (Schreiner et al., 2007, p. 31).

- *Formative learning or transformative Bildung:* Brugger's and Doberer-Bey's critical position towards a traditional understanding of learning and teaching (curriculum-driven, hierarchical), as represented in conventional education, entailed an examination of alternative (adult) learning theories (drawing on Mezirow or Freire) and praxis. There is a variety of pedagogical/andragogical (non-mainstream) theories of learning that focus on transformative and/or experience-based processes: This *debate* is central to Faulstich's book '*Lerndebatten*' (2014), where pedagogical/andragogical learning theories were connected: Pragmatism (Dewey), phenomenological learning discourse (Meyer-Drawe, 2000), subject-scientific *relational* perspective elaborating Holzkamp's theory (Künkler, 2011), (neo-)subject-scientific considerations (Grotlüschen, 2015). Koller (2017), referring to Kokemohr, re-visits Humboldt's *Bildung* as a transformative process. The *reflexive shift* (Beck et al., 1996) in *postmodernism* supports the notions of emotional, social and (life) practical dimensions and therefore extends primarily cognitive and constructivist approaches. ABE in Austria has been inspired by transformative ideas of learning and facilitating, and is in line with ideas of critical-emancipatory (liberating) education.
- *Oral history and dialogue as a mental (learning) space:* In the field of lifelong learning (Alheit & Dausien, 2002), biographical-narrative approaches play a central role (Von Felden et al., 2014, p. 61-85). The narrative becomes a *mental rehearsing* (Fahrenwald, 2011, p. 85); Brugger emphasised oral history (projects), where *story telling* is a learning space for perspective transformation. *Re-*production, stabilisation, or transformation of individual and collective beliefs (Neumann, 2000, p. 7) take place in dialogical encounters. Transformation is

intertwined with moments of *un-learning* and/or *re-learning* (Meyer-Drawe, 2012) and is triggered by *disorienting dilemmas* (Mezirow, 1991), *incidences* and *discrepant experiences* to the familiar or habitual. Transformative learning can hardly be forced by and *produced* through guided learning based on a narrow(ing) curriculum.

- ***Appreciation and recognition as a ground for joint transformation:*** Turning to prerequisites for good teaching and learning, a distinctive core element for ABE is *Anerkennung/recognition*. Honneth (1990) understands *Anerkennung* as a concept for political liberation for sovereign subjects. *Anerkennung* is achieved through interactively mediated negotiations in order to balance inner (personal) perspectives and outer (milieu-typical and socio-structural) demands and depictions (Ecarius & Müller, 2010, p. 19). This balancing performance can be very complex: For everything that is not sufficiently representable in the social context of one's own biography (i.e. ABE needs) becomes a *taboo* for a power-less subject, producing the *shame of inferiority* (Neckel, 1991, p. 171). These experiences of (self-)exclusion create the self-image and external depiction of a *deficient individuality* (ibid., p. 172). Drawing on Honneth (1990) and Stojanov (2006), a deficit-oriented depiction of learners needs to be shifted and transformed. In ABE, appreciation is key. Following Tett (2018), who presents findings on 'positive caring relationships' as catalysts and promotors for *reciprocity* and *recognition* (p. 11), this attitude towards learners is also visible in ABE in Austria (BMB Abt. Erwachsenenbildung, 2017; Doberer-Bey, 2007; Krenn, 2013).

This theoretical framework presented here, emphasises the learners' and providers' worldview. It paints a picture of multiple ways of understanding literacies and ABE, against the background of *Bildung*. It promotes dialogical and dialectic debate and facilitates re-thematising and/or shifting debilitating discourses on literacies or adult learners, providing a basis for critical debate with policy makers and professional and intellectual resistance against neo-liberal governance practice as tellers of a *single story* about a restrictive way of outcome-orientation.

The following part, based on a document analysis, portrays phases of national development and discourse.

Part 3: Phases of development of ABE and the Austrian debate

ABE and its reflection did not begin without theory and were at the same time essentially tied to actors in practice, which remained the case in the following years.[7] A chronological-systematizing analysis of all publications and studies related to ABE in Austria (until 2017) show a temporal proximity and clear connection with projects and initiatives funded by governments at regional and federal levels. Based on this document analysis, different phases can be discerned.

>   ***Discovery of a phenomenon by international comparison:*** The reception of debates about *Lebenswelt*, learning theories, reading research and the broadening of the view beyond Austria to the USA (Brugger & Robinson, 1989) and Europe (Brugger, 1990) or to the connection between adult education and literacy in development co-operation contexts (Baha, 1990) coincide with the pilot project at the *Floridsdorf Volkshochschule*. Austria, which was not yet a member of the

European Union (European Community at that time), was able to join international debates mainly through the traditionally well-networked *Volkshochschulen*. Even though there was little prior knowledge about course planning for a still roughly defined target group, the *adult illiterate with German mother tongue* (Brugger et al., 1997, p. 29, 31), it was possible to build on experiences from second chance education. In contrast to the school standards that were didactically adapted to adults in traditional evening classes, the educational goals for ABE still needed to be defined. For this, *basic knowledge in the broadest sense* (ibid., p. 29) should be addressed: Reading and writing (in German) were key, but numeracy, handling of technical devices, knowledge of politics, society, and culture, and social learning and communication were addressed equally in a learner-centred and *Lebenswelt*-approach, drawing on learners' needs and interests. From the very beginning, it plainly went beyond reading and writing courses. Learning tasks showed a clear orientation towards life skills (reading instruction manuals, counting change when shopping, filling in forms, historical contexts for understanding newspaper articles, etc.), and adult educators' tasks included planning, co-ordinating, counselling and facilitating (ibid., p. 37-52). This differentiation can still be found about 25 years later in programming documents on ABE. Unclear whether it was a hidden problem (Doberer-Bey & Rath, 2003) or rather a repressed one (Brugger et al., 1997), the scope of the problem could only be determined by comparative evaluation, which assumed that the number of persons concerned in Austria did not deviate significantly from the share in other industrialised countries. Accordingly, the UNESCO spoke of 300,000 to 600,000 people who do not have sufficient proficiency in reading, writing and numeracy in figures still referred to in 2013 by the Ministry of Education, as no evidence was available to date (Dorninger, 2013). Amid a slowly growing perception on the part of politics and research, special programmes were established at traditional adult education institutions, but also new providers and institutions emerged, which took over capacity building for ABE such as networking, professionalization (Aschemann, 2013; Muckenhuber, 2013) and thematic public relations work (Kammer für Arbeiter und Angestellte für Kärnten, 2005). The path of scientific monitoring and evaluation of practice, which had already started within the pilot project, continued with funding from the Ministry of Education.

Diversity of expressions – but also different concepts: The common term of (functional) illiteracy was increasingly classified as inappropriate in the views of practice (providers, learners), research and politics. However, this consensus ended where an alternative and non-stigmatising concept became necessary: (Basic) cultural techniques, basic education, (il-)literality, literacy, written language competence, basic or key competences, educationally marginalized, etc. can be found side by side and reveal distinct disciplinary approaches or understandings. The attribute *lacking* has increasingly been replaced by *low*, which essentially expresses the ability to develop and – to some extent – the need for development. This differs from sweeping statements about target groups, such as *socially disintegrated* and *in need of help*. To equate poor orthography with poor intelligence in a short-circuit manner was identified as *intellectual snobbery* (Krenn, 2009; Krenn & Kasper, 2012). This follows a credo, which Lenz (2010) articulated on behalf of Austrian adult education: *Nobody is uneducated*. Anyway, explicit arguments about terms had little effect on overarching language regulations (Schlögl, Wieser & Dér, 2011). A theoretically and empirically well-

informed new term, which simultaneously provided an essential dimension of impact, was introduced: *Vitale Teilhabe*/vital participation (Kastner, 2011), which combines the demands of educational work with a comprehensive understanding of impacts for both individuals and society at large. Parallel to this struggle for a non-stigmatizing, non-shameful, anti-discriminatory language, there have been recurring objections from scientists who, often with reference to the paradigm of lifelong learning, have problematized the growing commitment to ABE against the background of power relationships, marginalization in the self-understanding of critical education theory (Christof, Doberer-Bey, Ribolits & Zuber, 2008), and have expressed the accusation of falling for a generalized illusion of problem-solving through education.

- *Collecting evidence – competence assessment:* Austria first participated in a survey on adult competence as part of the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). Results were presented in late 2013 (Statistik Austria, 2013) and in-depth evaluations for low competence levels followed (Statistik Austria, 2014). For the first time in Austria, a data-based statement could be made on the extent to which people are affected, namely that around 17% of 16 to 65-year-olds in Austria (just under a million people) have only the lowest level of (reading) literacy. With this share, Austria is in the middle of the international rankings (Bönisch & Reif, 2014). Looking at those grouped into the lowest competence levels in all three domains tested, the share is 11% (Kastner & Schlögl, 2014). Previous assumptions have clearly underestimated the situation.

- *Challenging multi-level governance:* This new evidence-based situation faces a conceptual diversity, a lack of systematisation of the field of practice, which has only begun to take shape, and the ambiguous political responsibility for adult education in Austria. After a period of funding courses and networks for the development and professionalisation of ABE providers (since 2003), the Ministry started to co-ordinate a contractually agreed policy for the Länder and the Federal Government. This first succeeded in 2012 and is now integrated into the national strategy for lifelong learning (Republik Österreich, 2011). On the way to the accreditation of eligible provisions, however, a regulatory policy measure took place, which defines the field of practice in political terms: In the justification for the national programme IEB it is noticeable that ABE is both an offer for personal development and a condition for economic growth. What is striking is that no reference is made to transnational programmes such as the European Parliament resolution on illiteracy and social exclusion (2002) and the UNESCO Decade of Literacy (UNLD, 2003-2012). While planning and dimensioning were initially dependent on approximations (Länder-Bund-ExpertInnengruppe, 2011), planning for the following periods could refer to PIAAC and monitoring data from the implementation and evaluation of the first programme cycle (Stoppacher, Edler & Reinbacher-Fahrner, 2014). Offers dealing with all programmatically relevant content are accredited, provided they meet defined standards. Pure language courses do not correspond. Without elaborating on this, the standards refer to positions of critical pedagogy (in the tradition of Freire), migration pedagogy and postcolonial theories. In order to ensure that this claim is met, the subject-specific training of the teaching staff is also an element of accreditation. This follows the assessment that the high demands can only be met by sufficiently qualified personnel (Doberer-Bey, 2010, p. 122).

- **Demand and reality of ABE work:** The programming document of the IEB states that provisions are committed to be *demand-driven* (IEB, 2015, p. 16), want to *enable people to solve every day problems* and in this way create conditions for active social, political and professional participation (ibid., p. 18). Additional guidelines offer further descriptions: *ABE work makes cosmopolitanism and awareness of transculturality possible and allows social exclusion mechanisms and discrimination to be recognised and critically reflected. [...] It encourages individuals to help shape and change the world instead of 'only' living in it.* (BMBF, 2014, p. 4) In this way, the understanding of the *Lebenswelt* as a milieu is countered and tensions between a conservative ideal, the acquisition of traditional cultural techniques, on the one hand, and formal education as a socio-political programme, on the other, become apparent. In practice, this claim can probably only be partially fulfilled, since it is necessary to link up with real preconditions. Tenorth (2004, p. 170) soberingly states:

   In many cases, it is not so much the initial reasons that are addressed here, but rather the bright heights of target concepts, which describe the end and the maximum, not the realistically described basis or the everyday starting point of educational processes.

Signposts of change: Is Austria joining the tellers of a *single story*?

Some policy-driven attempts, structural and programmatic in nature (IEB since 2012), and even politically motivated ruptures (since 2018) have been rendered visible. The main questions are: Is the sustainability of almost 30 years of *Austrian tradition* in ABE, as reconstructed in this article, at risk? If so, what consequences might occur?

