# ADULT LITERACY AND LIFESTYLE CHANGES

## UNDERSTANDING THE SPECIAL AWARENESS, NEEDS AND STORIES OF SIX ADULTS WHO ARE LITERACY CHALLENGED

A Thesis

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## ABSTRACT

Comparatively few studies examined the possible lifestyle changes of adults whose literacy skills have improved. This research studied the experiences of 6 men and women with literacy challenges, who received help with literacy skills to determine if they perceived improvements in the quality of their lifestyles owing to improvements in their skills. This study focussed on the stories told by these adults after their literacy skills had improved. This thesis is based on interviews with 6 adults who were previously literacy challenged, 3 currently living in Canada and 3 presently residing in England. From a reflexive inquiry of my own involvement in the research process, I considered in this study the difficulties of entering the private world of adults with literacy challenges. Using a narrative inquiry method, I analyzed the interview results and found a positive correlation between the acquisition of literacy skills and the recognition of self-esteem and lifestyle change. The narrative inquiry method encouraged me to examine my own role as practitioner researcher. In doing so, I reexamined my 25-year assumptions about a researcher's supposed detachment and possible responsibility in the research process.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### Overview

As an international student from England studying at the University of Prince Edward Island, Canada, I bring to my studies a long history and interest in Adult Education. In the United Kingdom I lectured at a College of further education for over 20 years. For this reason, I felt it would be appropriate to draw on my experience as a teacher when constructing the research for my M.Ed. thesis. In particular, I was involved in establishing all the self-directed learning courses in the college. I was both a program leader and co-ordinator with the National Extension College (NEC), a program which formulated policy in the area of Adult Education. Initially, I assumed my experience would provide an ideal area for thesis research. However, in view of the fact that I was studying in Canada, I decided my research should reflect this new experience.

Significantly, I wanted to create a research project that would allow me to move between Canada and Britain, and one that would allow me to draw from my years of experience as a teacher. Knowing that Adult Literacy is a world-wide phenomena, I wanted my research to tell me more about how adults with literacy challenges perceived their actual experience. I wanted to examine perceptions about potential personal change and growth, particularly from the perspective of adults who have sought help through involvement in literacy programs. In setting up my research, I was more interested in hearing the stories of adults who had experienced

literacy challenges than I was in understanding how programs worked, or what theoretical perspectives could be developed to explain literacy difficulties in the first place.

From experience, I knew that Adult Literacy was a controversial area of research, not least because a high number of adults with literacy difficulties suggests that education systems are not working for them. Meyer (2002) observed, and supports my concern with the way in which government-sponsored groups and educators are responding to the debates about "the teaching and learning of reading" (p. 453). In effect, what has emerged is a situation where many students are now learning to read in classrooms made even more tense by debates about the right way to teach reading. What I did not want to do, however, when I began my research was to examine the educational, social, and political reasons for this problem. I wanted, instead, to hear the stories of adults whose voices had been silenced by a system that rendered invisible their experience as challenged readers and writers. I worried, however, that it would be difficult for me to find participants who would be prepared to talk about their literacy experiences. From experience, I knew about the code of confidentiality surrounding adult literacy: I was well aware of the shame carried by adults who struggle with reading and writing in a culture that prizes particular kinds of literacy skills. Teaching adults had taught me the importance of relating sensitively, and with discretion, to adults who are experiencing literacy difficulties. What I was not prepared for when I undertook my research was the way in which I would be changed by the research process.

Using a narrative approach designed to hear the stories of adults with literacy difficulties, and drawing from my previous work as a teacher, I set out to interview 6 participants, 3 living in Britain, and 3 living in Canada. My aim was to examine their experiences of literacy and how

they may or may not have been changed by participation in programs designed to help them. As in the research of Lewison, Flint, and Sluys (2002), I wanted to address the voices I assumed had not been heard. Unlike these researchers, I was not taking a consciously, critical perspective to my analysis of how language shapes, identifies, and constructs specific cultural discourses. Instead, the question I used to shape my study was: "Do literacy-challenged adults who have experienced literacy programs perceive significant lifestyle changes when or if their literacy skills improve?" Basically, my goal was to ask a series of why, who, where, when, and what questions which I assumed would allow me to hear their stories without bias. My intent was to understand why participants had entered a literacy program, what skills they assumed they needed to be literate, and what, if anything, helped them to change, or not. My questions were not designed to demonstrate the impact of change in communities where such programs were available, nor were they designed to explain why literacy challenges existed in the first place, or what measures were being used to eradicate reading problems. Rather, I wanted the participants to tell me about their experiences, in their words, and from their perspective, as adults who had been challenged with literacy difficulties.

Given what I have learned from my research, and were I to re-visit the participants in my study, I would shift my research focus and ask more directed questions of them. As well, and in keeping with a research approach used in the work of Cole and Knowles (2000), I would choose to locate my own experience as teacher and researcher more fully and consciously in the research project (p. 32). More specifically, I would locate myself more centrally in what Pritchard (2002) refers to as the field of practitioner research.

When my advisors first introduced this way of doing research to me, I was hesitant: I worried that such an approach would intrude upon the stories I wanted to hear. But, writing this thesis has helped me to understand that the stories I heard are even more powerful than I first thought. I began this thesis insisting I would not do a composite profile from interviews, nor would I in any way "intrude" on the stories or the participants' lives by asking questions that might embarrass, shame, or anger the adults who had agreed to work with me. But my findings, and indeed the whole process of framing questions, executing interviews, and writing up my findings has made me realize that I may have limited the power of my participants stories, even from themselves, by not asking questions that would allow them to reflect on the larger issues that helped to create their learning difficulties in the first place.

Once I had completed the interviews with participants, and I had begun to analyze the data, my supervisors encouraged me to introduce this thesis by acknowledging what I am now learning from the data about the power of story, as well as what I am learning from my role as researcher/practitioner. From this perspective, I now see along with Besley (2001) the value of current theories about how to use narrative and story "to help people see both dominant stories and alternative stories that in turn help to 're-author' their stories and to clarify what choices they may have and wish to make" (Monk as cited in Besley, p. 75). This realization, of course, applies to my own ability and decision to continuously re-author the research story I am constructing.

In analyzing the data, I was struck by the observation that no participant (male or female, British or Canadian) in my study found fault with the school system that had clearly failed them in their first attempts to learn to read. In asking myself why this was so, I was encouraged by my advisors to return to the literature and to look at current theories about critical literacy and the

socially imposed limitations on "voice", "silence", and "consciousness" particularly as it is applied to adult readers who had not learned to read as young children. While my aim in this research was not to theorize the origins of literacy skills, I discovered from doing the research that I was unable to explain my participants' collective silence except to say that it existed and that it involved considerable individual feelings of shame and secrecy. What, I wondered, could the stories I had heard mean even for the individuals telling them if each individual assumed the problem with literacy is personal and individual, rather than social and constructed?

Research indicates that teachers who are conscious of the social construction of literacy can help their students to disrupt the social construction and community relations that sometimes inhibit learning. If I, as a teacher, demonstrate no consciousness of the power of this disruption, then how could I help those adults struggling with literacy problems to see their difficulties, their experiences, and their lives in new ways? My aim in this research is to show how the data I collected, and the research approach I used to collect the date, enabled me to formulate this important question.

My initial aim in this study was to examine if adults perceive significant lifestyle changes when or if their literacy skills improved, having been on literacy programs. I now recognize that the word "perceive" as I used it to set up my study is "loaded" in a way that I had not first understood. From the perspective of hindsight, it is this very notion of perception and the consciousness that it requires that is necessarily tied to some understanding that perception is itself a concept which needs to be taught, learned, and developed. If a participant, (or young students who can not read), or even myself as researcher, is not taught, or is not interested in seeing and understanding the social/political context in which literacy skills have been inhibited

then I now see how they are/I am prevented from seeing the acquisition of literacy skills as a significant disruption of power relations. Equally, it is difficult to see individual triumph, or failure, as anything other than an individual, isolated story--one without community significance or social power.

In my research, I asked participants no questions that could have helped them see themselves as parts of a larger whole. By not wanting to theorize their stories, or make my questions ones that would make these adults reflect politically on their situations, I have been complicit with the assumptions expressed by the participants in my study—that their situations are personal, private, and shameful, rather than public and socially constructed. Of course, this was never the intent of my research. And, in making this assertion, I am in no way attempting to lay blame. What my observation, in fact, points to is the power of being able to engage in a qualitative research process that enabled me to make important discoveries throughout the whole research project. In other words, while I may have missed an opportunity to be a teacher in a situation where I was asking my participants to tell me stories about their experiences, stories that I now see could be told even by them in very different ways, nevertheless, the six questions that I did use to shape my thesis still make a useful contribution to the understanding of people's stories—people who have not previously been invited to reflect on the advantages of literacy to them personally. And, this initially, was my goal.

My aim here is not to demonstrate the "limitations" of my research project. Rather, my intent is to show the reflexive power of the research process itself, a condition or practice now common in the doing of qualitative research (Pritchard, 2002). Instead of assuming that I had somehow made or produced an error (i.e., my participants failed to analyze the conditions of their

literacy issues), or I had failed to ask good research questions, by using a reflexive, narrative approach I was able to double-back on the research process and examine up-front the assumptions and perceptions I initially took to the study. Thus, I am able to examine and re-examine the assumptions that shaped and informed my discoveries. In my opinion, this way of doing research is key to the development of good qualitative research. While some scholars might assume this to be a limitation I prefer, along with Pritchard, to see it as a growth process which is shaping my own experience as a practitioner/researcher. This way of doing research will be discussed in greater depth in the literature review and the methodology section of this thesis.

What assumptions, then, did I bring to initial thinking about adult literacy? Many misconceptions exist around the world of adult literacy. It is widely assumed that any adult who is literacy challenged is backward or even mentally challenged in some way. Research suggests this is not so, and I agree, for very few literacy problems are related to a person's lack of intelligence or motivation. To illustrate this, I had only to look at the ingenious efforts made by many adults to conceal their literacy difficulties: the conveniently mislaid reading glasses, the memorization of landmark sequences (as opposed to reading street signs) or even the pretended reading of a newspaper or book. The list is considerable. Ironically, these disguises are often more intellectually demanding than the ability to learn to read. What these conceptions suggest, however, is the degree of secrecy and confusion surrounding an actual definition of illiteracy.

Street (1996) defined an illiterate adult as one who only has the reading and writing skills up to the maximum of the average Grade 5 student. He defined 16 years or older as adult. UNESCO's (1988) guidelines, in my opinion, are more helpful in the "Standardization of Educational Statistics":

— A person is literate who can with understanding, both read and write a series of short, simple statements on his/her everyday life.
— A person is illiterate who cannot with understanding, both read and write a series of short, simple statements on his/her everyday life. (p. 2)

It is important to note, however, that the language used to describe literacy and illiteracy is constantly changing. For example, the term illiterate is now assumed to be pejorative whereas the term literacy challenged is considered to be more politically correct. For this reason, I have adopted this term in my thesis.

More recently, the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) (2001) divided literacy skills into five levels. They are as follows:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Level 1 | • | People have great difficulty reading and usually know they have a problem; |
| Level 2 | • | People can read but not well; |
| | • | They can deal with material that is simple and clearly laid out but dense print in particular can create difficulties for them; |
| Level 3 | • | People can read well, but have some problems with more complex tasks; |
| Levels 4 & 5 | • | People have a high level of literacy and can meet most reading demands; |
| | • | These levels are usually combined for convenience. (p. 2) |

From my perspective, the number of people falling into levels one and two is surprising. For example, on Prince Edward Island, it is estimated that up to 40% of the adult population have reading levels in these categories. As recently as December 2001, "The Employment Journey" claimed that 40% of adults have problems with interpreting words in their complete context even if they can recognize words individually. There could be many reasons for this. Prince Edward Island is largely a resource-based economy with farming and fishing being significant

occupations. In the past there was little need for high literacy skills in these professions, which is perhaps why there continues to be a low literacy rate among some seniors. Further, because literacy is a skill that must be practised, even people who have graduated from school can have lower literacy skills if they have not regularly used these skills as an adult at home and at work.

In Great Britain as recently as May 2003, the Basic Skills Agency estimated that up to 7 million adults in the United Kingdom need help with their literacy skills. The agency further maintained that 15% of the adult population could be classed as having such limited skills that they were functioning below a competent level of literacy.

From my years of experience as an educator, and based on my research data, I am well aware of the need to approach any area of literacy with deep respect because the world of literacy is often one of shame. For this reason, I wanted to design a research project that would enable me to tread softly as I set out to understand the experiences of adults who wanted to improve their literacy skills.

## Background

*Tackling Adult Illiteracy*

Since World War II, many countries in the Western and the developing world have sought to encourage adults to seek help with their literacy problems. Street (1996) outlines the developments from the 1970s to the end of the twentieth century.

During the 1970s, a number of activists and organizations in Great Britain united around the concept of the "Right to Read," in order to draw public and government attention to the large number of people throughout the country who have literacy difficulties and the need for funds and organization to provide tuition. An awareness-raising campaign acquainted the general public with learning possibilities. In this campaign it was recommended that all facilities would have to be free of the usual budgeting conditions attached to adult education provision. Classes should open and close on the basis of the numbers of enrollees. Fees should be waived for participants. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) committed itself to a 3 year series of broadcast programs and publications on behalf of literacy. The keystone program dealing with literacy was entitled "On the Move." Here, a literacy-challenged adult, played by the actor Bob Hoskins, found himself in a series of everyday situations, such as, a hospital unit or job centre, where at least some literacy skills were clearly needed. "On the Move" was successful, not only in terms of audience figures, which indicated a clear necessity, but it also tried to remove some of the stigma surrounding illiteracy. Bob Hoskins appeared as a normal adult who happened to have difficulties reading and writing.

The BBC continued adult literacy work after the initial period expired. The Central Government Agency, The Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit (ALBSU), established in the early 1990s, has had its mandate and budget renewed since that time. It has managed to ensure the availability of a high level of provision with most local education authorities. It is constantly encouraging innovative teaching methods appropriate for adults, and is experimenting with strategies to reach the most deprived rural areas and inner cities in Great Britain.

During the past 40 years, Laubach Literacy of Canada's motto, "Each one Teach one" has played a key role in helping Canadians with literacy difficulties. Its program mission is as follows:

> Laubach Literacy of Canada is a national non-profit volunteer organization. We are committed to raising the literacy level of Canadian society. Our trained tutors work with people to improve their basic and functional skills in reading, writing, speaking, listening, numeracy, and other life skills. Our programs are adapted to the goals of the student, materials and organizational support are available through local Laubach councils. (See Appendix A)

Each student is helped on an individual basis and guaranteed complete confidentiality. Thomas (2001) has done considerable research into the Canadian approach to adult literacy. She refers to the Canadian Literacy Policy in the following way,

> The history of adult literacy in Canada is the history of many adult literacies, through which the federal government presence can be found in different ways in different periods. However, its presence is always shaped by the constitutional fact that education in Canada is under the control of the provinces and there is no strong central federal power in education per se. ( p. 2)

In North America during the 1980s, the beginning of the family literacy movement was prompted by concerns about national educational levels and the failure of education to address

the needs of families identified as low-literate or educationally disadvantaged (Morrow, 1995). Based on early ethnographic studies of families in their homes and communities (Heath, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988) family literacy is understood to encompass the ways family members use literacy during the routines of daily living reflecting their ethnic, racial, and cultural heritages (Morrow, Paratore, & Tracey, 1994). Programs I have identified in the literature include:

- Family literacy programs—recognizing the influence of the family on literacy development of family members and perhaps even more important
- Intergenerational literacy programs—where direct literacy instruction is provided to more than one generation of family members (e.g., a mother and her child receive literacy instruction)
- Parental involvement programs attempting to work with parents to positively influence their ability to support their child's literacy development.

