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# Persistence in the Face of Adversity: What Drives Low-literacy Women Refugees to Continue on in LINC Classes in Calgary?

Perry, Rebecca

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Persistence in the Face of Adversity: What Drives Low-literacy Women Refugees to Continue  
on in LINC Classes in Calgary?

by

Rebecca Perry

A THESIS

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## **ABSTRACT**

For the thousands of refugee women who arrive in Canada annually speaking a language other than English, the language barrier is one of the most significant obstacles to integrating into Canadian society that they will face. To help facilitate the process, the Government of Canada offers free English classes called Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) to all newcomers. However, it has only been recently acknowledged that those who arrive might have little to no prior formal educational experience and as such will be largely illiterate in their mother tongues. This demographic will arrive needing help with both language and literacy and due to the nature of their situation, have been classified as ESL literacy students. Despite the seemingly daunting task of simultaneously having to acquire a new language along with first-time literacy skills, there are women who are working their way through LINC programs in Calgary, but little is known of them as a demographic. In this study, a methodology of narrative inquiry was used along with semi-structured interviews to gather the stories of seven women and from the interviews three main themes emerged: 1) The influence of past experiences; 2) Navigating new surroundings through language acquisition and literacy learning; and 3) Who am I now? Results of the study provide an overview of the motivations, challenges, perspectives and triumphs that these women have experienced and gained through engaging in classes as well as suggestions for improved practice in the developing field of ESL literacy.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Setting the Stage

Anyone who has travelled to a country where they did not speak the language has probably familiarized themselves, or at least considered familiarizing themselves, with a few common survival phrases before embarking. These could range from “I would like a beer, please” to “where are the bathrooms?” to “I need a taxi.” While putting in the effort to learn the destination language is by no means a waste of time, chances are if you are an English speaker on a holiday it is more of a novelty than a means for survival as English has become a common lingua franca worldwide. One of the more recurrent phrases I have encountered while working with immigrant and refugee populations in Canada, that has often been uttered apologetically, has been “My English bad” or “My English no good.” People often say this to me as I sit with them to explain the rules of a program or as I hand them a form written in English that they have to read and sign in order to move forward with program processes.

As Canada is both a print-oriented society and a predominantly English speaking one, the program forms I hand them, and the dramatically slow and increasingly loud explanations I give them, will not have been their first encounters with paperwork or with explanations in a foreign language since their arrival. With this being said, upon arrival, people from both demographics, refugee and immigrant, may then find themselves in English as a Second Language (ESL) and Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) classes not to just improve their English enough to order a beer but to enable them to fulfil their basic needs, find employment, communicate with others and navigate their new surroundings. However, the reality is that even those currently enrolled in classes may be subject to phrases bred from ignorance or frustration such as “You’re in Canada now, learn to speak English” or “Why don’t



you people speak English?” With this in mind it is important not only as fellow citizens and neighbors but as educators to acknowledge that we likely do not know under what circumstances people have arrived in the country and oftentimes people are not only learning a new language but a new way of life while trying to balance, integrate, acclimatize and provide. For some, moving to Canada might not even have been a choice but a necessity as unlike immigrants who have chosen to move to Canada and to permanently settle here, refugees have been forced to leave their countries of origin for fear of persecution. Therefore, when people arrive in English language classes in Canada, it is important to recognize that some people sitting in those seats may be there out of choice while others may be there out of necessity. More importantly and less widely acknowledged however, is the fact that while some may be there with rich academic pasts behind them, others may never have sat in a classroom before.

While I was completing my bachelor’s degree in Fredericton, New Brunswick I was cajoled into volunteer teaching at an Adult Literacy Program (ALP) provided by Frontier College. My students were middle-aged Bhutanese people (mostly women) who had spent a significant portion of their lives in refugee camps in Nepal and who were largely illiterate in their first languages. I remember sitting at a table with the group on my first day thinking “where do I even begin?” From the name of the program, I had assumed I would be working with English speaking adults who had difficulty reading and writing but when I arrived I was told that it had turned out to be more of an English as a Second Language program. As I had never taught before, I already felt ill prepared and as I frantically searched my brain for something to say I realized that I did not know anyone’s names. So, I suggested we all write our names down on a name-tag. I noticed that the majority of the group had great difficulty with this but I did not think

too much of it at the time. However, a few classes later when I asked the group to write “banana” in Nepali, they told me that they had never learned to write or read in their mother tongue.

### **The Problem**

Before I had the opportunity to teach in this program, I had not given much thought to who made up Canada’s refugee population or the challenges they faced upon arrival. I also had not taken into consideration the fact that people entering into ESL and LINC programs may be doing so having had little to no prior formal educational experience in their country of origin. The group that I taught dismantled my assumption of having prior educational experience as they were in fact starting from scratch and doing so in a new and unfamiliar country. As a result, once a level of comfort had been established, many students used class time to ask questions like: “I got this paper from my doctor, what does it say?” or “How do I catch a bus to here?” They also spoke of feelings of isolation in having little to no “Canadian friends.”

While I have been using and will continue to use the conventional term “ESL” throughout this study, I do so in acknowledgement of the fact that English is not necessarily the participants’ second language and therefore the term is not the most accurate. In most if not all of the participants’ cases, English is actually their third or fourth language and as Li, Myles and Robinson (2012) have stated, ESL is becoming a problematic term that is in competition with other and often more accurate terms that are emerging in the field. However, I continue to use the term “ESL” in this study for the sake of continuity and to be in congruence with literature that I have used and quoted throughout.

From working with the group in the ALP and in looking into the demographic of learners as whole it became apparent that many may likely face a more complex and lengthy road to English language learning for a number of reasons. Adult refugees with little prior education are

more likely to have distinct and substantial social, psychological and educational needs due to extended periods of living in violent or unstable conditions such as refugee camps (Benseman, 2012). Women in particular may be facing unique barriers to education due to traditional, societal, and cultural norms that have prevented or discouraged them from acquiring a formal education in the past (Morrison & Jutting, 2005).

Additionally, just as when any newcomer arrives, the re-settlement process is often quite hectic in working simultaneously to cultivate a sense of belonging, make sure basic needs are met and to work towards financial stability. As a result of these chaotic times, language learning can get put on the backburner. However, many jobs here in Canada require a certain level of oral and written language proficiency and those who do not acquire those skills may find themselves in low paying positions and in positions where they are being taken advantage of. Although it is evident that this demographic is important to explore, there is a substantial deficiency in the literature regarding this specific demographic of learners: low-literacy adult women refugees (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004).

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

In an effort to bridge this gap the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of refugee women 30 years and older with little to no prior formal education who are continuing on in LINC programs despite the barriers and challenges that they may face. This was accomplished by using narrative inquiry to elicit stories of experience from four to six participants who are taking LINC classes in Calgary. By gaining the perspectives of women within this demographic I hoped to develop a greater understanding of not only the challenges they face but also the strategies they use and supports they need to succeed. As such, my central research question was: What leading factors encourage and motivate refugee women with little to no prior formal

education, who face numerous and multidimensional barriers to learning, to persist in LINC classes in Calgary?

In an effort to narrow the focus of my study while still striving to capture and honor the stories and experiences of the participants, my guiding questions were:

1. What educational opportunities/experiences did you have before coming to Canada?
2. What were your attitudes and thoughts towards education before coming to Canada?
3. What does literacy and “being literate” mean to/for you?
4. What challenges and barriers have you faced in and out of the classroom since beginning your program?
5. How do you balance school, life and possibly differing attitudes towards women’s education?
6. What has and has not worked for you in your LINC program?
7. What, in your opinion, can be done to further support your learning and the learning of women in similar positions?
8. How did you find out about your LINC program? What made you decide to start a LINC program?

In asking these questions, my goal was to be able to conceptualize their experiences in an inclusive framework that took into consideration their pasts, their presents and what they believed lie ahead for them in their continued pursuit of literacy and language.

### **About the Researcher**

I was recently granted a position with Habitat for Humanity Southern Alberta working in the Family Services Department recruiting families for Habitat homes. However, at the time that this research project began I had been working at the Women in Need Society (WINS), a local

non-profit in Calgary, in their Community Programs department for three years. Prior to working there, my work experience can best be described as eclectic with a focus in the social services sector; this is with the exception of a few winters spent in remote drilling camps north of Fort McMurray. For the most part, I have worked with low-income and minority populations ranging in age from child to adult. Having had the opportunity to work with diverse age groups, I began to realize that while working with both are fulfilling in their own unique ways, I was more drawn to the idea of working with and teaching adults. The roots of this preference can definitely be traced back to teaching in the ALP. Although my time there was brief - as is my teaching repertoire which was developed largely during those two years in Fredericton - that experience has stuck with me and has continued to guide the direction of both my academic and career paths. Additionally, teaching in the ALP led me to Nepal, which was my first stop on a lengthy trip through South and Southeast Asia in 2013. There I had the opportunity to find and visit with some of the students' family members who were still awaiting relocation in the refugee camps. The visit added an illustrative component to the stories that the women in my classes had shared with me about their lives and reinforced the power of narrative which would later influence my decision to pursue a narrative study.

When I was hired at WINS, I was ecstatic as I had spent the months prior in a purgatory of fruitless job searches and endless applications. Somewhere in between applying to work in funeral homes and as a produce delivery driver, I came upon the advertisement for a Family Resource Center Facilitator at WINS. In this position, I worked closely with low-income women processing referrals, helping to stabilize their basic needs, doing case management and partnering with other agencies to organize, provide and teach various classes and programs. Many of the women I have worked with were immigrants and refugees and as a result, English

classes were frequently requested. Finding myself once again with an opportunity to teach English, I completed a 250-hour Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) diploma program to better equip myself to do so. Upon completing that diploma, I realized that I wanted to continue to improve my abilities to work with adults in an educative capacity and that is how I found myself applying to the University of Calgary's Adult Learning program through the Werklund School of Education. In being accepted, and in being given the opportunity to choose an area of research, it seemed without question that the research should be focused on the demographic of learners who had been a constant presence on my horizon.

### **Significance of the Study**

In exploring the existing literature around low-literacy women refugees it becomes evident that the gap between what is known and what is unknown about this demographic is substantial and worth investigating. Of the thousands of refugee women that arrive in Canada annually, there will be many who fit this underrepresented group of adult learners. The hope is that they will enroll in language classes but the reality is that many only attend for a short period of time (Condelli, Wrigley & Yoon, 2008) and unfortunately their inability to effectively communicate often leads to social exclusion, and significantly reduces their economic opportunity (van de Craats, Kurvers & Yuong-Sholten, 2006). As Gaber-Katz and Horsman (1988) have suggested, it is powerful when those who find their experiences significantly underrepresented, come together to put a name to what they have experienced. By using narrative research methodology to explore the experiences of low-literacy women refugees in LINC classes in Calgary, I hoped to provide them with the opportunity and space to engage in discourse regarding their English language and literacy learning journeys in a safe and non-

biased setting. However, as I embarked on this expedition, I was conscious of the fact that there are limitations to this project that I should remain aware of.

Qualitative research is a largely subjective process and narrative inquiry is even more so. The data that I gathered was subject to those who have lent me their stories and this project in no way sought to assume that the cumulative experiences of the anticipated four to six participants would be representative of the demographic as a whole. In this study I simply aimed to contribute to a much larger and continuous body of knowledge regarding the focus population. An individual's perception of reality is an important factor in the act of knowing and learning (Freire, 1970/1998) and it is important that educators work to understand the diversity of their students and their experiences in order to provide them with the tools they need to remain motivated to reach their own personal educational goals. This process may, in its most basic stages, begin with asking people questions and giving them the power to contribute to discussions regarding activities that ultimately concern them and have a direct impact on their livelihoods. As Friere has stated, "Experience teaches us not to assume that the obvious is clearly understood" (Friere, 1970/1998, p. 480).

## **Summary**

With this introduction I hoped to provide the context for the study as well as an explanation of the factors that fueled the exploration. In Chapter Two I move forward into a review of the literature surrounding adult ESL literacy learners that will work to situate this demographic of learners within the multiple fields that they span. In Chapter Three I discuss the methodology that guided the project and Chapter Four and Five will be a narrative analysis of the findings as well as a discussion surrounding what emerged as a result of undertaking this research study.

## **CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

After coming to understand that the students in the ALP were low-literate or non-literate in their mother tongues, I realized that I had walked into that classroom with a handful of assumptions. These assumptions largely stemmed from my own naivety as well as my own unacknowledged ethnocentric views. I had approached the classroom under the impression that I would be teaching English to adults who were literate in their first languages; it had never occurred to me that first language illiteracy was going to be something that I encountered.

Years later and with the opportunity to extensively explore the field of adult ESL literacy, a general consensus that can be found throughout the literature is that there is a significant lack of research in the area. I have seen my own lack of awareness reflected on a larger scale through an exploration of the introduction of language classes in Canada and on the remaining lack of formal acknowledgment and policy, surrounding ESL literacy as it appears to have only been relatively recently acknowledged as a separate field. Although it has been stated by some in the field that the literature is scarce, exploring the introduction of ESL classes in Canada, the various barriers to learning that adult ESL literacy learners may face and the status of women's education globally, as well as the literature that falls within and between these categories, could help to better conceptualize where in the literature the field is located. Additionally, I hope that this review of these identified areas of literature may also illuminate where there are significant gaps and what areas may benefit from further research. As Creswell (2014) has discussed, a literature review has several purposes and this review will act to integrate existing works, identify gaps and central issues and build bridges between the various areas that surround the field of adult ESL literacy. I hope to do this through presenting a generalized view of a low or non-literate refugee woman's journey to the classroom in Canada.



## **Immigration and Conception of Language Classes in Canada**

In 1971, Canada became the first country to declare itself a multicultural nation and to adopt multiculturalism as an official policy (Canadian Heritage, 2006). Canada's immigration patterns have ebbed and flowed in tune with other factors such as economic prosperity, instability, and times of war. While those who live in Canada now come from a mosaic of cultures and ethnicities from all over the globe, admittance was once quite selective as there were some fairly strict immigration policies in place. These provisions placed restrictions on the number of people who could immigrate from non-European countries as well as those living in poverty and those with mental illnesses (Boyd & Vickers, 2000).

From 1910 onwards, Canada began to welcome larger numbers of immigrants from outside of the UK and the US and as a result saw a growth in the numbers of people from other parts of Europe (Boyd & Vickers, 2000). The years between 1946 and 1970 were considered the "boom" years, as Canada saw more than 450,000 immigrants between 1946 and 1950 alone and it was in the 1960s, in congruence with the lifting of specific restrictions, that people living outside of Europe were then allowed to immigrate in greater numbers (Boyd & Vickers, 2000). Although both immigrants and refugees had been entering Canada for many years, it was the Immigration Act of 1978 that officially stated that Canada was to accept people based on humanitarian grounds, lifting the special regulations on the admittance of refugees (Boyd and Vickers, 2000).

Today, new immigrants and refugees are still an integral part of Canadian society, making up over 20% of Canada's population and of the thousands that arrive annually, many will face various barriers in terms of integrating and adjusting to Canadian society. Due to the fact that many will not be proficient in either of Canada's national languages, this inability to

communicate easily is one of the most significant barriers that immigrants and refugees will face during their transition (Guo, 2015). In an effort to facilitate language learning, the Government of Canada has been offering federally funded English classes since 1947 (Guo, 2015). However, these classes seem to have been designed in coherence with the evolution of Canada's views and attitudes towards immigration. For example, the first language classes offered were established to facilitate the assimilation of immigrant and refugee populations and to promote a nationalistic agenda (Guo, 2013). During this time, English and French, along with Canadian culture and values, were being taught in an effort to replace the languages and cultures of the newcomers that were arriving. As far back as 1918, in his treatise entitled *The Education of the New Canadian: A Treatise on Canada's Greatest Educational Problem*, James Anderson, the first Conservative to hold office in Canada, promoted the idea of not only language immersion, but absolute conversion and spoke of how the assimilative process would work to "Canadianize" newcomers.

This assimilative mentality assumed that if these populations were allowed to keep and practice their languages and cultures it would prevent them from developing strong ties to their new country (Banks, 2008). It is only since the early 1990s that the purpose of these language classes has shifted from an assimilative framework to one of economic integration, by focusing on the necessary skills for employment in Canadian society. Later still, the focus began to shift further towards a more wholly integrative framework of both social and economic integration in which the preservation and practice of foreign cultures and languages was promoted in addition to learning English or French (Guo, 2013). Accordingly, the focus of these programs has evolved from the formal qualities of language, such as grammar and pronunciation, in the 1960s and 1970s, to an acknowledgement of diversity within learning processes and learning styles in the

1980s and 1990s and more recently, the influence of a learners' social context and multiple identities has come into play (Ullman, 1997).

Although these programs have progressively become more inclusive and considerate of the vast array of learner needs, as well as more culturally and linguistically aware, up until the 1970s it was widely assumed that ESL learners were arriving with prior formal educational experience. This assumption was negated by the wave of immigrants that arrived in the 1970s who were largely illiterate in their first languages (Condelli, Wrigley & Yoon, 2009). This demographic came to be formally classified as adult ESL literacy learners, differing from mainstream ESL learners in that they straddled the divide between second language and literacy learning. The term ESL learner is then more associated with students who have had prior schooling and who have achieved a level of literacy in their mother tongues (Folinsbee, 2007). Despite the formal emergence of this demographic there is still a considerable lack of literature regarding ESL literacy learners (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004; Folinsbee, 2007; Vinogradov, 2010) and much of the information that is available is neither detailed nor formalized (Geronimo, Folinsbee & Goveas, 2011). So, while Canada does have these provisions in place to facilitate and aid in second language learning, the policies and programs have developed to be far more reflective of the traditional ESL learner.