These disruptions shall be discussed as signposts of a changing landscape:

1. **Standardisation and one of its unintended consequences:** The first signpost is rooted in the structure of the IEB. Funding for providers of ABE is per capita and completion rates of courses. Therefore, providers who used to address Austrian *natives* likewise, report a lack of money for outreach measures and raising awareness. The monitoring data show that those people with basic educational needs who speak German as their first language are not reached by the programme in an expected proportion and are clearly underrepresented. This is intensified by the fact that there are few free-of-charge German language courses for speakers of foreign languages (refugees and migrants) in Austria (apart from obligatory integration courses and voluntary offers without quality assurance).

2. **Technocracy over expertise:** The second signpost is presumably explicable by the funding authority's expectations with regard to monitoring the use of funds awarded and in relation to achieving measurable learning outcomes, and consists of several components: Within the Ministry of Education, a generation change is taking place, meaning that educational ideas and concepts of the 1960s and 1970s (critical-emancipatory, holistic, and related to *Bildung*) seem to decline in importance. The Ministry commissioned a consultant company to develop a curriculum for ABE within the IEB. The company itself was not previously involved in ABE. Leading experts in the field were excluded from the curriculum development process. Additionally, providers with high expertise in the field, but dependent on public funding, are not in a position to raise their voices and express disagreement.

3. ***Narrowing the curriculum:*** The implementation of a curriculum leads, as a third signpost, the way to standardisation of learning content by describing learning outcomes in a highly detailed manner and laying down measurable educational levels. This narrows the broad and plural approach of ABE and neglects learners' knowledge and abilities. In addition, the curriculum has a clear orientation towards the labour market, marketable certification/qualification and skills upgrading, in line with a Western, neo-liberal worldview. Acceptance of this binding curriculum and its obligatory learning outcomes on different levels of educational achievement is doubtful for the practitioners and learners. Additionally, facilitation of ABE and learning on a day-to-day level is made more difficult. Overall, this curriculum signifies a disruption with the ideal of learner-centeredness, which was specifically developed to meet the learners' needs and interests. These elements are in stark contrast with the Austrian tradition.

4. ***Teaching supersedes facilitating:*** This signpost involves the adult educators by putting them in an awkward predicament. The new curriculum requires the balancing of participants' needs, interests, and knowledge of curricular requirements in terms of measurable learning outcomes, and of maintaining the providers' responsibilities towards the funding authority. The pivotal question is, whether or not the adult educators will be able to maintain their andragogical approaches to facilitating and learning, and to 'keep learners and their goals at the centre' against all odds, as described for the UK case by Allatt and Tett (2019). For Austria, two essential factors must be taken into account. Firstly, there is a high staff turnover in the field. Secondly, the corresponding chapter on andragogical and critical-emancipatory learning culture (BMBF, 2014) in the programming document of the IEB will be deleted and replaced by the new curriculum.

5. ***Research and development – disliked:*** This signpost appeared within the latest call for publicly funded projects in 2018. Firstly, the Ministry called for developing and implementing ABE courses. This means that the good tradition of project-based innovation in the field and further development/evolution seems to have ended. Secondly, researchers and research institutions were excluded by defining them (us) as ineligible. This meant that research and development carried out jointly by practitioners and scholars and practitioners-scholars dialogue were prevented. Plans for community-based participatory research projects, involving providers, learners, facilitators, counsellors and scholars, could not be realised. One such example was a concept of researching workplace learning as part of *Lebenswelt* in a participatory way by involving formally low-qualified employees in order to jointly research abilities and needs and develop tailor-made continuing education in the workplace.

In lieu of a conclusion: raising voices

Effects of the five signposts described above could provoke declining acceptance and demand because of a possible loss of attraction or attractiveness for learners, adult educators and providers. On a societal level, this could contribute to neglecting the phenomenon of *basic education need*. This would once more lead the way to individualising the 'problem' as such, and the idea of educational inclusion would be abandoned.

For ABE in Austria, expertise-supported development has a longer history than its scientific examination. However, in times of changes and disruptions (neo-liberalism/populism), research gains a particular position and mission in order to observe ongoing shifts and raise a critical voice. Therefore, according to Street (2011, p. 584), *the (telling) case* shows the importance of different narratives and multiple perspectives on literacies. The inventory of practical and theoretical roots provides a framework for understanding what might be at risk (exemplified by the Austrian case). Questioning power relations (on individual, collective and policy/societal levels) is crucial and the importance of critical-emancipatory approaches in science and practice is evident.

The authors claim the responsibility of science and research to move forward theoretical framework(s) and provide counter-hegemonic perspectives and maintain the heritage of critical-emancipatory education (as presented here using the example of ABE in Austria) and a broad understanding of literacies/ABE to support the aims of sustainable humanisation and democratisation for all. A skill-oriented understanding of teaching will not suffice to reach this aim.

It is necessary to observe these major changes in order to bring unintended or even harmful effects into public debate. This is seen as a task to be cooperatively maintained by experts in the field: the community of practice (experts, providers, and learners) and the scientific community in order to safeguard the *spirit* of ABE in Austria, as reconstructed in this article, against fading and disappearing in the long run.

Acknowledgments

Notes

[1] Earlier, according to an international comparative study (Lichtner, 1988), literacy courses for migrants were offered at the Ottakring Volkshochschule in Vienna.[2][1] Part 1 was prepared by Monika Kastner, part 2 by Irene Cennamo, and part 3 by Peter Schlögl. The section on the signposts of a changing landscape of ABE in Austria was especially written for this article in order to contribute explicitly to the call for this issue.

[3] The authors decided to use italics in order to signify quotes that were translated from German to Englisch by them. So these quotes are not literal quotations but informal translations. This applies to the entire text.

[4] The interviews commenced in July 2016 and data collection was concluded in October 2016. Data is available as online and attachment texts. Consecutively, 'EB' refers to the e-mail interview with Elisabeth Brugger, and 'ADB' refers to that with Antje Doberer-Bey, and respective pages of the chronologically organised texts are cited.

[5] Dr. Elisabeth Brugger, born 1954 in Bozen/Bolzano (Italy); E&T: post-secondary college for teacher training (1972) in Meran/Merano (Italy); doctoral programme 1972-1977 at the Universities of Salzburg and Innsbruck (Austria) in educational science and psychology, dissertation on gender-specific socialisation with regard to education and occupation; several research stays (i.a. Australia, Canada); training in Counselling and Supervision 1990-1992; professional activities: 1973/1977-1978 teacher (primary and lower secondary); 1978-1979 teacher training (for civic education); 1987 teaching assistant at Teachers College at Columbia University (Victoria Marsick); since 1985 lecturer for educational science

in higher education; 1981-1986 pedagogical management at Ottakring Volkshochschule; 1987-2014 pedagogical director of the Vienna Volkshochschulen (training for course instructors, quality development, guidance and counselling, programme development, i.a. for oral history, basic education, environmental issues); 2012 state prize for a project on training of elderly volunteers for supporting the learning of children; Elisabeth Brugger raised two children.

[6] Dr. Antje Doberer-Bey, born 1946 in Santiago (Chile); E&T: high-school and bachillerato (general qualification for university entrance 1965) in Santiago; 1968-1974: teacher training (English/Physical Education) at Heidelberg University and school pedagogics at Freie Universität Berlin (Germany); training in Supervision 1996-1998; doctoral programme 2002-2012 at University of Vienna/Department of Linguistics, dissertation on literacy and language development; professional activities: 1978-1991 teaching of Spanish in adult and higher education and for enterprises; 1989-2016 set up and development of ABE in Austria including counselling/facilitating and content development in the pilot project, train-the-trainer/professionalisation, R&D in EU- and nationally funded projects, quality development, cooperating with and consulting of the responsible ministry; 2009 state prize as adult educator of the year for her achievements in the field of ABE; Antje Doberer-Bey raised three children.

[7] Few exceptions for linguistic or didactic questions of first and second language acquisition can be found.

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The Rise and Fall of Adult Literacy: Policy Lessons from Canada

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Abstract

There was a period of time, from the late 1980s until the early/mid-2000s, when interest in adult literacy in Canada was strong among the public, in the media, and with policy-makers, and a policy window opened for the mainstreaming of literacy. Against this background, it is surprising that the Canadian literacy infrastructure was subsequently largely dismantled. Drawing on theories of policy formation, and recent and previous research, including interviews with key stakeholders, we argue that mainstreaming literacy has failed and explore the reasons for this failure. The paper is structured in three sections. First, we report on the construction of an adult literacy infrastructure in Canada over two phases: i) the period from the 1970s up until the launch of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) in 1994; ii) the story of IALS and changes occurring up until around 2005. Second, we examine the reasons for the failure of the mainstreaming of literacy in Canada. We conclude with further reflections on the present situation in which adult literacy has been largely reduced to employability skills which are under-supported.[1]

Keywords: Adult literacy; Canada; IALS; mainstreaming; policy

Introduction

Beginning in the late 1980s, adult literacy emerged as a policy issue in several industrialised countries including Canada (Barton & Hamilton, 1990). This is in large part due to a changing definition and understanding of literacy as no longer a binary construct of literates versus illiterates, but as existing on a continuum, as a contextual social practice

(Street, 1984), and as related to surviving and thriving within a changing workplace and society. The first adult literacy surveys in Canada, which included the Southam newspaper report *Broken Words*, published in 1987, followed by the report *En toutes lettres et en français*, published by the Institut canadien d'éducation des adultes (ICÉA) for the francophone population, pointed to poor literacy skills among the adult population in the country and provoked public debates and policy responses. Canada is a particularly interesting case, as, at one point, interest in literacy was strong among the public, in the media, and with policy-makers. Both Conservative and Liberal federal governments have been supportive of adult literacy over the years. Canada was a driving force behind the 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), conducted in collaboration with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which furthered the adult literacy agenda in the country. Between the 1970s and 1990s, considerable infrastructure was built up for literacy in the form of national and provincial organisations. However, the Canadian adult literacy infrastructure has since been largely dismantled.

This paper provides new insights into the Canadian literacy story. It is based on recent and previous research, including nine semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders who played a part in the story, comprising government officials, experts and academics, and NGO representatives involved in literacy-related policy-making, research, and advocacy work in Canada. The purpose of these interviews was to better understand both the creation of Canada's role in the IALS as well as the history of adult literacy in the country. We also engaged in analysis of secondary data which laid out the historical development of Canadian adult literacy (e.g., Darville, 1992). Thirdly, we draw on data from our previous research on Canadian adult literacy policy (Rubenson & Walker, 2011; Walker, 2008; Walker & Rubenson, 2014). Conceptually, the article is framed by the concept of "mainstreaming" literacy, which will be further explained below, and by theories of policy formation, in particular Kingdon's (2003) theories of "policy windows" and "policy entrepreneurs" (see also Béland & Howlett, 2016). We argue that mainstreaming literacy has failed in Canada and explore the reasons for this failure in three sections. First, we report on the construction of an adult literacy infrastructure in Canada over two phases: i) the period from the 1970s up until the launch of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) in 1994; ii) the story of IALS and changes occurring up until around 2005. Second, we examine the reasons for the failure of the mainstreaming of literacy in Canada. Finally, we reflect on the present situation, in which adult literacy has been largely reduced to employability skills which are under-supported.

Canada's experience with adult literacy is of interest to other countries. Canada is important as a pioneer of adult literacy policies and measurement, especially given its crucial role in the creation of the OECD's IALS and subsequent surveys, which includes the current Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). As we show in this paper, Canada has been unable to support a robust system of adult literacy programming and policy for a number of reasons, which offer valuable lessons about policy-making in adult literacy and more generally, especially for federated states.