Continued strong interest in family literacy, and rapid program development in communities around the world, have set family literacy firmly in future social policy and planning considerations. A variety of family literacy programs has taken hold across Canada including Prince Edward Island. The value of family literacy programs is argued by Brooks (1998). Brooks' triple aim included,

a) Improving parents' literacy skills;
b) Improving parents' ability to help their children with the early stages of learning to read and write;
c) Boosting young children's acquisition of reading and writing. (p. 4)

According to Brooks, over 90% of parents felt their improved literacy helped their families in confidence, communication skills, and employment.

The account of Carole Bordnas illustrated the need for a human perspective approach to family literacy (Callwood, 1990). Her story points to the common difficulties caused by parental literacy challenges. Bordnas could not read and mistook adult painkillers for the child-size dose which resulted in making her feverish child much sicker. When her child eventually started school, he floundered. Because he had been raised in a household without books, print was strange to him. He would point to a word in his reader and ask his mother what it was. She was as baffled as he. A school cafeteria worker's story from Plymouth, Britain (Torr, 1997) is similar to that of Bordnas. Far from encouraging her son to read, she actively discouraged him. She admitted to saying, "'Put down your books, go out and play!' I was jealous, really, looking at him reading all the time." Clearly, as a mother she felt her parenting skills, and also her self-esteem, would suffer if her son was able to read and she could not.

The research into literacy in schools is understandably extensive. There are many viewpoints and analyses of why students do not achieve literacy skills in schools but the underlying theme remains that success in "schooled literacy" is still a firm requirement for success in a wider socio- economic life. Or to quote Hébert and Racicot (1997), "Literacy then must meet the complexities of the technological chameleon that is the global village" (p. 259). By contrast, Rothstein (2001) effectively argues that literacy can create both snobbery on the part of those who can read and shame for those who cannot (p. 1).

I have subdivided the thesis into a series of chapters looking firstly at related literature, then through to design methodology, and finally recording and presenting the interviews of adults with literacy challenges and analyzing their experiences.

# CHAPTER II

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### Adult Literacy

A good qualitative researcher, particularly one interested in narrative, pays close attention to the stories told when collecting data. In particular, close attention is paid to what may not be said in the stories. When I, as researcher, was surprised by the repeated pattern I discovered in the research data--all of my participants did not hold schools accountable for their literacy challenges--I wanted to examine in greater depth the reasons for my own silence around this issue. Specifically, I wanted to theorize what may have caused this silence, or possibly what lay behind the silence. Given that half of the participants I interviewed lived in Britain, it was not possible for me to return for a second round of questions once I had gathered the data. Nor, did I assume it was feasible for me to re-interview the Canadian participants, given my desire to ensure that I ask similar questions of all whom I interviewed.

Instead, I have chosen to expand my initial literature review to include a brief, and more specific, discussion of early literacy practices in the classroom, and how they may or may not be connected to later literacy practices. I think my over-respectfulness of silence could be interpreted as passivity in that I did not initially attempt to find out through my research question what precisely shaped the silence and shame of the 6 adults I interviewed. An awareness, and a concern about this silence, has now changed my role from a respectful and detached recorder to a researcher practitioner who is simultaneously examining my own 25 years experience in this field

in relation to the individuals I interviewed. In other words, doing the research for this thesis has changed the way I see myself as teacher, listener, and participant.

The question I used to organize my research is this: If adults do access literacy instruction and improve their literacy skills, do they experience a subsequent improvement in lifestyle? I divided the literature review into two parts. The first deals with the research question I set for myself, and the six questions I used in the interviews. The second part provides a theoretical frame for what it means to be a research practitioner.

In part one, I have selected and examined a number of authors who attempt to understand literacy from the perspective of the people who are experiencing literacy difficulties. The works cited were helpful to my research because they highlight the human experience of being literacy-challenged. In particular, I chose articles that showed how lifestyle change was beneficial to participants involved in literacy programs. As well, I wanted to examine works that supported my belief that adults with literacy challenges do not have, as is sometimes assumed, mental disabilities or learning disorders, precisely because participants do learn to read and write if given the right opportunity. While I tend to draw theoretically from humanistic perspectives, my study also relies on authors such as Besley (2001). I make reference to Besley not because her research is specifically about literacy but rather I use it to show the power of the narrative approach to any research problem.

Much of the literature I examined suggests that for many literacy-challenged adults learning to improve reading and writing skills is akin to escaping from a form of imprisonment. Schlink (1999) analyses the experience of a female inmate who learns to read and write whilst

serving a prison sentence in Germany. The lifestyle changes experienced by Hanna as she changed from an adult with literacy challenges to one with skills are well described by him:

> I knew about the helplessness in everyday activities, finding one's way or finding an address or choosing a meal in a restaurant, about how the illiterates stick to prescribed patterns and familiar routines, about how much energy it takes to conceal one's inability to read and write, energy lost to actual living. Illiteracy is dependence. By finding the courage to learn to read and write, Hanna had advanced from dependence to independence, a step towards liberation. (p. 186)

Schlink's work demonstrates the value of literacy skills to adults such as Hanna. From her new perspective, learning to read and write meant that she had escaped from at least one of her prisons. Would this metaphor, I wondered, be significant to the participants in my research?

Understandably, many adults with literacy difficulties are reluctant to admit, let alone share, their problems. Martini and Page (1996) write about the shame experienced by adults who are literacy-challenged, "The stigma of low literacy is powerful. Attending a program discloses one's level of literacy; adults who have internalized a sense of stigma may opt to hide their low literacy skills" (p. 3). Thomas (1990) lists some of the issues adults must face before entering literacy training. These include, "financial issues, personal issues, special needs, anxiety, past school failures, low perceived need for reading, instructional strategies that they are uncomfortable with, [sic] and a lack of support systems" (p. 4). Research demonstrates that the degree and scope of the effect of acquired literacy skills are not just comprised by not being able to read, but also the stressors that keep adults from entering training sooner than they actually do. Thomas also discusses some of the common motivational factors that lead adults to literacy training. These include, "desire for self-improvement, community/church involvement, economic need, family responsibility, job advancement, launching into a new life cycle, and the urging of

others" (p. 5). Clearly, the presence and use of these motivational factors would be the beginning of positive change for adults with literacy difficulties. It is possible that such changes, when combined with literacy training, could result in the quality of life changes I intend to examine in my research.

One area of particular concern to me in the literature is the practice of labelling. From experience I know that once a person is (negatively) labelled, the label can become a limiting factor in the life of an adult with literacy difficulties, one that may hold back personal progress and growth. Besley (2001) writes, and I agree, "It is notoriously difficult to change people's perception about a student or a class that has a negative label assigned to them" (p. 3). In effect, the concept of labelling can support the assumption that many adults hide their lack of literacy skills for fear of social reprisal. Perhaps one of the biggest changes that occurs in adults who enter literacy training is the acceptance of a label, even if only for a short period of time.

Sabato's (1990) research, done in Australia, shows the value of providing a space where adults can begin to examine their experience of being literacy-challenged. Like myself, Sabato was an instructor in a literacy program. Basically, she completed four in-depth interviews with 4 young adults, 2 males and 2 females, known respectively as Doug, Eric, Carol, and Jenny. All of the interviewees had been participants in the literacy program. Sabato's data collection methods consisted of a series of audio-taped in-depth interviews that were completed over an extended period of time. She also had the added benefit of observing her participants during the program. In each of these environments she encouraged participants to speak freely about their experiences. From this rich field of study she was able to understand and appreciate the complete canvas of what it means to be illiterate.

Nowhere is this richness more apparent that when she listens to her participants speak about the stigma associated with illiteracy. Her research shows that her participants likened illiteracy to a "terrible penalty" —one that left them vulnerable to scorn, shame and humiliation. All of the participants in her study described feeling "panic" whenever they were unexpectedly called to read or write in front of others. This feeling of panic was accompanied by a cold sweat and/or a "freezing" episode. As Sabato (1990) notes, her participants' everyday lives were plagued by the fear that their literacy challenges might be discovered. Her study also shows that all of the participants demonstrated a constant need to safeguard against disclosure. Prior to participation in the literacy program, the participants also described themselves as having poor self-esteem. As well, they all imagined that those who might discover their literacy challenges would also have access to other negative events in their lives--events that caused them to feel shame.

Reference to their literacy difficulties acted as a kind of catalyst in identifying other negative situations during the course of Sabato's (1990) research. For example, Doug talked about his issues with weight, Eric talked about his childhood foster-care experiences, Jenny talked about her abuse, and Carol talked about her unemployment, as well as two suicide attempts. According to Sabato, participants were often their own prosecutory enemies, feeling that they deserved to be exploited, and resigned in desperation that nothing could be changed. Because, from my perspective, a human approach is very much at the heart of Sabato's research, it is easy to visualize Carol's humiliation at the employment office after being told to wait at the end of the line as the social security officer announces loudly to everyone that Carol cannot fill in the forms.

Sabato (1990) argues in her research that as participants develop increased literacy skills, some of the baggage that came with illiteracy seems to melt away. Quite often, a negative outlook on life is replaced by positive ones. For example, Carol is eventually able to talk with other students and staff at a council of adult education. Indeed, as Doug, Eric, Carol, and Jenny's literacy skills improved, their personalities seemed to undergo significant change. All described experiencing an increase in self-esteem, independence, confidence, and sociability. Sabato concludes that the more literacy enables learners to interact with others, acting independently and with confidence, the more the possibility for increasing the areas of interest are likely to benefit their personal development.

Dillon-Black (1998) also examines the power of literacy to transform lives. Using a case-study approach, the story of Rose, Dillon-Black examined and analysed the way in which Rose's experiences were examined and used to consider the extent to which a figurative bridge was crossed--a bridge that lead to transformation in Rose's life. Here, I want to quote at length Rose's story as told by Dillon-Black because it so powerfully speaks to my own understanding of literacy-challenged adults:

> Her name was Rose. In early September she came into my adult basic literacy very quietly. Taking a seat at the back of the room near the door. Interestingly Rose asked that any tutor should pretend to be from the church if they should phone home explaining that her husband would 'kill' her if he knew she was going to school. Over the course of the year Rose's literacy skills increased, [so much so] that she considered applying for a job. However she felt she had no skills apart from housework. So the class asked her to indicate what this involved, pointing to the respective strengths: organizing, collaborating, co-ordinating, scheduling, counselling and trouble-shooting. Her class was so surprised that they gave her a title, 'domestic diplomat'. It was the beginning of a paradigm shift for Rose, for about 2 weeks later Rose said she had an announcement to make. The change was evident, Rose had never announced anything before in class, even her name. She had managed to get a job in a grocery store! (p. 12)

Horsman (1994) further illustrates the theme of women, literacy, and employment. Research done largely in the Maritimes, Horsman recorded her experiences of working over a number of years with women who were literacy-challenged. Although not all of the women she encountered were successful in overcoming their literacy difficulties, many did succeed and not only brought about better job prospects but for some even a sense of "empowerment."

Horsman's (1994) work is particularly interesting to me because her research approach is pragmatic. In her investigations, for example, she creates an environment where her informants are able, and encouraged, to speak for themselves. The women's stories are often brutally traumatic and in more than one instance a woman was abused both physically and emotionally. It is clear that, in several instances, men "welcome" their partners' literacy challenges as they are able to use these as a controlling mechanism. Some men, in fact, also discourage their wives from driving. In these ways women become dependent on their spouses. Nowhere was this more apparent than when women from isolated regions in Nova Scotia told Horsman about their experience. Ironically, here it is illiteracy that is seen as the cause of isolation; the illiterate woman, not the physical settings, is seen as responsible for her own isolation. Horsman suggests that the stigma of illiteracy often obscures the violence of women's lives; it is illiteracy that "disables" women or "chains" them in their prisons.

In keeping with the tenets of many literacy programs, Horsman (1994) is interested in women's desire to improve their literacy skills. In her research Horsman discovered that women hope that improvement in skills would mean an escape from the boring, monotonous, and dreary work into jobs that were more interesting and fulfilling, which improved skills would presumably bring. All the women in her study identified jobs they did not want to do. Knowing what they

might do differently, however, was a greater task. All expressed the hope that improved skills would mean better paid employment which, in turn, would mean freedom from the worries of economic survival. Women told Horsman that being around other women with like problems was thought to be beneficial because, in part, women felt more confident working with others in a similar predicament. Importantly, a few women in the individual tutoring programs spoke of what they felt they were missing, noting that in groups they felt they could get together, help each other, and feel less isolated:

> You'd do it sort of like together, learning from each other, you're not the only one with this problem. There's other ones with the same problem. When you're in with [the tutor] alone you feel like you're the only one with a problem. (p. 100)

Horsman's (1994) finding that some women preferred a group experience was a surprise to me precisely because the policy of Laubach Literacy in Canada is "one-on-one" instruction. This suggests that for some women at least the one-on-one experiences is not the most satisfactory means of literacy instruction.

Several women in Horsman's (1994) study reported wanting to help their children learn how to read, as well as expand the range of activities they could share with them. The fact that the women in her study saw improved literacy as beneficial to their children, as well as to themselves, would seem to make it worthwhile. In other words, even if improved literacy skills did not improve their lives there was hope that it would change their children's lives.

Below are two examples of how parents in the study saw their literacy challenges in relation to their children. Susan, for example, had taken her daughter to a wildlife park where she was not able to read the names of the animals. These are her words:

> If I can't pronounce the name of the animal, how is she going to know what it is? It looks like a fox, so you say fox, but there's many different kinds of fox. I just say it's another fox, I don't read things. (p. 106)

Susan reported feeling she could take her daughter to a museum, to a library, or to a park, if she herself could learn to read better:

> It would help me with her a lot more, because I could read stuff, if there's something going on like at the museum, if you can read stuff to her she'd understand it. If I understand it, I could bring it down to her level, it would be easier. Reading I think has a lot to do with life. If you can read and understand what you're reading, I think you can do a lot with it. (p.107)

Judy, like Susan, stressed the importance of being literate to provide a role model for her children. She felt she must set an example of reading to show that reading counts. "It's not good for them to think you don't know it--'*so why should I have to learn it?*' I'm pretty sure they would feel that way after a while" (p. 106). Both women, then show that literacy thus figures in women's hopes that their children's lives will be different from their own. However, several of the women in the study, notably in their twenties or early thirties, felt they were already too old to begin a literacy program.

Horsman (1994) identifies aspects of the academic debate that surrounds illiteracy. To some extent, the issue of literacy has been clouded by the term "functional" literacy, particularly in terms of looking at the human perspective. What, for example, is the dividing line that determines whether or not a person is functionally literate? From my perspective, I prefer the more generally humanistic approach which defines literacy as the necessary foundation for a higher quality of life. For those who espouse this view, there is no objective form of

measurement; the person's own judgement is the only authority. Or to cite Harman and Hunter (1979):

> The possession of skills perceived as necessary by particular persons and groups to fulfill their own self-determined objectives as family and community members, citizens, consumers, job-holders, and members of social, religious, or other associations of their choosing. This includes the ability to obtain information they want and to use that information for their own and other's well-being, the ability to read and write adequately to satisfy the requirements they set for themselves as being important for their own lives, the ability to deal positively with demands made on them by society, and the ability to solve problems they face in their daily lives. (p. 7)

Significantly, Horsman (1994) examines the training programs that are caught in the Social Services net. Such programs operate within the institutional framework of Social Services. Rather than escaping from being controlled and dependent on welfare through participating in such programs, women sometimes become deeply immersed in a process that may define for them what is both desirable and necessary.

Horsman (1994) also demonstrates the value of literacy programs to shape women's lives--offering the opportunity for employment, improved self-esteem and, for a few, even a sense of empowerment, particularly in contrast to their previous literacy-challenged existence. Women in her study frequently spoke of "the light at the end of the tunnel" (p. 112). Some spoke of enduring the struggle in the tunnel because they believe that, one day soon, they, will reach the light at the end: like playing the lottery, literacy keeps dreams alive. In Judy's words, "I'm even feeling better, just learning, having something else in my mind besides the everyday" (p. 240).