### **Second Language Facilitation**

Canada's federally funded language program is now called LINC. Those eligible for these classes include permanent residents and protected persons and those who are deemed ineligible are Canadian citizens and refugee claimants (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2014). While the overarching definition of a refugee is someone who has fled their country of origin due to fear of persecution, refugee claimants differ from convention refugees.

While convention refugees arrive in Canada with refugee status as defined under the 1951 Geneva Convention, refugee claimants or asylum seekers arrive asking for refuge and depending on the decision made based on their individual cases, may or may not be granted refugee status (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2010). In order to be placed in a LINC program, prospective students are required to first take a free language proficiency assessment through the Center for Canadian Language Benchmarks (CCLB), a national not-for-profit organization that was established by the federal government to regulate and measure students against the national standards of English and French in an effort to promote consistency, coherence, and effectiveness in language instruction (CCLB, 2016). These assessments are designed to determine which classes would be most suitable for students' proficiency levels. Once individuals are registered in LINC classes, they are only permitted to take these classes for up to three years.

In addition to launching the CCLB, in 1984 a national ESL organization called Teach English as a Second Language (TESL) was officially established in Canada. TESL Canada has coined themselves the "National federation of English as a Second Language teachers, learners and learner advocates" and it is an organization composed of provincial and territorial representatives from across Canada (Eddy & May, 2004). As an entity, they act as a collective voice for ESL educators with the objectives of facilitating communication across the different jurisdictions and organizations, advocating on behalf of second language teachers and learners, coordinating the distribution of resources and information, supporting development in the field and fostering research and instigating and promoting policies regarding the instruction of ESL (Eddy and May, 2004). These programs and organizations have been established in recognition that for newcomers to Canada, language acquisition and the ability to communicate with other

members of society is “probably the most important single alterable factor contributing to their social and economic integration” (Dustmann & van Soest, 2002, p. 243). However, despite the intentions of these organizations to help better facilitate language learning among newcomer populations, the lack of information in the field of adult ESL literacy and regarding the learners themselves, is creating and exacerbating a variety of barriers to learning that have been acknowledged by the researchers, instructors, and organizations working with learners in the field.

### **Non-Traditional Adult Learners and Institutional Barriers to Learning**

**Motivation, participation and identity.** Before exploring the barriers to learning that some adult learners and, more specifically, adult ESL literacy learners may encounter, it is beneficial to explore the concept of learner motivation and identity to better grasp the reasons why adults within this particular demographic may pursue classes in the first place. Boshier’s (1991) Education Participation Scale listed several factors that may drive motivation in adult learners. One factor on the scale is communication improvement which, in turn, can lead to increased social contact, professional advancement, cognitive interest, and family togetherness. For both general adult learners and, more specifically, second language learners, a sociocultural and historical dimension also comes into play when exploring motivation. While a factor such as communication improvement is evident in both spectrums, for second language learners the integrative motivation may be much stronger as learning the target language may mean greater cultural capital and increased access to previously inaccessible resources (Norton, 2013). As Norton (2013) has discussed, factors such as these may lead to a greater investment in learning different skills such as speaking, reading, and writing and, depending on the learner’s self-concept, different values may be placed on the different skills. Norton (2013) has also explored

the complex notion of the role of identity in second language learning that has been previously unaddressed by traditional theories of adult participation and motivation. She has found that as these learners acquire the various skills in the target language, their identity is continuously being reorganized in congruence with their relationships to their social worlds and she has proposed that there is a strong link between investment in learning and investment in the development of one's own changing and expanding identity.

For example, in a case study of four Cambodian women's participation and investment in Adult ESL Programs, Skilton-Sylvester (2002) found that each participant's reasoning for attending or not attending classes was innately driven by their multifaceted identities and how attending programs impacted or shaped these identities. Historical factors, such as the Cambodian genocide, in which millions were murdered because they were educated, were taken into account by the researcher when exploring potential mixed feelings of participants towards pursuing classes. Other factors women in the study mentioned when addressing non-participation or interrupted participation were the difficulties of maintaining the identity of wife and student simultaneously as in some cases, unsupportive spouses felt threatened by the wife's new status as a student. Some who continued with classes spoke of how their ESL journey was seen as both a school and a family activity.

What can be inferred from this brief exploration is that motivation and participation within the realm of adult learning are multidimensional issues that span the historical, sociocultural and personal realms and as such, non-participation is something that cannot be easily mediated. However, Vella (2002) has suggested that motivation can be enhanced when, as educators, we acknowledge and incorporate the experiences of adult learners during instruction. Norton (2013) has also discussed the notion of course specific motivation wherein students

spoke of the relevance and relatability of materials taught impacting their investment. However, when little is known or acknowledged regarding the demographic that is being taught, this can intensify barriers to learning at the institutional, instructional and learner levels and as a result can affect quality of programs and quality of instruction as well as student enrolment, motivation, and retention. Mathews-Aydinli (2008) has stated that as a population, the full spectrum of adult ESL learners studying non-academic English are an understudied population with much of the research being done in the area lacking in theory and with no discernible connection throughout the literature. However, touching first on the broader spectrum of non-traditional adult learners may act as a foundational starting point to help better conceptualize the learning journeys of adult ESL literacy learners.

**Non-traditional adult learners.** As Schuetze and Slowey (2002) have discussed, the traditional adult learner is typically one who has continued on with a formal education with little to no breaks in between, moving through the stages from high school to higher education in succession. A base definition of a non-traditional adult learner would then be one with breaks in their educational journey, one who has taken alternative routes to higher education, and those who may be re-entering higher education after taking time off for work and life duties (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). However, this definition indicates that these learners have continued on with higher education at some point in their adult lives. This may not be a reality for other non-traditional learners who face additional socioeconomic and cultural barriers and more typically fall into the categories of the “socially or educationally disadvantaged [...] working class [...] particular ethnic minority groups, immigrants, and, in the past, frequently women” (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002, p. 312).

**Adult ESL literacy learners.** Adult ESL literacy learners, as a branch of the non-traditional adult learner population, arrive requiring assistance with both language acquisition and developing foundational literacy skills for what may be the first time in any language. The CCLB (2016) has acknowledged that ESL literacy learners will require unique supports, instruction and guided practice throughout their learning journeys. They have stated that these learners often do not progress as quickly through course material as other learners because they lack foundational knowledge and have the arduous task of working on language and literacy simultaneously. It has also been acknowledged that due to the complexity of these learners' situations, their needs may be better met through both specialist resources and specialist teaching approaches (Benseman, 2012). However, it is more likely that adults within this demographic will find themselves being juggled between LINC classes and general adult literacy classes, finding neither adequately addresses their specific learning needs (Folinsbee, 2007).

As Vinogradov (2010) has stated, adult ESL literacy learners have twice the ground to cover, and further it has been acknowledged that the needs of these learners are often not being met by mainstream LINC or ESL classes. As such, these students are often being left behind, retention rates are often lower and learner achievement is inconsistent and difficult to measure (Mathews-Aydinli, 2008; Folinsbee, 2007; Gunn, 2003). Through an action research project conducted involving ESL students from Sudan who were participating in Australia's Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP), Gunn (2003) found that many of the ESL literacy students voiced that they had "learned very little" (p. 39) when they had been in mixed classes with mainstream students who were already literate in their mother tongues. Other institutional and structural barriers that learners may encounter can range from lack of childcare, lack of transportation to and from classes, long wait lists for classes or alternatively large over crowded



classes (Warriner, 2004) as well as circumstantial barriers such as prior commitments, the interference of multiple life roles, lack of interest or a lack of support from personal networks (MacKeracher, Stuart & Potter, 2006).

As non-traditional adult learners, as well as adult ESL literacy learners, this demographic faces unique institutional barriers which is in part caused by a lack of policy and a lack of foundational knowledge as well as a lack of communication between the fields of adult literacy and adult second language learning. Folinsbee (2007) has indicated that those learners who find themselves bouncing between programs, and finding themselves stuck on the margins, are more likely to fall through the cracks when they in fact may be the ones who would benefit the most from guided instruction. Due to their multidimensional needs, adult immigrants and refugees within this demographic in particular, have been deemed the only group of adult learners whose unique needs will span the entire spectrum of adult education from ESL classes to literacy and basic skills classes to various credit programs (Folinsbee, 2007) and yet the literature involving these learners is scarce.

**Refugee adult learners.** In addition to institutional and structural barriers to learning, immigrant and refugee adult learners may also encounter dispositional barriers (Hyland-Russell & Groen, 2011). Dispositional barriers are those beliefs, perceptions and attitudes of and towards the self that, when negative, can significantly impact one's ability to participate in learning activities. These perceptions can be shaped by low self-esteem, a lack of self-confidence in one's capabilities, feelings of unworthiness, unpleasant prior educational experiences and untrusting attitudes towards the institutions or authority figures that are representative of and associated with education (MacKeracher et al., 2006). However, while both immigrants and refugees are considered non-traditional adult learners and although both populations may arrive in Canada as

ESL literacy learners, much of the research done on language acquisition has been focused on immigrants and applied to refugees under the assumption that the process for both groups is similar (Beiser & Hou, 2000). As a result, there is a significant deficiency in the literature based around the needs and experiences of refugee ESL literacy learners (Folinsbee, 2007).

Although it has been assumed that research regarding immigrants is reflective of refugee populations, it has been acknowledged that refugees may experience distinctive barriers to learning in addition to the barriers faced by non-traditional immigrant adult learners. This acknowledgment takes into consideration the fact that refugees have been displaced and many may have spent significant amounts of time in refugee camps. As such, most are more than likely coming from violent, oppressive and/or turbulent situations (Benseman, 2012). As adult learners, these refugees also bring a wealth of experience with them to the classroom. Therefore, it is important to understand that these learners may not be able to prevent remnants of past traumatic experiences from entering the classroom with them. In fact, a stressful situation like entering the classroom for the first time in a long time, or for the very first time, could trigger or magnify feelings of trauma.

Jenny Horsman (2004), through her work on the links between violence and literacy, has suggested that it is critically important to look at the impact of violence on learning, especially in regard to the area of literacy, as these learners are more likely to have experienced trauma or interruptions to their learning. She theorized that literacy learning may actually elicit memories of trauma and violence. As a result, she has stressed the likelihood that traumatic experiences may be a very present and very real part of a learner's journey. Similarly, Magro (2006-2007) has also worked to solidify the inseparable link between resettlement issues and language development for refugee populations and has postulated that ESL literacy instructors need to

approach instruction from a “broad definition of literacy that includes not only numeracy, problem solving, and the ability to read, write, and speak English, but also emotional and social literacies such as motivation, interpersonal effectiveness, critical thinking, and cultural awareness” (as cited in Benseman, 2012, para. 16).

Just as it has been recognized that the experiences of adult refugee learners are unique in nature and should not be entirely generalized alongside adult immigrant learners, there are also identifiable gender disparities within the adult refugee ESL literacy learner demographic. As a demographic themselves, women refugees remain the least likely to gain proficiency in either official Canadian language (Beiser & Hou, 2000). As this study will ultimately aim to gain a more thorough understanding of the experiences of non-literate and low-literate women refugees in LINC classes, it is necessary in this literature review to touch on the global status of women’s education.

### **Women and Literacy Education**

In the 2016 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics’ report on literacy, they found that of the hundreds of millions of adults worldwide who are illiterate, two-thirds of them are women (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2016). There are still 43 countries in the world, including countries like Syria, Sudan, Nepal and Pakistan, in which female literacy rates are significantly lower than male rates, which accounts for about one quarter of the world’s nations (Nussbaum, 2004). Although there are many definitions of what it means to be “literate”, literacy has been conceptualized in Canada as not only the ability to read, write, understand, and communicate through multiple modes in diverse contexts but also the ability to “achieve his or her goals, develop his or her knowledge and potential and participate fully in community and wider society” (Richmond, Robinson & Sachs-

Israel, 2008, p. 18). McCaffery, Merrifield and Millican (2007) have discussed various elements of the meaning of literacy, such as access to information, two-way communication, having skills as well as understanding a topic and a sense of critical awareness. Literacy has also been connected with self-sufficiency in the ability to gain meaningful employment, participate politically, access legal systems and to expand social circles and network with other women (Nussbaum, 2004). However, women continue to endure the most challenging roads to literacy as well as to second language learning, often because of resistance to women's education due to the varied socio-cultural norms, and traditional views of women's multiple roles that have typically excluded them from formal educational opportunities (Morrison & Jutting, 2005).

Not only do women face resistance from external societal structures but this resistance may in turn also skew a woman's own perception of the importance of her education and the role of education in her identity construction. Nussbaum (2004) has outlined some possible barriers that both girls and women may experience within themselves that may cause reluctance and resistance towards pursuing education. These barriers included unwillingness to voice the desire to gain an education, a lack of information that leads to a preference to remain "uneducated", a preference to not pursue education due to other inequalities in their lives, and the conclusion that education is not part of the life that they *should* wish to lead. As such, it would seem that a refugee woman who arrives in a LINC classroom in Canada may have in front of her the generalized barriers to education for non-traditional adult learners, as well as the unique challenges faced by refugees and through her presence in the classroom she may be challenging the dominant discourses felt within herself as well as in her socio-cultural context. For some, a LINC classroom may be their first experience of an educational setting and as facilitators, the hope would be that their experience is positive and that these learners feel supported in their

language learning journey as well as in their introduction to a formalized education system. As Warriner (2004) has stated, “The complicated experiences of individual women refugees, however, challenge stereotypical descriptions of the experiences of ‘second language learners,’ new ‘immigrants,’ and ‘refugees’ while illustrating the importance of analyzing the role gender plays in the processes of SLL [Second Language Learning], refugee resettlement, and the social construction of identity” (p.280).

### **Identifying the Gaps**

Through a review of the literature it becomes evident that the field of adult ESL literacy is dynamic in that it has roots in several different discourses and fields. What also becomes evident is the lack of research and policy in the field; however, it is a gap that has been both identified and discussed by organizational bodies as well as by researchers and professionals working with adult ESL literacy learners. As these learners exist in a grey area created in part by a disconnect between adult literacy and second language learning, their learning journeys are likely to be more complex and as such they may benefit from specialized programs and instruction. However, it has been expressed by instructors in the field that they often feel under qualified, under resourced, and unprepared to adequately attend to the unique needs of this demographic, which may mean that these learners are being underserved (Folinsbee, 2007).

Many of these shortcomings emanate from a lack of research in the field and a lack of understanding of the target population. An even more unrecognized population within the adult ESL literacy demographic is the population of non-literate or low-literate refugee women who may find themselves in LINC classes upon arrival in Canada. Women themselves may encounter the generalized barriers that non-traditional adult learners encounter as well as barriers unique to both the refugee learner and the woman learner. As such, it is integral to understand that a

woman who arrives in a LINC classroom in Canada, despite forces that may be working against her, may be experiencing both internal and external obstacles that are not being understood or acknowledged by instructors.

As instructors, we then have to ask ourselves how well equipped we are to help facilitate this learner's journey to the best of our abilities when resources, information, and support in the area are few and far between. With this in consideration, through this study I hope to add to an ongoing body of literature that is working to bridge that gap between what we know and what we do not know about these learners. In listening to and documenting the specific experiences of women within this group, I will work to further the exploration of this demographic and to hopefully not only foster a further understanding but to offer insight in terms of learning strategies, coping mechanisms, methods of support for both the learner and the instructor and to provide the women a platform with which to foster an encouraging and more informed environment for themselves and others.

### **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

Before entering into the complex and bewildering realm of research and choosing a research method, I had never taken the time to consider, in-depth, the ways in which I see the world and how that has impacted and continues to impact my beliefs and opinions. Once I stepped foot into the role of novice researcher, I was bombarded by terms such as ontology, epistemology, and theoretical orientation and for a while felt as though I was lost in a rabbit hole, trying to orient myself in this disorienting new space. However, as I continued to explore research methods and methodology, the importance of understanding how you approach your research and how that impacts what guides and shapes it, became evident. As Creswell (2014) has stated, “this [theoretical] lens becomes a transformative perspective that shapes the types of questions asked, informs how data are collected and analyzed and provides a call for action or change” (p. 64). As such, in this chapter I navigate through my own ontological and epistemological positioning and how it influenced my approach to the study. That is followed by a discussion on my decision to use a qualitative approach with a methodology of narrative inquiry and the chapter will then conclude with an outline of my chosen research design as well as some additional and ethical considerations.

#### **Theoretical Framework/World View**

When I was six my family and I moved from Corner Brook, Newfoundland to Navan, Ireland and we lived there until I was 12. During that time, I grew up like a middle class Irish kid. I learned Gaelic, owned horses, watched Irish television shows and listened to Irish boybands. I lived beside a castle, played in rolling fields dotted with ancient ruins and I attended a three-roomed protestant elementary school located on what can only be described as a patch of lawn with a concrete slab for recreational activities. Although I never fully adopted the very

distinguishable Navan accent, I still sounded foreign to people when we moved back to Canada, and what a shocking experience that was – although by nationality I was Canadian. We moved from Navan to Bathurst, New Brunswick and I entered middle school sounding different, having learned different things, and having had a vastly different childhood than many of my new peers.