Understanding mainstreaming adult literacy in Canada

Throughout the industrialised world, adult education has long been lamented as the "poor cousin" (Newman, 1979) to compulsory schooling, and has clamoured to capture government attention as a policy issue. In Canada, as in other Anglo-Saxon liberal welfare

states, such as the UK, Australia or the United States, adult education has long been associated with basic education for poor people with low literacy skills. Accordingly, as veteran Canadian adult literacy researcher and practitioner, Allan Quigley (1990), has long noted, it has been stigmatised. Literacy practitioners have been associated with volunteer do-gooder grannies in cardigans, rather than professional teachers, and adult literacy has, by and large, existed outside the mainstream of education and its learners outside what is generally understood as the mainstream of society.

"Mainstreaming" literacy is about bringing literacy in from the periphery to the centre of both education and social policy. We are using the term here in three related ways. First, it refers to bringing literacy into the mainstream of social policy, so it occupies a similar space in public policy to compulsory schooling or other social policies (i.e., it is no longer an afterthought, the poor cousin, or lying outside principal government concerns). Second, it means institutionalising adult literacy policy so it links with, and infuses into, other policies and connects with other related government bodies (e.g., in the areas of housing, health, correctional services, employment etc.). Third, the term also refers to bringing adult literacy more squarely into, or embedding it in, existing vocational, language, and skills curricula in a contextualised manner (Conway, Lopez, & Casey, 2007). The hope is that adult literacy, and adult education more broadly, will no longer be thought of as existing for a small and marginalised subset of society, or as separate from other educational programming, and that its connection to all other social policy questions will be recognised. This idea of "mainstreaming" was expressed by several of our interviewees:

> So, the question of literacy training at the end of the day isn't or shouldn't be independent of a whole range of essential skills. And it shouldn't be independent of teamwork skills. It shouldn't be independent of language training for immigrants…The correct policy answer… is to move it [literacy] into the mainstream. (Interview with EI[2], Former Assistant Deputy Minister in the Canadian Federal Government)

> I would say that [mainstreaming literacy means] it needs to be not off on its own, sort of a renegade. It has to find its place within a suite of activities and look like the other programmes and act like the other programmes. (Interview with RA, former programme director in the National Literacy Secretariat, Canadian Federal Government)

> So it's very important that [literacy] be institutionalised, to be connected with everything. So it doesn't fall between the cracks. (Interview with AR, former high-level officer in Human Resources and Skills Development, Canadian Federal Government)

On the one hand, mainstreaming could be a positive direction in terms of integrating literacy into policies that support learning and social development. For example, mainstreaming is part of the strategy of the United Nations to enable the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, where it refers to helping governments 'to land and contextualise the agenda[3] at national and local levels; ultimately reflecting the agenda in national plans, strategies and budgets' (UNDP, 2017). At the same time, mainstreaming literacy has also led to moving literacy away from the community or regional bodies, resulting in a narrowing of literacy in content and purpose, with attendant deleterious effects. For example, previous research on New Zealand's success in developing a national literacy strategy showed how mainstreaming literacy resulted in the creation of a workplace, employment agenda, while undervalorising community literacy organisations (Walker, 2011). Furthermore, in the case of New Zealand, such mainstreaming was accompanied by an intensification of administrative work and bureaucracy, increasing competition for funds, and a disregarding of difficult-to-quantify

literacy outcomes. One of our interviewees used the term "institutionalise" in terms of establishing greater bureaucratic control over literacy. In our view, mainstreaming can be a double-edged sword.

A policy window for mainstreaming literacy in Canada?

From the late 1980s until the early/mid-2000s, a "policy window" existed for mainstreaming literacy in Canada. According to Kingdon (2003), policy windows open when the separate streams of problems, policies, and politics 'are joined at critical junctures' (p. 227). The "problem stream" relates to the public perception of a problem that demands a policy response. With heightened attention to a problem, the "policy stream" can then open up, in which experts examine problems and propose policy solutions. Finally, the "political stream" connects to political will and 'comprises factors that influence the body politic, such as swings in national mood, executive or legislative turnover, and interest group advocacy campaigns' (Béland & Howlett, 2016, p. 222). Indeed, with these three streams flowing freely into one another, adult literacy had the ear of the government, national bodies existed, and literacy practitioners were optimistic that a pan-Canadian literacy initiative was possible.

Nonetheless, unlike places like New Zealand, Canada never really succeeded at mainstreaming, professionalising, or institutionalising adult literacy. This is particularly curious given the tradition of adult education in Canada and its global influence (see Draper & English, 2013), the high standard of its formal education system, and the chief role Canada played in the creation of the OECD's major international adult literacy surveys – specifically, the IALS and Adult Literacy and Lifeskills (ALL) surveys, on which the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and PIAAC surveys build. Yet, since 2006, most of the literacy organisations and research institutes have become defunct, core funding for programming has diminished, and the literacy community remains disillusioned (Smythe, 2018).

Canadian adult literacy practitioners, researchers, and literacy advocates likely had reservations at what mainstreaming literacy could entail; there is, as Addey (2018) explained, a danger of a single story in monolithic and hegemonic interpretations of literacy emanating from the OECD, and in a culture of measuring literacy and comparatively ranking countries in their achievements. At the same time, raising the profile of literacy has been a continuing desire expressed by many practitioners and supportive government officials alike. After presenting a brief chronology of adult literacy in the country from the 1970s until today, we put forward theories for why the promise of mainstreaming literacy in Canada has not been realised.

Adult literacy in Canada from the 1970s to 2006

Canada is well known by adult education scholars throughout the world for its pioneering adult literacy achievements. The Antigonish Movement in Nova Scotia remains an inspiration for the development of cooperatives in its asset-based approach to community development and teaching of literacy (Selman & Dampier, 1991). Frontier College is another exemplary model of adult literacy provision: originating in the 1800s in university extension by sending students to remote communities to help teach literacy to lumber workers, the college continues to offer numerous literacy and language programmes to Canadians, new immigrants, and refugees (p. 56). For the purposes of this paper, however, we start by examining the national state of adult literacy from the 1970s up until this day.

This is because there was arguably no Canadian "literacy movement" or much discussion of problems with adult literacy prior to the 1970s (Atkinson, 2019; Hautecoeur, 2001).

From the 1970s to pre-IALS: Building an infrastructure for adult literacy

In the mid to late 1970s, an infrastructure around adult literacy began to be built and the question of adult literacy started to gain federal government attention. We would argue that this constitutes the beginnings of attempts to mainstream literacy; though at this time, the focus was much more on community literacy than anything else. An incipient network was formed between practitioners and the few researchers publishing on adult literacy, which ultimately became the Movement for Canadian Literacy (MCL), established in 1977 (Draper & Carere, 1998, p. 69). MCL subsequently developed a coalition of 10 literacy organisations across the country, called the Canadian Alliance for Literacy, that later released the high profile publication, *A Call to Action on Literacy*, which was disseminated throughout national media (Shohet, 2001). As Hautecoeur (2001) writes, 'the Movement for Canadian Literacy acquired an almost monopolistic legitimacy in the provinces and with the Federal Government' (p. 413). In addition, the national government started to commission research on adult basic education for the labour force, and the Canadian UNESCO Commission convened, for the first time, a working group to examine literacy in Canada. Québec was arguably key in growing an adult literacy sector and interest. This is, in some ways, not surprising given the historical and ongoing concern in the province to retain its culture and language, as well as its autonomy within – if not separation from – the Canadian state. In particular, the Institut canadien d'éducation des adultes (ICÉA), formed in 1946 to bring together civil society French language adult education organisations in Canada, started to examine questions of adult literacy from a Freirean perspective; its 'ALPHA' publication series on literacy and basic education research was launched in 1978, and was committed to supporting "literacy awareness" in French and Creole across the world (Hautecoeur, 2001).

By the 1980s, many policymakers, researchers, and literacy organisations were no longer satisfied in equating years of schooling with skills and literacy (Jones, 1990). In 1986 (results released in 1987), Canada conducted its first national survey of literacy skills. The Southam Survey, commissioned by the eponymous newspaper chain, examined Canadians' ability to complete "everyday literacy tasks", defining literacy in a way that was adopted almost verbatim in IALS: 'using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential' (Darville, 1992, p. 13). The survey found that 38% of Canadians were below the literacy level deemed adequate for succeeding in society (Calamai, 1987). According to one of our interviewees, 'it caused a political problem for the government. They said 24% of the Canadian adult population can't be functionally illiterate' (Interview with CU, a methodological expert involved in IALS). In response to the Southam Survey, in 1989, the federal government commissioned Statistics Canada to carry out the LSUDA survey—*Literacy Used in Daily Activities*. The precursor to IALS, LSUDA measured Canadians' reading, writing, numeracy and information processing skills across five levels.

During the mid-late 1980s, the federal government started to pay serious attention to literacy. Thanks to lobbying by MCL and other literacy advocates, and to the worrying results of the Southam survey (see Hautecoeur, 2001; Rubenson & Walker, 2011), a funding commitment to literacy was made in 1987 by the Conservative Prime Minister, Brian Mulroney, to create the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) which then formed part

of his re-election platform. The NLS was created 'with a mandate to work with provinces, the private sector, and voluntary organizations to develop resources to ensure that Canadians had access to the required literacy skills' (Hayes, 2013, p. 4). As Darville (1992) noted, 'in 1988…for the first time, the platforms of the political parties included substantial plans to mobilise governmental programmes to respond to the literacy issue' (p. 7). At this time, the link between the economy and literacy was being made strongly in media and by politicians (Walker & Rubenson, 2014), which coincided with the time around which the OECD began publishing reports on the topic (Atkinson, 2019). Following the establishment of the NLS, federal monies were put towards the creation of three additional national bodies of adult literacy: The National Adult Literacy Database (NALD) (1989), ABC Literacy Canada (1989); and Fédération canadienne pour l'alphabétisation en français (FCAF) (1989). Furthermore, 'UNESCO's International Literacy Year of 1990 gave literacy a new visibility in Canada and, in part, prompted the government to lend greater financial and moral support to [literacy]' (Rubenson & Walker, 2011, p. 3). By the beginning of the 1990s, there were six national adult literacy organisations, all but one created between 1977-1989, as shown in the table below.

Table 1: The Six National Adult Literacy Organisations[4]

Date Formed	Literacy organisation	Description
1899	Frontier College	Formerly Reading Camp Association and providing adult education across Canada
1977	Movement of Canadian Literacy (MCL)	Developed coalition of 10 literacy organisations throughout the country
1981	Laubach[5]	Community-based literacy tutoring programme
1989	National Adult Literacy Database (NALD)	The Canadian Adult Literacy Information Network
1989	ABC Literacy Canada	An advocacy and research non-profit
1991	FCAF (since 2011: RESDAC)	Advocacy and national organisation for French language literacy

From all appearances, and for the first time ever, literacy advocates, researchers, and practitioners were no longer outside the mainstream.