Greer's (2000) research, unlike Horsman (1994), draws from a male population and demonstrates quite clearly that illiteracy issues are not gender specific. Greer discovered, moreover, that when the boys in her study were provided (even one) male role model with whom

they were able to form a warm bond, their reading skills improved. Greer assumes, and I agree, that as boys and men begin to talk more openly about how they are affected by low literacy skills, more men may participate in vital literacy development, both within their homes and in their communities.

Willinsky (1990) argues that those involved in learning strategies should shift the control of reading and writing from the teacher to the student. To make his point he uses an analogy of learning to ride a bike. From his perspective, new literacy programs should not simply demonstrate the ability to ride (i.e., through practising and performing the skills). Rather, if bikes are worth riding they should take you places. In other words, literacy should not be an end in itself. More precisely, it is about what one does with literacy.

I appreciate Willinsky's (1990) metaphor because it reinforces my desire to examine what happens to adults with literacy difficulties when they learn new skills. In other words, what is important about riding, I think, are the places to which you ride and the pleasures gained on the way. In the process of this riding with purpose, the skill may naturally improve. Thus, new literacy programs would shift the focus of intention and purpose to the student rather than letting it reside in the teacher and the curriculum guide book. Willinsky continues by saying that, "New Literacy programs redefine reading and writing as the active pursuit of meaning; participation in this meaning is the right of every student" (p. 243).

Cambourne (1998) examines the idea of "natural learning" and the acquisition of literacy in the classroom. In terms of adults who do not acquire literacy skills despite having been in a classroom situation, he identifies what can go wrong when teaching literacy skills. In his opinion, "The distaste for sustained engagement with text seems to begin in primary school" (p. 23). He

also discusses the literate illiterate, that is the pupil who can read, but chooses not to. More pertinent is his question as to why nearly all of the population learns to speak without difficulty whereas learning to read and write can create such problems. Two possible reasons are given for this. First, the teachers in his study expressed a strong sense of frustration and dissatisfaction with the way they had been teaching literacy skills in the classroom. Second, as a consequence of their frustration and dissatisfaction, each of them realized they were tied to a model of learning which was not only outdated but based on quite dubious assumptions. Furthermore, they each came to the conclusion that they were (metaphorically) prisoners of a model of learning which locked them into ways of teaching that made learning complex, dysfunctional, and trivial. Third, they tried to break free from the model which had imprisoned them and which stinted and trivialized their teaching, by developing and implementing a different model of learning based on the remarkable human capacity to learn language "naturally." From his research, when the above was implemented, the teaching of literacy was more successful and the newly acquired literacy skills were more durable.

Kazemek's (1999) work, in my opinion, is diametrically opposed to that of Cambourne (1998). In his portrayal of a supposed typical literacy-challenged adult, whom he calls Mary, Kazemek creates a composite of people he had known while tutoring in literacy programs. From my own perspective as a teacher and someone who has worked for many years with adults with literacy challenges, I was offended by Kazemek's composite. Moreover, I think it is unhelpful, and perhaps even dangerous, because the composite portrayal works to effectively stereotype adults with literacy difficulties. In effect, the composite works to suggest that all challenged adults must have all of the composite characteristics. Surely, this practice would act to encourage

labelling both in the eyes of the general public, as well as in the eyes of the subjects themselves. While Kazemek may have been trying to preserve the anonymity of his students, nevertheless each adult is surely an individual who happens, for whatever variety of reasons, to have difficulties with reading and writing.

Hamilton (2002) indirectly confirms my concern about not creating stereotypes with respect to adults with literacy challenges. Concretely, Hamilton discusses an approach to literacy which suggests "we should look beyond texts themselves to what people do with literacy, with whom, where and how" (p. 6). She writes that "another implication of the shift in understanding literacy is that it places centre stage people's own definition of literacy because there is no one standard that is valid for everyone, for all time. This means exploring both as teachers our own starting points, and with students their starting points and assumptions about literacy" (p. 2). Hamilton concludes, and I agree, that "the New Literacy Studies encourages us to be reflective about the everyday practices that we are all part of, to ask questions rather than to assume that we already know what literacy is" (p. 4).

When I set out to do my research I did not know that participants would uniformly dismiss the importance of their schooling experience. Had I known this I may have changed my questions and my focus, to understand better why this was so. What is exciting about a qualitative approach to research that allows for change while the research is in progress is the assumption that notions of reflexivity are welcomed in the process, including the assumption that what I am doing in this research will have a direct impact on my work as a teacher.

Pritchard (2002) notes that many "Educators are joining the ranks of people carrying out projects that deliberately generate knowledge in the context of improving practice" (p. 3). From

his perspective, "Practitioner researchers understand research as an integral part of what they do in the ordinary course of events as a way of improving their regular practice" (p. 4). Within the field of education "Practitioner research may be directed solely at enriching the practitioners' understanding of their own professional activity, or they may seek to discover something that promises to improve educational practice" (p. 4). In other words, "Practitioner researchers may want to improve their understanding of their own practice without pursuing generalizable findings" (p. 4), which is precisely my aim in this study. My goal was to listen well to the stories of these adults with literacy difficulties, and my goal was to improve my own teaching practice, particularly with respect to adults who are seeking to improve their skills; my aim was not to demonstrate that what I discovered in my research was generalizable to other studies or situations. Should readers, particularly the participants in this study, find ways to read this work that are helpful to them, I will have accomplished my goal. Similarly, I like the term used by Pritchard, "practitioner researcher", because it is one that locates me as teacher and researcher in the centre of the reflexive practice of generating new knowledge--a practice that leaves space and room for me to change and grow as a teacher and researcher.

According to Beattie (2000), a narrative and holistic orientation to teacher education is grounded in Dewey's philosophy of education and his belief that we learn from experience and reflection on experience. This holds, she suggest, whether "one is in a setting of teacher education, a high school or a kindergarten" (p. 2). Beattie goes on to suggest that "To an extent far greater than most of us commonly recognize, what we know about our physical environment, and ourselves, is determined, either directly or indirectly, with our relationships with other people" (p. 4).

What I find significant about Beattie's (2000) assumption, particularly in view of my own research is the question or problem of why it was that my participants were silent about their schooling experiences with respect to not holding schools accountable for their early loss of literacy. More importantly, how could I expect the adults I worked with to assess their learning if they had never been expected or taught to do this? What I now find interesting, particularly in terms of early literacy development, is the attention being given to critical literacy at a formative stage.

Lewison et al. (2002), for example, argue that "teaching is not a neutral form of social practice, yet often it takes place with no attention given to how sociopolitical systems, power relationships, and language are intertwined and inseparable from our teaching" (p. 383). From their perspective, children can be taught critical literacy skills at very early ages. This, they suggest, is important because it provides a space, or wider net, for engaging students who are experiencing literacy difficulties at a young age. Basically, they synthesize critical literacy into four dimensions which include: "(1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focussing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting social justice...none stands alone" (p. 382). What I find interesting about this approach to early literacy skills is that it provides a model for teaching both teachers and students how to ask, "Whose voices are heard and not heard" (p. 387). This is an important question, and approach, precisely because the child who may be experiencing literacy difficulties is simultaneously learning how to question why this is the case. What this, then, suggests to me is the need for a critical analysis--one that is applicable to those who are literacy-challenged, and one that is applicable to those who assume they know what is best for those who are challenged. Stuckey (2002) writes "To

those of us who thought language was a key, the power of writing was the virtual guarantee that children can and will acquire unlimited ways with words if they are provided appropriate conditions and tools" (p. 226). There is a need to return to the drawing board to examine what can be done for children and adults who are experiencing literacy difficulties.

Neilson (1997) writes, and I agree, "Good teaching is not merely the successful execution of a teacher-directed plan, but the weaving of an ever changing patchwork of knowledge and understanding we create with our students in our reading and writing experiences" (p. 41). In the kind of world described by Neilson, a world that is much larger than town, city, home, or classroom, perhaps all children would have the opportunity to avoid becoming an adult with literacy challenges.

# CHAPTER III

## DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

### Approach and Rationale

My aim in this study was to interview 6 adults with literacy challenges, 3 currently living in Canada and 3 presently living in England. The question I brought to this research was: "Do adults who have been on literacy programs perceive significant lifestyle changes when or if their literacy skills improve?" To provide consistency in the study I asked each participant specific questions, varying them only slightly when I judged it was necessary. The questions were as follows:

1) How did you become involved in a literacy program?
2) If I followed you through a typical day, before you began the program, what would I observe you doing? How might you have been feeling about yourself and your ability to accomplish your tasks and goals?
3) In your opinion, what, if any, change have you experienced in yourself as a result of improving your literacy skills? When did you first notice a change taking place? How has this change affected you personally? Professionally?
4) Is there any advice you might give to someone you know who has literacy difficulties?

Pritchard (2002) writes that many "Educators are joining the ranks of people carrying out projects that deliberately generate knowledge in the context of improving practice" (p. 3). According to Pritchard, "Practitioner researchers understand research as an integral part of what they do in the ordinary course of events as a way of improving their regular practice" (p. 4). It is,

he claims as way of "learning on the job" (p. 4). Importantly, Pritchard suggests that "Practitioner researchers may seek to improve their understanding of their own practice without pursuing generalizable findings" (p. 4). In effect, I see myself in this thesis as a former teacher, a practitioner researcher, one who is committed to understanding the stories of adults with literacy challenges and one committed to improving my own practice as this thesis unfolds and reaches completion.

I came to my research with a deep respect for the work I was doing and for the adults who were willing to share their stories with me. When I began my studies I worried about whether or not I would have the ability to listen well to the participants who had agreed to work with me. From the beginning I wanted to learn from them: I wanted most to be careful about imposing upon them either my own biases and assumptions or theories to explain their stories as these stories emerged in our conversations. In retrospect, what I perhaps did not consider sufficiently was the degree to which my own biases and assumptions would shape the work. When I began the study I did not assume it was necessary to talk with them about their early schooling experiences. But, after it became apparent from the data that all the participants did not make obvious connections between their past and present experience, I wondered why this was the case. As well, I wondered if this might have been different had I asked other questions. In effect, what I have learned from the data is the difference between doing "reflective" and "reflexive" inquiry. Hindsight tells me that I have situated my work in reflective inquiry. Had I asked different questions I would have been situated in a more reflexive inquiry. However, because I am, in fact, questioning my own process as a researcher, I would also argue that my work has a

reflexive quality to it. It is this quality that enables me to change as I write up my research findings.

According to Berg (2001), reflexivity "implies a shift in the way we understand data and their collection" (p. 139). Moreover, he writes, "To be reflexive is to have an ongoing conversation with one's self" (p. 139). Cole and Knowles (2000) suggest that

> Reflective inquiry is an ongoing process of examining and refining practice, variously focused on the personal, pedagogical, curricular, intellectual, societal, and/or ethical contexts associated with professional work, perhaps, but not necessarily, from a critical perspective. Underpinning all such reflective inquiry is the idea that assumptions behind all practice are subject to questioning. (p. 2)

They go on to say that,

> Reflexive inquiry, on the other hand, is reflective inquiry situated within the context of personal histories in order to make connections between personal lives and professional careers, and to understand personal (including early) influences on professional practice. . . . Reflexive inquiry, . . . is rooted in a critical perspective. Such a critical perspective is characterized by interrogation of status quo norms and practices. (p. 2)

From this latter perspective, then, I would suggest that I have used a reflexive approach when reflecting on what I have done in this thesis.

This ability to change and grow while in the thesis process is integral to doing qualitative research. Again, according to Cole and Knowles (2000), "Another feature of reflexive inquiry is that, unlike traditional research, it is not a linear, sequential process; it is more spiral or cyclical.... Thus the research process requires ongoing reflection, analysis, and responsiveness" (p. 104). In a similar manner, I have attempted to construct a methodological approach that is less sequential and more cyclical. Had I had more time, and if my participants were not in two different countries, I now know that I would have returned to the participants and asked them

even more open-ended questions about their experiences. Because this was not possible, I have chosen, instead, to inquire about my own experience of doing the research. For example, while I was clear when I began this research that I wanted to use a qualitative rather than quantitative approach, I did not truly appreciate the difference until I had gathered the data for this study. My early questions reflect this difference. Cole and Knowles write that "The broad intention of classroom-based reflexive inquiry is to further teacher-researcher' understanding of their practice" (p. 105). Marshall and Rossman (1999) support this view when they show that "in Narrative inquiry the method assumes that people's realities are constructed through narrating their stories. . . . Narrative analysis can be applied to any spoken or written account--for example, an in-depth interview" (p. 122). In effect, what I have done in this thesis is to use my previous experience as a classroom teacher, and my current story as a researcher, to examine and re-examine how I am constructing my thesis. As well, my foremost aim has been to tell as honestly as possible the stories of 6 adults from a selected time and place in their histories, following their participation in a literacy program.

I began this research hoping it would result in a work "about the power of narrative in human lives--the stories lives tell--in educational practice and research" (Witherell and Noddings, 1991, p. 1). From Marshall and Rossman's (1999) perspective, "In narrative inquiry the method assumes that people's realities are constructed through narrating their stories" (p. 122). According to Witherell and Noddings, the use of narrative and interview/dialogue can serve as a model for working with literacy-challenged adults whose lifestyle has changed when they have experienced some improvement in their literacy skills. As Witherell and Noddings suggest "Narrative structure contributes to our understanding of the meaningfulness of everyday life" (p.

3). Bruner (1985) contrasts the pragmatic mode which leads to good theory, tight analysis, logical proof and empirical analysis with the narrative mode which leads instead to good stories, gripping dramas, believable, historical accounts.

I agree with Bruner (1985) that we learn from stories, more importantly we come to understand ourselves, others and even the subjects we teach and learn. Stories engage us. Further, he argues that there are inductive and phenomenological uses for stories. Interpretive theorists use variation upon variation to get at the meaning of a phenomena. Stories are powerful research tools, and can provide researchers with a picture of real people in real situations, struggling with real problems as is the case with literacy-challenged adults. According to Bruner, they banish the indifference often generated by samples, treatments, and faceless subjects. They can invite researchers to speculate on what might be changed and with what effect. Thus, in narrative inquiry, people are looked at as embodiments of lived stories. Or to conclude, using Dewey's (1938) metaphor, "Life is education" (p. 34). For Dewey, education, experience, and life are completely intertwined. From my perspective, because experience happens narratively, educational experiences therefore can be studied narratively.

Working within a qualitative frame, I also drew from phenomenology again, in part, because it allowed me flexibility, particularly as qualitative research can unfold in the field as the study progresses. As Van Maanen (1992) explains, "Phenomenological sources allow us to see the limits of our interpretive sensibilities . . . a phenomenological study of a topic of our interest may suggest different ways of looking at phenomena or reveal dimensions of meaning which we had hitherto not considered" (p. 76).

Thus, I anticipated achieving an understanding of the phenomenological reality of specific individuals, i.e., those who had experienced literacy difficulties. Moustakas (1994) suggests that there are seven key principles that ground all phenomenological research:

1) A commitment to the use of qualitative methods;
2) A primary focus on the whole experience, rather than on its parts;
3) A search for meaning over a search for rules;
4) Primary use of first person accounts as main data sources;
5) Insisting that accounts of experiences are a necessary part of any scientific understanding of any social phenomenon;
6) Performing research that is guided by the personal interests and commitments of the researcher;
7) The necessity of treating experiences and behavior as integrated parts of a single whole. (p. 56)

Using these approaches, I was able better to critique my own work. In summary, the approaches I used enabled me to see how 6 adults with literacy difficulties interpret their worlds, as well these approaches enabled me to begin to interpret their interpretations after they had embarked on some form of literacy improving program. This type of approach is in keeping with Shank (2002) who writes, "We could not only examine our own consciousness to see the workings of meaning and interpretation in our perception of the world, but, by careful and skilled questioning, we could come to see how others tackle those same tasks" (p. 81). My hope when I set out to do this research was that I would be able to hear 6 adults speak about their lives in a holistic way. Holistic education according to Cruz (1991) is one that builds on "the learner's previous and present knowledge and experiences and interconnects the processes of thinking, listening, speaking, reading, and writing" (p. 3). I now know, however, that great care must be

taken by me as a researcher at all times due to the sensitive quality of attempting to understand adult literacy.