As a new researcher trying to position myself within the role, the experience of living abroad and coming “home” was very important to re-examine as it played a huge role in the ways in which I interpret and approach the world. My learning and my identity are very much embedded in my experiences, which have been and continue to be shaped by the social and cultural contexts I find myself in. In acknowledging this I can informatively say that the ways in which I conduct myself personally and professionally, and my thoughts on learning, are predominantly guided by the belief that learning is an ongoing process that is rooted in experiences and in actively seeking to understand those experiences (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007).

As Creswell (2014) has discussed, constructivists believe that individuals make meaning through interacting with others and their environments and that meaning is influenced by various cultural and historical norms. Some constructivist assumptions would be that meaning is always generated socially through interactions with other people; people make sense of their worlds through their own historical and cultural perspectives; these perspectives determine their engagement with their worlds and that meaning continues to be constructed through this engagement (Crotty, 1998). In acknowledging this and considering my own views on how reality is shaped, I would place myself on a constructivist spectrum in that I acknowledge that learning is a process through which individuals construct meaning through their experiences and that I also believe that knowledge is constructed socially through interactions.



### **Research Orientation: Choosing a Qualitative Approach**

I have always held a great interest in people's experiences and in learning about different cultures. In my early days of teaching in the ALP I felt there was a disconnect between myself and the students that went beyond a language barrier. I knew nothing about their pasts, where they had come from or what they had experienced. In essence, I did not understand them and for me an integral part of teaching is understanding who I am teaching. When I began asking questions about their experiences as a group and as individuals, I not only learned volumes and was able to apply what I learned to lesson plans but I also saw a significant rise in their engagement and participation as well.

As a constructivist-oriented researcher, I took into thorough consideration how the experiences of the participants had been shaped by social, cultural, and historical factors. In doing so, I learned that there were multiple and varying meanings derived from their experiences and that my role was to work with the complexity of their stories as opposed to examining them through a narrow lens (Creswell, 2014). As my aim was to try and understand participant experiences in a holistic way as opposed to a quantifiable way, I understood that this study was definitely going to take me in a more subjective, exploratory, and interactive direction where I would be looking for rich, narrative descriptions to influence and guide the research. Additionally, taking into further consideration that constructivism is more typically seen as an approach to qualitative research (Creswell, 2014), it seemed without question that a qualitative approach would be more fitting than a quantitative approach for this study.

Approaching this study as a qualitative researcher allowed me the means to explore the experiences of my participants while positioning myself within the research as an active and involved participant (Creswell, 2014) as opposed to solely remaining an objective observer. As

my own experience working with students who are part of the target demographic was one of the major catalysts in pursuing research in this area, it was important to be able to act as both researcher and participant and to have the means to ensure that I checked my assumptions, interpretations and behavior throughout. A qualitative approach also enabled me to focus on the multiple meanings that participants themselves held regarding the study topic and to obtain rich and authentic descriptions of their experiences (Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). As Denzin and Lincoln (2005) have discussed, a qualitative research design allows for interpretation and endless creativity which may be beneficial factors when working to gain a more complete understanding of a seemingly little-known demographic.

### **Research Methodology: Narrative Inquiry**

Lawrence and Paige (2016) have suggested that telling our stories is one way in which we make sense of our own experiences. They describe storytelling as a holistic process, furthering that through storytelling we engage our minds along with our hearts, bodies and spirits. I have always been a firm believer in the power of stories and personally feel that some of the most valuable learning that I have done has been through listening to people talk about their own experiences. The one subject I connected with and committed to throughout my years at school was English as I felt there was a creative and interpretive freedom there that many other subjects did not allow for. I also thought there was an authenticity there that moved beyond the preoccupation with simply obtaining information while neglecting the importance of understanding expression (Sandelowski, 1991).

In considering the nature and design of the study as well as my own values and beliefs, I landed on narrative inquiry as my research methodology. Although the act of narrative inquiry is an old practice, as a field itself it is fairly new and still developing (Clandinin, Pusher & Orr,

2007). Clandinin and Connelly coined the term “narrative inquiry” in 1990, establishing the importance and legitimacy of it as a methodology, with their interests falling primarily on how people live their lives or, in short, on lived experiences (Clandinin et al., 2007). They were guided by a Deweyan view that life itself is education and that the art of narrative inquiry “begins in experience as expressed in lived and told stories” (Clandinin et al., 2007; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 4). With the purpose of the study being to explore the experiences of low-literacy refugee women in LINC programs in Calgary, a narrative inquiry methodology allowed for a more immersive, collaborative process where the individual as well as the social, cultural and institutional dimensions that shape individual experiences were examined authentically and deeply (Clandinin, 2006).

To embark on a narrative research journey is to first understand that the territory you will be entering is an interactive and interpretive space that bridges trans-cultural, trans-historical and international boundaries of being and knowing (Sandelowski, 1991). As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) have also discussed, to enter into the realm of narrative inquiry is to enter into a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space consisting of temporality, sociality and place. Temporality being the act of understanding that people have a past, present and a future and that they should be studied as always in transition. Sociality is being concerned with personal conditions like feelings, moral dispositions and hopes as well as social conditions like environment, and other integral factors and forces that shape an individual’s experience. Finally place refers to the physical location or sequence of locations where events have occurred and where the inquiry will take place (Clandinin et al., 2007). As such, I focused on these three commonplaces of narrative inquiry throughout the research process. While other forms of qualitative inquiry might also incorporate one or more of these aspects, what sets narrative inquiry apart is that all three are

explored simultaneously (Clandinin et al., 2007).

In choosing to pursue narrative inquiry I understood that it was important to acknowledge that the process is not as simple as just telling and listening to stories. It is a complex process that involves building relationships and developing trust between researcher and participants and in order to honor this I made every effort to immerse myself in the participant narratives and to offer my own stories when appropriate as opposed to simply listening from a distant and dissociated position (Clandinin et al., 2007). I began the process thinking narratively and continued to think narratively throughout (Clandinin et al., 2007). I worked to focus on the “so what” and “who cares” elements of the research and to justify why the study is important. The participant narratives were not viewed as entertaining or frivolous sources of information but were treated as legitimate, valid and important sources of knowledge and throughout the process I adhered to the fact that narrative inquiry follows a range of complex ethical guidelines. As participants trusted me with their stories, I worked diligently to accurately represent each individual. I had to ensure that I did not distort or twist individual narratives or take them out of context to better fit my expectations and that I did not lose their voices in the process. Respect, mutuality and openness to the diversity of voices and experiences were of the utmost importance and the process was one of negotiation between researcher and participants when it came down to what was going to be told (Clandinin, 2006). As King (2003) aptly postulated, once a story is told, it cannot be untold, so as a researcher working with narrative inquiry, it was integral that I worked to accurately represent and preserve the voices of those who were kind enough to lend me their stories.

## Research Design and Data Collection

**The participants.** As I set out to work with a specific demographic - low-literacy women refugees aged 30 and over who are actively enrolled in LINC classes - my participants came from purposive sampling and I aimed to recruit four to six women. In the end, I recruited seven women. Five of which were currently engaged in classes, one who was in the process of enrolling in a different institution and one who was not currently in classes due to circumstantial changes but who had encouraged several other women to enroll and had supported them throughout the process.

During recruitment, I took into consideration the likelihood that my desired participants would not be wholly proficient in English, whether it was speaking, writing or reading, so in order to efficiently and ethically find participants I had to consider different methods. In order to do so, I thought back to the roots of the project and realized that I knew of some women who were taking classes and assumed that they might know other women who would be interested in taking part. Additionally, I had established connections with women through their participation in programs I had been part of facilitating at WINS. Due to the unique nature of the project, I took the fact that I already had a pool of potential candidates into consideration and decided to use a word-of-mouth recruitment method where, when I obtained permission from WINS, I contacted past clients to determine whether they had any interest in participating in the study and to see whether they would be willing to pass my information along to other women in their classes and I reached out to the other women that I knew of. In doing so, instead of having participants from just one LINC class, I was able to recruit participants from several different agencies and institutions throughout the city which in a way gave me a broader scope to work with.

**Interviews.** To collect my data I used a semi-structured interview protocol. I made this decision using the rationale that as opposed to a structured or unstructured approach, semi-structured interviews allowed for freedom of deviation and provided better opportunity for rich conversation. My questions were designed to be open-ended and I intended to initiate and guide conversation as opposed to strictly sequester it. Semi-structured interviews provided the kind of flexible atmosphere that was needed for asking these open-ended questions and as Fylan (2005) has suggested, they are well suited for exploring more multifaceted research questions. While I did have those interview questions and a direction in mind, I also had to honor the requirements of a narrative study as I used a methodology of narrative inquiry. In doing so, I acknowledged narrative as a method as well, drawing the narratives from the interviews themselves. To collect the data, I used the voice memo device on my phone to audiotape each interview and transcribed them using smooth verbatim transcription. This was done in order to preserve the authenticity and essence of each narrative. I took little to no notes during the interviews and positioned myself as an active listener and participant as opposed to simply an interviewer. After each interview, before I listened to the recordings, I took a few minutes to descriptively note aspects of the interview that had stood out to me such as individual participant qualities, atmospheric quirks, body language and connective themes.

I conducted two rounds of inquiry with each participant in order to gather as much information as possible. Both the first and second rounds of inquiry consisted of individual interviews. I anticipated that the first round of interviews would last approximately 30 minutes to one hour – which they did for the most part. The second round was a follow-up interview intended to give the participants the chance to expand on or retract previous statements and to further explore their perspectives. For the second round the questions were derived from the

analysis of the first round of interviews and took up to 30 minutes per participant. The questions went accordingly:

- 1) What/who inspires you
- 2) What are your strengths?
- 3) Why do you keep going to class?
- 4) What helps you feel successful in class?
- 5) What are your short and long-term goals?
- 6) If you need help with school work, who do you go to for help?

I member checked with the participants throughout the process and during both rounds I gave them the option to listen to their transcriptions, and suggest any alterations (Hendricks, 2016). They then had two weeks to contact me after their interviews to let me know whether they wanted to make any changes. As per the consent form, I worked to ensure that each participant was aware that they could withdraw from the study at any point and that any information collected prior to their withdrawal would be removed from the study immediately.

**Researcher notes.** Tierney and Lincoln (1997) raised the issue of checking and balancing cultural baggage during narrative processes. To check this baggage is not to disregard it, or deny it, but instead, one aspect of negotiating voice is to acknowledge and make clear any biases or preconceptions that you have before entering into the field (Hendricks, 2016).

Engaging in this reflective process and referring back to these biases can aid in keeping track of thoughts that may prevent the researcher from seeing beyond their own beliefs and, can also enable them to realize places where the bigger picture may be being overshadowed by these notions (Hendricks, 2016). With this in consideration and in an effort to capture the different dimensions of each narrative, as I mentioned previously, I kept notes that I recorded after each

interview, to document feelings, emotions, and specific details that arose during the research and interview processes. I used these notes to reflect on the process as a whole as well as to keep track of and address my own assumptions and preconceived notions that surfaced throughout the process. This was done in an attempt to keep my own biases or hopes from influencing the direction of the study (Hendricks, 2016). These notes were used in addition to the data from the interviews to corroborate the narrative analyses and findings (Hendricks, 2016).

**Data analysis.** Due to the nature of qualitative research and narrative inquiry as a qualitative methodology, analysis was an ongoing process that coincided with the data collection process and the final writing of the report (Creswell, 2014). After all of the individual interviews had been transcribed, they were thoroughly coded using thematic analysis to interpret and identify emergent themes and patterns. As my data was wholly collected from the two rounds of individual interviews, as well as researcher notes, these sources were merged during the thematic analysis. Once the data had been categorized, I used the themes to conceptualize and weave participant stories into a broader, more complete narrative. As Creswell (2014) has stated: “...narrative research employs re-storying the participant’ stories using structural devices, such as plot, setting, activities, climax and denouement.” (p. 196). Participant quotations were used throughout as guiding voices and evidence as were my own interpretations.

**The process.** Following each individual first-round interview a separate file was opened for the participant, using the chosen pseudonym as an identifier. Each interview was then transcribed using Microsoft Word. During the first round, before each interview formally began I spoke with each participant to gather background information that was not directly related to the interview questions but that would enable me to create more descriptive participant profiles. Once all of the first-round interviews were complete, I did a preliminary thematic analysis of the



data to identify any predominant, emerging patterns that could be used to create the questions for the second round of interviews. However, during both sets of interviews I noted recurrent, important or connective information as I encountered it in order to ensure a more solid foundation from which to analyze the data as a whole.

The second round of interviews followed the same process as the first. Once each interview was completed, it was then transcribed and saved to each participant's individual file. Once both rounds were complete and participants had indicated that they were satisfied with the transcriptions I began to thematically analyze the transcripts as a whole. In order to do so, I created a document that used each interview question as a heading and I began to pull the relevant quotations and compelling data from each participant's transcriptions. I used the Copy and Paste function on Microsoft word to do this and color coded each participant. The original transcripts remained unchanged to preserve the original information. Once I had a more holistic and integrative script to work with, I began to identify the themes and recorded them in a separate document, once again moving the applicable participant quotations under the coinciding themes using the cut and paste function. The quotes remained color coded based on the participant they belonged to. Once this organizational process was complete and the themes were finalized the data was interwoven and amalgamated into a thematically guided all-encompassing narrative. The process itself began more inductively as data was continuously emerging but became increasingly more of a deductive process the deeper into the analysis I got. Viewing the data through a deductive lens enabled me to better determine where additional information and more supporting evidence was needed (Creswell, 2014).

During the thematic analysis and I used the background information that I had collected on each participant before each interview began and my own anecdotal notes that I had compiled

throughout the interviewing process to begin the separate process of creating narrative portraits for each individual. As this was a narrative study, I felt as though it was important to introduce the participants in detail, describing not only their backgrounds but trying capture their personalities as well. Having been the one to speak with them, I knew them on a different level than a reader would and I wanted to try to emulate their unique quirks and characteristics in a way that would allow the reader to relate each participant to their individual narratives as well as to relate to the participants on a personal level. As so much of the narrative process revolves around rich descriptions, I wanted the participant profiles, that are portrayed in Chapter Four, to respect this integral narrative element.

### **Reliability and Validity**

In using stories for research purposes, questions of reliability and validity arose as did questions of how to differentiate between fact or fiction. From examining the literature, the consensus appeared to be that in the case of narrative research, as with other qualitative research methods, from the beginning there is a recognition of the fact that participants may embellish or construct stories in their favour, or alternatively, omit experiences that may portray them unfavourably (Bell, 2002). However, the narrator's or participants' told experience often takes precedence over the traditional constructs of validity. As Clandinin et al. (2007) have suggested, as narrative inquirers our immediate focus should be on the telling and receiving of the experience and on being within that experience as opposed to trying to immediately see beyond what is being told. Sandelowski (1991) has differentiated between formal scientific truth and narrative truth in that the emphasis, when looking at narrative truth, is in the intelligibility, plausibility and consistency of the story - in the ability of the narrator to make coherent sense of the experience.

I endeavored to keep these principles at the forefront during both the interviews and the analysis. In doing so I acknowledged that when researching narratively it has to be taken into account that behind the stories that are being told exists both lives lived and lived experiences and as a result, what we receive is an amalgamation of what actually happened along with the feelings, emotions, thoughts and meanings made that came from the experience (Sandelowski, 1999). To engage in narrative research then, as a form of interpretive qualitative research, is to accept that it will not conform to standard scientific criteria for validity and reliability (Denzin, 2009). However, I was still obligated to defend and justify the importance of the study using alternative measures such as member checking, triangulation, recording and including researcher notes into the process and using theory to guide the study (Hendricks, 2016). These strategies were not only an obligation but a priority while working to maintain the credibility and validity of the study. A statement that beautifully tied together the concept of searching for a different kind of truth in qualitative research for me, was in Denzin's (2009) mention of Madison's (2005) thoughts on critical ethnographers where he stated that: "Few critical ethnographers (Madison, 2005) think in a language of evidence, they think instead about experience, emotions, events, processes, performances, narratives, poetics, the politics of possibility" (p. 142).

### **Ethical Considerations and Anticipated Obstacles**

The fact that my study involved a demographic of people who are marginalized in multiple ways, being low-literate women who were not entirely proficient in English and who were members of ethnic minorities, I had several important ethical considerations to make. As I anticipated working with a diverse population, I had to make myself aware of the various religious and socio-cultural differences that needed to be respected and considered in order for participants to feel comfortable and safe during the study (Creswell, 2014). Due to the possibility

that some participants may have had specific stipulations or traditional norms to adhere to, I asked them, individually, to choose the sites where the interviews were conducted.

Although I intended to recruit participants that had a basic working knowledge of conversational English, I still had to be extremely aware that there were going to be instances where I would encounter language barriers as well as cultural barriers. With this in mind, I took precautions to ensure that all aspects of the project and process were communicated clearly, and I made a conscious effort to use straightforward, audience appropriate language to prevent miscommunication, deception or exploitation (Creswell, 2014). This was a particularly important consideration in both creating and getting participants to sign consent forms. I composed the consent forms in the plainest English possible and read over each aspect of the form carefully with each participant to make sure they fully understood and agreed to what they are signing. Potential power imbalances were kept in mind as well and mediated to the best of my abilities (Creswell, 2014). The imperative nature of building trusting relationships and establishing a high degree of mutuality throughout the narrative inquiry process became very clear to me while pursuing this direction of study. Furthermore, because I was undertaking the sensitive job of handling and re-telling participant's stories, maintaining an equal partnership was an intrinsic element of the study.