IALS in Canada: A "focusing event"

We would argue that IALS could be considered a "focusing event" that opened and sustained a "window of opportunity" (Kingdon, 2003) for mainstreaming literacy in Canada and connecting it to numerous social issues and policies. While the first IALS results were published in 1994, the story of IALS in Canada goes back much further to 1976 when the OECD sent a delegation to Canada to conduct a country report on education which sparked many headlines and educational initiatives (Interview with AO, former director of a leading Canadian adult education NGO). At the time, the push for more data about adult education came, to a large extent, from Canadian NGOs, in

particular the Canadian Association for Adult Education (CAAE) and their francophone counterpart, ICÉA. These two organisations, with funding from the federal government through the Department of the Secretary of State, had commissioned studies on adults' participation in education in the 1980s, such as the Adult Education and Training Survey (AETS) and *One in Every Five*, a survey of participation in adult education in Canada, published in 1984 by Statistics Canada and the federal Department of the Secretary of State (Draper & Carere, 1998). Based on the results of those earlier studies, the 1987 Southam newspaper survey, and the LSUDA study of 1989, Canadian NGOs, as well as other public advocates such as the Canadian journalist and broadcaster Peter Gzowski, were lobbying the federal Department of the Secretary of State to invest in a broader study. The department was interested, and sought to involve the OECD which 'could provide substantive analytical oversight and international credibility' (Interview with DI, senior official in the Department of the Secretary of State). Another reason to involve the OECD was to avoid working with the provinces, which hold jurisdiction for education in Canada: at the time, the provinces resisted publicising any findings on literacy problems in Canada (Interviews with AO, former director of a leading Canadian adult education NGO; and with CU, a methodological expert involved in IALS). The IALS study was then conducted cooperatively between Statistics Canada and the OECD. The expertise for the study came from Canada and the American Educational Testing Service (ETS), building on the same team of statisticians that had already worked on the LSUDA study. The OECD was in charge of the overall coordination, recruiting countries, and planning and framing the reports and products that came out of IALS. The first IALS survey, published in 1994, was conducted in Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States. The funding for the study was shared by these countries, with the United States being the most important financial contributor to the development of the methodology (Interview with CU). IALS examined literacy (broken into sub-components of prose and document) and numeracy. Later versions of the study (i.e., ALL and PIAAC) also looked at additional areas, such as life skills and problem-solving using technology.

According to IALS, 42.2 percent of Canadians were estimated to be in the two lowest levels of the prose scale (out of 5 levels) (OECD & Statistics Canada, 1995). Level 3 was considered the minimum for a person to be able to function adequately in society. The results were widely debated in the media and policy circles, contrary to other countries such as Germany, where the IALS results were equally alarming, but never discussed, or France, which rejected the results and withdrew from the study (Thorn, 2009). For the next decade, IALS greatly contributed to advancing the literacy agenda in Canada. The funding available through the NLS (that had also funded the Canadian contribution to IALS) helped to build up a literacy infrastructure, with provincial organisations being created across the country (Interviews with RA, former programme director in the National Literacy Secretariat). In the years after the publication of the IALS study, the budget of the NLS was increased (Shohet, 2001). According to a former staff member, the NLS was "really golden" at that time: 'We had all our international literacy activity, we had all the start up stuff, things were starting to snow ball and then it rolled into IALS and then that added momentum' (Interview with RA). Prominent literacy advocates, who acted as "policy entrepreneurs", defined by Kingdon (2003) as 'people willing to invest their resources in return for future policies they favor' (p. 204), added to that momentum. For example, the creation of the NLS was enabled by two Ministers, David Crombie and Lucien Bouchard, and two media personalities, Peter Gzowski and Peter Calamai, who had personal reasons to become champions of literacy, such as experiences of illiteracy in the family (Interview with DI, senior official in the Department of the Secretary of

State). Kingdon (2003) describes how 'subjects become prominent agenda items…because important policy makers have personal experiences that bring the subject to their attention' (p. 96). Another key advocate for literacy was Senator Joyce Fairbairn. When IALS was published, she was leader of the government in the Senate and Minister with Special Responsibility for Literacy. She had been one of the driving forces behind the creation of the NLS and used her extensive political influence to lobby for literacy. Her influence cannot be underestimated: 'What triggered the strong government [response to IALS] was Senator Fairbairn; she was a force of nature' (Interview with former federal government official EO). In 2003, a follow-up study to IALS was conducted, the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL). The goal of the survey, in which 12 countries participated – seven in the first round 2002-2003, five in the second in 2006 (Thorn, 2009) – was to measure progress since IALS. The ALL results showed very little difference compared to IALS (Rubenson & Walker, 2011). The Canadian data that were published in 2005 underpinned the launch of the "literacy and essential skills" agenda that was part of the Canadian government's Workplace Skills Strategy announced in December 2004 (Jackson, 2005). The shift to "essential skills" signalled a move away from the citizenship and collective dimensions of literacy and largely reduced literacy to individual skills required for the job market.

In 2005, Claudette Bradshaw, who was Minister of State (Human Resources Development) and, like Fairbairn, an advocate for literacy, set up the federal Advisory Committee on Literacy and Essential Skills (the Bradshaw Committee), which put forth a broad vision for a national literacy strategy that was backed up by a commitment on the part of key actors in the federal government to increase its dedicated $28 million in annual spending on literacy by $30 million over three years (Hayes, 2013). But nothing came of the momentum nor of the activities set in motion by the literacy advocates in the NLS and the federal government. In the years from around 2005 onwards, we can see a clear shift in the policy approach to literacy.

2006 to present: The dismantling of the Canadian literacy infrastructure

It is fair to conclude that the election of the Conservative government in 2006 obliterated the progress towards mainstreaming literacy in Canada. Months after its election, the Harper government announced it would cut $17.7 million in funding to adult literacy, effectively dismantling the NLS. In spite of a budget surplus, Conservative MP John Baird lent support to his government's decision, announcing 'I think if we're spending $20 million and we have one out of seven folks in the country that are functionally illiterate, we've got to fix the ground floor problem and not be trying to do repair work after the fact' (quoted in Delacourt, 2006). The shift in adult literacy policy can only partially be attributed to the newly elected Conservative government, however (Hayes, 2013). Indeed, it had already started in the 1990s with institutional changes in the federal government (Smythe, 2018), which prevented the building of solid foundations necessary for the mainstreaming of literacy. In 1993 the NLS, originally housed in the Department of the Secretary of State (which had responsibility for citizenship), was transferred to Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC), tying literacy to the labour market (Hayes, 2013). In 2007, what was now called Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) abolished the NLS to create the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) (Hayes, 2009). While the literacy strategy pursued by the NLS was community-based and inspired by a view of literacy as a driver of social and personal development, the HR(S)DC's interest in literacy focused exclusively on employment (St. Clair, 2016):

> In about 2002…all of a sudden you know we're literacy and essential skills and we're having to partner with more of the employment side of the department. Where do you put family literacy activities and where do you put community and that started to be a big rub in that didn't fit with the mandate. (Interview with RA)

Even before a Conservative government was elected in 2006, there was a group of civil servants in the HRDC that actively worked against greater investments in literacy. As EO, former federal government official said in our interview, 'the late 90s I would say is when there might have been this shift from the bureaucratic side…to institutionalise literacy.' There was tension between the people working at the NLS and the "bureaucrats" in the HRDC: 'Because of their [people working in the NLS] style of doing business within the government, HRDC people…were pulling their hair out' (Interview with EO). When it came to implementing the recommendations of the Bradshaw Committee, 'the bureaucrats stalled and they stalled and they stalled until there was an election that brought in the Conservatives' (Interview with EO). According to a former NLS staff member, the NLS had been distributing funding to a range of non-governmental organisations, provincial organisations, and community groups, in a rather un-bureaucratic and collaborative manner. As former NLS programme director RA said in our interview, 'at the time, the NLS was all about partnerships.' That changed in 1999 with the scandal that ensued after an HRDC audit that condemned the management of grants and contribution funds. The audit of the NLS was part of a larger, albeit likely poorly executed, audit of all government grants and contributions (Sutherland, 2001). Several of the NLS files were deemed problematic by the auditors, who criticised poor documentation and claimed missing funds (Hayes, 2009). In some ways, the problems plaguing the NLS were not entirely external. "Bureaucratic sloppiness," appears to have been an issue, with awards made without applications and a lack of faithful recording of evidence of consultation (Sutherland, 2001). Nonetheless, the uproar that followed was likely overblown, and the changes that occurred were arguably not warranted (Sutherland, 2001):

> As it turned out there wasn't any real money missing by the end of it, it was just not all the paper was in the file, but by the time everybody figured that out it was too late and so the whole mechanism changed. (Interview with RA)

The audit led to New Public Management reforms, a management philosophy in which governments seek to make the public sector more efficient and cost-effective by increasing privatisation and instituting market-oriented reforms (Boston, Martin, Pallot, & Walsh, 1996). In the case of Canada, the Liberal government at the time introduced greater accountability measures, and tightened bureaucratic processes, such as the use of computer systems (Interview with RA). Before the audit scandal, the NLS had engaged in collaborative development of proposals with literacy organisations across the country. This way of working became much more difficult after the audit, when competitive calls for proposals were introduced. According to RA:

> we [the NLS] had to have calls for proposals and we weren't allowed to talk to anybody if the proposals came through and…the whole atmosphere changed…the leadership at the NLS at that point shifted to just really managing grants and contributions.

As discussed by Elfert and Rubenson (2013), these new bureaucratic arrangements 'resulted in a transformation of the relationship between the federal government and the provinces, in which the provinces [were] no longer partners but clients' (p. 225).

Although previous developments had weakened literacy's foundations, the Conservative Harper government arguably gave literacy the final blow as it was at odds with its social policy ideology. Not only was its 'social policy…based on an ideology and practice of limiting and restructuring the role of the federal government in social affairs' (Prince, 2015, p. 57), but the Harper government upheld an 'institutional-punitive conception of social policy' (p. 54), involving 'the discipline and punishment of deviant individuals' (p. 60). The dismantling of the NLS in 2007 and whittling away of support for literacy reached a culmination in 2014 and 2015 when all national literacy organisations were defunded. Jason Kenney, Minister of Employment and Skills Development (as the HRSDC was renamed), declared in 2014:

> Our government is committed to ensuring that federal funding for literacy is no longer spent on administration and countless research papers, but instead is invested in projects that result in Canadians receiving the literacy skills they need to obtain jobs. (cited in Smythe, 2015, p. 16)

This reduction of literacy to skills for the job market is represented by the shift from literacy to essential skills. The HRSDC's nine essential skill areas, subdivided in five levels of complexity that can be tested through a workplace skills test called TOWES, derive from the IALS and ALL methodology (Jackson, 2005; Pinsent-Johnson, 2011; Smythe, 2015). OLES made applying for grants more competitive and bureaucratically cumbersome, which has had a devastating effect on community organisations in Canada. Furthermore, OLES has failed to apportion the little funding it has (Hayes, 2018); as noted by one of our interviewees, only 50% of OLES allocated funding was spent in 2017.

The failure of mainstreaming literacy in Canada

As shown above, the streams of problems, policies, and politics crossed to some extent in Canada between the mid-late 1980s and approximately 2005. The IALS survey was greatly analysed and followed up upon in Canada through investments and the creation of institutions promoting literacy as a policy issue and delivering literacy programmes. "Policy entrepreneurs", including high-level politicians, had created a favourable political climate for literacy.

However, the policy interest was short-lived. In our view, the policy window was only ever partially open and with a moderate breeze, easily blew shut. Indeed, the notion of mainstreaming adult literacy in Canada was always fragile and subject to the vicissitudes of government. Despite a strong adult education tradition in the country, there has never been adequate long-standing infrastructure. Bégin, Eggleston and MacDonald (2009), cited in Smythe (2018, p. 141), describe Canada as 'a country of perpetual pilot projects.' Adult literacy lies under the shadow of international surveys and measurements—which presents a contradiction to the sociocultural understanding of literacy as a plural and dynamic social and cultural practice 'with different literacies according to the different domains of life and defined by the individual and wider community goals and cultural practices' (Addey, 2018, p. 317, drawing on Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000). Starting with the Southam newspaper survey, then continuing with LSUDA, leading eventually to IALS, and reinforced by the media, literacy has been constructed as a measurable and standardised skill that a person either has or does not have. Level 3 was determined as the threshold, dividing those who are literate and those who are not. It was used to frame literacy in a way that it 'was no longer about citizenship,

empowerment, motivated training and being learner-centred. It was about moving people to "Level 3"' (Hayes, 2009, p. 22).