**Site and/or Population Selection**

I gained entry to sites on Prince Edward Island and in the United Kingdom that are directly involved in helping adults with literacy difficulties. I had hoped to ascertain some kind of ability range in the participants, i.e., those who had shown slight improvement, those who showed significant improvement and those who might consider themselves functionally literate. I did not, however, get this mix. But in any case, I looked for increasing levels of improvement or successes. My sample was 6 and it included 3 males and 3 females. McMillan and Schumacher (1997) suggest purposeful sampling in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study. In addition, they state that using this method also increases the utility of information obtained from small samples. Because I do not argue in this thesis for generalizability one participant, in effect, would have been sufficient. I now realize that had I simply listened to the stories of the participants, without framing the interviews with limiting questions, I may have heard very different stories.

**Data Collection Methods**

The data collection method consisted of a combination of interviews, using a qualitative methodological approach that favoured narrative inquiry. To record the interviews I used audiotape and I used a general interview guide to shape the interviews. This guide is described by Patton (1990) who notes,

> An interview guide is a list of questions or issues that are to be explored in the course of an interview. An interview guide is prepared in order to make sure that basically the same information is obtained from a number of people by covering the same material . . . with a focus on a particular subject that has been predetermined. (p. 283)

If I were to do it again, rather than use the more standardized or formal interview I might use the more unstandardized interview described by Berg (2001) who notes that,

> Unstandardized interviews operate from a different set of assumptions. First, interviewers begin with the assumptions that they do not know in advance what all the necessary questions are. Consequently, they cannot predetermine fully a list of questions to ask In an unstandardized interview, interviewers must develop, adapt, and generate questions and follow-up probes appropriate to the given situation. (p. 69)

Using this approach may have created a richer data base. I chose the standardized interview approach, however, because I felt it would help me to understand participants' meaning. In other words, the purpose of interviewing would be to develop an understanding of what students thought, felt, experienced, were concerned about and hoped, when they, for example, came into or left a literacy program. I used an interview guide (see Appendix B) to help me stay generally on track during the interviews. Possibly I was not confident at the time of the interviews to use a more open-ended approach.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

Using a qualitative approach, I analyzed my data inductively. As Bogdan and Biklen (1992) explain, data analysis is like "constructing a picture that takes shape as you collect and examine the parts . . . the process of data analysis is like a funnel: things are open at the beginning (or top) and more directed and specific at the bottom" (p. 32). After the initial

interviews were conducted, I transcribed the audio tapes immediately. This increased my familiarity with the data. I then coded the data. McMillan and Schumacher (1997) suggest "Qualitative data analysis is primarily an inductive process of organizing the data into categories and identifying patters (relationships) among the categories . . . most categories and patterns emerge from the data" (p. 501). They also describe the process of coding as "a process by which the data are sorted into topic categories" (p. 504). I coded the transcripts by question. My aim was to "identify similarities and distinctions between categories to discover patterns" (p. 505). I was looking for a variety of evidence in each case, though not necessarily patterns that would be generalizable. Instead, I assumed that readers would make meaning of the stories they read. In this sense, the data becomes more general. The codes led to patterns and these, in turn, became my major themes. Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) words nicely sum up my intent, "As we make the transition from field texts to research texts, we try to interweave our researcher experience of the experience under study with narrative ways of going about and inquiring into that phenomenon" (p. 14).

**Trustworthiness**

I chose to use a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach because I wanted to hear the voices of the participants who agreed to speak with me. I shared the interview transcripts with individual participants once they had been transcribed. I also shared my early findings with them and invited them to react to my rendering of their stories. I wanted to know if I had, in fact, captured their reality. With confirmability it was important for me to share my ongoing work with peer reviewers and friends who would challenge my thinking. This I did. As a researcher, I

had a responsibility to keep track of the multitude of decisions I made as I went through the research process. Finally, if I were to find that one of the participants revealed quite a different reality from the others, I was prepared to search for alternative explanations. This did not happen.

**Protection of Human Participants**

Before undertaking my research, I obtained ethical approval from the Research Ethics Board at the University of Prince Edward Island. Initial contact was made with each potential participant explaining the nature of my proposed research (see Appendix C) and further contact was made to confirm whether or not they would be willing to participate. On this second contact, one possible participant changed her mind and backed out saying she did not wish to participate.

While I was disappointed, I was pleased she did not feel she had to invent an excuse or reason for dropping out. Mutually convenient times were arranged to meet with all of the other agreed upon participants. I came with the "Statement of Informed Consent" which explained the purpose of the research in more detail and their rights as participants (see Appendix D). I stressed that their names were not needed at all and if I did refer to them individually it would be through the use of a pseudonym. All of the Canadian participants expressed an interest in coming to my thesis defense.

# CHAPTER IV

## FINDINGS

### Background of Participants

I entered the research process sensing it would be difficult to penetrate the secret world of literacy-challenged adults. As expected, it was indeed difficult. Because I had worked in the literacy field, I was aware of and had respect for the Laubach Literacy policy of complete confidentiality. To ensure this confidentiality I used pseudonyms. I also worked hard to avoid being intrusive.

*Experience of Participants (British)*

I thought it appropriate that the first student I interviewed was one that I had actually tutored on an Adult Literacy program. I returned to the United Kingdom for 3 months and during that time managed to reestablish contact with **ROY**. When I first taught Roy, I remembered his goal was to develop his reading and writing skills so he could read the Highway Code which was a prerequisite for obtaining a driving licence. Like many adults with literacy challenges he could recognize some words, but Roy's writing skills were particularly weak. I knew that he had difficulty in keeping the shape of his letters consistent and that he consistently muddled up "b"s and "d"s. He was also fairly adept at covering up his literacy weaknesses. We spent considerable time developing his writing (and reading) skills. Eventually he felt confident enough to fill in the form for a provisional driving licence and could read the Highway Code. He did pass his driving

test which seemed to be an appropriate reflection of his improving literacy skills. Surprising to me, Roy did not seem keen to help me in my research, indeed he wondered initially if everything could be done by telephone. I did persuade him to meet and speak about his literacy experiences. He seemed defensive at first. It was almost as if he would rather not be reminded of his past difficulties. This reluctance was also evident in his wife's reaction to me. She remained in the room during the whole interview. I wondered if she worried her husband might say something inappropriate. I felt fortunate to have been his ex-tutor. Otherwise, I am not sure he would have been prepared to recall anything. Roy's reaction is, however, completely understandable, demonstrating the embarrassment faced by adults with literacy challenges. In no way is it a criticism.

I also interviewed 2 female participants with literacy challenges as a result of a contact at Wirral Metropolitan College, where I had lectured for 22 years. The first participant was **DENISE**, a single female about 20 years old. Denise was on a "scheme" which meant she could get an extra £10 a week (approximately $25 Canadian) on top of her "dole," or rather job-seekers' allowance, if she would attend a training scheme that would involve help in improving her literacy skills. I felt rather uncomfortable when I discovered via Denise that attendance on these schemes was one way of removing people from the unemployment register. It was almost as if this adult literacy training was being used for a sinister reason other than helping these adults improve their literacy skills. (The unemployment figures in the United Kingdom have been a politically sensitive issue over the last decade.) Denise had never been able to find work due to her literacy weaknesses. She had missed much schooling due to illness and left education at the earliest opportunity, in her words, "not being able to read or write properly." Although very helpful, I sensed there was a general feeling of reluctance to talk with me.

This same reluctance to speak was evidenced in Tina. Tina, a mother, concerned that her children might have literacy difficulties similar to her own, had enrolled on a recently established family literacy program. However, she cancelled our proposed meeting at the last moment, saying she did not want to be interviewed. Although I was glad she did not feel she had to invent an excuse, I did consider that my proposed area of research might prove to be both unfeasible and unrealistic.

Following my meetings with Denise and Roy, I had the opportunity to interview a participant who by contrast to Denise and Roy was able talk easily about illiteracy. In Klondike terms this claim delivered real gold. **HOBBO** was a widower aged about 70 years, who had always had a problem with reading, or, to quote him, "words." Up until 1995, his late wife did all the reading and writing for him. When she passed away, Hobbo suddenly found himself obliged to do his own reading and writing, and so he sought help. When questioned about how he had coped previously with his literacy difficulties, he was particularly articulate. He likened the situation to one where a couple were travelling in France or Germany, one member of the couple could speak, read, and write French or German fluently, and the other could not. So the non-speaking partner was quite content to leave the speaking, reading, and writing to the fluent partner. This I found to be a very perceptive and reasonable explanation. In other words, it was only when his wife was no longer with him that he was faced with having to read.

Unlike Roy or Denise, Hobbo was not reluctant, or even ashamed, to talk about his literacy difficulties. He seemed eager and pleased to contribute. Indeed, he hoped his experiences would encourage literacy-challenged adults to come forward and seek help. I found his frankness particularly refreshing. For example, he identified the significant fact that for part of his schooling as a boy, during World War II, he had been evacuated from Liverpool to a farm in rural

Lancashire. The farmer apparently did not mind if Hobbo helped out on the farm rather than attend school. But this was not presented as an excuse or someone to blame for his literacy problems, though it must have contributed. Hobbo was also very perceptive about the struggles the literacy challenged face in their daily lives. At length, he told me about the case of Evans, an illiterate man, wrongly executed on the basis of a signed confession. Hobbo suggested that the outcome might have been different if Evans had been able to read.

*Experience of Participants (Canadian)*

To support my research with the British adults with literacy challenges, I interviewed 3 Canadians who had experienced literacy difficulties, all of whom had been through programs.

**SUE** came from a family where there had been a cycle of illiteracy passed from generation to generation. Sue could not read even a children's book, and could not work out the difference between the English and French words, on a food item, for example. She suffered from feelings of low self-esteem and failure, but as a member of the "working poor" did not have the time, and was too exhausted at the end of the day, to try and improve her literacy skills. Interestingly, she identified a clear link between illiteracy and poverty. She likened her situation to being caught in a trap and worried that her children would inherit her literacy difficulties and the struggles that accompanied them. She also mentioned she had a family friend to whom she (and her mother) could turn to help with literacy problems.

**JOHN** was a carpenter who had left school with only "the very simplest of reading and writing skills." Although he had very good carpentry skills, he had problems with any reading associated with his job, i.e., instructions, quantities of wood, etc. Also, when people gave orders

he found difficulties with customers' names. Like Hobbo, his wife did most of the reading and writing at home where necessary, but when they separated he was left on his own to fend for himself. It was this that largely contributed to his decision to seek help. Unlike the students interviewed so far, John was very keen to talk about the actual process of improving his literacy skills, and less keen to talk about the predicament of being challenged by literacy.

**JANET** managed to leave school with Grade 12 qualification, but she knew that this was really an inaccurate reflection of her reading and writing abilities. She found the forms for job applications particularly demanding to complete, and thus enrolled in the Laubach Literacy program. When her literacy skills improved, she secured employment whilst still in the program. Janet's anxiety was replaced by a new found confidence, though she worried if her literacy skills were good enough to do the job well. Janet's case is particularly interesting because it points to the question of what is considered to be functional literacy. Having completed Grade 12, it would be assumed that she is a capable reader and writer. Janet's story disproves this common assumption, and would support the possibly surprising statistic in the "Employment Journey" (January 2002), which states that up to 40% of the adult population on Prince Edward Island have difficulty reading dense print and are in maximum literacy level 2.

Despite setbacks, I felt I had sufficient data from the 6 participants who talked with me, to proceed with, and develop my findings. In order to give balance and uniformity to my research, I decided to ask the same set of questions to each participant. I also chose to list their differing responses within a specific frame of questions.

## PARTICIPANTS

In this section, I have reproduced my actual interviews with 6 adults with literacy challenges. During each interview I repeat the questions. I initially made this choice because I assumed it was necessary for consistency of findings to my research.

*Participant 1* *Roy*

Due to Roy's initial hesitation to be involved in the study, I approached the interview quite gently. It was over 10 years since I had tutored him and as I did not want to "put him on the spot," I re-arranged the question order slightly because he was familiar to me.

*What advice would you give to someone you knew who was having literacy difficulties?*

I would suggest they try and get help. It may be a struggle but it is worth it in the long run.

*Have you ever given anyone advice?*

Not really, but if I knew someone was in difficulties I would suggest they seek help. The thing is, you don't always know who has literacy difficulties or not.

*I would be interested in knowing how you first became involved in St. Olave's Literacy Program.*

I wanted to learn to drive. Unfortunately I knew that I could not do so because I could not really read the Highway Code and could not read certain signs. I could recognize STOP but other signs I was not so sure of. Some signs were okay because they had pictures, like

"no overtaking," but other signs would bother me, the yellow signs with information like "Diversions" and "Road Ahead Closed." So I decided to join St. Olave's. I knew somebody who had gone there and received help with the reading and writing. Also, I had big problems with spelling. I am still not very good at spelling, but better than I was.

*If I could have followed you through a typical day, before you began at St. Olave's, what would I observe you doing?*

It was such a long time ago I can't really remember, but for much of the time I was unemployed.

*Could you describe then what you did on your "signing on" day?*

Well, I would get up and go down to Norroy House (the local job centre) with my signing on book. I would have to bring evidence that I had looked for jobs but that was not always easy because I was not able to read what was on the cards (job advertisements). My book would then be stamped and I would get my "Giro" (unemployment benefit) 2 days later. I was often worried that I would have my money stopped. Also, a lot of jobs required a clean driving licence so that was why I wanted to learn. Filling out job applications was always a problem for me. I would find them difficult and I often made mistakes.

*If I could follow you through a typical day, what literacy skills would I observe you using?*

I now work as a groundsman for the local council. I clock in and then pick up the instructions for the day. I could be working in the park or on the "round-about" gardens. The instructions would be typed out so I would read those. Also, I need to know about

fertilizer and weed-killer amounts and so on. My previous job was at the zoo and there we were told each day what to do, but I had to read the delivery order to the cafés and restaurants. So I was using reading there as well. It's difficult to say how often you read something. Things just come up and you read them.

*Could you give me an example?*

If we run short of something I just tick it off and it should be brought up from the warehouse to the office centre.

*In your opinion, what, if any, change have you experienced in yourself as a result of improving literacy skills?*

I passed my driving test and have found employment, though I still find forms a problem so I often have to practise with them. My spelling is better. We have spell-check on the computer.

*Do you find your literacy skills have helped you with your computer then?*

Definitely, I don't think I could work a computer (then). Anyway, they weren't really invented, but you can't use a computer if you can't read properly.

*So you feel that's a major change to your lifestyle?*

Yes, I probably would just avoid computers. I couldn't read the instructions.

I felt Roy's last point about computers was particularly pertinent because he assumed the inability to use computers might further inhibit the adult with literacy challenges. Not all adults with literacy challenges believe this to be the case.

Roy startled me when he concluded with a surprisingly powerful metaphor. For him, "being illiterate is like waiting for the bus, whereas being literate is being able to drive." This reflected his own situation. His comment, and ability to use metaphor, suggest to me the complexity of his thinking.

*Participant 2* *Denise*

Denise, unlike the other subjects I interviewed, was still completing a literacy program as part of a scheme to help her find work. Her responses to my questions proved to be interesting and differed from other participants.

*How did you become involved in your "literacy improving" program?*

If I signed on the program involving literacy skills development, I would get an extra £10 a week on my J.S.A. (Job-Seekers Allowance). It also means that I am no longer unemployed.

*In other words, you are no longer registered as unemployed.*

That's right.

*What would you have done on a typical day before you began this program?*

I dunno. I'd just watch TV or go to the pub with my mates. All I know is that I left school without being able to read or write properly.

*Was there any reason for that?*

I missed a lot of school due to illness and I did not get any "qualies" (qualifications). Also, I was in a low band of class and some of the pupils were very difficult.

*In what way were they difficult?*

Well, they were very disruptive and rude to the teachers. It wasn't the teachers' fault, like me, they just didn't want to be there. But I don't like to talk about school.