As I was working alongside people and conducting interviews and because a high degree of interactivity was required for the study to progress, I prepared myself for the possibility of encountering various issues along the way. I considered that people may divulge or simply talk a lot less than I had previously anticipated them to, which would give me less data to work with when compiling the narratives. I worked to address this with the two rounds of inquiry as opposed to one as I figured that participants may be more subdued during the first interview and

more open during the second once their confidence and familiarity with the process and myself had grown. On the other hand, I had to anticipate that participants might also have the tendency to digress for extended periods of time. To address this, I arrived at the interviews prepared to use cues and specific dialogue to hopefully guide them back to the interview questions. Another important factor that I had to anticipate was the possibility that it could be more difficult than expected to find people that fit my very specific demographic. This was an obstacle that I actually did encounter which is another reason why I decided to pursue the word-of-mouth recruitment method.

As Creswell (2014) has noted, an important aspect of qualitative research is the concept of reflexivity wherein part of the researcher's role is to reflect upon their role along with their own biases, baggage and personal background and the effects that these elements will have on the study. This is done in an effort to both prevent biases from influencing the study and to recognize the ways in which these elements will influence the researcher's interpretations of the data. With this being a narrative study, I understood that my voice was to coincide with voices of the participants in order to weave an inclusive narrative. With reflexivity being the act of reflecting upon my role as researcher and my personal background and interpretations, in a way the act itself was as a source of data for the study. I tried to include my voice in a way that would emphasize my thought processes and some of my more prominent experiences, hopefully lending transparency to my methods of interpretation. Aside from this, frequently referring to my notes grounded me in the sense that it reminded me how I had felt at particular moments, enabling me to recognize how emotions or thoughts could potentially influence the way in which I approached pieces of data. As I had known some participants previously, my notes and the act of reflection kept me from assuming that I already *knew* the participants which enabled me to

catch myself in the act of anticipating what they may share with me. As I came to learn from having the opportunity to listen intently to what they had to say during the interviews, I had only known them on a very basic level before. My previous experience teaching ESL literacy students was another aspect of my personal background that I had to keep in check as I was so eager to hear participants' opinions on what could be improved in the classroom that I occasionally found myself listening from an instructor's perspective as opposed to a researcher's perspective which narrowed my focal point. Again, as I noticed these tendencies, recording them and doing routine mental checks and balances enabled me to be more watchful of my own inclinations.

An interesting occurrence that I noticed during the interview process was my tendency to feel almost diminutive in the presence of my participants. This is not to say that I was scared of them or that I even felt intimidated by them - as that was not the case – but that my own experiences were dwarfed by their vastly different, colorful and sometimes turbulent pasts and presents. With this in mind, I had to remember to keep my admiration in check in order to provide an analysis that was not solely based upon these feelings so that I could maintain a level of objectivity and professionalism. In conjunction with this sense of smallness was perhaps the fact that some participants had a tendency to “mother” me by scolding me for walking into their homes without a coat on in the winter or for looking tired as the assumption was that I was not getting enough sleep. Additionally, they provided me with snacks and beverages - which I believe was more of a cultural practice and it was always appreciated. This experience in its entirety was both a delightful and puzzling one to have had as a novice researcher.

## **Summary**

Throughout this chapter I hoped to provide a thorough guide that detailed my rationale to approach the study from a qualitative perspective using a methodology of narrative inquiry. In order to better position myself within this decision, I began with an explanation of the ways in which I view the world and how those views influenced how I approached the study as a novice researcher. I then moved into an explanation of the theoretical foundations that framed the exploration and followed that with a step-by-step description of the routes taken to find participants and to gather and record the data as well as a discussion on the anticipated obstacles that I may have met along the way. In Chapter Four I introduce each participant with a participant profile and transition into outlining in detail the process of analyzing and organizing the findings and in Chapter Five I provide a concluding discussion on the results.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS**

The process of recruitment through to interviewing participants was a revelatory experience in both patience and realizing the often more subtle cultural differences between the participants and myself. All of the participants in the study were women who I had met through work, through teaching classes, through facilitating various community programs and through friend of friend connections. While I had established previous connections, and working relationships with the majority of them, I had not seen any in quite some time and was hesitant to contact the ones I knew as I knew that they led very busy lives. Despite this, I proceeded to contact them as I was extremely interested to hear their stories and their opinions and to converse with them on a different and perhaps more substantive level. My persistence to interrupt their lives was also due in large part to the fact that they had, individually, played significant roles in the inspiration behind the pursuit of this topic. In contacting them I realized that they were all still leading hectic lives but that they were all willing to speak with me. Whether this was because they actually felt like sharing their stories with me or they felt like reciprocating – I did not ask – I was just grateful that they had agreed to meet with me. However, even in my early attempts to contact and set up interviews with many of them I ran into obstacles like disconnected phones, unanswered calls, and voicemails left in limbo. On several occasions, I called a participant and left a voicemail and got a call back a week later – not because they had listened to my very detailed message but because they had seen that they had missed a call from that number.

My own cultural preconceptions driven by a very fastidious North American grasp on time led me to believe that my phone calls would be answered promptly, that voicemails would be listened to, that meeting times would be upheld, schedules would be kept and deadlines would



be met. This illusion was relentlessly and repeatedly shattered throughout the entire process. Although my participants spanned the globe from South Sudan to Pakistan to Bhutan they all shared a very loosely perceived concept of time that was admirable, elating, and frustrating all at once. This became blatantly obvious when I had driven across the city to arrive at a participant's house at a time dictated by them only to knock on their door – several times – to no avail. I got back in my car, wondering if I had gotten the times wrong, realized I had not and then proceeded to call the participant and leave a message. I drove away fairly dejected only to receive a phone call several hours later from her explaining that she had been asleep and was wondering why I had not called. I explained that I had in fact called several times AND left a message and her response was something to the effect of “Oh, I didn't listen to my messages... Can you come back at 3 pm?” I did go back at 3 pm and had a fantastically informative conversation with her and left realizing that the experience as a whole was extremely enriching as well as eye-opening. I stopped leaving voicemails after that day.

From those missed appointments to children eating my interview question sheets, to homes filled with family members, wonderful aromas, phone calls answered mid interview, televisions blaring and unexpected guests, I could not have asked for a more authentic experience. Many of the interviews were conducted in the homes of participants – at their request - during their very limited moments of free time. This gave me the opportunity to not only speak with them about their experiences but to, for a brief time, immerse myself in their daily routines. Clandinin (2016) has described the concept of building narrative relationships with participants as living in the midst where, as a researcher, you are in the midst of your own life and routine and when interviewing participants, you insert yourself into the midst of theirs. Being allowed the opportunity to experience these glimpses of my participants' lives added a depth to my own

understanding of their narratives as I not only learned about them through their stories but through the many social, cultural and familial narratives that played out around us in their homes.

As Bell (2013) has stated, the impact of a learner's prior educational background on their current learning pursuits is significant and as such the main purpose of the study was to not only illuminate a small sample of who is participating in LINC classes in Calgary but also to discover their motivations to do so. With this in mind, through the interviews, I attempted to focus on understanding factors that may affect motivation such as participants' personal experiences with education, how factors like age, health, personality, and learning style played a role in their learning journeys and how their life experiences shaped who they were in and out of the classroom. However, what I came to realize was that working to understand what motivates a learner comes hand in hand with learning about who that learner is as not only a student, but as a whole person. This notion is reflected in what has been described as a whole language approach to teaching adults ESL. This approach is one in which, as educators, we learn to acknowledge the multiple roles that students play outside of the classroom and their importance within the classroom (Bell, 2013). In this chapter I hope to introduce each participant in an individual light, highlighting their unique experiences through their participant profiles and then to later contrast each participant's story through my thematic analysis. In doing so my aim is to provide a more thorough representation of the person behind the student and their motivations behind the pursuit to engage in and continue on with their various LINC and ESL programs in their quest to improve their English as well as to attain and improve upon their literacy skills.

## Participant Profiles

**Participant A.** When asked where a convenient meeting spot would be, Participant A had suggested the Genesis Center in the Northeast part of the city. I had never been there before and was quite pleased to walk into the lively recreational area. There were children and adults from an array of ethnic backgrounds running around and socializing and a steady hum of voices and laughter. As I did not see Participant A in the vicinity, I took a seat outside of the library doors and spent a moment taking it all in. It was my first interview so I was filled with a mixture of excitement and nerves. After a few minutes of waiting, I began to worry that I had mistaken the meeting spot but soon after I saw her striding confidently towards me, laughing and gesturing as if to say, “What are you doing?” She is a tall woman with striking features and a very calming, relaxed presence and almost immediately upon seeing her again, my nerves dissipated and we fell into friendly conversation as we walked over to one of the small tables along the side of the main entrance where it was quiet enough to talk.

I had met Participant A a few years prior through my work and had kept in contact with her. She is a single mother of five from South Sudan who arrived in Canada in 2006 as a refugee. She is “maybe 34” years old as she described it to me explaining that she did not really know when her birthday was and her birth year is estimated. Her children range in age from infant to teenager and she is a very proud and hardworking mother. Before arriving in Canada, she had had no prior formal educational experiences and she explained that while she was growing up, in her culture, educating males was prioritized over a female’s education: “Back home, in my culture, the girls can’t go to school only the boys. And girls they have to do housework and no school for girls. It is difficult. And now in Canada they don’t say the woman can stay home and cook - everybody the same.” Already having worked for most of her life her priority after

arriving in Calgary was to find a job to support her family and she had been working up until fairly recently when a friend had convinced her to take English classes. Due to having lived and worked in Canada for a few years, her verbal English is quite good – despite her many comments insisting that it is not. She is currently attending Bow Valley College and is in LINC level 4. She is serious about her studies and mentioned that she has been frustrated with other students in the class who do not seem to have the same drive and often act “like the kid.” Her current goal is to find a class that is filled with people who want to learn English and not with people who want to speak above the teacher in their own languages.

**Participant B.** When I arrived at Participant B’s house one extremely snowy day, she opened the door and hustled me in with a warm invitation and a motherly scolding about being out in the cold. Participant B had been someone I had thought of from the early stages of the project’s conception due to a conversation we had one day while she was visiting with me in my office. She had been telling me about some of the marks she had been getting in her classes at Bow Valley College and her exuberance and dedication to her studies had stayed with me. She had told me that she was excited to be attending school and that she was finally able to do something for herself – something that she had wanted to do for a long time.

When I finally got in touch with her to inquire about an interview, I was delighted to hear that she had not lost that exuberance and throughout the interview she spoke with an infectious energy that filled the room and her words radiated with pride. Participant B is a 43-year-old woman from Pakistan who arrived in Canada in 2012 with 4 children in tow. She and her family had fled Pakistan in 2006 due to religious persecution that had led to the capture of her husband by the police. They first sought asylum in Sri Lanka where they lived for a few years. A couple of months before she and her family were set to arrive in Canada, her husband

passed away and she arrived in Calgary alone, in the winter, with her children and had to rely on her nine-year-old son's English to get around: "I have no English and weather cold and I don't know the places but my son he was I think nine years old and he had English classes in Sri Lanka and Pakistan but he helped me lot. Everywhere, he going with me in the bank and to pay the bill and rent. I didn't know how to use a PIN like my card's pin – no I didn't know – he knows."

Prior to her arrival, Participant B had only attended school for about six months as a child before she stopped. She had quit when her older sister had quit as she was a shy child who had been afraid of the other children as well as the teachers who she had seen beat students with large sticks. Although she can speak both Urdu and Punjabi fluently, due to leaving school at such a young age, she never learned how to read and write in either language – making it as far as some letters of the Urdu alphabet and some nursery rhymes. However, her desire to learn never ceased to grow and she has always had academic aspirations, she just thought that she had waited too long to pursue them: "When I was younger - that time - I was scared but after that when the time is gone I was *really* – I *all the time* I wish I had gone to school – but I was shy. When I'm little bit older and how can I go with the small children [...] All the time I wish if I had have studied – if I had a chance in Pakistan I had a goal that if I finish my study I was a doctor and if not doctor then a mechanic."

Three months after arriving in Canada, Participant B began full time LINC classes at Bow Valley College and has now completed ten semesters there. She began at level zero in a LINC literacy class, has since worked her way up to an academic level of ESL and now volunteers with the college in their lower level classes to help others who are starting where she once sat. Her outlook on life and learning is largely influenced by her spirituality as she is a devout Muslim who believes that she is on the right path for herself, her family and her God.

**Participant C.** My fondest and most vivid memory from my interviews with Participant C was the sight of her school books laid neatly on her bed, opened to the pages where she had been working on writing different and increasingly more difficult words. She showed me the meticulous display while flipping through the book explaining what she had been doing in class. I was given this very wonderful opportunity when she invited me down into her living space which was also her place of worship. Her living room contained only one couch and a table and, in her bedroom, there was a single bed, a small temple with home-made quilts laid on the ground on which to sit and to worship and the walls were decorated with colorful posters depicting different Hindu gods and goddesses. I discovered, during the second interview, that in her culture, Participant C is known as a living goddess and that she is believed to have powers similar to that of a psychic and spiritual healer. At the age of 13 she experienced what was described to me as a series of convulsions and later when she was 16 she was required to leave her home and live a solitary life for six months during which she fasted for 45 days. She is highly respected by others in her culture and people travel from all over Alberta to seek her help and guidance. Due to her unique circumstance, she is required to abstain from meat, alcohol, other recreational/illegal substances and cannot get married or have children. While I was there she offered to read my palms and with the help of the translator we figured out my future. There were some precarious predictions, but I was assured, at the end, that I would live a long, productive life.

I was introduced to both Participant C and D through some of my previous students who are all part of the Bhutanese community here in Calgary. Both women were part of the wave of Hindu, Nepali speaking Bhutanese who were removed from Bhutan during an ethnic cleansing that began in the early 1990s and saw over 108,000 people expelled into seven refugee camps in

Nepal (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2016). Participant C resided in one of these camps until 2013 when she and some of her family members were resettled in Calgary and she now lives with Participant D and her family. I arrived at the house with the daughter of one of my students as she had been the one to connect us. She had been eager to come and help me translate should we hit a language barrier. We were invited to sit in the living room amongst the hustle and bustle of family members going about their daily routines. When Participant C entered the room from her apartment downstairs, I noticed that she moved quite slowly and would later find out that she suffers from severe arthritis pain in her back and knees. However, from the introduction through both rounds of interviews, she struck me as a very stoic woman, with a calm demeanor and a great sense of humour that outshone her visible discomfort. It also became clear, quite quickly, that she is an avid story teller with much to say.

When I first asked Participant C her age, she told me she was 24. I must have looked and sounded as astounded as the translator because Participant C and D both began to laugh. She then thought for a moment and corrected herself – she is 54. She grew up alongside 11 brothers and sisters in rural Bhutan. The only children in her family to ever attend school were two of her brothers who only attended for brief periods of time. She had never been to school before arriving in Canada, although she expressed that she had wanted to go even as a child: “We were a big family, no time, we were everyone working, every time working but no time so no school. I like school but no time.” She began taking classes four months into her arrival and has been attending steadily since. She has attended classes at both Bow Valley College and the Genesis Center – where she now attends Monday to Thursday mornings.

It was clear that much of Participant C’s life is dictated by the pain caused by her arthritis and that it has been wearing on her mentally as of late. She expressed feelings of frustration and

disappointment in her body and how she often feels older than she is. Her mobility issues have posed problems in the past with making it to class, however she was lucky enough to have a teacher who recognized the difficulties she was having and who helped her find classes closer to home. This is how Participant C moved from Bow Valley College, which was a significant expedition to get to from her home, to the Genesis Center where she is only a ten-minute bus ride away. This change has also allowed her more opportunities to participate in recreational activities - as the Genesis center has both a gym and a pool, as she excitedly explained – and for socialization: “Gym this way, swimming this way, school this way! School free, no pay, no pay [...] Now everywhere moving, walking and this seeing friend, they talking English, they’re coming. It’s good!”

**Participant D.** What immediately struck me about Participant D was her blatant honesty, her boisterousness and her “no nonsense” attitude. During Participant C’s interview Participant D sat on a kitchen chair beside her and listened intently, often laughing with us. During Participant C’s interview, I was sitting on a cushion on the floor while she sat in a kitchen chair as well, however when I turned to face Participant D to begin her interview she simply said “No” with a defiant look in her eyes. Initially I was confused – I thought that she no longer wanted to do the interview but then she smiled, gestured at me and pointed to a chair. She said something to the translator in Nepali and the translator explained to me that she wanted to be “eye-to-eye” with me while we were speaking as this was a sign of equality and respect. I was struck by this gesture and as I hastened up to accept the chair she had offered me, everybody in the room laughed at my obviously flushed face. I remembered this for the second interview!

At 62 years old, Participant D was the oldest woman that I interviewed and I was eager to hear her point of view. Aside from being a student, Participant D is a mother, a grandmother and



a widow. She arrived in Canada in 2011 and began taking classes shortly after. However, her reason behind taking classes stood out to me as she straight forwardly explained that if she did not take classes, she would receive no money from the government: “No go school, no government pay me. I go to school, give me money a little bit. I every time go school, every day.” She had never attended school before her arrival and it was not just because she had little access but because she had never had an interest. In Bhutan she had been a farmer and a home-maker and school had been unnecessary. Although she had spent 19 years in a refugee camp in Nepal prior to her arrival in Canada, it still seemed much more like home than a wintry Calgary initially presented itself to be. During the first few months after her arrival, she had badly wanted to return home. The country was unfamiliar (and cold), people spoke a language that she did not understand and she began to realize how necessary school was going to be here, not only monetarily but in terms of being able to cultivate a sense of belonging and comfort.