The Southam survey, IALS and ALL were double-edged swords: They helped bring literacy to the attention of media and policy makers but at a cost. The Southam survey constructed literacy as a national crisis, based on criteria to sort the literate from the illiterate that were quite arbitrary: 'In arriving at suitable figures for Canada's literacy crisis, the Creative Research Group…set a single test score against the accomplishments of an education and a career' (Willinsky, 1990, p. 9). The media that covered the Southam survey, 'across the front pages of 26 Canadian newspapers' (p. 1), identified 'Newfoundlanders, immigrants and workers' (p. 6) as the groups that Prince (2015) refers to as "deviant" or "dangerous" in social policy. French Canadians and the Indigenous population were also more likely to have literacy scores below level 3. The IALS survey has been widely criticised as contributing to the construction of literacy as the "single story" (Addey, 2018), a "project of social ordering" (Hamilton, 2001), serving literacy as a "competitiveness project" (Darville, 1999) and making illiteracy "a national sickness" (Hautecoeur, 2001, p. 411). For some of the experts who worked on the IALS, "level 3" constituted 'a line in the data that's absolutely clear' in so far as 'that group of people [levels 1 and 2] face a disproportionate share of the risk' (Interview with CU). At the same time, others criticised level 3 as it negated the very notion of literacy existing as a social practice. According to another statistician involved in IALS, the construction of "level 3" as the "watershed" of functional literacy put 'a label on [people], as inadequate' and did not appropriately reflect the competences of people, noting that 'level two people are a lot more capable than the rhetoric around the results would suggest they were' (Interview with TO, a statistical expert involved in IALS and previous Canadian literacy surveys; see also St. Clair, 2012).

Ultimately, the "single story" damaged literacy in Canada as it contributed to stigmatising people. Literacy learners were "framed" by placing them in categories and referred to as '"level ones", "level twos"' (Smythe, 2015, p. 9). Funding was invested towards raising people to level 3, neglecting those with the lowest literacy levels. A report by the Conference Board of Canada (2013), a Canadian think tank, argued:

> Moving this group [those currently at level 2] up to a solid level 3 – considered to be the minimum 'job standard' level that enables employees to cope with the demands of work – would be less expensive and involve fewer resources, per capita, than moving the group of employees with extremely rudimentary level 1 literacy skills up to level 3. (cited in Smythe, 2015, p. 11)

As the follow-up studies to IALS did not yield significant measurable improvements, there was no clear solution for the literacy "problem" at hand. According to Kingdon (2003, p. 178), when the "alternative" as a solution is not coupled to a problem, the policy window closes. Furthermore, the political climate was shifting towards an accountability and outcome-oriented approach to policy-making. Rather than 'situating literacy within the context of full citizenship' (Hayes, 2009, p. 19), literacy efforts were increasingly measured against 'tangible delivery outcomes such as the number of jobs created and the number of people employed' (p. 20). Another effect of the focus on measureable results was that many of the interesting findings of the IALS and ALL surveys were hardly discussed, such as the enormous difference in literacy skills found in Québec between the generation prior and after the quiet revolution of the 1960s, a period of intense social and political transformation in Québec when the Catholic church lost its tight grip on the population which was becoming more educated. One of our research participants who is very familiar with the data was particularly excited about the results from Québec:

> You could see in the data when the change took place, because there was such a difference in the people that had been educated before 1960, and those that had been educated after 1960…if you want proof that the education system in Québec got so much better, we have it there, in the results in the study. So things like that is what gives you confidence that you've actually tapped into something that's real. (Interview with TO)

The studies also revealed new information about how adults learn that was largely ignored because it was not deemed politically interesting. In the words of TO:

> there's a lot more information in the results that anybody ever really made use of because most of the rhetoric and policy that came out of it focused on how many people are in a particular level. Which meant a lot of…educationally significant information never really got into the public policy.

The focus on the economic argument for literacy led to its downfall as a political issue, as evidence for economic benefits of adult literacy are difficult to quantify within the timeframe of an election cycle. Moreover, there are outcomes of adult literacy education that cannot be accounted for in narrow assessments, such as people developing the ability to make phone calls, to show up for work on time, etc., which are not considered relevant. In other words, IALS could have been used to mainstream literacy in a way which allows for multiple narratives, but Canada chose a single story. Understandably, the NGOs and community organisations used the IALS numbers to lobby for more funding. At the same time, the literacy community became disillusioned with the effects of the big data from IALS. As former NLS programme director RA said: 'What started as…an awareness, a population level glimpse at what people could do, became…all pervasive…by the time PIAAC came along things had really gone sideways in terms of how people in Canada viewed IALS.'

The increasing disconnects between certain "bureaucrats" and adult literacy learners and practitioners that some of our interviewees referred to were exacerbated by institutional reforms in public management. While the period of the "high time" of the NLS was characterised by partnership-oriented and collaborative relationships between the federal government and literacy organisations and stakeholders, the bureaucratic reorganisation of government structures furthered the separation between the policy level and on-the-ground literacy learners and practitioners. There has been a trend of increasingly professionalised career bureaucrats who move from one unit to another without any expertise and no background in education. Somewhat at odds with Kingdon's (2003) analysis that 'elected officials and their appointees turn out to be more important than career civil servants' (p. 199), we found that the "hidden participants", as Kingdon calls them – middle-level civil servants – had significant leeway in resisting particular policy attention to literacy, even against the will of elected politicians.

The federated nature of Canada constitutes another challenge to integrating literacy into the mainstream of education. Policy processes in the field of adult education differ from those in relation to schooling. While the provinces have a clear mandate for schools, the responsibility for adult education is spread across sectors, more complex in its delivery and linked to labour market policies (Elfert & Rubenson, 2013). Québec is the only province that has mainstreamed literacy to some extent. Since 2001, Québec has a *Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training* (Gouvernement du Québec, 2002), which differs from those in other provinces in that it emphasises a rights-based approach to adult education and the responsibility of the state in providing adult education opportunities. Although this policy has long been neglected due to changes of government, Québec has set a system in place in which the school board offers adult education provision. This integration of literacy in the formal education

structure is unique in Canada, as in the other provinces literacy and basic education provision tends to be more ad hoc and diffuse and divided between different ministries. Québec also has a unique policy in place, the Bill 90 of 1995, the "Act to Foster the Development of Manpower Training", also referred to as "the law of 1 %", which aims at improving workers' skills through training and development, to promote employment in general, and to foster employment adaptation and employment integration. The law stipulates that every employer whose total payroll for a calendar year exceeds $1,000,000 CAD is required to participate in workforce skill development by allotting an amount representing at least 1% of his or her total payroll to eligible training expenditures (Charest, 2007).

As previously mentioned, another reason why adult literacy has failed to be mainstreamed in Canada is that literacy is associated with poverty, stigmatised groups, and with adults who "made poor choices" (Quigley, 1990). In other words, people outside the "mainstream" of society. Unlike children, adults have no appeal to innocence and so are blamed for their educational "failures", particularly in Western liberal societies dominated by current neoliberal frameworks. As one of our interviewees said, discussing a (successful) pilot project with single mothers that was never expanded, 'single moms on welfare are lazy, undeserving citizens. That's the rhetorical structure' (Interview with CU). Given the cuts and policies enacted under the Harper government, one might conclude that adult literacy learners were viewed as undeserving recipients of social policy.

Further exploring the present situation

Adult literacy policies and programmes have fallen out of favour in Canada. It is important to note that the most recent study of adults' literacy skills, the 2013 PIAAC, which built on the IALS and ALL surveys, has abandoned the concept of "literacy" – as have most public policies – in favour of "skills" and "competencies". Most institutional structures of adult literacy in Canada have now been dismantled—so, even with a slightly more sympathetic government as the current Liberal government may very well be, the effort it would take to mainstream literacy would be more than they care to invest. Smythe (2018), in a chapter about the closure of the National Adult Literacy Database, writes about the infrastructure that cannot be easily replaced once it is gone. As one of her interviewees, Sue Emson, said, 'I don't know if the knowledge from the field is still out there. This is the problem of the infrastructure that has been lost' (p. 188).

Against this background, it is not surprising that PIAAC, according to St. Clair (2016), has had no policy impact in Canada so far. One of our interviewees stated that 'PIAAC died in Canada four days after it was released' (Interview with RA). This is not unlike what has happened elsewhere, such as Denmark (Cort & Larson, 2015). The reasons, according to one of our interviewees, are "political" – news about low adult literacy skills is not favourable to "getting re-elected" (Interview with CU). Another interviewee pointed to the lack of federal leadership and "policy entrepreneurs": 'There was nobody out there promoting it [PIAAC]…nobody was the flag bearer on the file' (Interview with RA). Priorities have also shifted towards compulsory education for the Indigenous population: '…the federal government in Canada is under a lot more pressure to put its educational interest into Indigenous education…for children, which is just a disaster in this country' (Interview with TO). As Steiner-Khamsi (2004) points out, 'the most frequent response to OECD-type studies is indifference. In fact, in most countries, comparative and international studies pass unnoticed by politicians or the general public

and cause little excitement—positive or negative' (p. 208). This is not to say that PIAAC might not have a more indirect policy influence down the track, as one of our interviewees suggested:

> In many countries, it is seen as one of the major data sources that you can use when you want to justify certain directions that you go, it will kind of play out differently in different countries, depending on the policy context" (Interview with JU, an academic who was involved in IALS).

IALS fell on fertile ground because it capitalised on a "window of opportunity". 'There was money' and 'a number of people from civil society, a few public servants and a few people in leadership roles felt that this was something to do' (Interview with DI). "Policy entrepreneurs", such as politicians, the media, and the public alike were interested at the time to get to the bottom of the literacy problem and there was hope that the data could be used to implement reforms that would benefit employers and workers. As Steiner-Khamsi (2004) argued: 'The potential of influencing educational reform depends on whether a controversy over educational reforms already exists—attractive if at that particular time policymakers are in need of additional external support for an already existent agenda' (p. 208). UNESCO's International Literacy Year in 1990, a general drive for data, and a more unbureaucratic way of governing were part of this policy window. Actors among the Canadian NGOs, and in the federal government, Statistics Canada, the OECD, and academia, formed a policy network that pushed for IALS, albeit with different motivations. It is interesting to note that the initial drive for more data about literacy came from the Canadian NGOs with 'the educationally disadvantaged adult' (Interview with AO, former director of a leading Canadian adult education NGO) in mind. They lobbied for IALS, but then the file moved to the federal government and the OECD. PIAAC has now been taken over solely by the OECD as part of the 'PISA engine' (Interview with CU, methodological expert involved in IALS). Ultimately, IALS was used by the federal government to underpin the employment-oriented Essential Skills agenda, which is 'arguably not in relation to instruction and learning at all, but rather in relation to assessment and screening' (Elfert & Rubenson, 2013, p. 227). The same happened with PISA, which is built on the empirical design of IALS. As stated by Lundgren (2011), 'the outcomes of PISA we hoped could stimulate a debate on learning outcomes not only from an educational perspective but also a broad cultural and social perspective. Rarely has a pious hope been so dashed' (p. 27). In that respect, IALS paved the way for PISA, as it offered many insights into social issues in Canada, as illustrated by the data from Québec, which were not taken up (St. Clair, 2012).

After the "golden years", when the data showed no quick improvements and the political economy changed towards bureaucratisation of governance and less NGO and civil society influence, the lack of a robust literacy infrastructure enabled the dismantling of literacy in Canada in a relatively short time. As one of our interviewees said: 'We went from the real high of being totally engaged down to like nobody even knew it happened' (Interview with RA). We might think about adult literacy in Canada as a straw house that was easily blown down by a few acts of government rather than solid infrastructure that could withstand changing political whims. Although certain policy entrepreneurs were important, their achievements were not sustainable.

What we can learn from the Canadian case is that only a robust infrastructure can survive the vicissitudes of governments and bureaucracies. It is also needed to avoid the constant reinventing of the wheel in educational policy-making (Smythe, 2018). A new promising development in Canada in the last couple of years has been the creation of a federal Future Skills research and advocacy centre which was formed as a response to the

challenges facing us in the "Fourth Industrial Revolution" with the rapid developments in artificial intelligence and ensuing job automation and labour market upheaval (Schwab, 2016). But if literacy had been mainstreamed to a greater extent, this new initiative, such as other new initiatives that are bound to be launched by future governments, could build on past achievements, even if new themes and new priorities come along.