*How long have you been on the work scheme?*

This is the second part, so altogether, about a year.

*Do you find your literacy skills have improved?*

Yes, quite a lot.

*If I could follow you through a typical day, what literacy skills would I observe you using?*

At college on the "scheme" we're now doing a module called job-searching skills. We write letters for jobs, do CVs and search for jobs. I've also done Word Power and Number Power.[1] I also worked with my spelling. If I'm offered a job I will have to take it and leave the scheme.

*Any luck so far?*

No, but I've had a couple of interviews. I'd like to go into nursery nursing, but I'm not sure if my "English" is good enough.

*Do you think it will improve more if you stay on the scheme then?*

Yes, I hope so.

*Do you feel you have noticed any change as a result of your improved literacy skills?*

I suppose I feel more confident and I don't feel stupid. I can do things. I don't need to ask for help so much with my problems.

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[1] Word Power and Number Power is a new program designed to help adults improve their basic life-skills in English and math. One of the strengths of Word Power is that it not only goes back to the beginnings of literacy acquisition but it is clearly designed for adults rather than children. It uses a grading system and each student has to take a recap test before moving on to the next level.

*Was there anyone in particular you could ask for help?*

Yes, a few people would help me like my Nan. Now I think I can read most things.

*What sorts of things do you read?*

"*Hello*" and "*OK*".[2]

*Finally, is there any advice you might give to someone you know who had literacy difficulties?*

Dunno.

*What about your course then, would you recommend it to anyone?*

Yes, the tutors are very helpful and understanding. It's been worth it.

I felt Denise's comments, albeit brief, about her education were important. There is much educational debate about "exclusion" both in Britain and Canada. Exclusion is an education policy where academically weak students are taken out of mainstream education for special tuition. From Denise's experience, it would seem that to separate and segregate the academically weak pupils is ill-advised. Not only does it create a label for the pupils, i.e., needs special help, so therefore stupid, but the end result could be where you have a "ghetto"-like situation of reluctant and hostile students, which is hardly educationally sound. Contrary to my expectations, Denise did not see a relationship between her unpleasant school experiences and her literacy difficulties. She seemed to sympathize with the teachers' classroom predicaments. Furthermore, having acquired some literacy skills, she wished to continue developing them to advantage in terms of employment and recreation.

[2] British magazines similar to the American publications "*People*" and "*US*".

*Participant 3* *Hobbo*

Hobbo's approach to being interviewed was very different from that of Roy and Denise. His body language was much more relaxed. He seemed at ease with the tape-recorder. He was very pleased, almost anxious, to help, particularly as I was seriously thinking of changing the approach to my thesis, if not abandoning it. Given further opportunity, I would like to do further research with Hobbo, looking at the actual process of how he acquired his literacy skills. Hobbo taught me that it was easier, and thus more productive, when I, as researcher, was comfortable.

*How did you first become involved in a literacy program?*

Very briefly, I was widowed in 1995. Up to that time I always had a problem with words. My wife always did the reading and writing in the family. However, when she died, apart from many other problems, I realized that I would have to learn to read and write. I'd also recently retired, so I had more time on my hands. So I made enquiries at the local library and they put me in touch with the Blackpool Literacy Scheme. Rather than meet at the college, I chose to have a personal tutor who I met once a week at Mereside Library. Fortunately my tutor was a man roughly the same age as me and we got on very well. We worked together for almost 5 years and he also helped me with my maths as well. Over that time I felt my literary skills have improved a lot. I can now read most things--newspapers and books. Whereas before the program, I could only recognize the odd word.

*If I could have followed you through a typical day before you began the program what would I have observed you doing?*

That's going back a bit. Perhaps I will describe my job at the bakery. If I was working the day shift, I arrived about six in the morning. I would check all the newly made bread and I would then move the bread into the delivery section. I would then go back into the baking section and start mixing the ingredients together, flour, yeast and other stuff, and put them into bread moulds. I would then put the moulds into the ovens. I knew the word flour, but looking back, I'm not sure if I really read it. I could now. My job didn't really involve reading and writing.

*Did you feel you needed to use many literacy skills in your job?*

Not really. I felt I could get by. If there were any problems, I would bring them home for Gladys, the wife, to answer. I think my boss knew I had a literacy problem but did nothing to help me with it. Perhaps I could have done other things if my reading was better.

*Other things? Could you elaborate on that?*

Well, I think I might have had better job opportunities. I always had some difficulty reading and filling in job application forms. I was often worried that a job would need reading and everything.

*If I could follow you through a typical day, what literacy skills would I observe you doing now? And how would you feel about yourself and your ability to accomplish the daily tasks and goals.*

As I am now retired, my use of literacy skills now vary. I can read books and newspapers and can look at C-fax (British computer program). My grandson has a computer so I can look at and read the information on that. I feel quite proud of what I've achieved and can

achieve. I feel sad that I did not seek help earlier. It takes courage to admit that you have a problem and face up to it. Also to seek help in the first place.

*What, if any, change have you experienced in yourself as a result of your improved literacy skills?*

I feel much more confident and feel I missed out. I feel it was a mistake to leave everything to Gladys, but it was much simpler. It was like travelling in a foreign country like France or Germany with someone who knew the language. It was easier to let her do the reading and writing because she understood it. Now I can read most things. It's just better. I feel I could go places, travel. It's like the world is opening or opened up.

*Is there any advice you would give to someone you knew who had literacy difficulties?*

Yes, definitely. Don't leave it as I did; there is help available and it is well worth it. I wish I'd done it earlier. In fact it's far easier to learn to read and write than to cover it up. It's funny, that's what you do, you reach a point and you decide that's what you are going to do. You just try to get by as best you can.

Hobbo's final observation was particularly pertinent to my study. His response raises a question that is perhaps at the crux of all adult literacy. What is it, and when is it, that a child/pupil/student/adult decides that he/she is not going to read or write? It is almost as if a barrier comes down at some point and any academic energy seems to be channelled in a different direction. This shift usually involves cover-up and deception. I also think that as the literacy-challenged person becomes older the problems become compounded because society assumes that reading is something we learn as a child, so the literacy challenged become a kind of "sub-

child" to be judged failures both in their own eyes and by the world at large. It is after all literacy that separates humankind from the rest of the animal kingdom. So the stigma is considerable, not just laziness but stupidity, or worse, a mental condition, the word "retard" being applied to the some challenged adults. Because Hobbo was so much older than Roy and Denise, perhaps he was not so sensitive, and of course, I was interviewing him when he *could* now read and write. It would have been interesting to see if his attitude was the same if I had interviewed him before his wife died.

*Participant 4* *Sue*

Sue was the first Canadian participant I interviewed. She, like Hobbo, was very forthcoming and I did not feel I had to extract information from her.

*I would be interested in knowing how you became involved in a literacy program.*

When I first became involved with literacy I was involved in--I tried over the years, in fact, over my whole life, to get a better education. I found when the teacher was teaching it on the board to the whole class, I didn't understand what she was saying. The problem, I know now, is that I didn't know the phonics, I didn't know how to break the words up in order to understand, and I've been struggling so much to learn, or being under a lot of stress, trying to run across some of those sounds in the words that I didn't understand, it put a lot of stress on me. Reading wasn't very pleasant or comfortable. I took 3 years trying to pass Grade 8 and I decided I couldn't do it, so I put a stop to it. I decided to serve other people. Usually when you don't have a decent education, there is suffering

with low self-esteem, poverty, no money, and dysfunctions of different kinds. Money doesn't buy happiness. If I could've read better, it would have opened a lot of doors for me, to make my life better and also my children.

*How did you become involved in a literacy program? What did you do to ...*

I looked around. I found when I was looking that I was one of the working poor, and found that there was no program for the working poor. Some for youth or people on Social Services, or whatever, but I was so busy scrounging and working to keep things going that I didn't have time or energy or money even to increase my education. On top of that, it was the fear of failure again. Knowing that I had tried for 3 years to pass Grade 8. So, as the years went by, I did go out to school for upgrading. I took a carpentry course. I used to be the very best as sales person, but that didn't really pay a lot of bills so I wanted to get my education. So I did really work hard and got a Grade 10 equivalency, and got into carpentry, a long time ago, and then my friends were saying, a lot of people were saying move yourself up from carpentry, so I thought I'd try truck driver or bus driver, or truck driver long distance, so I took that too. I had to struggle hard and I did get through it and I did enjoy carpentry. I got married and had a couple of children. I misunderstood--he was a very controlling person, and I thought he was a loving person. I didn't know the difference between . . .

****Participant breaks down--taping interrupted to gain composure*

. . . anyway, after twelve years of abuse, I went on to Social Services. They asked me if I had a wish, what would I like to do. And I said I would love to go back to school and it just happened that there was a program available, called a Goal Program. It was life management and academic reading and writing. That was a program that Health

spearheaded and with that we learned nutrition, child care, problem-solving, anything to start putting our life . . . And with that list of approach it was taking care of the whole person, plus our children, because sometimes if you can't read well, the information books all over the place, if you can't read well you can't get that information.

And I'd just like to say a little bit more about people who are not able to read very well and understand what they are dealing with. I bring it back to my own situation. I had come down with cancer and there's so many books to read about that subject and also being so confused and in despair, that was just horrible. But by that time I had learned to read better and thank God for being able to have the opportunity to improve my education because that alone has changed my life and that of my children. I want to be the one to build the literacy training in their lives. In our family I see that illiteracy has come down for generations, and I was trying to teach my children to read when I couldn't read myself and Mom was trying to teach me when she couldn't read very well, and her Mom died when she was little. I just find that with an education and work, you can achieve, but without an education there's not very much hope to be able to fly on your own and take care of your children. You could end up to be a statistic. I think if you could just invest more money into education for our children because they are our future and they are an investment for our future.

*When you were in the programs themselves, how did you find that? Did you .. what was the result of being on the program?*

When I first found out that I could go to a school I was very, very afraid. I was so afraid because that was the place that defeated me. The books were not a good thing. I wasn't even able to read to little children. If they took books out I'd have to go away.

*So did the program change things for you in any ways?*

After I was in the program for awhile, I started at a Grade 4 level and some of us had to go out for extra resource, and they would take out a book that was only at a Grade 3 level or lower than that and they'd ask me to read it and it was very big clear print and it was just like a child's book and it looked fairly innocent, but there were some of those sounds in that book that I wasn't able--I was so afraid, when reading that book that the pages were floating, and by putting my finger on it, it helped--

Then after I'd been in the program for a while, when I went to resource they'd say, "Okay, would you read that?" I would read to myself, but I could never read out loud without crying. When I tried, I would read a line, and then I'd cry, then I'd stop. They said, "What can we do?" So they got me a box of Kleenex and closed the door and I said, "I'll get through it." So, determination got me through with that.

At first I felt like everybody was smarter than me and I was stupid, because I was told I was when I was a youngster and I believed I was. I thought I was the lowest.

But, you know, after I got into the program for awhile and got the confidence to sit down and know that nobody was going to judge me or laugh at me, or anything like that, I was free to work then without any fear of somebody putting me down. Then I was able to go and use the Kleenex that I needed and go forward.

But I tell you that that was--from that point I just started grabbing onto everything and I started falling in and . . . that was just so . . . words can't really explain it, you know it's so freeing, it's something that I wanted all my life but couldn't get. I got a Laubach tutor, and I'd go to her house every week and she would help me for an hour. I thought she was an angel on earth because she took a whole hour out of her life to teach me. Then I'd go

home and do my work and come back. I thought she was just an angel because that was something I'd been wishing and wanting and needing all my life, and she was going to give it to me an hour at a time and I wasn't going to lose one minute.

*What literacy skills do you feel you use now in your normal day? Do you use your reading and writing much?*

All the time. You see, I think that we're using reading and writing all the time, and for a person who has never had a difficulty reading . . . like, when I look at a book or a sign, it looks like French (I don't have any idea what French looks like) but I know when I look a cereal box or a can, I never used to know what was French and what was English except they had the little things over the top. It's just so . . . when I looked at a sign or something it was just letters, but it might as well have been smears or dots and dashes because it didn't make any sense to me. And if I saw a bigger word, like with two or three syllables, I would just freeze. I just thought I couldn't do it until I learned to break them down into little words.

*Do you now find you read a lot during the day?*

All the time. I've got books, big, big, big books. The whole house is full of books and I want to read every one of them. I don't let anything go. I don't throw anything written away until I read it, and I remember it. By the way, by me learning to read and write, I was hoping to help my son who has difficulties too, because I wasn't able to read to him when he was a child and so he has difficulties. I was hoping he was going to break the chain. But by me learning to read and write and encourage other people too, to direct them and suggest they can go to adult education, or you can have a tutor, and you can have this and that, and I tell them what is available. But even my children, well up to last

year, they'd never, well even most of their lives, they'd maybe missed two days of school because school is so important. So they don't quit school or anything and by them knowing that I am an advocate for other people they talk to their friends and their friends confide in them and say "Dad can't read," and so I give my children the information and the phone numbers, so my children are advocates. And their friends are always saying, "Oh, your mother is always talking literacy." And now I am able to read better and I am a tutor for a child. He's having trouble in school and he may not pass . . . I see him once a week and we do reading and writing. He likes to come because I give him the books that he's interested in. And I know different people over the years that . . .

****She makes several rambling comments here about the positive value of books and having books around.*

*How do you feel your life has changed?*

Oh definitely. It's changed from black to white. It's given me hope. It's given me knowledge. My life, if I didn't have it, I would still have to work really, really hard. And if you don't have an education, you are going to have less sort of jobs, and the lower jobs, and nothing to be proud of. Those jobs you don't really bounce out of bed to run to, to go clean a house or dig a hole, . . . Life isn't very pleasant if you're working like a dog trying to keep bills paid but those jobs are low paying and they tax the body a lot. So it is very difficult and that creates the working poor and the poorest of poor.

*What advice would you have for someone you knew had literacy problems?*

That is a topic that you would really have to be careful to approach. You can't come out and say, "I see you're having difficulty reading." That person will be affected adversely because they don't want anyone to know. And when I had that secret, even though I

wasn't able to read very well, I always carried a book, and a pencil, a newspaper, anything--I always had something like that in my hand so people didn't know I couldn't read very well. If I thought somebody was having a problem, I would befriend them a little bit and would get conversation around . . . "Oh, did you know there's free tutoring over at Laubach? . . . (further details of opportunities for learning . . .)"

*Participant 5* *John*

The second Canadian student, John, lived in a different county of Prince Edward Island from Sue. He is approximately the same age as Roy.

*I would be interested in knowing how you became involved in a literacy program.*

I saw an advertisement on a local television station. I had left school early and I had problems with my reading, writing and spelling. So I wanted to do something about it. Also, this program was completely confidential and that was important. I went through Laubach Literacy and started with a tutor who I met a few times a week.

John then showed me examples of the literacy work he had completed. Interestingly, he had kept all his work, which presumably would be used as a source of reference. We looked at the Primary Word Building Chart. For example, Phase A concentrated on vowels and consonants. From there he had built up a lot of pseudo-words like **tem** and demonstrated how he did this using various cards each bearing a specific letter. From there we moved to Phase B, using the phonic approach to blend letters together to make various sounds. Then finally, we moved on to Phase C, which

was actually building words. He mentioned that an **e** at the end of a word normally lengthened the sound of the vowel. For examples: **bit — bite, fin — fine**.

*If I could have followed you through a typical day, before you began the program, what would I observe you doing? How would you have been feeling about yourself and your ability to accomplish your daily tasks and goals?*

I was a carpenter based at a local boat house. My job involved repairing boats and building new ones. I felt my actual carpentry skills were good, but I always worried about the orders. In particular I found problems with people's names and addresses. Bills and invoices, too, were a big problem.

*If I could follow you through a typical day, what literacy skills would I observe you using? How would you be feeling about yourself and your ability to accomplish your daily tasks and goals?*

I now feel I can do most things connected with my job. Everything is much better and easier now. It was very difficult before but things are more straightforward. If I need to write out names and addresses I can do that. Everything makes me feel more confident and I am generally pleased.