As she began to learn some English, her transition became marginally less daunting and she began to enjoy life in Calgary – however she still does not enjoy winter and has continued to view the benefits and purpose of school in a practical light: “No English, no friend. No English, not working. Not give job. I have English, I get job. I working, I have money. Not working, no money.” She attends classes part time and would attend them less if she could. She does not aspire to continue on to get a GED or to go to college; she has worked hard her entire life and for her, classes are a means of income, an opportunity to better acquaint herself with her surroundings and a chance to socialize. When asked what inspires her, she spoke with the translator briefly and the translator replied: “She says when people come to her, talk to her. Before it was not like this, when she came to Canada, nobody come to her to talk to her. Now,

when we come, somebody come talk to her, when she goes to school she have friends that makes her inspired.”

**Participant F.** Participant F is a poised and driven woman of few words who got right to the point when asked to describe her experiences. When I arrived at her house for the interview she invited me into her living room, turned off the television and gestured to a couch opposite her as if to say, “let’s do this.” She had a slight smile on her face throughout most of the conversation and often took a minute to herself to think before replying. When I initially spoke to Participant F about the study and what it was about, she said that the topic was very good and immediately began discussing her challenges with reading. Although she spoke less and was not easily persuaded to elaborate, her responses were insightful and reflected upon what she deemed was important to share.

Participant F has had the most prior educational experience out of all of the participants in the study. She had attended school until the end of grade nine in her country of South Sudan and had learned how to read and write in Arabic. However, as the Arabic language does not follow the Roman alphabet, she finds reading English to be the most difficult aspect of her classes today: “Before is easy in my country. It’s easy because it’s Arabic. When I come here it’s difficult for me - like ABC in my country is easy and here it’s different. For me level one is too hard.” Participant F arrived in Calgary in 2003 and has only been attending classes for the past nine months. She is now a 41-year-old single mother of eight who married young and when she arrived, she arrived with her ex-husband and three children – the youngest was five at the time. They first moved from South Sudan to Egypt due to war and instability and later relocated to Canada. Her youngest child is now four and her oldest is attending Mount Royal University. When asked why she decided to start school recently she exclaimed: “Because last 13 years I

have my kid they are too small. Now the younger one is 4 years old but when I come in my back home I have three kids and I born one here 2004 and I get another one I until I have eight kids. I didn't go to school. It's too difficult but now the youngest one is four and I'm free. I have to go to school!"

Having spent more time in a formalized educational setting and having experienced a grading system, Participant F holds herself to very high standards in her current pursuit of English. Although she has only been in classes for a short amount of time and has had a significant gap in her schooling, she already expects herself to have progressed further than she has in reading and writing. She is also experiencing the huge contrast of attending school in her youth and attending school now as a mother who has to work around her children's varied schedules, their homework, her homework, maintaining a home and maintaining the family finances. She is currently attending Bow Valley College's LINC program Monday to Friday mornings and working part-time on the weekends as a dish washer. She aspires to continue on with her English studies and to eventually become a homecare nurse.

**Participant G.** The first word that came to mind when I first met Participant G a few years ago was "matriarch." She is also a mother of eight children ranging in age from 5 years old into the 20s and she holds a commanding presence in her household and beyond. She is 41 years old, from South Sudan and she speaks Arabic, Dinka and English. She moved to Canada in 2001 and has since acquired her citizenship which has made it more difficult for her to attend classes as she now has to pay. When I spoke with her, she had recently returned from a trip back to South Sudan and was in the process of applying to take classes at Columbia College. Prior to that, she had attended a four to six-month program at the Calgary Immigrant Women's Association (CIWA) and an 18 month LINC Literacy program at Bow Valley College that was

funded by the government. Most recently, she had been paying to take classes at the Chinese Cultural Center however she had not been taking classes on a regular basis for a few years. She had however jumped at the chance to attend a weekly ESL class that WINS held at one of their resource centres which is where I had gotten to know her as I had been one of the facilitators. The class was offered on an on-demand basis and Participant G had been one of the women who both attended and advocated for it – adamant that it was important and insisting that it should be offered more than once a week. Due to her chaotic schedule, she often missed or forgot about classes; however, when she did not receive a reminder call notifying her of class time, she would appear at the door demanding answers. She is intimidating and jovial, powerful and honest and a pillar of strength for her family.

During both of my interviews with her, it was clear that for her the concept of free time was a foreign one but that she thrived in the chaos. During the first interview her five-year-old daughter was present watching television in the living room where we were talking, she was in and out of the kitchen cooking for her other kids who would soon be returning home from school, and she was answering phone calls and doorbells. At one point she answered her phone, walked into the kitchen to tend to something on the stove-top, and returned a few minutes later with a bowl of food only to gesture at my phone with an apologetic realization that I had been recording the whole time. We laughed and she told me she had forgotten I was recording and then sat down and interacted with her child as we continued to go through the questions. For the second interview her husband and a family friend were in the living room so we conducted the interview in the kitchen where she was again cooking and about halfway through her kids started arriving home from school. She then began switching back and forth from Dinka to English, answering their questions and mine, admiring the homework that her youngest was proudly

showing her and instructing one of her other daughters on what to tend to in the kitchen.

Prior to her arrival in Canada, Participant G had only attended school for a few short years as a child, beginning when she was six and stopping when she was in grade three. When asked why she stopped she explained that in her country, there was not a huge emphasis on education, especially for girls and that her father had wanted her and her sisters to stop attending: “I stop because my back home there, everything, everything be tired. You can go to school, you stay home, you tired, you want to do anything, you do in my country. That’s why. After you tired you say I don’t want to go school. Nobody they care, go or not go. And my dad they say they don’t want us to go to school. Only boys, they going to school.” She was married at 16 and already had three children when she arrived in Canada in her late twenties. When asked why she moved here she explained that she wanted her children, herself and her husband to have the opportunity to go to school. Now, all of her children are attending school as her youngest just began this year. When speaking of the importance of her daughters attending school, she relates to her own experiences of her father telling her that she could not go because she had to be home to help out around the house: “Yeah he say like that. That’s not good. I can’t say something like that to my daughters – to my kid I can’t.”

**Participant H.** Participant H is a single mother of four from South Sudan who arrived in Canada in 2000 as a refugee. When asked her age, she explained to me that she had gotten married when she was underage and to be able to leave the country as a married couple she had had to adopt her older step-sibling’s birth year but she is estimated to be in her early 30s. Her two youngest children are three and under and as such she is not currently taking classes and has not taken classes in a few years as work and caring for her children are her top priorities at the moment. However, she is a serious advocate for people to participate in ESL programs, has

convinced and encouraged several women in her community to start classes and has assisted them in the process.

She invited me to visit her at home during her “free time” and when I arrived her two oldest children were at basketball and her two youngest were at home with her. I took a seat in the arm chair that was offered to me and she took a seat on the couch so she could tend to the baby in the highchair beside. She turned down the volume on the television where the children’s show “Caillou” was playing and encouraged her three-year-old to play quietly while we spoke. It became quite evident early on that this was not something he was keen on doing and by the end of the interview I was exhausted. As I collected my ripped up, chewed on, half-digested interview papers, I could not fathom how the last hour could have been considered her “free time.” However, throughout the flying building blocks, a large painting being knocked from the wall, spilled juice and sibling quarrels she had remained calm, collected, and smiling as she passionately shared her insights with me above the disorderly symphony in the background. Later, as I was transcribing the interview, I was transported back to the house, to the sounds of the children laughing and screaming, to her lovingly yet sternly placating them while hardly missing a beat with me and I wondered how dull an interview in a quiet room would seem to me now.

In South Sudan, Participant H attended school until grade four when she had to stop because her parents could no longer afford to pay for her education. She explained that one day the school had sent her home to collect money and there was none to collect: “They said go home and get your parents to bring the money and then you can come back. If no money – and my parents were working hard and that but no money – so I tell them it’s ok. I don’t want to bother you guys and you guys don’t have money.” She comes from a large family and is the

youngest of her siblings. When she was seven years old her mother sent her to live with her older sister in Egypt and while there she met an American woman who took an interest in her education and began to teach her how to read, write and speak English while she was teaching her own children. Participant H explained that the woman eventually went back to the United States and offered to take her along, so she could continue her education, but she was still young and wanted to stay with her family. In regard to the woman's offer, Participant H affectionately explained the situation as something that happened quite often where she was in Cairo: "They help as a kid and they will teach them down there until they finish university and then you will go back and see your parents, but I say Hell no! Hell no, I want to stay with my Mama, no way! But she helped me a lot."

Due to this experience, she felt like she had an advantage when she arrived in Calgary because she could speak some English and had some experience with reading and writing. This being so, within a week of her arrival, Participant H had already marched herself down to City Hall to apply for a cleaning job – which she was given to her own shock. When she arrived in 2000 she had no children and after acquiring a job and working for some time she began taking LINC classes at Bow Valley College where she attended for one year. During that period of time she maintained a very full schedule: "Yeah I go to school full time and I have full time work at night and I have part-time. So, I just take the coffee, drink coffee and sleep and wake up go to school, after school go part-time, then go full time night and come back and that all I do." After she began having children, her schedule changed to accommodate their needs as well. However, she still sustained a weekend job and left for school when her children did. She attended an ESL upgrading program at Columbia College from 2010 – 2014.

Much of Participant H's motivation to pursue an education and her inclination to

encourage others to do is rooted in the constant and fierce support that her late mother gave her in regard to her own learning as well as her own life experiences and what she has witnessed happening within her own community. Although we did not delve deep into her personal life she shared with me that she and her husband had divorced some time ago and that the experience had caused her to realize, even more, the importance of the relationship between educating yourself on your surroundings and having a sense of independence: “Every bill, husband go and pay everything. You don’t know how to pay the bills, you don’t know how to go grocery. Those are stuff the woman need to know. It’s not everything for husband because one day they will tell you it’s over. What you gonna do? You’re not gonna call anybody and say ‘Oh take me to grocery store, you know?’ So you need to learn.”



### Participant Profile Chart

Name	Country of Origin	First Language(s)	Age	Marital Status	Children	Educational History	LINC LEVEL
Participant A	South Sudan	Dinka	~34	Single/ Separated	5	0 years of prior education	4
Participant B	Pakistan	Urdu, Pakistani, Punjabi	43	Widowed	4	A few months	Academic Level 6
Participant C	Bhutan	Nepali, Tamang	54	Single	0	0 years	CLB Level 2
Participant D	Bhutan	Nepali	62	Widowed	1	0 years	CLB Level 2
Participant F	South Sudan	Dinka, Arabic	41	Single/ Separated	8	Up to Grade 9	LINC Level 1
Participant G	South Sudan	Arabic, Dinka	41	Married	8	0 years	Between LINC Level 0-4 (Returning to classes after a break)
Participant H	South Sudan	Dinka, Arabic	Between 28 and 38	Single/ Separated	4	A couple of years	Not currently in classes

### Thematic Analysis

After speaking with all of the participants it became evident that their decisions to begin and continue on with their programs were not simply rooted in one easily definable need or want but resulted from a culmination of past experiences and present desires that fed into future aspirations. As such, the themes that began to materialize encompassed the multifaceted nature of their individual pursuits and they began to form a narrative map that detailed where the

participants had come from to where and who they are now to where they want to be. However, during the early stages of analysis, I found the process of compacting the richness of the narratives into neatly laid out themes to be a significant struggle. I continuously felt as though, in doing so, I was overgeneralizing the complexity of their experiences in order to make them fit into my preconceived thematic vision. Taking time to pause and reflect, once again, on the interview process caused me to realize that my themes should work to emphasize the complexity of the participants' learning journeys as opposed to trying to generalize their experiences. As Wlodkowski (2008) has stated: "Seeing adults as unique and active, we emphasize communication and respect, realizing that through understanding and sharing our resources we create greater energy for learning" (p. 29). With this in mind three main themes emerged:

- Theme One: The Influence of Past Experiences
- Theme Two: Navigating New Surroundings Through Language Acquisition
  - Current Attitudes
  - The Decision to Commit
  - Challenges Inside and Outside of the Classroom
- Theme Three: Who Am I Now?
  - The Balancing Act
  - Ask me About my Weaknesses
  - Strengths and Relationships
  - One Door Closes, 100 Open

Through these themes I hope to convey the holistic nature of why these women are pursuing second language acquisition and literacy while developing an understanding of what they are going through to attain their goals.

### **Theme 1: The Influence of Past Experiences**

As Li et al. (2012) have stated, the ways in which adults form opinions of and interpret knowledge, ideas, and skills are shaped by their life experiences. Within the participant profiles, I briefly outlined their prior educational experiences and touched lightly upon some of their views of these experiences. However, I believe this subject is worth revisiting in a more in-depth manner to better demonstrate the connection between past experiences and current attitudes. In an effort to do so, this theme will expand on the participants' first impressions of their schooling and how their impressions were influenced by external factors.

Although I purposefully sought participants who had had little to no prior formal educational experience, their early views of education were of great interest to me and of great importance to their learner identities. Some participants had absolutely no prior educational experience, while others had a few months or a few years. What they all had in common though, was a significant break in their educational histories due to factors such as lack of access, lack of money, lack of encouragement, lack of interest and fear of authority figures within a school setting. Having had these adverse experiences or having lacked educational experience altogether made it important to understand how these first impressions helped shape their current thoughts on education.

In discussing their first impressions of education, participants revealed several determining factors that resulted in their short or non-existent prior educational experiences. Being excluded from the education system due to cultural gender norms was an occurrence mentioned by several participants and a theme that seemed to pervade and reoccur throughout the entirety of the analysis. Traditional gender roles affected their ability to participate in the school system in several ways. Participant A, who had grown up in South Sudan had never gone

to school as a child due to having responsibilities at home. This early on experience of marginalization and the prioritization of educating males over females left a significant imprint on her and she contrasted this experience with what she has encountered in Canada regarding equal opportunity: “I am proud of Canadian people because they make everybody the same. Not like anybody, woman and man and they are the same. They’re not like my country because in my country woman and men they’re not the same and here in this country they are the same, that is the freedom. It’s good and I wish them to continue like that - maybe my country one day will be like that. Is be good for me and good for other people who have kid right now to support and to go to school and know what they’re doing.”

Participant G who had also grown up in South Sudan had experienced similar gender-based exclusion in the sense that she had watched her brothers go to school while she and her sisters had stopped very early on because it was more important for them to participate in household duties. When asked if her brothers made it very far in the school system she replied: “Yeah! They finish high school, they have diploma. All boys. Some girls now they’re going up now but me and my sister and my step sister, like my age, they stop school. Just me and my sister and step sister but all girls they go to school now.” She acknowledges these changes as positive – that girls in her country of origin have more of an opportunity than she did to acquire an education early on.

While Participants A and G both spoke of adverse attitudes towards educating females, with household chores being of more importance than schooling, Participant H furthered the gender nuance by discussing another gender-based cultural norm: early marriage. As previously explained in the Participant Profiles, Participant H had been married at an early age and as a result had to adopt a different birthdate to be allowed to travel out of the country. She was unable

to reconvene her studies until she arrived in Canada. While it was not the only factor responsible for the interruption in her studies, it was a significant one and one that her mother reportedly took to heart: “My mommy tell me ‘my daughter you need to finish your school’ but I couldn’t [...] At that time, she tell me ‘Ah, my daughter, I know it’s hard, they make you married quick and you still under age. I want you to finish your school, don’t think about whatever gonna happen.’” In comparison, marriage *was* the main reason for Participant F’s diversion from her studies: “Yeah we were three we went to school. My sister she finished university and my brother finish it. Except me because I skip my school and I get married 18 years.” Although she did not make it as far in the school system as her siblings, she did make it farther than the other participants, being the only participant to have learned to read and write in one of their primary languages. The fact that she had this prior experience of acquiring literacy and learning for an extended period of time in a formal setting lends a uniqueness to her perspectives in this current thread and the themes that follow.

While the gender theme is one that re-emerges throughout the study and will be revisited to discuss how gender-based experiences have continued to impact participants’ current views of education, other factors from the past also played a significant role. Another substantial factor mentioned by some participants was the impact of poverty on educational opportunities. In the process of explaining the effects of being married underage, Participant H initiated a discussion around the implications of a lack of money limiting access to school. Although Participant H had mentioned attending school for a few years as a child, her family had been experiencing financial struggles and she had to quit early on due to being unable to afford it. She simply stated: “There is a problem with money so if not pay I cannot go to school. They had to send me home, said go home and get your parents to bring the money and then you can come back. If no money – and

my parents were working hard and that but no money – you cannot continue your education.”

Financial difficulties had also hindered Participant C’s ability to attend school as did a lack of opportunity. As she explained: “I really wanted to go school since I was a kid because back then you had to pay money and had no time and no opportunity but here free and you got to know place, people and I really wanted.” As Participant C and D had both grown up in rural areas of Bhutan and had spent a considerable amount of time in Nepalese refugee camps, I had guessed that their experiences with education would be largely similar. While there were circumstantial similarities, as Participant C conveyed, she had been eager to attend school whereas Participant D firmly stated that she had had absolutely no interest in the prospect. She rationalised that prior to arriving in Canada, not having a formal education had had no impact on her ability to lead a fulfilling life: “I don’t like school. Never. Because I am cooking, and I am farmer and no interest in school.”