Acknowledgement

Notes

[1] This article expands and draws on an earlier and shorter version of this paper, published in M. Schemmann (Ed.), Internationales Jahrbuch der Erwachsenenbildung/International Yearbook of Adult Education 2018. *International Comparative Adult Education Research, vol. 41*. Köln/Weimar/Wien: Böhlau Verlag.

[2] The interviews are anonymised.

[3] This refers to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

[4] After the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) cut operational grants to all national organizations, most became defunct. ABC Literacy Canada, that has been recently relaunched as ABC Life Literacy, was less vulnerable since it received funds from private donors. The FCAF, renamed Réseau pour le développement de l'alphabétisme et des compétences (RESDAC) in 2011, maintained operations only because it had accumulated surpluses over the years.

[5] Laubach Canada has its roots in the U.S. and is a global literacy initiative. While provincial units still exist, e.g., Laubach Literacy Ontario, there is no longer a national Laubach Literacy of Canada.

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Low literacy in Germany: Results from the second German literacy survey

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Abstract

When Germany performed the first national assessment on reading and writing skills among adults in 2010 (LEO), it was late compared to other European countries such as England or France. Now the results of the second round of that survey reveal a higher average literacy level in Germany compared to the preceding survey. In this paper, we briefly discuss the state of literacy research in large-scale surveys and offer some critical viewpoints. Next, we present the results of the two LEO surveys from 2010 and 2018. Besides providing information about the composition of the low-literate adult population in Germany (aged 18–64 years), we selected results that might help to critically revise current stereotypes about adults who have difficulties reading and writing.

Keywords: Assessment; literacy; literacy practices

Introduction

The field of literacy research is diverse and contested. Much of that research relies on qualitative work, often associated with the New Literacy Studies (NLS). In that approach, literacy is not interpreted as a unique set of skills that can be precisely defined and measured but as a diverse social practice. Brian Street made the influential distinction between an autonomous model and an ideological model of literacy (Street, 2003). Part of the history of that debate, however, seems to be forgotten (Hamilton, 2018). Large-scale surveys like the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), the Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey (ALL), and—more recently—the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) had a strong impact on how literacy is defined and understood (for a critical appraisal, see Hamilton, Maddox, & Addey, 2015). Regarding the history of the 'rise of international large-scale assessments' (Addey, Sellar, Steiner-Khamsi, Lingard, & Verger, 2017) Grek (2010) elaborates on the role of international organizations in this development - especially the role of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OCED). This paper reports on another large-scale survey on literacy in Germany: the 2018 LEO survey. We know from earlier research that using large-scale data may not only reinforce existing deficit-oriented stereotypes about low-skilled adults but may also help challenge such stereotypes (Grotlüschen, Riekmann, & Buddeberg, 2015). The 2018 LEO survey started with the objective to combine an assessment module on reading and writing *skills* with an extensive questionnaire regarding literacy-related *practices* and basic competencies. The correlation between skills and practices has been reported by PIAAC data (OECD, 2013, p. 214), for example, or by the Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning (LSAL) (Reder, 2012). PIAAC used a number of questions on skills use (Reder, 2017). The survey on which this paper is based was carried out in the context of a national basic skills strategy, the 'National Decade for Alphabetization and Basic Education' (Nationale Dekade für Alphabetisierung und Grundbildung), which is financed and organized by the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF) and the state governments (*Länder*). The survey asked questions on practices regarding different life domains, including financial affairs, politics, health, digitalization/mediatization, work, or family life. The objective of the present study is to examine whether low literacy *skills* (measured in the assessment module) show correlations with literacy-related *practices*.

This paper will present key results of the survey, including the proportion of low-literate adults in Germany, and compare them with those of the earlier 2010 survey. A smaller section deals with practices and their use in some of the fields mentioned. The presentation of first results is mainly descriptive; aspects for further analysis are discussed in the final section.

State of research

Large-scale literacy research

Internationally, the reading and writing skills of adults have already been studied over time. The number of panel studies is relatively small, however, with the exception of the National Educational Panel Survey (NEPS) in Germany (Blossfeld, Roßbach, & Maurice, 2011) or the LSAL (The Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning) in the United States (Reder, 2012). For some other countries, it was possible to compare the results of cross-sectional studies, because they participated in more than one international assessment, such as the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) (OECD & Statistics Canada,

2000), the Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey (ALL) (OECD & Statistics Canada, 2005), or the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) (OECD, 2013). Trends between these surveys are reported in Desjardins (2017). Given that Germany did not participate in ALL and that the German dataset of IALS has technical weaknesses, no trend could be reported regarding low literacy over time. This was the starting point for a second round of the LEO survey in 2018, which had been conducted before as LEO – Level One Survey in 2010 (Grotlüschen & Riekmann, 2011). In England, there were two national surveys (Skills for Life Survey) (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2011; Williams, 2003). In France, there were two rounds of the IVQ survey (ANLCI - Agence Nationale de la Lutte contre l'Illetrisme, 2005, 2012; Jeantheau, 2007, 2015).

The first LEO survey was conducted in Germany when Skills for Life and IVQ had already entered the second round. LEO 2018 now offers the opportunity to look at the development of basic literacy skills in Germany.

Literacies and low literacy

In the tradition of the 'New Literacy Studies' (Street, 2003), literacy may be understood as a social practice that varies from context to context, and even from person to person. These diverse 'literacies', however, are not considered to be equal. For the German language, spelling reforms and the *Duden* dictionary of the German language take up conventions and thus record a specific kind of literacy. Public administrations, schools, and universities are bound by the application of this kind of literacy. Hence these conventions are established as supposedly 'correct' or 'legitimate' literacy in society at large (Grotlüschen, 2011; Street, 2003). The competence tests of LEO 2010 and LEO 2018 measured literacy determined in this way, also known as dominant literacy.

Low literacy in the context of the LEO survey and in the context of the National Decade for Alphabetization and Basic Education means that a person can only read and write up to the level of simple sentences. In the classification of the LEO survey, low reading and writing competencies are described with a set of so-called 'alpha levels', introduced on a large-scale in 2010. Alpha levels 1, 2, and 3 indicate low literacy (for more detailed information on the alpha level classification scheme, see Grotlüschen & Riekmann, 2011).

- Competencies at alpha level 1 correspond to the level of single letters. It is very rare for a person in Germany to be literate only at the level of letters.
- Competencies at alpha level 2 correspond to the word level. At this alpha level, people are able to read or write individual words, but they fail at the level of sentences. Even common words are often composed letter by letter when reading and writing.
- Competencies at alpha level 3 correspond to the sentence level. At this alpha level, people are able to read and write individual sentences, but they fail at the level of coherent texts, even shorter ones.

Low literacy in the sense of the above-mentioned literacy concept of LEO 2018 includes these three alpha levels. Persons may be restricted in their autonomous participation in society or be vulnerable to exclusion in various areas of life due to their limited competence.

- Competences at alpha level 4 describe noticeable incorrect spelling, even in common and simple vocabulary.

In their definition of literacy, the publications of the National Decade for Alphabetization and Basic Education place special emphasis on the relationship between written language and minimum social demands (for a critical discussion of what is a suitable minimum, see Black & Yasukawa, 2014). Low literacy is often operationalized through so-called functional illiteracy:

> We speak of 'functional illiteracy' if the written literary competencies of adults are lower than those that are minimally necessary and taken for granted in order to meet the social requirements of a given situation. [A functionally illiterate] person is not able to read and make sense of one or more pieces of information directly contained in a simple text and/or is at a comparable level of competence in writing (Egloff, Grosche, Hubertus & Rüsseler, 2011, p. 14, translation by the authors).

The term *functional illiteracy* (German: *funktionaler Analphabetismus*) figured very prominently in the German discussions of recent decades. It is now regarded as stigmatizing and unsuitable for adult education practice. In addition, experience following the LEO – Level-One study has shown that the term is misleading because it requires a great deal of explanation and is difficult to transfer to the international discussion (Steuten, 2014). Moreover, the terms *functional illiteracy* and *functional literacy* share a focus on the functionality of literacy skills in their respective social contexts but differ in their implied perspective and purpose. While functional illiteracy focusses on an (individual) deficit, functional literacy might be used to describe an educational aim or policy. To circumvent these unwanted implications, LEO 2018 uses the terms *low literacy* or *low-literate adults*—always in relation to dominant literacy in Germany.

Research questions

The survey followed two main objectives. The first was to quantify the proportion of low-literate adults among the German-speaking population aged between 18 and 64 years. The first LEO survey in 2010 reported a proportion of 14.5 per cent of low-literate adults, which adds up to about 7.5 million persons (Grotlüschen & Riekmann, 2011).

The second objective was to widen the focus from literacy assessment to an understanding of literacy as represented by practices. The survey thus aimed to provide insights into how the level of literacy interacts with the frequency of the use of certain practices and with domain-specific basic competencies.

Survey Design

The LEO survey 2018 was based on a random sample of adults aged between 18 and 64 years. Only persons living in private households were interviewed. The survey was conducted among persons who speak German well enough to be able to complete a survey of about 60 minutes (including the reading and writing assessment). The net sample comprised 6,681 persons. It was supplemented by an additional sample of 511 persons with lower formal education degrees. The sample was weighted on the basis of socio-demographic key data from the micro census.

The interviews were conducted as computer-assisted personal interviews (CAPI). The first module consisted of an extensive questionnaire about various aspects of their life situation.

- **Digital** practices and basic competencies
- **Financial** practices and basic competencies
- **Health** practices and basic competencies
- **Political** practices and basic competencies
- Text-related practices in the context of **work**, **family**, and **everyday life**
- Literacy skills in the context of **continuing education**
- Literacy skills in the context of **immigration** and **multilingualism**

Whereas literacy was assessed with a paper-based reading and writing test, the basic competencies regarding health, finances, digitalization, and politics were not tested. The information gathered relies on respondents' self-assessment. The structure of the questions regarding the frequency of practices follows the structure of the questions on skills use implemented in the PIAAC questionnaire (Reder, 2017). The questions regarding basic competencies follow the structure of questions implemented in the Health Literacy Survey Europe (HLS EU) (Sørensen, Pelikan, Röthlin, Ganahl, Slonska, Dole, & Brand 2015).

After answering the questionnaire, the interviewees took a competence test featuring reading and writing tasks. All 7,192 persons received a so-called filter test. On average, respondents needed almost twelve minutes to complete the tasks. Those who scored only a few correct answers for the test items presented received additional, simpler items from an in-depth test. In this second run, the average processing time was seven minutes.

The items of the assessment were calibrated using Item Response Theory (IRT). To make LEO 2010 and LEO 2018 comparable, the two studies were also linked on the basis of the 2018 item parameters. A latent regression model was used for population modelling, and nearly all variables measured by the questionnaire served as covariates. Subsequently, ten plausible values were drawn to obtain proficiency scores.

Results

Literacy skills results in Germany 2010 and 2018

In 2018, the proportion of adults with low reading and writing skills (indicated by alpha-levels 1, 2, and 3) adds up to 12.1 per cent of the German-speaking population aged 18 to 64 years (table 1). This corresponds to 6.2 million adults. Compared to the results of the 2010 LEO – Level-One survey, this represents a decline of 2.4 percentage points. The change is statistically significant (p<0.01).