*In your opinion, what, if any, change have you experienced in yourself as a result of improving literacy skills? When did you first notice a change taking place? How has this change affected you personally? Professionally?*

Things are better now. My ex-wife used to do some of the reading and writing and now I can do it all. So the change has been good. When I finished the Laubach literacy scheme I decided to go on further with my studying. I enrolled in Spell/Read Canada in Charlottetown, which is a private course, though it is quite expensive — $50.00. It is a

very well put together course. It helps me with my grammar. I am then hoping to go on to take my G.E.D., which is my goal, having achieved Grade 12. So there have been big changes.

*Is there any advice you might give to someone you know who had literacy difficulties?*

Yes, I would tell them to enroll in a literacy program. It's free and confidential. These days you need reading and writing for everything, whether it be résumés or job applications. It's there, so go ahead.

Like Hobbo, John seemed very positive about his literacy experiences. For him everything was very much a success. This success was confirmed by a visit he made in 1999 to Ottawa to receive an award for his new found literacy achievement. John, like the other participants, did not speak about his early schooling experiences. Had I asked him different questions, however, he may have done so.

*Participant 6* *Janet*

The third Canadian student I interviewed was able to read and write at a low level, because she had achieved Grade 12 (in her words, "just got through"). However, she did not feel her reading and writing skills were sufficiently up to par, certainly not up to Grade 12 level. She felt her skills were such that she was unable to get the sort of job she wanted. Her story interested me because it brings into question the problem of what really constitutes illiteracy or literacy.

*I would be interested in knowing how you became involved in a literacy program.*

I looked in the phonebook and found a reading line.

*So your skills were good enough for that?*

Yes, I had finished Grade 12, but my reading was not what it should have been. So having made enquiries, I enrolled in the Laubach Literacy program, twice a week, for one hour. The tutoring was free and my tutor went right back and started at the beginning. It was also one-on-one, which I found helpful.

*Why was that particularly?*

I could work at my own pace and I think it was good to start over.

*If I could have followed you through a typical day, before you began the program, what would I observe you doing? How would you have been feeling about yourself and your ability to accomplish your daily tasks and goals?*

My main problem was although I could read, I could not always process the information. This was particularly true with job application forms. When I eventually did get work in retail (Zellers) I was worried that my reading was still not good enough to deal with stock orders and the wholesale merchandise.

*If I could follow you through a typical day, what literacy skills would I observe you using? How would you be feeling about yourself and your ability to accomplish your daily tasks and goals?*

I am much more confident applying for jobs and I can price all the coded items at work. For example, say six pairs of red shoes would be put out and I would tick off the coding scheme. Also, my self-esteem is far higher than it was when I was having difficulties reading and writing.

*In your opinion, what, if any, change have you experienced in yourself as a result of improving literacy skills? When did you first notice a change taking place? How has this change affected you personally? Professionally?*

The biggest change is self-esteem. It has increased considerably and I feel better in myself and about life generally. It is also better and easier in work. I can also look around for other work, filling in application forms, résumés, and so on.

*Is there any advice you might give to someone you know who had literacy difficulties?*

I would not just shout out "I hear you can't read." That would be very insulting. But, if I knew the person well, I would say that I myself had experienced literacy difficulties and I would recommend Laubach. I'd tell them a bit about Laubach, the history. I would give them the number, but let them make the call.

*You wouldn't call for them?*

No, they have to make the decision on their own, if they want to learn to read and write.

This last comment was interesting because in Janet's experience it is ultimately the adult who must decide for themselves whether or not to go into literacy training. Also, I wonder if her lack of success in school is partly due to the "unwritten pact" that sometimes exists in my experience, often with female students, when there is a sort of "if you don't rock the boat nor will we" attitude and students "slip through the net" without being able to read properly despite appearances to the contrary, i.e., achieving Grade 12. This was further confirmed when I was talking with a teaching colleague who mentioned sometimes a student goes up to the next grade level as a sort of "social promotion" rather than a true reflection of his/her ability level. As

regards the IALS, Janet was clearly in Level 2, in that she could read but not well. It was interesting that she actually attained work whilst in the program. Janet also mentioned that she wished to put "something back" by being involved in a council for Adult Literacy on Prince Edward Island.

Out of the 6 participants, Hobbo and Sue were easier for me to interview. Hobbo's maturity meant that he was very relaxed in talking about his literacy experiences. Although for structural purposes I asked him the same questions as everyone else, I now know that in many ways it would have been better just to let him talk without any prompting or guiding. It would have been possible just to use him, certainly as the only interviewee from Britain. I felt the recall of his literacy experiences could and should be used to help other adults with similar difficulties. His honesty and integrity were such that I felt he might become involved in the adult literacy world by giving advice or even publicly speaking about his literacy experiences, although he modestly said he felt he was now too old. But he was delighted that his experiences might be of possible help to other adults with literacy challenges.

Of the Canadian students, Sue's recall stood out particularly vividly for me. I sensed the real desperation Sue must have felt (and thus other similarly challenged adults) as she talked about her struggles in her pre-literacy world. The secrecy, depression, and exhaustion were all too poignant and reflected the common patterns in the literature, particularly for women. The contrast too between the "before" and "after" situation was most striking, moving, and heartfelt.

## Findings and Patterns From Interviews

I chose in this section to report data without first subjecting it to comparison with literature findings. I wanted the stories to stand by themselves. Although there was some flexibility in the interviews, I asked all participants the same set of questions. In one instance a participant became rather upset in the recall, so I felt it appropriate to abandon that particular question, and after a suitable pause, to move onto the next. Although there was variance in response, their respective realities appeared very similar, in part because the questions were similar.

My first question concerned *why students first became involved in a literacy program.*

Hobbo and John were motivated because of the loss of their "reading mentors." This is a term that I have devised for a person to whom the adult with literacy difficulties could turn in confidence for help and support. Nearly all the participants identified such a person in the background and so when the mentor was no longer available for whatever reason the participants would be left to face literacy challenges on their own. The term "life-line" is not an exaggeration with respect to mentors. It is easy to appreciate the awful situation challenged adults are thrown into when mentors are removed.

Employment was another major consideration that led adults to literacy programs. All the participants realized that job prospects would be severely restricted with only limited literacy skills. Even the actual process of filling in a job application form could be problematic. Also a poorly filled in form could act as a kind of early warning system to tell a potential employer that

this particular applicant would be in most cases highly unsuitable. All participants were well aware of this limitation.

Another major contributing factor that led to change was the problem of low self-esteem. Janet, in particular, mentioned this several times. Weaknesses with literacy invariably bring about feelings of low self-esteem and self-worth. All the students mentioned how they felt people in society judged them as failures, or worse, "illiterates." Interestingly, the students themselves were even more their own severest critics. Significantly, not one tried to lay blame for their failure elsewhere, for example, the respective education systems both in Canada and Britain. From their perspective, the fault clearly lay with the students themselves. Thus, to enrol in a literacy program to improve literacy skills would hopefully give rise to an increase in self-worth.

Fortunately, participants found the advertizing for literacy programs to be "user-friendly." Laubach Literacy, for example, advertizes on television and radio, for as John pointed out, it would be impractical having an advertisement that relied heavily on written data. The fact that the literacy programs were all free was another incentive to all participants. All of them admitted that it took considerable courage to take the initial steps because by doing so they were admitting to the outside world their "guilty secret," i.e., literacy weaknesses.

Participants felt that the Laubach approach was particularly good. From my own teaching experience I know that adults (even if not literacy challenged) can find it traumatic to return to "school." The idea of being in a class can be off-putting particularly when the previous classroom situation was unsuccessful. How much more so if you had literacy difficulties and had the fear of public failure or humiliation? The one-on-one approach offered by Laubach seems ideal, not least because the students can work at their own individual pace without any comparison with fellow

classmates. Also, the initial standard of reading could vary within Levels 1 and 2 so the teaching approach by the tutors could reflect this. All participants stayed with the literacy program because the tutors seemed sympathetic to the individual needs of each student. Significantly, one former student now tutors other literacy-challenged adults, which would seem to be an ideal scenario, i.e., the pupil eventually becomes the teacher of other similar pupils.

My second question concerned the plight of participants before they had enrolled in a literacy program.

"*If I could have followed you through a typical day, before you began the program, what would I observe you doing? How would you have been feeling about yourself and your ability to accomplish your daily tasks and goals?*"

The answers to this question demonstrated the "twilight" world faced by many adults with literacy-challenges, a world of secrecy, frustration, and anxiety. Two participants stressed that if you cannot read, even the supposedly straightforward task of shopping can become a nightmare. How, for example, would one know if you bought the right product and certainly the right amount? The majority of stores in Canada and Britain are self-service, i.e., the shopper selects the product. Wal-Mart proudly signs each aisle as to where the products are but to a literacy-challenged adult, these signs might be meaningless. Sue mentioned that when asking directions for a particular product, reference was given to these written signs. Even when the right product was finally acquired, written instructions or information about the product could be problematic. For example, medicines could be particularly worrying and, as previously mentioned, Sue took the wrong amount of an antidepressant drug and had to be hospitalized. Indeed, depression caused by literacy problems was widespread along with feelings of helplessness. Sue mentioned

that poor literacy skills inhibited her travel because of anxieties about the signs in bus/rail stations or the actual transport itself. Even a short trip or visit was often a daunting prospect. It was for her like being "trapped."

The deception involved in trying to cover-up literacy difficulties was even more traumatic. I remembered that Roy would claim that he had injured (conveniently) his writing hand, and therefore was unable to fill out a form. Sometimes the deception though was more unwitting. Hobbo admitted that he could recognize some signs where he worked by the shape of the letters without necessarily being able to read them. However, there was no escaping the struggles that all the participants had felt as hitherto literacy-challenged adults. The word "*exhausting*" to describe the experiences of adults with literacy challenges seems appropriate.

My third question was a comparison with question 2.

"*If I could follow you through a typical day, what literacy skills would I observe you using? How would you have been feeling about yourself and your abilities to accomplish your daily tasks and goals?*"

"I use literacy skills all the time now." This quote from Sue, who clearly felt she had benefitted from improved literacy ability. Sue told me:

> The whole house is now full of books and I want to read every one of them. I don't let anything go. I don't throw anything away until I read it and remember it. By the way, by me learning to read and write, I was hoping to help my son who has difficulties too, because I wasn't able to read to him when he was a child so he has difficulties. I was hoping that with my help he was going to break the cycle. I feel generally much better and more confident.

Sue's comments about her son seemed particularly pertinent because it points to the problem of the generational cycle of literacy. A child who does not experience reading/writing in

the home is clearly at a major disadvantage when starting school, not least when there is no literacy back-up from the parent(s). (This is why "family literacy" programs have developed both in Canada and Britain.)

All participants felt they used their newly found literacy skills throughout the day whether for work-related or recreational activities. For example, reading job advertisements, completing job application forms or specific work-related tasks like checking stock orders. It was now possible to read the listings for television schedules. Computers were no longer mysterious but the opportunity to a wonderful world of information that could be accessed whenever convenient. Previously computers were avoided as they emphasized literacy difficulties. In a multitude of ways, positive feelings and a newly found confidence replaced uncertainties, hesitations, and fearfulness. It was as if a door had been opened for so much opportunity. With newly found literacy skills the struggles endured by participants seemed to evaporate. All seemed to experience life as richer, easier, and more fulfilling. Energy spent trying to cover up past difficulties prior to the acquisition of new skills could now be channelled into new directions developing and expanding their abilities even further.

Question four reflected my general research question, i.e., were there any lifestyle changes as a result of having been on a literacy program?

"*In your opinion, what, if any, changes have you experienced in yourself as a result of improving literacy skills?*"

All participants felt that to varying degrees they had experienced change in themselves. One student felt that he/she could build on the strong foundation the literacy program had given, to gain further qualifications, and hoped eventually to take the GED. John found the literacy

program had been "a good step up" to the GED program at Holland College. As a back-up, he continues to work on the Spell/Read Canada program, which is apparently very good for helping students with spelling difficulties. This change has been dramatic for John. He has been able to pursue academic qualifications which could open up major career opportunities that would otherwise have been denied. By contrast, Hobbo was glad to be able to read and write satisfactorily, but did not wish to pursue any qualifications to prove, as it were, his newly found literacy abilities. He knew that he was now "literate" and that was all that was important. He also stressed how much easier his job would have been with the acquired literacy skills. Indeed, Roy felt that he would probably not be in his current job and certainly not have achieved the recently obtained promotion without the improved literacy skills. Also, Roy described a better relationship with friends and family most of whom did not have literacy difficulties. For Roy, it was as if the literacy discrepancy had been a barrier which now was removed. One participant mentioned it was like coming out from a shadow. I found this to be an appropriately effective metaphor. Perhaps the clearest explanation came from Sue again, who said:

> Oh, definitely. It's changed from black to white. It's given me hope. It's given me knowledge. If you don't have an education, you are to have very low jobs, nothing to be proud of. Those jobs, you don't really bounce out of bed to run to, to go clean a house or dig a hole. . . . Life isn't very pleasant if you're working like a dog trying to keep bills paid but those jobs are low paying and they tax the body a lot. So it is very difficult and that creates the working poor and poorest of poor. I now have a better paid job and one that I like.

All participants felt their lives had changed for the better. Everyone gave me the impression that given the opportunity they would have enrolled on literacy programs far sooner than they did, particularly if they could have known the extent of the benefits the literacy changes

would bring. The changes in students' lifestyles were worthwhile, positive and far better than they could have possibly imagined.

As all participants seemed to have benefitted very positively from their experiences in literacy programs, I thought it would be interesting to see how they would respond to adults who were in the same predicaments as they themselves had been.

"*Is there any advice you might give to someone you knew who had literacy difficulties?*"

All concurred that an adult with literacy difficulties would benefit from enrolling in an adult literacy program and the subsequent considerable advantages that literacy would bring. However, they remembered the courage it took to do so. Roy recalled making more than one attempt to join a literacy program and on one occasion backing out at the last moment. All stressed that the approach to recommend just such a program would need to be carefully considered. Janet emphasized the point that you could not suddenly blurt out "Oh, I hear you are having literacy difficulties." She continued that it would only be comfortable to mention a literacy program when they knew the person really well. My own experience with a potential interviewee "Tina" would confirm this. John mentioned how he would stress the value of one-to-one tutoring as in Laubach. The fact tuition was free and could be worked around the adults' schedules was important to John. Not one student though mentioned that they had taken such specific action in real life. Interestingly, the son of one participant mentioned he had a friend whose father could not read. The participant discreetly gave information about adult literacy programs to the son to in turn pass it on to his friend and then hopefully to his father. This apparent rigamarole further demonstrates the sensitivity surrounding adult literacy.

Hobbo stressed that it is never too late to join a literacy program. From his perspective, there is absolutely no age barrier, indeed the tutors themselves can be of any age. The learning process could even be fun like playing a special scrabble game, where three letters for a word was the maximum. It is worth stressing that approach in teaching literacy skills to adults is different from that of children because adults can be humiliated and their problems compounded further if they are presented with a reading approach and material that is clearly designed for children. Over the last decade much reading material has been devised for the adult learner and the new Canadian Adult Reading Assessment CARA (2001) reflects this, selecting reading passages on more mature themes, such as AIDS. Although enthusiastic to help adults with literacy difficulties by recommending literacy programs, all participants approached questions in a guarded manner. Perhaps they did not wish to prejudice the adults, remembering what it was like when they were once in a similar predicament.

In conclusion, I felt that all the participants were co-operative in their responses, although there was some variance in the quality of answer. Canadian participants were more forthcoming, I sensed. This may be cultural and perceived. British reserve may be a factor. Participants were successful in overcoming their literacy difficulties and experienced common breakthroughs. If I had further interview opportunity I would now feel confident about my ability and right to question the actual process of learning to read and write.