Participant D’s disinterest in school introduced the sub-themes of both the non-essential role of education as well as the impact of differing attitudes towards education. Following along the lines of Participant D’s own view of the unnecessary nature of formal education, Participant G described growing up in a culture of indifference towards learning wherein, you could go to school, or not, it did not matter either way. This indifference went beyond the gender-based exclusion she had previously discussed to encompass both males and females. She clarified: “In my country, after you tired you say I don’t want to go school. Nobody they care. Go or not go.” In contrast to both Participants D and G, Participant H had described growing up in an atmosphere of encouragement whereby her mother persistently worked to reinforce the value of education which in turn greatly shaped her own views on the subject. Despite their financial struggles, Participant H explained that her mother wanted her to have every opportunity to learn

which is why she was sent to live with her older sister in Egypt in hopes that she would be able to continue her studies there: “My mom said ‘take her because she cannot finish school because we don’t have money to pay. I want my daughter to finish her school.’” Although Participant H was offered an opportunity to travel to the United States with the woman who had taught her in Egypt, so she could continue her studies, she was still a young girl who did not want to be separated from her mother or her family by such a dramatic distance. She ultimately declined the woman’s offer and later got married while living in Egypt.

Beyond the realms of gender roles, financial instability and varying attitudes towards education, Participant B spoke of having had both the opportunity to attend school as well as the encouragement she needed outside of the classroom. It was inside the classroom that she encountered difficulties and the brief period of time she spent attending school was done so in fear. She described being taught in an authoritative atmosphere and this in conjunction with the violent demeanor of the teachers and her timid character had driven her to quit. Although education was encouraged it was not mandatory and so she was not forced to continue attending. She later regretted her decision to stop her studies but felt she was too old to start school at that point.

Examining the participants’ diverse educational backgrounds helps to illuminate the range of factors such as the fulfillment of traditional gender roles, poverty, exclusion, fear, and indifference that have led to these women arriving in classrooms in Canada as non-literate or non-Roman-alphabet literate learners. Acknowledging and incorporating these experiences into the broader landscape could also encourage a more holistic and thorough understanding of attitudes that participants may hold regarding themselves, their own learning, formal learning environments and other factors that can affect motivation and engagement (Li et al., 2012). This

deepening understanding becomes beneficial as participants begin to identify reasons for pursuing language and literacy classes later in life. As Li et al. (2012) have addressed, adult ESL learner motivation can be divided into two categories: Instrumental and integrative. Instrumental motivation focuses primarily on the practicality and applicability of skills acquired – such as using them to meet basic needs, acquire a job or for further education. Integrative motivation is more focused on both integrating and identifying with the language and speakers of that language. In the following theme I will present participants' current attitudes towards education and as well as the influencing instrumental factors that motivated them to engage in classes. In addition, I will discuss the challenges they have encountered inside and outside of the classroom in pursuit of the fulfillment of these instrumental factors.

## **Theme 2: Navigating New Surroundings Through Language Acquisition and Literacy Learning**

**Current attitudes.** While people are not necessarily defined by their pasts, listening to the women in the study examine their current attitudes towards education reinforced the notion that people's pasts can have a profound impact on their current perspectives. In this case, the participants demonstrated that prior experiences have influenced how they have situated themselves internally and have come to interpret what the realm of education means for them in adulthood. As mentioned in Theme One, Participants A and G, had grown up understanding that female education was not a priority and Participant G had also grown to understand that education itself was not valued in her society. As a result of this, Participant A has come to connect the value of an education with a sense of self-sufficiency: "School is better. Like maybe somebody will write you something and you don't know how to read you have to go find



somebody to read and it's difficult. And it's good thing to know how to read. You can do your own thing without having to give it to someone to do it for you."

Similarly, the opportunity to go to school was an important motivational factor guiding Participant G's move to Canada. Having dealt with her father's own adverse attitude towards her education along with societal indifference she was motivated not only by thoughts of her own academic opportunities but by the academic opportunities that would be available for her children and her husband as well: "I come Canada to go to school and my husband go to school and my kids they go school. Because we come here, I not go to school in my back home that's why I came here." Although her husband finished high school, she still spoke proudly of his current educational pursuits, sharing that he was taking a computer class and that he had supported her in her decision to take LINC classes, helping her find various programs in the city.

As Participant H elucidated, the sporadic nature of her schooling in childhood due to factors such as marriage and poverty had a great impact on her later views of education. As she later disclosed her views were further impacted by having to quit her LINC program in order to work to send money home to help support her family members in South Sudan. Like Participant A and G, she came to hold the prospect of an education in high esteem. More specifically, like Participant A she came to associate an education with the concept of self-sufficiency and also equated it with the concept of a better livelihood. When sharing what she wished for other women in her situation and for immigrants and refugees arriving in Canada in general she said: "I don't want them to get mistake to what I did, you know? I want them to continue to study so they can get a better job and better life. If you get more education you will get the better life. If you didn't get the education you will get less life and it's hard. So, I want them to be continue to go back to school and study." With this statement Participant H implied that education is a

necessary component in the ability to live a good life. Participant D expanded on this concept in her current views on education and education as a necessity is a theme that will be further developed when describing motivations for attending classes.

Participant D explained that arriving in Canada and experiencing not only the language barrier but the realization that level of education has a greater impact on quality of life and employment opportunities in her adopted country, had led her to see the contextual value in what she had previously deemed unimportant before. I asked her if she had wanted to begin school when she arrived in Calgary or if she had been encouraged to by a settlement counselor and her initial response was: “No. Counselor. I don’t like school. Too difficult, no English. I learn English, too difficult. But government not give money if no school.” That is not to say that Participant D sees no value in the experience. Although she did reiterate that even now, she is in school 70% for the money and 30% because she enjoys it, when she began to see results her demeanor began to soften: “Now, I little understand English. I learning English. At bus stop I talking English. In Superstore little bit English. I like. I only understand English a little bit.” Due to having wanted to attend school previously, Participant C viewed the opportunity to attend classes in a more positive light. In addition to acknowledging the necessity of it she also explained: “I like school. I want to school go. The teacher teaches me everything, she’s a good teacher. It’s good for making friends but because I’m not working I forget, forget, forget. I like school. It’s hard.”

Participant B shared Participant C’s positivity and like the rest of the participants, she was encouraged by a settlement counselor to start English classes upon arrival. Having regretted quitting her studies as a child and having previously believed that she had missed her opportunity to attend classes due to her age, she jumped at the chance: “I said if I get a chance I have to go

school. But I was not sure but when I came here the counselor then she took me and after that I was so excited [...] You know I was young then I couldn't get a chance to study but I love to study so when I came here I got a chance so it's my dream. I follow my dream. That's why I'm happy to do even if it's hard." She laughingly recalled her first day of class explaining that she had been so excited and nervous that she showed up an hour early: "I was SO excited to go school and school was starting in the morning at 8:00 a.m. and before one day I went with my son to look where is the school. He show me this is school, you can just take a train from here and walk here to go. First day I went at 7:00 o'clock in the morning." For her, education had always held an important yet seemingly unattainable place in her life as she thought she had missed her mark. Despite this she had always had academic aspirations and her passion for and dedication to learning are evident in the way she speaks of her classes, her progress and her plans for the future.

Like Participant B who had dreamed of the chance to go school and as such had more specific academic aspirations, Participant F who *had* had the chance to advance farther in school than the other participants also had current views that were laden with academic aspirations. Having had more extensive prior experience with a formalized grading processes before Participant F explained that she puts pressure on herself to meet the same standards she was meeting in school before, despite the notable gap in her schooling as well as the fact that she is learning both a new language and an entirely different alphabet. While getting a good mark is a general indication of progress for most regardless of prior experience, due to the extent of her experience compared to the other participants, marks are not only a measure of progress for Participant F but something that measures the gap between the student she was before versus the student she is now. When asked how she measures success she replied: "When I do the test and I

get 100% I get myself is everything will be easy.” When asked what happens if she doesn’t get 100% on a test she replied: “NO! No, when my back home I need to get everything because my back home we have number one, number two, three until 10. In class when we have tests you have number one, number two, number three. Number one they got a lot of gifts and number two and then to the last. When I back home I need to get in number one, two or three. I like this one. I don’t like to go behind.”

The current views of the women in the study reflect their past interactions with various societal and gender-based inequalities. Their views have been characterized by the desire to establish a sense of self-sufficiency and by realizing that while education may not have played a role in their lives before the prospect now holds significant meaning. Taking these factors into consideration, their opinions circulated around the notion that education, while sometimes unfavourable, was an opportunity. Establishing an understanding of the participants’ past and present outlooks on education creates a more accessible pathway to exploring more deeply the motivations behind taking the steps to make it into the classroom. The following sub-theme, as mentioned above, will touch first on the instrumental motivations and then on some of the challenges that participants have encountered inside and outside of the classroom. The discussion on motivations will be continued in Theme Three with a focus on integrative factors and personal investment.

**The decision to commit.** It has been proposed that as learners, adults are driven by purpose. That purpose could be survival, pleasure, personal growth or a multitude of other reasons (Li et al., 2012). The participants in this study listed several reasons for participating in classes; some reasons coincided, while others were unique to individual situations. English language learning and developing literacy skills, however, remained interconnected throughout

each participant's pursuits and participant intentions were in part driven by their perceived challenges.

Each participant in the study had identified that education was important to them and in various ways was integral to their current situations. This understanding was a stepping stone in their initial pursuit of classes, however, taking that leap was facilitated by a number of factors that participants gradually identified. While all of the participants had first heard about classes from settlement counselors working for the Calgary Catholic Immigration Society (CCIS) quite early into their arrivals some participants mentioned friends or family members ultimately influenced their decision to enrol or influenced their level of commitment. Participant A spoke frequently of a friend who had given her that final push to commit by helping her put things into perspective: "I have my friend tell me, she said 'Why you go work, you don't go to school?' I have issue because in back home I have to support my family and if I go to school it's not be enough money to support them. I support them all those years and I need something for myself too and I said 'Ok it's good to go to school and learn a little bit English.'"

Similarly, Participant B spoke of an instance of great significance where she had been confronted by her then nine-year-old son. Although she had been eager and excited to enrol in classes and began taking them as soon as she could, she was hesitant to do things on her own as she was doubtful of her own abilities. After asking her son for help paying bills one day, a moment of clarity ensued: "One day I told him – at that time I started classes in Bow Valley around six month or three months – I want to go to pay a bill and he said 'Mom, I have full time classes. If I go with you, what time I go with you? He said 'You have to learn now, why are you going to Bow Valley if you don't know?' Then I got angry and I took a step, first time. I started reading a letter from the government. It was too hard for me - what is the word meaning? Not

just ABC, you know? But that time I decided to myself, you have to learn! You have to become independent. He was right. He was young, he had classes and I all the time depended on him.”

While being introduced to new realities by the frank words of a child was an experience unique to Participant B, several other participants acknowledged that they took classes in hopes that it would improve their abilities to complete the practical tasks necessary to their lives in Calgary. These practical activities have come to be understood as being fundamental to effectively navigating new surroundings and to developing livable routines. As such, another consideration made by those who decided to attend classes revolves around the thread of education as necessity that was introduced in the previous theme.

Like Participant B, Participants A and F both mentioned encountering issues navigating paperwork. Participant A shared: “Sometimes I’m going to an appointment and they give me the form and I have to fill it and I don’t have anybody with me. Who will do it for me? I will go ask them maybe they are busy. Participant F echoed Participant A’s statement: “I go for myself because sometime I get something like form and I can’t fill it out myself and I can’t do it in myself.” The reality is that while paperwork may be a cumbersome and monotonous chore to most, new immigrants and refugees are often faced with the task of wading through seemingly endless forms. The inability to understand what is being requested from them on a page, whether it is a bank form, government form, school form, etc. could be detrimental to and prolong their acclimatization process. Additionally, Participant A and F both shared similar views in regard to finding motivation in the need to be able to assist their children. Participant A mentioned that she wants to be able to help her children with their homework while Participant F expanded upon that desire: “I have to read and write because now I have eight kid and I have to write something

for them and I have to read something when they have something in school so I do it for myself and my kid.”

The desire to more effectively fulfill integral responsibilities was a recurring element throughout the interviews as was the desire to feel connected on several different levels. Whether it was an intention or a consequence, learning was therefore associated with new opportunities that existed beyond the doors of their homes. Aside from merely wishing to be able to complete routine tasks, participants alluded to the fact that they wished to not simply exist outside of their homes but to actively participate in society as a member, opposed to an outlier. For some participants the pursuit of an education coincided with the pursuit of establishing and strengthening their connections to various platforms of information.

During her interviews, Participant G acknowledged the impact of moving from a society that depended more on spoken word than print, to a completely print oriented society where she did not even speak the language. Having been able to previously rely primarily on speech for conveying and receiving information, education was a way to approach and diminish feelings of alienation through learning to tackle both the language and print in general. She also spoke of the gap that she feels exists between herself and the digital world, where much of our information is now shared through numerous media platforms: “You need to write, you need to talk. You need to change everything because my back home everything they low. It’s not like Canada [...] It’s important to me because Canada, you want to stay in Canada you have to know something, to read, to talk, to do something in yourself. To do something in computer, to see something in TV - that’s why it’s important in Canada [...] I want to learn writing, to see something in Facebook. To read something. To see something on TV, news, to listen something.”

Participant H shared a coinciding view: “Get education, learn, so you will know what is

going on around the world. You sitting in house you don't know anything but if you get your education you will know what is going on, you know? Even on the TV you will know some time they read, something is written so you have to read. You have to know what does it mean."

Participant B also noted the relationship between English language and literacy learning and understanding not only your immediate surroundings but understanding what is going on around you in the broader context while suggesting that understanding can also lead to access and participation: "To read and write – if you not read and not write then you don't understand the world. Even my life was just inside my house – nothing is outside. In Pakistan I never going anywhere. If I go somewhere like shopping it was with someone, not alone. When I came here my husband had passed around two month and 20 days and then I came here with my children."

In her rationale for attending classes, Participant C expanded upon this concept of access and opportunities for participation as she explained that, through her classes, she also learned of various city resources that could be of benefit to her. Additionally, through the help of a teacher who recognized her mobility issues, she was enrolled in a LINC program at a different agency that was closer to her home: "It is necessary to everybody. You have to go to school no matter what [...] This way maybe sitting 10 minutes on bus - now good, now good. Genesis center exercise have. Gym have, Swimming have, I have this card, give me this teacher."

She explained that now, her bus ride takes her 10 minutes as opposed to an hour and the card she referred to is the Recreation Fee Assistance Card that is offered by the City of Calgary through their Fair Entry Program which is geared towards low-income Calgarians. The card allows card holders to access various recreational centers around the city at reduced cost (The City of Calgary, 2018). She continued on to explain the importance of being able to access other vital services and how she tries to educate others on the importance of attending: "School is



important, education. ‘YOU let’s go’, I tell people. If I want to go this way - hospital - doctor talking English. I talking with this social worker – English. Not my language. Every time I try to speak – better after. Practice good. Practice at school, hospital, everywhere - the store, everywhere with the shopping. If you don’t talking, who is going understand? Little bit, little bit talking, soon understand.” Participant D’s view corresponded, and she mentioned several other amenities, emphasizing the fundamentality of knowing how to properly approach and utilize said facilities: “I need English learning. I see the doctor and bus driver and C-train and Superstore. I need it to live. I need English [...] I say to my friend, you need English. Now little bit easy. I have English. Before, NEVER me English. Never. Now little bit.”

Education may be seen as a necessity for a successful and fulfilling integration into society as well as a necessity for obtaining legal status. Participant F who had faced barriers in obtaining citizenship status due to the language and literacy barriers, equated acquiring this official status with the opportunity to live a more complete life in Calgary: “I have 15 years here and I don’t got a lot of things. Like now, I don’t have the citizenship because when I go there I fail for read and writing; I can’t read, I can’t write. That’s why I fail. I have to know writing and reading. I need it. That’s why I need a lot the thing in myself.”

Each participant, in their own way, suggested that taking classes was or would be an indispensable endeavour that would better enable them to engage with the world around them. Easier access to basic needs such as food, transportation, and healthcare were mentioned as was the ability to better assist their children and to connect with their community, the country, as well as the global community. Participant H took it one step further and looked beyond the fulfillment of basic needs and the prospect of education for survival to education for a flourishing livelihood: “Yeah you need English to read and write and speak. Three things that you need in

your life. If you don't have, you're not going to be having good life at all. Even when you're going to choose, you are going to work the hard job but if you know how to read and write, it's good, you can get a good job. It's really good you need to learn English in Canada so you can get your citizen, no problemo. You can go travel wherever you want to go, USA, nobody is gonna bother you. If she just coming to Canada and doesn't know how to read and write that thing, is not good. You need to go to school and learn English."

In listening to these participants, it is clear that each and every one of them have come to build their own understandings of the importance of the role that English language and literacy learning has come to play in their lives. Attending classes has opened various doors and aided in regaining a sense of self-sufficiency and has allowed participants to look at a more all-encompassing future. Although many positives were discussed, it was also acknowledged that this endeavour does not come without its challenges.

**Challenges inside and outside of the classroom.** Often, half the battle of embarking on a new and unfamiliar journey is taking that first step outside of your comfort zone. Each participant took that step when they entered their respective classrooms and immersed themselves in their programs. As ESL literacy students with limited classroom experience, I was eager to learn what challenges (if any) they had identified since beginning their programs. When I initially posed the question, I assumed that it would initiate lengthy narratives as the women would have plenty to discuss. On the contrary, what I quickly came to understand was that for the participants in this study motivations were cohesively linked to challenges and were often alluded to when speaking of why they were taking classes. Not only that, but more often than not, what I would have expected participants to view as a challenge was viewed more as an

expected responsibility of the process. One recurrent example was regarding participants' views of their instructors.