Table 1: German-speaking adult population (aged 18-64) classified by alpha level (2018)

Literacy level	Alpha level	Percentage of adult population	Number (extrapolated)
Low literacy	alpha level 1	0.6%	0.3 million
	alpha level 2	3.4%	1.7 million
	alpha level 3	8.1%	4.2 million
	alpha levels 1–3	12.1%	6.2 million

Frequent spelling errors	alpha level 4	20.5%	10.6 million
	above alpha level 4	67.5%	34.8 million
Total		100.0%	51.5 million

Source: Universität Hamburg, LEO 2018 – living with low literacy.
Base: German-speaking adults (aged 18–64), n=7,192, weighted. Deviations from 100%
or from total figures are due to rounding.

Table 2 shows that the proportions have changed positively compared to 2010: The
percentage of low-literacy adults fell from 7.5 million in 2010 to 6.2 million. There was
no significant change among the lowest alpha levels 1 and 2, which might be due to quite
small numbers of cases. Significant changes are apparent among alpha levels 3 and 4
(significant decline) and above alpha level 4 (significant growth). This development was
reported in a similar way for the two Skills for Life surveys in England (Department for
Business, Innovation and Skills, 2012, p. 2).

Table 2: German-speaking adult population (aged 18–64) classified by Alpha Level,
comparing 2010 and 2018

Alpha Level	2010 percentage	2018 percentage	Significance of change
alpha level 1	0.6%	0.6%	Not significant
alpha level 2	3.9%	3.4%	Not significant
alpha level 3	10.0%	8.1%	Significant (p<0.01)
alpha levels 1–3	14.5%	12.1%	Significant (p<0.01)
alpha level 4	25.9%	20.5%	Significant (p<0.01)
Above alpha level 4	59.7%	67.5%	Significant (p<0.01)
Total	100%	100%	

Source: Universität Hamburg, LEO 2018 – living with low literacy; leo. – Level One
Study 2010.
Base: German-speaking adults (aged 18–64), n=7,192 (2018), n=8,436 (2010),
weighted.
Deviations from 100% are due to rounding.

The general decline seems to be an effect of changes in the composition of German
society. Compared to 2010, a larger share of adults is employed, and a larger share of
adults obtained higher formal school qualifications, that is, the average number of years
spent in school has risen (similar results were reported for France, see Jeantheau, 2015,
p. 181). An entropy balancing procedure (see Hainmueller, 2011, p. 30) was carried out
to compare the two samples from 2010 and 2018. This statistical method is used to weight
the sample of one survey against a second survey, making it possible to show which
change would have occurred if the 2018 sample composition (regarding employment
level, educational level, demographic change, percentages of adults with German as a
first language) had been the same as the 2010 sample. The entropy balancing shows that
there would not have been a remarkable decline between LEO 2010 and 2018 if these
compositional changes had not occurred.

Only persons with a sufficient oral command of German were interviewed, as for
technical reasons the interviews were conducted in German. Therefore, adults without
sufficient oral command of German are not part of the sample. Due to this methodological
limitation—which applies also to other national and international assessment surveys—
it is important to mention that the figures reported by the survey only represent a specific
part of the adults with a first language other than German. It is not possible to reliably

quantify the respective number of adults. According to the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP), about 75 per cent of migrants report good or very good skills in German (regarding oral communication), meaning that about 25 per cent have lower language skills (Brücker et al., 2019, p. 7). But some of these 25 per cent would probably have been able to follow the interviews, nonetheless.

Structure of the low-literate subpopulation

This section displays the profile of the subpopulation of 6.2 million adults with low literacy skills. The tables therefore do not refer to the entire sample of 7,192 adults but only to the low-literate subsample (n=781 in the unweighted dataset). The results are organized by gender, age group, first language, formal education, employment, and marital status.

Based on the dataset of the first survey, a multivariate regression analysis showed that low formal education (or school dropout), first language spoken, and family educational background are the strongest predictors of low literacy. Compared to these factors, gender and age are of minor relevance (Grotlüschen, Riekmann, & Buddeberg, 2012, pp. 40-42).

Gender

As in the 2010 survey, the results indicate that the 6.2 million low-literate adults include more men than women. The male proportion is 58.4 per cent, whereas the female proportion is 41.7 per cent. The 2018 proportions differ only slightly (and not significantly) from the 2010 values: In 2010, 60.3 per cent of adults with low literacy were men and 39.7 per cent were women.

Table 3: Proportion of men and women among the low-literate population

	2010	2018
Men	60.3%	58.4%
Women	39.7%	41.7%
Total	100%	100%

Source: Universität Hamburg, LEO 2018 – living with low literacy.
Base: German-speaking adults (aged 18–64) with low literacy skills, n=867, weighted. Deviations from 100% are due to rounding. Figures for 2010 from Grotlüschen et al., 2012, p. 24.

Age groups

Adults older than 50 years of age make up a large proportion of the low-literate adults. The two oldest age groups (aged 40–49 and aged 50–64) account for 56.9 per cent of low-literate adults. The middle birth cohorts (aged 30–39) include 23.7 per cent of the low-literalized adults. The youngest age group (aged 18–29) account for 19.5 per cent. These results correspond to results from international surveys like PIAAC (OECD, 2013). They contradict the hypothesis popular among cultural pessimists that low literacy skills of sections of society are a product of the recent past.

Table 4: Proportions of different age groups among the low literate population

	2010	2018
18–29 years	19.9%	19.5%
30–39 years	20.6%	23.7%
40–49 years	27.0%	20.6%
50–64 years	32.6%	36.3%
Total	100%	100%

Source: Universität Hamburg, LEO 2018 – living with low literacy.
Base: German-speaking adults (aged 18–64) with low literacy skills, n=867, weighted.
Figures for 2010 from Grotlüschen et al.2012, p. 25.

First language
First language, or the language of origin, refers to languages acquired by people during their childhood. These languages are used daily in the family and in the child's environment, meaning they acquires it through this language contact. First language may be one language, but it may also be two or more languages. The concept of origin does not refer to a geographical origin but to a family origin.

> For the situation in Germany, this can be substantiated as follows: Children from migrant families grow up with the language of their family's origin; it is not unusual for more than one language to be spoken. At the latest when they leave their parents' home for kindergarten or school, German is added as the surrounding majority language. (Gogolin & Krüger-Potratz, 2012, p. 12, translated by the authors)

Only persons who have mastered the German language orally to such an extent that they can follow a survey in the German language were interviewed. Immigrants without sufficient oral knowledge of German were not interviewed. It is therefore important to note that all results relate to reading and writing skills in German.

Table 5 shows that of the 6.2 million low-literate adults, 3.3 million (52.6%) grew up in family environments where German was spoken. Around 2.9 million (47.4%) initially learned a language other than German. We conclude that more than half of the low-literate adults in Germany learned German in childhood. In 2010, the proportion of people with German as their language of origin was 58.1 per cent, whereas the proportion of people with a different language of origin was 41.9 per cent. Compared to 2010, this change is not statistically significant.

Table 5: Proportion of adults with different first languages among the low-literate population

	2010	2018
German is first language	58.1%	52.6%
Other first language	41.9%	47.4%
Total	100%	100%

Source: Universität Hamburg, LEO 2018 – living with low literacy.
Base: German-speaking adults (aged 18–64) with low literacy skills, n=867, weighted.
Figures for 2010 from Grotlüschen et al., 2012, p. 27.

There is a connection between the age at which someone migrated to Germany and the assessed reading and writing competence. Of those migrants who moved to Germany by the end of primary school, around 16 per cent have low literacy skills. Among those who immigrated at the age of 31 or older, this proportion is slightly more than 50 per cent.

Research on language acquisition indicates that literacy skills in one language can be an important predictor of learning to read and write another language (Dünkel, Heimler, Brandt, & Gogolin, 2018). Adults who migrated to Germany after school age and who at a certain point show low skills in reading and writing the German language over time might acquire higher skills, especially if they are literate in their language(s) of origin. Respondents in LEO 2018 were asked to assess their (written) language skills in the languages they understand or speak. 77.8 per cent of those with a different language of origin who are low literate in German state that they are able to read and write complex texts in their first language (see table 6). Even if we have to rely on self-assessments at this point, reading and writing complex texts with some degree of certainty indicates a high level of literacy far beyond the level of sentences.

Table 6: Self-assessment by adults with low literacy (alpha levels 1–3) and a first language other than German of their ability to read and write complex texts in their first language.

	2010	2018
Able to read and write complex texts	Not reported	77.8%
Not able to read and write complex texts	Not reported	22.2%
Total	Not reported	100%

Source: Universität Hamburg, LEO 2018 – living with low literacy.
Base: Adults (aged 18–64) with low literacy skills in German, who did not learn German as their first or only first language, n=523, weighted.

Education qualifications
One of the common stereotypes about low-literate adults is that most of them dropped out of school early. Survey results show the opposite. About three quarters (76%) of the low-literate population earned some form of school-leaving qualification. Compared to 2010, this proportion decreased slightly (2010: 80.1%). Most of these adults (40.6%) obtained school-leaving certificates on the lower secondary level (in Germany: *Hauptschule, Volksschule)* or an equivalent degree. Nearly one quarter (22.3%) of low-literate adults do not have any form of school-leaving qualification, a slightly higher proportion compared to the first survey (2010: 19.3%). Among the low-literate adults, about 10.8 per cent attended a school abroad before coming to Germany. This proportion does not include persons who spent part of their schooling abroad and earned a school leaving degree in Germany.

Table 7: Proportions of adults with different degrees of formal education among the low-literate population

	2010	2018
Upper secondary	12.3%	16.9%
Intermediate secondary	18.9%	18.5%
Lower secondary	47.7%	40.6%
No school leaving certification	19.3%	22.3%
Still at school or not specified	0.6%	1.6%
Total	98.8	100%

Source: Universität Hamburg, LEO 2018 – living with low literacy.
Base: German-speaking adults (aged 18–64) with low literacy skills, n=867, weighted.
Deviations from 100% are due to rounding. Figures for 2010 from Grotlüschen et al,
2012, p. 29. The answer 'not specified' was not displayed for 2010.

As the concept of lifelong learning implies that learning does not end after finishing
school, the survey also captured information about participation in adult education. One
general finding in surveys about adult education like the Adult Education Survey (AES)
is that the lower the formal qualification, the lower is participation in continuing
education ('Matthew principle'). It is therefore not a surprising result that adults with low
literacy skills participate less than the national average – just 28.1 per cent of adults with
low literacy skills took part in any type of continuing education activity in the last twelve
months before the survey. The share in 2010 was quite similar (2010: 28%)1. We
conclude that participation rates have stagnated since 2010. Participation rates of the adult
population as a whole increased from 42.0 per cent in 2010 to 46.9 per cent in 2018.

   Participation in adult education classes explicitly focusing on adult basic education
and reading and writing is very low. Only 0.7 per cent of low-literate adults participate in
this type of classes. Statistics from Germany's adult education centres
(Volkshochschulen) correspondingly display low attendance figures for basic education
and literacy-related courses (Reichart, Huntemann, & Lux, 2019, p. 47).

Employment status
Another common stereotype about low-literate adults is that the majority of them are
unemployed and dependent on social transfer payments. Again, survey results show a
different picture. Nearly two thirds (62.3%) of low-literate adults are employed. This
proportion increased from 56.9 per cent in 2010 with an even stronger increase of
employment for the population as a whole. Still, unemployment is higher among low-
literate adults. 12.9 per cent of this subpopulation are unemployed, a decrease compared
to 2010 (16.7%).

Table 8: Proportions of adults with different employment status among the low-literate
population

	2010	2018
Employed	56.9%	62.3%
Unemployed	16.7%	12.9%
Homemaker	9.0%	8.1%
Retired	6.3%	5.6%
Others or not specified	11.1%	11.0%
Total	100%	100%

Source: Universität Hamburg, LEO 2018 – living with low literacy.
Base: German-speaking adults (aged 18–64) with low literacy skills, n=867, weighted.
Deviations from 100% are due to rounding, figures for 2010 from Grotlüschen et al.,
2012, p. 35.