## Common Themes

Several common themes emerged in the data, some of which I have already discussed. The significant similarities were in the participants' attitudes towards their literacy difficulties, their socio-economic status, their conscious decision to improve their skills, their attitudes before and after change, of others with similar obstacles, and of themselves. There were also similarities in their perceptions of how others saw them, and their self-perceptions. The aspect of secrecy about their difficulties was a recurring theme, even to the point of reticence during the interviews, when there was no longer a need for protective concealment. Another theme that emerged was the gender-specific attitudes towards the literacy-challenged adult.

### *Similar Setting/Content*

Despite the variety in age, country, and gender, all participants at one time or another were in a similar situation. For despite having all been through the respective country's education system, they arrived at adulthood with such limited literacy skills that they were unable to read and write at a satisfactory level. They all perceived themselves as failures and felt that society at large would judge them in the same way. The statistics tell us that in both countries the participants were by no means alone but these were not as relevant to them as the day-to-day struggle of living with this tremendous handicap and burden.

*The Social and Economic Backgrounds of the Participants*

Initially, I was reluctant to ask questions about socio-economic status. Although it can be difficult to determine the exact socio-economic category of each student, from my observation all would probably fall into a lower socio-economic grouping. This was particularly true with the British participants. Perhaps I can make this assumption because I am able to read the signs better in Britain. For example, Hobbo lived in a simple terraced house in a clearly less affluent part of Blackpool, which is known as a very much "working class" seaside resort. Roy lived in council-owned housing (high-rise flats/apartments) which would be suitable for people on modest incomes. Denise came from a social priority area of Merseyside. By contrast, Canadian participants all seemed to live in comfortable detached town-housing, although I would classify them as "blue collar" rather than "professional" workers. For the Canadian participants I sensed their literacy skills had improved their job opportunities. This improvement had brought about better housing prospects.

However, it must be emphasized, and this is supported in the literature, that although adults with literacy problems tend to be towards the lower socio-economic strata of society, it is not necessarily exclusively so. My own experience at St. Olave's would suggest there is a complete social mix of adult students with literacy difficulties and possibly one of the wealthiest men in Britain, a landed aristocrat, had some reading and writing difficulties as a young adult.

*The Wish to Develop/Improve Literacy Skills*

All participants made the conscious decision to improve their literacy skills. What was it that made the participants come forward to seek help at one particular time rather than another? I discovered there was invariably a catalyst that led to change. This could vary from the loss of a reading mentor, job worries or even financial incentive, but the effect was the same. The decision, though, to enroll in a literacy program was not taken lightly and in one case it was late in life. Without literacy, participants were often obliged to adopt and exist in a narrow world of routine. For example, shopping at only the one store where the layout was known. Any sudden changes in the routine might, participants feared, expose literacy difficulties.

*Similar Perspectives Held by Participants on their Respective Difficulties and Achievements*

Participants had similar perspectives both in terms of their lives before the literacy programs and after. Unanimously they highlighted the tremendous problems of being literacy-challenged, often in terms of the employment factor. They experienced difficulties both in obtaining work and when actually being in work. Having improved their literacy abilities, their employment was the area which seemed to benefit particularly. Not only was it easier to find work, but the type of work changed, often being more fulfilling, and certainly less stressful than previously. But more than that, they all experienced improvements in confidence, self-esteem and their general outlook on life was more positive. Two participants intended to build further on their newly acquired literacy skills, suggesting a commitment to lifelong learning. Although I did

not ask direct questions about the respective literacy programs themselves (this would have been a different thesis focus), I felt that all participants were happy with the literacy programs, and thought them worthwhile, and to be recommended. None questioned the fact that it was an individual solution to a problem that initially arose in a social, classroom context.

*Participants' Ways of Thinking about People*

Here again there were similarities, particularly in view of how participants saw other adults with literacy challenges when they themselves were no longer similarly challenged. Having once been there themselves they greatly sympathized with other challenged adults. Thus, to enter and certainly change the "secret world" that these adults create required a sensitive approach. Certainly to shout about their own achievements would be inappropriate. They felt a more subtle approach was needed if they wished to encourage those adults to improve their literacy skills by joining appropriate programs. Participants noted that programs could be mentioned or recommended, but ultimately the decision and choice as to whether to enroll must rest with the adults themselves. I find this approach understandable especially when considering how participants felt about people with literacy skills when they had been struggling. Participants felt the literate world would judge them, and be so hostile, that it was often necessary to cover up or disguise their literacy weaknesses. None of the participants would, for example, have been prepared to admit to anyone and everyone "I have reading and writing problems so I can't do that."

*What is Not Said*

As the world of adult literacy is a sensitive, if not controversial, area, it must also be remembered that what is *not* said *is* as significant as what is actually said. All 6 interviewees talked about their literacy experiences, but I sensed they were not always talking about the complete picture. I sensed they may have chosen to hold certain things back. One area where this was particularly apparent was the deception that had to be used in the masking of their literacy weaknesses. Although clearly a "white lie," I did not stress it if the interviewees chose to be "economical" in their recall. Their initial embarrassment could easily turn to shame if the cover-up was discovered and I wondered if this may have happened on occasion. However, not one of the interviewees identified such a situation or predicament and interestingly this reflected similar scant mention in the relevant literature.

*How Participants View Themselves*

Participants' view of themselves was remarkably consistent. Initially they were very critical of themselves because of literacy difficulties. I expected, in fact, they might find external factors to blame, factors such as school or family. Instead, they attributed the reason for their literacy weaknesses as due squarely to their own lack of ability. Most seemed to accept the stigma and hostility that the outside world showed them, understanding it almost. However, when their literacy skills did eventually improve participants saw themselves in a new light. They had much more confidence, self-esteem, and capability, and now they were able to achieve things that hitherto would have been impossible. Data suggests that all participants saw their own futures as much, much brighter than previously.

*Differing Gender Approaches To the Literacy-Challenged*

Data suggests a difference in experience for males and females in this study. The three male interviewees received both support, and almost protection, from their respective female partners. Hobbo is the best example of this situation. For all of his married life, his wife appeared to do any necessary reading and writing for him and seemed happy to do so. Indeed, it was only when she died, and this security was lost, that Hobbo felt he had to "bite the bullet" and try to learn to read and write. Although he coped very well, I sensed that the literacy issue was probably one of the major factors contributing to his sense of loss. Frankly, I doubted if Hobbo would ever have learned to read and write if his wife were still alive. John, too, mentioned that up to his divorce his ex-wife did much of the reading and writing. The refusal of Roy's wife to leave the room, when I was asking him about his literacy experiences, suggested to me that she wanted to be there while he discussed his literacy problems, perhaps sensing the power of illiteracy.

By contrast, the attitude of males towards females with literacy challenges in this study is nowhere as nearly sympathetic. In some cases, almost the opposite is true. Sue mentioned that her ex-spouse was very controlling, and that her lack of literacy skills contributed to this control. Sue's ex-spouse was able to exploit her literacy difficulties, and dominate the marital relationship to his own advantage. I sensed that Sue might have left him earlier had it not been for her apparent helplessness and lack of literacy skills, a helplessness compounded by the breakup. In general, the literacy challenges experienced by females in this study are greater than those experienced by males. Males have had more social support than have females. However, the shame experienced by both is possibly equal.

# CHAPTER V

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

### Learning from Analysing Stories About Literacy Acquisition

What can be learned through analysing the stories adults tell about their acquisition of literacy skills? The purpose of this research was to determine if there was an improvement in the lifestyle of adult learners as a result of their success in literacy programs. I interviewed 6 adults with literacy challenges, 3 in Canada and 3 in England, asking the same set of questions of each of them. Their answers to the questions did affirm that there had been improvements in their living as a direct result of their new-found competence in reading and writing. I had thought that by listening impassively to their stories, I would glean data that I could tidily analyse. I assumed that my role as researcher was not to interfere in any way with their stories-either their telling of them or their framing or reflecting on them themselves. Accordingly, I asked the questions, faithfully recorded their responses, and then examined what I had heard. But over the course of the past year, while assembling the data and writing this thesis and going to numerous talks on literacy, I began to see that there was something powerful and undeveloped in the research as I had performed it. I began to see that the stories all bore out one major and disturbing pattern--a pattern I had not anticipated but could not ignore.

In all six cases there were improvements in lifestyle, and in all six cases the participants laid no blame on the ways they had been taught or on the system that had failed them. Not one of the participants saw his or her situation as a result of anything but their own misfortune. In other

words, the participants all felt shame, all overcame some of this shame, and all felt grateful that they had made some progress with literacy skills, but not one of them was encouraged to ask or think about how their shame had been socially constructed and how their inability to learn had also been systematically enabled by inadequate learning models and methods. I began to see that their shame--one of the biggest challenges for literacy intervention--was directly related to their lack of understanding of the social construction of that shame. And as I reflected on this lack of critical awareness, I realized that my role as researcher had done nothing to help them to see themselves differently.

In my 25 years as an instructor, I had followed the model of private instruction and individual help that also, I began to see, may not help individuals see themselves as part of a larger social issue or picture of illiteracy. Horseman's (1994) work with groups helped me to see that the most powerful use of story by individuals comes in their telling stories in groups. Not only does the group hear the person's story, but the group helps people to re-frame and re-interpret stories. The dynamics of the group help individuals to see themselves as parts of larger social pictures and so the shame and stigma the individual feels in isolation is removed by the social awareness that comes from working with others.

Reflecting on Horseman's success, I wondered what would have happened in this research project if I had seen my role as researcher to intervene in the learning process. What would have happened with my 6 interviewees and their awareness of themselves and their stories if I had seen myself from the beginning as a practitioner/researcher, one involved in helping others to see the processes of their own learning and of their own reflection on that learning?

The most striking finding this research project has given me is seeing that the role of the qualitative researcher can be active, interventionist, reflexive, and enabling. While I cannot know how my 6 participants would have been changed by my having seen myself in a different role with them and/or by my having brought them together to explore their own stories, I can know that had my role been perceived differently from the outset of this project I would know that all of us had been changed in some way by the very act of critical inquiry into their stories and my own. As it stands, my research findings are important and positive, but more important is that I have been transformed as an educator and researcher. I now see that my story is also continual and changing just as are the stories of the participants in this study. The power of story and the power of the teller and listener are critical positions--ones that are changing my own views about literacy acquisition, including the dominant view of how to do research.

Seeing myself as connected and involved in the process allows me to understand better how the new literacy described by Willinsky (1990) is "a substantial attack on the foundations of schooling" (p. 85) precisely because it is an approach to literacy designed to teach students how to transform their worlds while learning to read rather than passively accepting the conditions that may have set the stage for their failure. In a parallel way, now that I see myself as integral to the research process, I understand better Horsman's (1994) pragmatic decision to have participants meet in groups to discuss the conditions of their literacy difficulties--groups where women with literacy-challenges were able to see themselves as connected and powerful rather than as isolated and powerless. This view supports Willinsky's view that,

> Students need to have literacy set in the larger context; they have to be let in on the challenge that it can pose to the reading of others. They have to learn to play with the politics of reading, the context of meanings and sources of authority. (p. 87)

The stories of the participants in this research show the grim plight of the literacy-challenged and the subsequent benefits in their respective lifestyles when their reading and writing improves. This, I discovered, from talking with real people about their real issues. To use an archeological metaphor, conducting this research was for me like returning to the actual historical site for investigation purposes. What I discovered at this site was the harsh reality of the literacy-challenged world. As well, I discovered a newly found world of confidence and opportunity that can accompany change and transformation as a result of the acquisition of literacy skills. Specifically, I discovered it is not enough to imagine what it might be like not to read or write and to then speculate on subsequent lifestyle changes that may occur when, and if, literacy improved. Importantly, this study suggests the need to examine the real life stories of people who are challenged by a lack of literacy skills.

The work of Witherell and Noddings (1991) supports my view that story is important to analysis when they write,

> Stories and narrative, whether personal or fictional provide meaning and belonging in our lives. They attach us to others and to our own histories by providing a tapestry rich with threads of time, place, characters, and even advice on what we might do with our lives. The story fabric offers us images, myths, and metaphors that are morally resonant and contribute both to our knowing and our being known. (p. 1)

Coles (1989) claims, and I would agree, it is only through story that he can fully enter the life of another. Lopez (1989) supports this view and extends it further. "The power of narrative to nurture and heal, to repair a spirit in disarray, rests on two things: the skilful invocation of unimpeachable sources and a listener's knowledge that no hypocrisy or subterfuge is involved" (p. 69). Likewise, Brockleman (1985) writes about the "thickness of personal identity" as

revealed through an emerging personal story, a story that has a narrative plot characterized by connections across time, by intentions and by an attitude toward life. In keeping with these authors, I experienced the power of narrative as I entered the lives of the adults I interviewed to complete this research.

The 6 participants I interviewed were drawn from a range of age, culture, gender, and outlook, but they all had one thing in common. That is, they were all adults with literacy difficulties who chose to involve themselves in programs to improve their literacy skills. Importantly, they all acquired improved literacy skills. And, while their responses were varied, all of them were positive about the changes that occurred as a result of their new skills. None wanted to return to their previous literacy-challenged state.

**Conclusions**

What conclusions, then, can be drawn from my research? My original research question was: "*Do adults perceive significant lifestyle changes when or if their literacy skills improve, having been on literacy programs?*" The answer would be an unequivocal yes. The stories told by both Canadian and British participants were surprisingly similar. The study indicates that while literacy challenges cross gender, age, and culture, differences between men and women were noted. Significantly, all of the men interviewed had ongoing caregivers to help them with their literacy difficulties. Women did not have this experience with male spouses. Further, men unlike women did not report resistence when their literacy skills improved. In general, this difference mirrors a power imbalance common to men and women in both Canada and Britain. A

similar gender imbalance is recognized by Horsman's (1994) and Greer's (2000). I particularly learned from Willy Russell's play "Educating Rita" (1983) about the relationship of gender to literacy.

All participants talked about their belief that improved literacy offered the possibility of escape from a life of drudgery, stress, and secrecy. This escape, I suggest, is similar to that described by Schlink (1999) in his depiction of Hanna. And, like Hanna, all participants in this study chose to escape from the shadows and shame produced by not being able to read in cultures that tend to prize verbal and written literacy.

All told me stories that suggest change as a result of improved literacy skills. Janet described well what improved literacy did for her. Now that she is able to process information better with help from Laubach, she noted that, "The biggest change is self-esteem. It has increased considerably and I feel better in myself and about life generally." John, too, declared he feels better about himself. "I now feel I can do most things connected with my job. Everything is much better and easier now." Similarly, Sue's world has changed. This was evident when she told me: "It's change from black to white. It's [improved literacy] given me hope. It's given me knowledge." With regret, but considerable hope in his voice, Hobbo said, " I wish I'd done it earlier." Denise, like other participants, expressed the view that "It's [literacy] been worth it." Roy in his interview, too, talked about the struggle involved in improving literacy skills. His words, I suggest, offer advice and support to those who continue with this struggle. As he said, "It may be a struggle but it's worth it in the long run." In my opinion, all of the participants I interviewed had experienced, to varying degrees, a sense of empowerment because of their new

skills. As Willinsky (1990) writes, "literacy signifies or enacts power in the world" (p. 5). From his perspective, everyone has the right to participate in the making of a culture and to do so means a degree of literacy.

Data indicates that illiteracy is a prison with many faces including shame, fear of being discovered, low self -esteem, poor employment possibilities, and a host of related personal and social problems. All participants I interviewed knew this shame. Sue, in particular, talked about the power of wanting to escape from the secret and shadow-like "twilight" world of illiteracy to the world of "light" where one is included. For Sue, this meant increased employment possibilities, and a house filled with books, books she could read to her children.

Generally, the decision to improve one's literacy skills was preceded by an event that acted as the catalyst to that change. For some, it was a matter of wanting to be able to read to their children. For others, it was knowing how to read official documents. For others, the opportunity to change came about when someone in their life changed. Hobbo, for example, decided to seek help to improve his literacy skills when his wife died. Sue chose to seek help following a separation from her husband. Common to all participants in the study, however, despite the degree of change sought, were feelings of shame and inadequacy. As Martini and Page (1996) have said, "The stigma of low literacy is powerful." With improved literacy skills, this sense of shame and failure was lessened for participants in this study.