Having been an instructor, if only for a brief period, I was curious to learn what issues participants may have encountered with their teachers and what would be mentioned. As such, I found it intriguing that any mention of teacher-student interaction was largely positive. Participant C not only took a moment to speak of her teacher and the patience she shows with the class, but she tried to view things from her perspective: "Everything is good. Old woman, this my teacher. She is good. My mistake, everyone, the students' mistakes they make. Teacher no mistake. The student sometime understand, sometime no understand. Sometime listening, sometime no listening. Sometimes we are mistake. The teacher no angry. This teacher every time good. Everything is good!" Likewise, Participant D took a moment to commend both her instructor and her classmates: "Teacher good, classmate is good. Everything is needed." While the feedback on instructors was largely positive, as participants continued on to identify areas of difficulty in the classroom they implied that there are areas in need of improvement that could fall under the purview of what instructors can do. In addition, they suggested several ways in which their ability to learn within the classroom could be improved.

With regard to barriers mentioned by participants, the most widely identified challenge was with reading and writing. Each individual reported that they had experienced difficulties in these areas and some participants went on to consider how difficulties in these areas further exacerbated other challenges. Participant B had found that slower progression in these areas had led her to feel pressured during exams due to time constraints: "In the beginning someone help us how to – like – we have reading, writing, they have a test, they have a time limit. So, sometime it's difficult to finish on time. Mostly I have a problem with reading. I'm a slow

reader.” Participant C shared her confusion regarding her writing skills and how she felt as though at times she was making headway and on other occasions like she had lost the ground she had previously gained. She used the benchmark levels she had been given for each skill in order to depict the difference in progression between her speaking and listening skills and her reading and writing skills: “I have a problem with reading and writing. Teacher is give me this listening level three, speaking level three, she is give me. Maybe government give me. Reading, writing level two, level one. This problem. I don’t know. Slowly I am reading, no fast. And writing sometimes good, sometimes no. Somethings go down, sometimes go up! The teacher told me ‘what happened your mind, sometime go down sometime go up?’ Just try, try. Reading, writing I have problem. Writing is slowly, no fast. Reading slowly. Listening, speaking, three-three. This little good.”

Like Participants B and C, Participants A, D, F and G reported problems with reading and writing and again like Participant C, stated that their speaking skills had developed quicker and with more fluidity. As Participant A shared: “It’s easy because I know a little bit, I know how to speak. It’s difficult like you don’t know how to ask somebody and you don’t know how to speak, that is difficult. And now, only my problem is reading and writing, that is my big problem. Speaking a little bit I’m ok with it. That one I find the easy one for me.” So, while reading and writing posed a challenge, learning to speak English was a more easily acquired skill and improvements in this area were more widely noted.

For some participants, the recognition of various obstacles came with suggestions that they felt might help facilitate a more effective and productive learning environment. Participant D felt as though her difficulty in learning various skills could be being perpetuated by the fact that she had nowhere to turn to for help outside of the classroom. She believed that she could

benefit from some extra assistance. As explained to me by the translator: “Everybody is busy, she wish somebody – you know – she doesn’t have anybody right now because her son works until late and daughter in law is busy with kids. Nobody is there for her. If she have somebody she would go to them even for at least one hour if somebody was willing to do that for her.” The translator went on to further explain that Participant D thought she would benefit from having a translator present in some classes. Participant C was in agreeance with this: “OK she think translator. Translate. If somebody’s there to translate what’s happening, what is this - she would be really successful she thinks. For example, so if they teach her something new that she never know about in her language and she will only know the name of that particular thing in English she will not know what is this in Nepali so she can’t understand. So, if she could know what is this in Nepali, she would know much better.”

While Participants C and D theorized that they would benefit from extra help outside of the classroom and translators in the classroom, Participant A encountered issues with classroom dynamics. She stated that finding a different class with equally invested people would be beneficial to her: “I think because, the thing doesn’t work inside the class. I’m going there to learn English and there is a lot of people from different country. Like you go in there, you need to sit there and learn what the teacher is saying because it’s a different language and my class is full with the people that speak Arabic. All the time they don’t listen. They are acting like the kid! Before I used to sit in the front and now I go back because they will talk too much and I don’t want to waste my time. I go there to learn and that is difficult. I will find the class full with the people they want to learn English - is be good for me.”

Participant B too touched on the topic of classroom dynamics but rather than discussing ways in which they could be improved she acknowledged her own improvements that she had

noticed in contrast: “I found the people - they have experience long time. People who have university, who is studying with me. Some people have two degrees. Some people have three degrees. Some people have had back home like 25 year working after university. They sitting with me. I participate with them so I proud myself. It’s hard for me, not easy to manage but when teacher speaking – because I now understand English words that she is saying – everyone listen and I am listen too. But they have skills and they going fast because they used to it. I didn’t use to. I have to learn right now with them so I think it’s a little bit hard for me, but I’m not give up because it’s my passion so I have to pass this class.” She illustrated a similar parallel when it came to dealing with the amount of homework being given: “They give a lot of homework, how can I manage? So like a lot of pressure on me for a whole more than one month. So, then I’m slowly, slowly – that time I say ‘How can I?’ But I did! Like one o’clock, after one o’clock I had to read in the morning. I just make a little bit food and then again, I look at my papers. So, after that I found it’s not like before. It’s easy because when I read more, more, more I get so many new words and also what is the meaning this word. Now I feel a little bit confident.”

Participant B demonstrated that her perceptions of her own skills change as she continues to participate in classes, navigate the challenges and as she continues to notice progression. Comparatively, Participant G’s view was on par with Participant B’s: “Everything they hard. Everything to me I think they hard. But you know before I came I see everything I can’t do. But now I think I will learn a little bit [...] Yeah before I started school in 17<sup>th</sup> avenue I think something changed. They gave me a book, they asked me questions, they tell me to read this one. I see some word I know. There. But before, I can’t see anything in the paper, I can’t see something in the paper. After I go there, I know some word.”

Throughout this theme, the various reasons why participants have decided to take classes

were examined focusing largely on increased access, practicality and necessity, as were obstacles and attitudes within the classroom. As participants continued to share their experiences, they began to move from instrumental rationalizations for attending to developing integrative motivations. The following theme will then aim to expand more upon if and how embarking on their individual learning journeys has altered their perspectives - as introduced by Participant C and G's shifting views on their own abilities. In order to do so, the focus will then be more on thoroughly exploring how participating in classes has changed their perceptions of self, as well as their perceptions of their broader social contexts.

### **Theme 3: Who Am I Now?**

**The balancing act.** As evidenced, the women in this study have many roles to play and innumerable day-to-day responsibilities to attend to. They are mothers, wives, grandmothers, sole-providers, important cultural figures and employees to name a few. Amidst these identities, and while working to forge and define themselves in a foreign country, along the way they have added student to their repertoires - a collective term which, in the broader context, expands to include adult learner, literacy learner, and ESL learner.

As Mertesdorf (1990) has stated, adult learners who have encountered breaks in their education will often require more time to adjust to their roles in their new academic environments. In accordance, the impact of transitioning between their multifarious roles and of incorporating the new and continually developing role of student was identified by several participants. Participant A straightforwardly stated that to her, at this time in her life, learning is compulsory as opposed to an option and she acknowledged that her decision to prioritize her education was due in large part to the long-term effect it could have on her other priorities – such as her children: “It mean a lot to me because right now I’m a mother and I have to support my

kids. Sometimes they have homework and I can't help them and that would make me sad. And now, now little bit I'm ok. I can help my son and other kids [...] You know, it's not easy and I don't have choice. I have to go to school and I have to come and pick my kids and do a lot of things to them. It's not easy and still I don't have way to say 'Ok I will have to give up and I will give up everything' it's not be good. I have to do it I don't have choice to say 'no'."

Participant B articulately rationalized the tension she sometimes feels while trying to perform her multiple roles. "I think if someone has some hope, if someone has inside to do something and someone have a goal then why they scared? It's because some people thinking about just their children's life. I'm a mother. I'm a mother and I'm a father too. They have no father, you know? You have to learn something. Even you help your children, your husband, family, everyone, but your life is your life. Even sometime my children they need food, a different kind of food, and clothes, the new things. I have not enough money. Sometimes they told me 'Mom you can stop school and go to the full-time job.' I found a job before that I did for one and half years." She also provided me with a breakdown of what some of her early days in Calgary had looked like: "When I started classes it's morning classes and I just I left from my home at 7:10 a.m. in the morning and so I woke up at 4:00 a.m. and I made food for my children and then around 7:00 a.m. because I want to go and I scared maybe they sleep all day and then they woke up and go take showers and then I left from home and then I come back around 1:30 p.m. [...] I come back from school sometimes I had to go grocery and I didn't have a car and I'd take my kids to go Superstore by walking, by bus and after that by walking. We bought grocery and we all have to be holding, the whole family and then the night around almost 12:00 a.m. I went to my bed and then 4:00 a.m. I woke up again." Like Participant A, despite feeling the strain of trying to balance busy schedules, her children's needs as well as her children's



perceptions of how she should be acting as a mother, Participant B viewed her pursuit of education as something that was non-negotiable to her and as something that would benefit everyone in the future.

Being the most senior participant and also the participant with the strongest initial resistance to the notion of taking classes, I was keen to hear what Participant D had to say on the subject of balance. As always, her pragmatism shone through as she explained how her life has been impacted by the added responsibilities: “I’m now busy. Very busy. Son, grandson, granddaughter. Now it’s too hard. Too hard. I need school and I need to do all of this. I am going to school because I will get money from government [...] I like working. Not find, not give. I need more money. I want working but I am old woman. No give me money, no give working. I like money. I like working. All like money.” We agreed that everyone would probably like to have more money and anyone who contested that could take it up with her. Coming from a rural background where she had farmed and had been a homemaker, where education played no role in defining her lifestyle or capabilities, it is understandable that both age and change of circumstance have been matters of frustration for her. When I asked her where she would work if she could she told me she would like to work a cleaning job. I asked her if she likes working with her hands and she replied “Yeah, with hands. With brain, no!”

Having had prior experience as a student, Participant F was working on reacquainting herself with the role in adulthood. She quickly realized the difference between going to school when that is your sole priority as a child and going to school as an adult having to manage several other principal responsibilities: “It’s difficult because when my back home I go to school when I young I didn’t married. But here I have kid, and I have homework and I have work, it’s

difficult [...] Inside I need to do homework and listen to my teacher and when I get home I need to do something for my kids. Cooking, cleaning, yeah.”

Returning to the subject of gender roles, Participant G, who had been attending classes, stopped during her pregnancy with her eighth and youngest child and had not had the time to return on a regular basis until recently. While her role as mother had taken precedence when her children were small, in speaking with her, it became readily evident that returning to classes is something she is not only eager to do but something she feels that she has to do for herself now that her youngest is old enough: “I stop because I go there, I’m pregnant with this baby. I’m tired, I’m sick every day. That’s why I say I can’t lose my time. Sometimes I go to school and sometime I not go. After I born baby, baby is small, I can’t leave baby home. But now, I need school. And then I can’t stop school anymore because I don’t have another baby. I want to know things in school [...] To write my book, to know something, to know my Facebook [...] I want to know English. I want to find job. I want to do my stuff in myself. I want to know everything in Canada in myself. That why I go back to school.”

Although participants expressed that they had felt the pressures of balancing their academic lives with their personal lives, many had appeared to have become accustomed to the discomfort. This acceptance seemed to be due to the belief that pursuing the roles of student, or aspiring to once again become a student, would bring them to a level of self-fulfillment that would enable them to achieve a lifestyle that would benefit their families in the long term. However, while participating in classes was listed by some as a desire that could no longer continue to be disregarded, as indicated by Participant D in her mention of age related difficulties in adjusting to her new role, others too mentioned dispositional hurdles faced while easing into their academic roles.

**Ask me about my weaknesses.** The objective of the second round of interviews was to allow participants a chance to further comment on what they had already shared with me and it was also a chance to get to know the participants on a more comprehensive level. During this round, I posed a question regarding what participants thought their personal strengths were and they all met the question with a pause, a quizzical look and a bout of laughter often ending in “I don’t know!” When I asked Participant D, her response resonated with me and caused me to realize that in asking about perceived strengths I had been focusing only on one side of the coin. With the help of the translator she asked me: “Do you have any weaknesses to ask?”

In the previous theme, I outlined the more easily identifiable challenges within the classroom that participants had discussed such as difficulties with reading and writing, navigating classroom dynamics and completing necessary day-to-day tasks. Participant D’s matter-of-fact question however, challenged me to recognize the more subtle situational and dispositional barriers and self-perceptions that participants had already been sharing with me and continued to mention in the following interviews. For Participant C, chronic pain had been a reoccurring topic during our discussions and was something that not only dictated her days but also impacted her progress in class and her ability to participate. During our second interview, she was feeling particularly sore as was shown by her slow and laboured movements. I quickly noticed that she was more inclined to speak her own language, using the translator far more frequently than in the previous interview. Additionally, the conversation was in large part dominated by talk of her arthritis and the mental and physical repercussions: “I like school but I have a problem. My two knees pain every time - this feeling when I’m going, too much pain. I like reading, writing but because too much pain, too much pain in my back, my knees. If I’m inside home no reading, writing, no good time. Mostly sleeping. I don’t know this, my body

problem.” As this was undoubtedly an important topic for her to discuss, she enlisted the help of the translator to further elaborate: “These days she doesn’t have anything inspiring because of her knee pain. One day it gets better with medicine or weather is nice and she feels so happy that ‘I will be OK now, I have too much to live for’ but then next day, it starts paining and she will be like ‘Oh this worthless life’. If she gets away from pain for one day she feels like new life [...] She cannot work, she cannot make money, the government give her a very little amount to live, and she wish she have money, she wish she was healthy [...] The thing is her body itself is not helping her which disappoints her. She is not even that old. She sees old people walking freely, living freely but she feels stuck, controlled by the pain.”

While Participant C illustrated her battles with a body that she felt was failing her, and how that affected her abilities to not only participate in school but lead a functional life, Participant D’s perceived weakness was her mind. Like Participant C, Participant D appeared to be feeling more vulnerable during the second interview and spoke through the translator the majority of the time. The translator explained: “She feels like she is forgetting things these days. Somebody has to remind her that you have an appointment this day, you have to go to school this day, this time, it’s time to wake up. She forgets that she has to take medicine and she forgot for three days, somebody had to remind her. She once got lost three times from school. She got twice lost when she got home from school, one time from relatives and she call ‘I am lost’ and she doesn’t know where she was and somehow, she make it home and she is really sad about it. She is just saying that she is getting old and she doesn’t want to do more stuff like before.”

Participant C and D touched on age and health related factors and how they can impact motivation and perception of abilities and while Participant G also reported memory problems, hers fell more into the realm of issues with retention due to inconsistencies in participation. As

she had mentioned before, Participant G had experienced a significant lapse in time between when she had last participated regularly in classes and the present. She believes that stopping and starting has substantially affected her ability to retain information as well as the speed at which she learns: “My problem I go there I stop, I go there I stop. But now I can’t stop anymore. Now I want to go forever, because I want to know something. Like before, I go I know some but now I forget some. It goes away. I go to school, I go to sit, everything it go away.” Feeling as though she cannot commit what she has learned to memory or that she is not progressing as fast as others has reportedly become a great source of anxiety for her: “Yeah I have a lot of people they starting school. Now I think they good, they learn a little bit. I have some ladies they come from back home they can’t go school when there but now they talk, they read, they do everything. But I don’t know, I ask myself, some people they come from back home they can’t go school, they learn quick. But me, I not learn quick. I don’t know what happened to me. I think that I think a lot in my head.” She has even watched her kids progress in a way that she perceives to be far beyond her and while she is without a doubt infinitely proud, she is still perplexed by their swift progression in comparison to hers. During an interview, she pointed to her youngest daughter and exclaimed: “Even this girl, she go pre-school now. She know everything - to talk, to read but to me, they hard to me. They give me heart attack, I’m thinking, I’m worrying, I have something bad or what?”

Initially it surprised me that participants were more readily inclined to speak of their limitations than their strengths. It later occurred to me however, that had I been asked the same questions, I too would have found it easier to think of my shortcomings. As such the dispositional, circumstantial and uncontrollable factors that have created anxieties and uncertainties in their lives may be more apparent to the participants and thus easier to identify

than their assets. When asked to focus on their skills participants were eventually able to recognize their contributions in the classroom as well as the essential roles they play in their homes and communities.

**Strengths and relationships.** Although participants laughed when I solicited them to share their strengths with me a few came to recognize they had both personal and academic assets. As Participant B is deeply immersed in her academic journey, it was fitting that she led with her skills within the classroom: “I like to learn with the classmates. I found out first when the class is started I thought maybe it’s hard for me and other people it’s not hard but I found that everyone finds it hard but they have some different strategies. Everyone have different skills. So, when you study with the group you will learn better than alone because different experience you know? I get an idea from someone, sometime I don’t know what the meaning, we learn from each other – sometime I give them advice, sometime they give me because when we discuss we get an answer.” When I asked her what skills she brought to the group she laughed and replied: “Speaking. Like team work, I’m friendly!”

For someone who had previously relied solely on her son to help her navigate life in Calgary, through classes she had discovered her problem-solving skills, approachability and her contributive value in group settings. She later addressed the question in a broader context with regards to perseverance being another of her personal strengths. “Hmmm, one thing I’m not give up. Even in my life there were so many difficulties but I believe everything from Allah. You know I believe that if you not doing hard work, if life everything easy, you not increase anything so if you doing hard work even study - even any category like any area in the life anywhere – if you doing something hard you think it’s hard but you don’t give up doing, doing, doing. One day you find it. You increase yourself.”