Blue-collar jobs are of specific importance for low-literate adults who are employed.
About 40.1 per cent describe themselves as blue-collar workers (entire population:
18.4%); 45.5 per cent describe themselves as white-collar workers (entire population
62.1%).

Low-literate adults report that they are less satisfied with their overall situation at work. On a scale ranging from 0 (very dissatisfied) to 10 (very satisfied), the entire employed population would rate at 7.6. The average satisfaction rating for adults with low literacy skills is 6.7. This difference is statistically significant (p<0.01). Moreover, low-literate adults report higher concerns about job security. Nearly one quarter (23.0%) of adults with low reading and writing skills stated that they were worried about losing their jobs. This proportion is twice the size of that among the total working population (11.8%). Monthly personal incomes are clearly below average, and a larger proportion of low-literate adults report difficulties in making ends meet.

Material status

Another stereotype about low-literate adults is that they live in some form of social isolation. Again, the survey results show a different picture. At 54.2 per cent, married persons are the largest sub-group of all low-literate adults with low literacy skills (entire population: 55.0%). A further 30.7 per cent are single (entire population: 33.3%).

Table 9: Proportions of adults with different marital status among the low-literate population

	2010	2018
Married	61.8%	54.2%
Single	27.2%	30.7%
Divorced	8.0%	12.2%
Widowed	2.5%	2.4%
Others or not specified	0.5%	0.5%
Total	100%	100%

Source: Universität Hamburg, LEO 2018 – living with low literacy.
Base: German-speaking adults (aged 18–64) with low literacy skills, n=867, weighted.
Figures for 2010 from Riekmann, 2012, p. 177.

Independent of marital status, 20.9 per cent of low-literate adults live by themselves. The national average for people living in single-person households is slightly lower at 16.9 per cent. Regarding the numbers of children within a household, there are only slight differences between low-literate adults and the total population. Just over one third of all households include one or more children.

Concepts of family literacy have recently gained prominence in literacy research (Wasik & van Horn, 2012). These concepts focus on promoting the development of reading and writing skills in the family environment. Frequent positive literacy-related experiences within the family help to promote children's literacy skills (McElvany, Becker, & Lüdtke, 2009). Family reading behaviour influences the acquisition of reading skills (Bracken & Fischel, 2008; Burgess, Hecht, & Lonigan, 2002). Studies on reading aloud to children (*Vorlesestudien*) of the German Reading Foundation (Stiftung Lesen) show a correlation between parents' formal education and the frequency with which they read to their children (Ehmig & Reuter, 2013). LEO 2018 used the respective question to analyse a correlation between literacy level and reading activities. Low-literate parents spend less time reading to their children than parents with a higher level of literacy. Among the entire adult population with children living in their households, 44.8 per cent indicated that they read to their children daily (up to the age of twelve). In contrast, 30.7 per cent of parents with low literacy skills read to their children every day. Now, a share of nearly one third of low-literate adults who read aloud to their children daily appears surprisingly high. A deeper analysis shows that out of these 30.7 per cent, the majority of

74.0 per cent does not speak German as their language of origin. It can be assumed that they read to their children in other languages than German.

Practices

We understand literacy practices as context-dependent and diverse. Therefore, besides measuring dominant literacy *skills* in an assessment test, one other goal of LEO 2018 was to report the literacy *practices* of low-literate adults. The objective was to show whether, and if so how, low-literate adults perform certain literacy practices, and whether they compensate for their low-literacy by performing non-written practices more often. The practices can be related to several domains of everyday life. In the following, we will present results from an exemplary list of practices from the domains digitalization, financial affairs, health, and politics. The aim is to give a brief overview of the results of LEO 2018 regarding literary practices and a short discussion of the results.

LEO 2018 asked participants how often they engage in certain practices such as writing emails or reading newspapers. The structure of the questions and the response format were similar to the questions used in PIAAC (Reder, 2017). The percentages in table 10 show the proportion of people per group who perform certain practices regularly. This means that they perform the respective practice either at least once a week or, in response to some questions, 'often' or 'quite often'.

Table10: Proportion of adults performing domain-specific practices at least once a week, low-literate adults compared to the total population

	Low-literate adults	Total population
Digital practices		
Regularly write emails	35.9%	63.7%
Regularly send voice messages	39.1%	37.4%
Regularly write in social networks	23.5%	19.4%
Regularly read in social networks	41.8%	41.4%
Financial Practices		
Frequent use of online banking[2]	40.6%	65.3%
Frequent use of bank transfer forms	42.3%	25.1%
Health-related practices		
Frequently check dosage instructions in pharmaceutical packaging	55.8%	68.7%
Frequently check with your doctor or pharmacist for signs of illness	60.5%	62.0%
Political practices		
Regularly read a newspaper (print or online)	44.5%	63.2%
Regularly watch the news (on TV or online)	82.6%	84.4%

Source: Universität Hamburg, LEO 2018 – living with low literacy.
Base: German-speaking adults (aged 18–64), n=7,192, weighted.

Looking at digital practices, low-literate adults are less likely to engage in most written digital practices. Only 35.9 per cent of adults with low literacy write emails regularly, compared to 63.7 per cent of the total population. Looking at a mostly oral practice we cannot find this difference: Low-literate adults send voice messages more often (39.1%) than the total population (37.4%). This margin is small but indicates a common trend regarding practices: The difference in the frequency with which a practice is performed is smaller or disappears if the practice is mostly (conceptually) oral. Participating in communication via social networks is an exception to this general trend. Reading or writing in social networks is a text-related practice which low literate adults use at least as often as the entire population.

Low-literate adults use online banking less frequently than the total population (40.6% to 65.3%). Conversely, 42.3 per cent of adults with low literacy fill out bank transfer forms frequently. The total population is less likely to do so: Only 25.1 per cent use bank transfer forms frequently. This may indicate two things: First, practices that require the use of relatively complex apps or websites are more difficult for low-literate adults compared to the population. Second, low-literate adults are more likely to look for support when confronted with forms or documents, for example by asking family members or a bank clerk for assistance when filling out forms.

Health practices show another trend regarding literacy practices. When looking for health-related information, low-literate adults check dosage instructions in pharmaceutical packaging less often than the total population: 55.8 per cent of low-literate adults and 68.7 per cent of the total population check dosage instructions regularly. But when checking with a doctor or pharmacist for signs of illness and how to explain and treat these signs—a non-text-based but face-to-face practice—this difference nearly disappears. 60.5 per cent of low-literate adults and 62.0 per cent of the population talk to their doctor or pharmacist frequently. Again, difference occur as long as reading and writing is required. They get smaller when alternative practices are available.

A similar picture emerges when looking at political practices. Although a quite high percentage of adults with low literacy report reading a newspaper (print or online) at least once a week (44.4%), the proportion is still higher in the total population (63.2%). But again, when asking for a similar non-written practice, the differences between the groups disappear: 82.6 per cent of low-literate adults and 84.4 per cent of the population watch the news on television or online at least once a week.

Our conclusion is therefore that written practices can be partly substituted by oral practices or can be managed with assistance. This partial exclusion is problematic in itself, but it is even more so because digital practices and the use of complex computer interfaces will become more and more important, while the number of local bank branches or post offices is in decline.

Discussion

The second round of the LEO survey showed positive results regarding a decrease of low literacy among adults in Germany. The figures refer to adults between 18 and 64 years and they refer to reading and writing in German. This decrease cannot exclusively be explained by higher participation in adult basic education. Additionally, changes in the social structure of the adult population in Germany are to be seen as reasons for the

decrease from 14.5 per cent to 12.1 per cent of low-literate adults between 18 and 64 years of age.

The composition of the heterogeneous group of 6.2 million adults in most respects did not change significantly compared to the first LEO survey in 2010. Within this group, we find more men than women, more older adults than younger adults, and slightly more adults with German as their first language. The majority of those adults who learned a language other than German as their first language and who have difficulties reading and writing has high competencies in reading and writing in their first languages. The age at which people moved to Germany has a strong influence on their reading and writing proficiency in written German. Since migrants have had systematic access to language courses since 2005, further analyses should examine differences between recent and established immigrants in terms of their literacy skills. It should be noted as well that the majority of the large numbers of migrants coming to Germany in 2015 were not part of the sample if they lived in collective accommodation (and not in private households) and/or did not have the necessary German language skills.

The employment rate of low-literate adults rose from 56.9 per cent in 2010 to 62.3 per cent in 2018, probably caused by the positive development on the German labour market. It may additionally be seen as an effect of deregulation, especially in the low-wage sector (Nachtwey, 2016). In fact, employed adults with lower literacy skills (or low formal education) on average earn less and report lower job satisfaction and higher concerns about job insecurity. The majority of low-literate adults holds some type of school-leaving certification. There are no significant differences in marital status between low-literate adults and the total population. These last three findings (employment, formal education, and family situation) confirm earlier results based on the 2010 survey. They counter common stereotypes about low-literate adults. These stereotypes evoke images of a group of people who are mainly unemployed, left school early, and live in some form of social isolation (Grotlüschen et al., 2015).

The objective was to widen the focus from people's abilities (assessment) to people's activities in their daily lives (practices). Results show that in most practices, there is a correlation between reading and writing skills and reading and writing practices. This is in line with results from PIAAC (OECD, 2013) and with practice engagement theory (Reder, 1994). An interesting exception is the participation in digital social networks. This field of mediatization does not show a tendency of excluding low-literate adults from using this type of communication. If, however, social networks are also used by people who have difficulties reading and writing, this has implications for the planning of educational programmes in the field of adult basic education as well. Adults who have some difficulties reading and writing might also choose practices that are not strictly text related or provide assistance by networks of support (Buddeberg, 2019).

In the context of the German National Decade for Alphabetization and Basic Education, there is a strong bias towards reading and writing. Survey results support an alternative view. Reading and writing certainly is a relevant field of work in adult basic education. However, it is not the only relevant field. Results regarding health-related practices indicate the significance of health literacy. Results regarding financial practices indicate the significance of financial literacy and so forth. Literacy—in the sense of reading and writing skills—is embedded into these practices (Reder, 2017). What might be common sense in international discussions is a relatively new aspect in the discourse in Germany. Finally, it can be shown that there is demand for adult basic education, but this demand not only refers to low-literate adults. This paper pointed out correlations regarding reading and writing skills. Further multivariate analysis should examine further correlations, for instance between practices and age, practices and formal education, or

practices and first language. The domains examined in the survey (politics, health, finances, digitization) are fields for adult basic education for different subgroups of the adult population.

Notes

[1] In LEO 2010, the definition of adults with low literacy skills that was used to calculate participation rates in continuing education was based on a different set of methodological principles than those used in 2018. There are therefore limitations to the comparability of the continuing education data for LEO 2010 and LEO 2018.

[2] This question was only given to people who had previously stated that they had access to the internet (n=6,645).

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Aims & Scope

The European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults (RELA) is a refereed academic journal creating a forum for the publication of critical research on adult education and learning. It has a particular focus on issues at stake for adult education and learning in Europe, as these emerge in connection with wider international and transnational dynamics and trends. Such a forum is important at a time when local and regional explorations of issues are often difficult to foreground across language barriers. As academic and policy debate is increasingly carried out in the English language, this masks the richness of research knowledge, responses and trends from diverse traditions and foci. The journal thus attempts to be linguistically 'open access'. Whilst creating a forum for international and transnational debate, contributions are particularly welcome from authors in Europe and other locations where English is not the first language.

RELA invites original, scholarly articles that discuss the education and learning of adults from different academic disciplines, perspectives and traditions. It encourages diversity in theoretical and methodological approach and submissions from non-English speakers. All published contributions in RELA are subjected to a rigorous peer review process based on two moments of selection: an initial editorial screening and a double-blind review by at least two anonymous referees. Clarity and conciseness of thought are crucial requirements for publication.

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