According to Thomas (1990) one of the common factors that lead people to adult literacy training is the desire for self-improvement. This was certainly the case for all the participants I interviewed. Individually, participants told me how they had improved as a result of having

improved skills. Much of what I heard resembled the issues and changes described by Sabato (1990). In her study literacy was likened to a "terrible penalty" one that left them vulnerable to scorn, shame, and humiliation. Again and again I heard this same story from the participants who shared their stories with me.

Nowhere is shame felt more deeply than in the area of work. Without well-developed literacy skills all of the participants had known the shame of not being able to support themselves easily and adequately. One participant, for example, highlighted the link between literacy and poverty, a link also discussed by Lewison et al. (2000). The phrase "working poor" was used to indicate the fact that jobs available to literacy-challenged adults are limited and are invariably poorly paid. In general, my research demonstrated that improved literacy skills opened up better paid job prospects, promotion opportunities, and enabled some to break the poverty-illiteracy connection.

Horsman's (1994) study was particularly helpful to my analysis of the links between work, poverty, and literacy. Specifically, I noted a correlation between Sue and Denise and with the women described by Horsman. Sue, like several of the Nova Scotian women in Horsman's study, faced the bleak prospect of a life of physical work because of limited literacy skills--work so exhausting that Sue did not have the energy to do much of anything at the end of the day. To embark on anything academic, such as the work of improving reading skills, seemed almost impossible to her. Sue indicated that she felt helplessly trapped prior to her decision to improve her skills.

Denise's struggle to improve was similar to stories told by Horsman (1994), a study that demonstrates how this situation can be a double-edged sword because it can make some even more dependent on social support after skills have improved. Specifically, Denise had been receiving welfare when she was offered a financial incentive to improve her skills. Although not negative about her improvement, she appeared lukewarm about her training potential. I wondered if when the program was finished, and if her plans to go on to further training did not materialize, if she would drift back to receiving social support. Denise recognized that her improved literacy did not automatically guarantee employment. Denise's concern, I would note, was warranted. She lives in an area of England where unemployment can be as high as 50%. Though higher than the Maritimes, this is a concern, too, for participants living in Canada.

Dillon-Black (1998) writes about the power of literacy to transform lives. For 2 of the participants I interviewed this meant wanting to give something back to society as a result of having improved literacy skills, a finding commonly reported in the literature. One participant chose, then, to become a literacy tutor and the other chose to work as a committee member for a group designed to discuss literacy policy. This desire to help others is well described by Elsasser and Steiner (1987) who write, "When people are convinced that they can shape their social reality and they are no longer powerless, they begin to participate in dialogue with a larger world, first orally and then through writing" (p. 51). All of the participants described feeling more social as a result of improved skills.

A move from the inner world of shame to the outer world of social interaction is metaphorically similar to the move from inner speech to outer written speech described by

Vygotsky (Parry, 2000). Shor (1987), too, discusses the power of the movement from inner speech to written language. All 6 participants, I suggest, experienced this shift from inner to social speech as a result of their participation in literacy programs. Roy's story and use of metaphor (the change from waiting for a bus to that of being able to drive a car which he could do finally as a result of being able to read) is an apt metaphoric depiction of the power of the move from non-literacy to literacy.

According to Cambourne (1998), and I agree, literacy is not a single entity like the amount of water in a container or a single ability like knowing how to type. For him, "Literacy is a word which describes a whole collection of behaviours, skills, knowledge, process and attitudes" (p. 3). From an examination of the experiences of the participants I interviewed, I agree with his definition of literacy--all were now enabled to do whatever and go wherever was thought to be appropriate or necessary. Roy's observation about how he could read things as, and when, they came up confirms this idea. It might be helpful to use Cambourne's research in a possible subsequent study which would look at the actual process of how adults acquire their new found literacy skills. John, in particular, might be a suitable investigative candidate to consider here.

While undertaking this research, I appreciated Horsman's (1994) investigative approach to the problem of illiteracy because she seems determined to speak to actual people about their literacy experience no matter how traumatic the experience. I particularly appreciated the fact that when doing her research she included a participant who had dropped out of a literacy program, one who had chosen, despite opportunities, not to improve her skills. In a very real and practical way, Horsman's research gave me the confidence to do research in a difficult field--one

of shadow and secrecy, a field where considerable joy and pleasure is also experienced when change occurs. Too, I learned from Horsman about the benefit of working with groups to effect change. This way of working, I discovered, is different from the one-on-one approach used by Laubach. Horsman's study suggests, and I agree, that the one-on-one method is not necessarily beneficial for every literacy-challenged adult, even though it was clearly a success for participants in my study. I appreciated, too, Horsman's willingness to listen carefully to these adults to understand better what they need to effect change.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) emphasized the value, power, and authenticity of narrative inquiry. My desire to listen carefully and respectfully to the stories that provide the basis for this thesis meant that I began this research with a deep concern that I not impose my theoretical views on the stories I heard. Following the approach used by Hamilton (2002), I wanted to study real people in real situations and, like her, I have learned that people's stories do matter. At present, in Britain there is an on-going educational development/movement organized around the idea of "Lifelong Learning." From this perspective, government policy is being organized around the assumption that education does not just finish abruptly early in an adult's life but rather is a continuing process through his/her entire life. Hamilton is obviously an exponent of this policy. She argues, and I agree, that a humanitarian approach to literacy and lifelong learning should be adopted. In her opinion, and again I agree, the usual access points for literacy should be strengthened not just in the traditional academic institutions but also in places such as libraries, cyber cafes, bookshops, and advice centres. Hobbo's story would support the

value of such an approach. For it was an enquiry at a local library that set this 65-year-old retiree on the successful path of literacy and the subsequent beneficial lifestyle change.

Any approach to literacy, I suggest, is complex. And, as this research indicated, it is best done in the reflexive manner outlined by Cole and Knowles (2000), an approach that enable me to examine what was said and what was not said in the research process. For example, this approach enabled me to examine my own involvement in the actual process of attempting to do qualitative research. More specifically, I was able to reexamine the implications of using specific kinds of questions in an interview situation. When the data showed that participants did not make a connection between their early education and an inability to read easily, I wondered why this was so? And, would different questions have addressed better this connection? Or, is the ability to read connected, as Cambourne (1998) suggests, to the way in which early literacy is taught?

During my research, several people asked me why there are so many adults with literacy challenges both in Canada and Britain. The reasons, I suggest, can be as widespread and as diverse as the adults themselves. Certainly, there is not one simple answer. I do, however, see a metaphor.

The situation for all potential readers is like that of being on an escalator. For some, the escalator moves quickly. They stride up it, learning to read and write easily, building on their abilities as they move. For some, the escalator moves more steadily, nevertheless, they do learn to read and write. But, for others, the escalator moves slowly, or worse still, stops. When this happens the energy to acquire and learn reading skills seems to take a different direction. In this case individuals turn their attention to masking reading weaknesses. Often as adults, non-readers

have become adept at this despite all the ensuing difficulties that concealment brings. Like a person who refuses to ask for directions, non-readers flounder, often getting lost. But it is not easy and takes courage to get back onto the moving escalator. All of the participants I interviewed seemed glad that they did. In my own family, the reading escalator for one young nephew has almost stopped. He managed to memorize his reader, thus fooling his teacher into believing he could actually read. At home, he persuaded his elder siblings to do any reading for him. The pattern of cover-up and reading mentor seemed to be starting. My hope, after doing this research, is that the escalator will move again for him. I am certain Roy, Denise, Hobbo, Sue, John, and Janet would agree.

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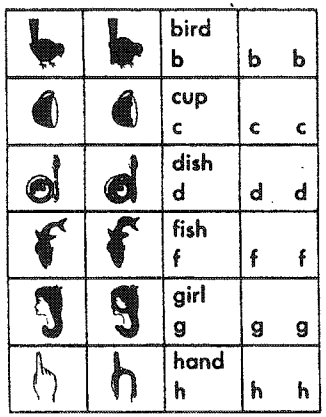
## What is the Laubach Method?

Phonics and picture association, along with the "each one teach one" approach, are basic to the Laubach Method. Developed about sixty years ago by Dr. Frank C. Laubach, the method has had world wide success. It is used in 103 countries and in 312 languages.



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| | | fish f | f f |
| | | girl g | g g |
| | | hand h | h h |

## PEI Literacy Councils

Six Literacy Councils across the Island are part of Laubach Literacy of Canada - PEI. Councils are made up of volunteers from all walks of life who contribute their time and energy to help people build literacy skills across the province.

The councils are located in:
*East Prince County*
*West Prince County*
*Queens County*
*Southern Kings County*
*Eastern Kings County*
*Mi'Kmaq First Nations*

Laubach Literacy of Canada - PEI was formed in 1981. Its members have taught hundreds of adult Islanders to read and write.

Call the Reading Line
1-800-348-7323

* From Reading Skills of Adults in Canada, Statistics Canada, December 1992.

Laubach Literacy of Canada
Prince Edward Island

## If you can read this, we need your help.

## If you know someone who can't read, we can help.

Laubach Literacy of Canada
LLC
EACH ONE TEACH ONE
Since 1970

*Each one teach one*

Laubach Literacy of Canada
Prince Edward Island

## APPENDIX B

## THE INTERVIEW GUIDE

1). I would be interested in knowing how you became involved in a literacy program.

2). If I could have followed you through a typical day, before you began the program, what would I observe you doing? How would you have been feeling about yourself and your ability to accomplish your daily tasks and goals?

3). If I could follow you through a typical day, what literacy skills would I observe you using? How would you be feeling about yourself and your ability to accomplish your daily tasks and goals?

4). In your opinion, what, if any, change have you experienced in yourself as a result of improving literacy skills? When did you first notice a change taking place? How has this change affected you personally? Professionally?

5). Is there any advice you might give to someone you know who had literacy difficulties?

## APPENDIX C

### Letter of Information

Letter of Information about the project

ADULT LITERACY AND
LIFESTYLE CHANGES

Dear _____

I wonder if you could possibly help me? I am currently completing a project for a course at the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI). As part of my research, I am interested in finding out if any changes happen to the lives of adults when their literacy skills improve. I wonder if you would be able to assist me by answering a few simple questions. These could all be done at one meeting and would be completed under one hour. Your name is not needed at all and all the information would be strictly confidential. It is hoped that my research might help people who would like to improve their reading and writing skills.

If you would be prepared to help, perhaps you could sign the following form.

Thank you in anticipation for your help.

Yours sincerely,

## APPENDIX D

### Consent Request Letter

### Statement of Informed Consent

### Letter of Thanks to Participants

Dear _____

I am currently completing my M.Ed. thesis. As part of my research, I would like to look at adult literacy programs. In particular, I am interested in discovering what, if anything, happens to the lives of adults when their literacy skills improve. I wondered if you would be prepared to participate in my research via a series of informal chats. At all times, the information would be strictly confidential and anonymity would be assured. Hopefully my research will benefit people who would like to develop their reading and writing skills.

If you would be prepared to help, perhaps you could sign the following form.

Thank you in anticipation for your help.

Yours sincerely,

## APPENDIX D

### Statement of Informed Consent

**RESEARCH CONSENT FORM**

I, _____ agree to help in the research study Adult Literacy Developments and Life-style Changes being conducted be Iain Edmonds for his Masters in Education in Leadership and Learning thesis requirement.

I understand that the aim of the study is to see if any changes happen to the lives of people who attended Literacy programmes.

I am willing to participate in an interview of approximately 1 hour in length. The interviews will be audio-taped and Iain will also take notes. I am aware that all of the information I share will be kept confidential and that Iain will be the only person with access to the data. I realize that no names will be attributed to any specific data.

I understand that my participation is completely voluntary, and that if I wish to conclude the interview I may do so at any time without providing an explanation. I realize that I may withdraw from the study anytime prior to the final analysis of data. I am also aware that I will not receive any monetary benefit from participating in this study.

If I have any questions I can call Iair or his thesis advisor Anne-Louise Brookes, Ph.D. Dr. Katherine Schultz, UPEI Vice President for Research Development , if I have any concerns or worries. I understand that I may keep a copy of this form and return the other to Iain.

I have read and understand this information and agree to participate in this study.

Instructor signature _____

Researcher signature _____

Participant signature _____

Date _____

I wish to have a copy of the final results _____

## APPENDIX D

## LETTER OF THANKS TO RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Dear _____

This is a brief letter to thank you for your participation in my M.Ed. research project. I found it to be a most interesting and worthwhile experience and hope you found it the same. I intend to hold an informal meeting on _____ when I hope I can share with you the results of my research and findings. You would be welcome to make any observations or comments as you felt appropriate, indeed any feedback would be appreciated. I look forward to seeing you on_____ .

Thank you again for your help.

Yours sincerely,

# APPENDIX E

## Australian Visit 2003

In March 2003 I had the opportunity to visit Melbourne, Australia. Whilst there I was able to interview a hitherto literacy challenged adult, Karen. I wondered if her experiences would be similar or different to the Canadian and British students that I interviewed. Like Britain and Canada, there has been an established and strong tradition of helping adults with literacy difficulties in Australia. Gina Sabato's work with Doug, Eric, Carol, and Jenny reflected this and interestingly Karen received help from a similar state-run program in Victoria to improve her literacy skills under the umbrella of the Australian Counsel for Adult Literacy (ACAL).

To begin with, Karen talked about her schooling. Her father had been with the Australian armed services and as a result she had changed schools frequently. She found it very difficult to settle in or meet new friends. Also, she was rather shy. But more than this, she felt her reading and particularly her writing suffered. Although she got some help from the teachers she felt that they knew she would be moving on. When her father was posted to Darwin in Northern Australia, she was placed in a special class with mainly Aboriginal pupils which she did not like although initially Karen was reluctant to identify why exactly this was so. (I wondered if this might be a similar case to Denise and her experiences in a "special needs" class). After some further probing Karen admitted that other children in the school very much "looked down" on her and the Aboriginal children.

The net result of this was that Karen left school at the earliest opportunity but she knew she had to find a job where she would not need much reading and writing. Fortunately she had always liked animals, although she knew she was not "clever enough to be a vet or anything like that." When her father retired back to Melbourne she managed to get a job in a cattery. (A cattery is the feline equivalent of boarding kennels for dogs.) Her hours are 7-10 a.m. and 5-8 p.m. every day. It was during the gap in the day that she eventually decided to "do something about her reading and writing." It was not an easy decision and she had to "find the courage" to get help. It was amazing how she could always find an excuse to put it off. However, eventually she joined a local literacy help program located on the outskirts of Melbourne. She had a very kind and helpful tutor, who had been a teacher. Although Karen felt it was a struggle in the beginning, gradually both her reading and writing skills improved. Her tutor encouraged her to read, saying this would help her spelling and writing skills. Karen spent nearly 2 years on the program and she felt her spelling in particular was much better. She also felt she could actually use a dictionary to check on words for which she was unsure of the spelling. Previous to her program this was not possible because she was not always sure of the first letter(s) of the word(s) in question.

Although Karen was still working in the cattery she might look for work that required some reading and writing skills. As regards her present job she felt she could now give the cats their necessary medication without worry. For example, hitherto she had been reluctant to give the diabetic cats their daily insulin injections for fear of making a mistake on the dosage.

But perhaps Karen's most pertinent observation was that because she was no longer stressed about her poor literacy skills, she could deal with situations far more easily. So, now

that she was not so bothered and anxious, she was as a result much happier and relaxed and did not get depressed. There was little trace of bitterness about her hitherto problems, it was just the way it was. However, Karen was rather evasive when I asked if she had a mentor or someone to turn to for aid, who would know about her literacy difficulties. I wondered if she'd even managed to conceal them from her parents. Nevertheless, her experiences, attitude, and general outlook, both before she acquired literacy skills and after, were remarkably similar to those of the Canadian and British participants.