Participant C also thought of herself in the classroom in comparison to her other peers but she incorporated how the feedback and validation that she gets from the instructor had shaped her perception of her strengths. Through the translator she shared her point of view: “She is saying that comparing to her other friends she is a little quiet and they talk. This is because she doesn’t have any friends to talk Nepali with and even if she had she would stay quiet. She is saying she would respect teacher and teacher always says ‘Be like Participant C. Respect me, listen to me, don’t talk.’ That makes her feel good and feel she is doing well.”

Participant F described feelings of strength and accomplishment that were largely rooted in her children’s successes and reflective of her abilities as a parent: “In school so-so. And in my life I work hard because my kid now my big son, my son the older one is 19 years old and he start University in Mount Royal. He start last month, maybe last three or four months ago. I get myself is OK because my son is going there. Maybe my daughter she go there because it’s good.”

Signalling a good-humoured frustration with a wave of her arms, Participant G exclaimed: “I would say I’m good with ... I don’t know what I say! I would say I’m good with ... Ah, I don’t know!” Her daughter was in the kitchen at the time preparing dinner, so she passed the question onto her. Together, we identified several strengths that extended from the home: “Ok. I think because now I am cooking, I go to school, I braid kid hair. I’m braiding kid hair. You know I have how many girl? Five. Every time braiding hair” to the classroom: “Some people they tell me - you know Chinese people? They have a lot Chinese there in the program I went to. They say ‘Participant G, you good with talking.’ But some people they can’t talk but they know reading and they know writing. Yeah, every Chinese in class they tell me ‘Participant G, you good.’ I say I don’t know English, they say you know English because you talking. I like

to talk with classmate.” Like Participant C, her perceptions were also shaped by validation from others, such as her classmates and her children. Like Participant B, she felt that she demonstrated perseverance with regards to the pursuit of information. Instead of shying away from something she does not understand, she stated that she will seek out the answers: “I will ask about meaning too! I will talk and I will ask ‘you know what meaning this one?’ I ask like that.”

While participants required some encouragement in identifying what they felt they excelled at, something they freely shared with me, that was perhaps more illuminating and sincere, was the emerging relationships, observations and philosophies that they were developing in conjunction with English language and literacy learning. Participant A expanded on the concept of perseverance touched on by Participants B and G, as she reflected on the importance of diligently working to establish yourself in a new country: “When you came to a different country - don’t give up. You have to try your best. Especially like you have kid, you want to help your kid and you give up you can’t know anything. And you keep going one day maybe you will be succeed and know everything and support your family to know English because this one is different country it’s not like our country. Maybe you can speak in your own language and here they speak different language, so you have to go to school to learn more and succeed, to know everything and support everyone.” Her perception of success is closely linked with a sense of independence and ability to support herself and those who are dependent upon her.

Like Participant A, Participant B too touched upon this notion of freedom and independence as she spoke of education as a tool that not only helps to create transparency in a new community but also makes that community more justly navigable: “If you know the rules – even I still I don’t know so many rules in Canada, I don’t know– but if you’re educated then you’re not dependent on someone. Your feeling is free. You know, I’m a human being. I’m not



dependent on anyone. Some rules I don't know so maybe if there's someone not good maybe they take advantage from me. If the people educated then no one take advantage from you but also if you educated you know how the life works for you. You know the world ... maybe in future my life will be easy if I understand something like English. Who is come in Canada, even any age, if they study English, they understand what the meaning, this reading, writing."

Participant D's relationship with Canada was adverse at first but growing familiarity and improvements in her ability to communicate and socialize enable her to shed some light on the situation: "Here Canada, after I cry. I don't like Canada. I go back my country, I say. My son told me 'Ok Mom, you go back.' I said I'll go back. Now, I like Canada. I loving Canada. I say thank you, Canada." As per our first interview where I could not begin until we were sitting eye-to-eye, she elaborated on this gesture through the translator explaining that establishing that sense of equality is a significant factor in her ability to connect with and find comfort in her surroundings: "She is saying when somebody treats her, you know, equal she feels happy. You know sometimes for example you – you speak good English – and she doesn't, and you don't dominate her. She is looking, you know, trying to balance up, right? And somebody treat her like that she feels really happy. It's happening now and she's happy about that!"

Participant F described the process of finding herself through overcoming the difficulties associated with adjusting to a foreign place, a foreign language and new learning processes. When asked what she would share with others who may find themselves in her position she said: "They have to work harder because nothing easy here. You have to work harder and you have to find until you know. When I come here I don't know English but now I find myself a little bit because my speak is good and everything is easy now but you have to work harder."

Both Participants C and G described different aspects of the processes of forming a relationship with a new language and practicing that new language in different social contexts. As Norton (2013) has stated, through speech, language learners are not only learning to communicate with target language speakers but are continuously redefining who they are in relation to their social contexts. Participant C found a humorous side to practicing a new language: “No we talking – me, my friend and her friend. Sometimes we are English talking. Somebody laughing. Somebody else laughing. Sometimes we are joking in English when English talking, my friend and me. Another one laughing. Sigh, little sigh, and then again. It’s good.” In contrast, Participant G touched on the more complex side of the relationship between language, culture and identity as she explained the use of language at home as well as in the Sudanese community here in Calgary: “My problem is in my community. After you go your community you have meeting, you have talking my language - Dinka. I like to go to talk English - even in my community I like to talk English. I want to go there to talk English. Because after you talk every day, you do something every day, you catch something quick. Even my kid home, I can’t talk my language in my kid home. My kid say ‘Mama don’t talk your language home. Talk English.’ I will change. Even home I talk English with my kid. But in myself, I say I know my language well. I know everything talking, everything. But English I can’t say I know English well, now. Because you know it’s not my language. Arabic, I will tell you I know Arabic but English I can’t say I know English.”

While detailing a recent trip home to South Sudan, Participant G also spoke of the permeability of English and the little thought of effects of the language becoming a lingua franca: “Something for the English. I go back home. I hate that. Back home there, people they talk English. WHEN? In plane and everywhere they talking English. Everything English! That’s

why I'm very mad. After I come back from my country I'm mad. I'm very mad. Before, no English. Now, everything English. No Dinka, no Arabic just English. Signs - English. To go shopping and the store? English! I'm very mad after I come back."

Norton (2013) proposed that the globalization of the English language plays a meaningful role in issues of identity in relation to language learning. She explained that ESL learners may be facing the question of who they are when they speak English and how the world in which they speak English differs from the world in which they speak their mother tongue. This concept was demonstrated through participant discussions on their use of English, their relationships with the language and how they felt when they spoke English in their communities as well as how they felt when they realized English had become prominent in their home countries. Norton (2013) also suggested that language learners are grappling with other existential dilemmas such as how their understanding of their relationship to the world influences their possibilities for the future. Throughout the interviews participants discussed their views on the paths they have taken and on the roads they are currently on, but just as importantly, they shared their aspirations and hopes for the future.

**One door closes, 100 open.** In listening to each participant's position on their experiences of incorporating the role of student into their lives, it became clear that their attitudes towards learning were in large part fostered by a desire to establish a sense of autonomy. This desire and their unique perspectives are in turn reflected in their talks of what their futures might hold. Participant B's goals were academically focused: "I want to go finish upgrading. If I finish in this period it's good. If not, I am near to upgrading. It's no problem. I have really proven something. I have a goal; I have to finish my upgrading and take a course after that and then I have to get a job and I not depend on the government and not depend on my children – I have my

life. I hope I help others. If I finish my high school when I have a chance to go, there is like medical assistant and a clerk program. They have a requirement of finish high school so then I go there. But if I didn't finish then it's something else, no problem. I am not worry about that [...] maybe I will going to be bus driver. I read on Google some information where they say finish high school and then have opportunity to drive a bus – a BIG bus. If I didn't finish high school then the small bus but I don't like small, I like the big buses. Two opportunity, two things in my mind.” Similarly, Participant F also had aspirations in the healthcare field: “I need to finish my class until grade nine or grade 10 because I will take the nurse homecare course. I need to get the job.”

Participant G's future plans take her back to South Sudan so that she can utilize the skills she is developing now to help others at home: “I want to go English to take course first. After school I will take courses. More English courses. After I know English, I want to help some people. My back home they have a lot of people poor, they don't have money. After I will go and find job there and help people. In my country after you know English, you writing, you go there you have your own office! After you have own office, you can do anything! These people they give you money, they help you. What they called? The government! After they give you money, you come to help people. Back home in Sudan after you know reading you can do anything and people like that have a lot of money. But my country, some people they can't put school in their mind. No. They say I'm not care, I'm not care about school. I will do this one, I will go to place, buy stuff, I will do business.”

Participants B, F and G indicated that the classes they are taking now, or hope to be taking soon, are foundational stepping stones in their journeys to obtaining work that is meaningful to them and their futures. In contrast, Participant C's objectives were equally as

meaningful to her, but were rooted more in functionality than employability. As the translator helped her share: “Her goal in life is to get relief from her pain of course. In class, she doesn’t know how to pronounce the long words in English so her goal is to know how to pronounce long words and learn computers. She is saying to be honest I’m not going to school to be a doctor or anything, she just – if she stay home she will be home thinking and worrying and have crazy stress. If she goes to school she can have friends and just get out and away with all that is happening with her.”

Like Participant C, Participant D’s future thoughts were not focused on academic achievements or on obtaining a job that would demand a certain benchmark: “She is saying just it’s been almost six years she has not gone up from one level in class and she is happy about it. She is just saying that her friends they all go up and she is the only one still there and she is OK with that. She doesn’t need any benchmark, she is not going to college.” Instead, the goals she shared were rooted in financial literacy, marketplace navigability and independence. Initially, she expressed that she wanted to improve her English so that she could bargain in stores in Canada. I told her that if she becomes successful in this endeavour she would have to teach me how it is done but that I do not know how well received bargaining would be in Canadian stores. After a group discussion on the oddities of societal differences, she said through the translator: “Ok, then some time you know she sees some new things that she never know what they are and she wish she can ask ‘What is this?’ ‘What does this do?’ Then she could clearly understand and they can explain to her what it is and she can buy - she can utilize her money properly. Sometimes she buys a thing that she doesn’t know and if she even ask them she wouldn’t know what they told her so she wish that she would be equal. If she can do that, she would be the happiest person, she

said. She wishes that she can do shopping by herself without needing anybody. Just go ask someone if she have any questions.”

Listening to the women speak about their future desires was a humbling experience for me as a master’s student, a novice researcher and as someone who is in constant battle with the unknown and in-between. While each participant spoke with a certainty that I would not be able to match when discussing my own future plans, Participant B’s words, while her own, were representative of the collective mind-sets of the group and I found them to be wonderfully powerful: “In my culture we say if one door close, 100 open. Don’t worry. So, I don’t want to block my mind to how can I go to future, what I do? I have a plan. Why I’m thinking right now and block my mind – who knows, you know? I’ll finish my study, then I when I finish my study like English, like high school, then just the school door closes, 100 more open. I will go somewhere.”

### **Summary**

Throughout the interviews, the construction of the participant profiles and during the analysis process, I was struck by the authenticity of the participants’ responses and the sense of optimism that remained strong even when speaking of something as unknown as the future. Their vastly different personalities and unique philosophies acted as beacons that helped me to navigate the complexities of the research process. I hoped to organize this chapter in a way that would emphasize each participant’s stance on education prior to arrival in Canada, their experiences in the classroom, and ultimately where they hope their learning may lead them. In order to do so, the analysis began with an exploration of the influence of past learning experiences and continued through to examine their current attitudes, experiences, barriers and finally the impact of English language and literacy learning on identity and relationships. In the

following and final chapter, these analytical results will be measured in contrast to the information that has been presented in the previous three chapters and considerations for future practice and future research will be identified and discussed.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As Wlodkowski (2008) theorized, “all adults want to make sense of their world, to find meaning and to be effective at what they value – this is what fuels their motivation to learn” (p. x). He also stated that there are more adults pursuing English language learning than ever before (2008) and Li et al. (2012) have identified prior educational attainment to be the principal factor in predicting changes in the rates of second language acquisition for adults. The purpose of this study was to discover what motivated low-literate women refugees to pursue and engage in LINC classes in Calgary despite any challenges and barriers they may be facing, with most participants being non-literate in their mother tongues. In speaking with the women who generously lent their time to this project, several factors were identified, observations were made, and the limitations of the study became apparent, revealing potential areas for future study. Throughout this chapter I will discuss these findings further in contrast with the literature and clearly identify the areas that could potentially benefit from future research.

### Observations

During the preliminary stages of the project and the process of designing the research questions, I decided to pose the question “*What, in your opinion, can be done to further support your learning and the learning of women in similar positions?*” I did so because during the early stages, before I had started interviewing participants, I had envisioned that the women I spoke to would have inspirationally driven statements to share that would help encourage others to pursue classes. I later realized that I had initially been viewing their “positions” through my own eyes and had been forming my own assumptions based on those visions. Li et al. (2012) have stressed the importance of teachers of adult ESL classes cultivating an awareness of the fact that students may have experienced significant challenges and barriers on the road to the classroom, however,



we should not assume we know how they themselves perceive obstacles or what they consider the obstacles to be. When the most recurrent response to questions surrounding how they navigate certain challenges was “I just do” or “I have to. I can’t say no” I came to understand that the participants in this study approached their learning in a way that indicated that it was a fundamental and non-negotiable aspect of their lives and therefore the obstacles were simply part of the process.

Having reviewed the literature surrounding the field of ESL literacy learners prior to speaking with participants, I had imagined that participants may have encountered challenges with institutional and structural barriers such as lack of childcare, lack of transportation, long wait lists for classes or, alternatively, large over crowded classes (Warriner, 2004). As mentioned during the thematic analysis, this did not seem to be the case with this group of women. Although they only represent a very small sample of the whole, the fact that a few of the women actually voiced contrary views encouraged me to look deeper into the supports that Calgary has in place for refugee and immigrant populations that may help facilitate participation in classes. A preliminary investigation revealed that Calgary is the fourth most common place in Canada for newcomers to settle (The City of Calgary, 2018) and as such is host to numerous immigrant serving agencies that are in place to help newcomers adjust to life in the city. As all of the participants mentioned, they had been assigned settlement workers through CCIS who had shared information about accessing LINC classes with them. In Participant B’s case, her settlement worker helped facilitate her transition into classes and assisted her in choosing the program that best fit her needs.

Aside from immigrant serving agencies, there are also numerous social serving agencies in the city as well as programs in place to improve access to city resources for those living within

certain income barriers. As Participant C mentioned, her teacher had told her about the city's Fair Entry Program (The City of Calgary, 2018) and had helped her acquire a Recreation Fee Assistance Card. The Fee Assistance Card allows holders to access various programs and recreational centers in the city for a reduced price. The Fair Entry Program also allows people to acquire subsidized bus passes that are geared to income. These bus passes make using public transportation a more viable and affordable option. Bow Valley College, an institution that facilitates various LINC and ESL classes is located right off the C-train line, which makes it that much more accessible in congruence with the low-income bus passes.

Although the majority of the women in the study had two or more children, with two participants having eight children each, issues with childcare were not widely discussed. In fact, Participant A mentioned that she had had no problems finding childcare before starting her program. Participant G did mention that she waited until her youngest child was school-aged to continue on with classes, however she did not attribute this period of latency specifically to lack of childcare. This could have meant that she stayed home due to other reasons such as personal preference, convenience, or the fulfillment of cultural gender roles. Participant F had also decided to resume classes after her youngest was in school because she was then free to do so but did not mention any particular struggles with finding daycare or even attempting to find a daycare. Some programs offered by agencies like the Calgary Immigrant Women's Association (CIWA) actually include free daycare to those who participate. The fact that some participants were able to attend classes after their children were all in school, suggests that class times for some programs are likely structured with this in mind. While Participant A did mention that she preferred the timing of her lower level classes to the more advanced level classes, she indicated

that class times did vary from morning classes to afternoon and evening classes implying that those who wish to engage in classes may have options more accommodating of their schedules.

Participant H, who is not currently in classes and has two younger children, did not make her decision to remain out of school for the time being based on lack of child care, it was more attributed to the fact that as a citizen, she now has to pay for classes and cannot accommodate the costs at the moment: “I’m telling other women, don’t take citizen! If I need to go Bow Valley I need to pay. That time I just went back to school they say ‘Oh you need to pay for the first classes, this is \$1000 a month. I said ‘Ha!’ I don’t have a penny and you’re telling me to pay money? Where I work? At that time, I work part time. And that what I have I pay for my house and food for my kid.” Her comment suggests that while the city may be equipped to assist immigrant and refugee populations, those who have become citizens may actually experience a lack of assistance and more financial barriers.

Once inside the classroom, the obstacles that participants experienced were more congruent with the literature. As discussed in Chapter Two - the literature review - ESL literacy students straddle the divide between literacy and English language learning and may often find themselves in need of more specialized instruction but lacking these specific resources (Folinsbee, 2007). Li et al. (2012) have also suggested that ESL literacy students should ideally be placed in separate classes from mainstream ESL learners due to the differences in their needs and goals but that the reality is that students of all levels may be studying in one classroom. As evidenced by Participant B’s experience in the classroom, she was working alongside students who had obtained university degrees in their home countries and recognized that she was not progressing as quickly in classes as they were. However, she concluded the statement on a

positive note, sharing that she felt a sense of pride in her ability to participate and contribute in class.

The fact that all participants reported slower progression in reading and writing skills than in oral communication skills is also indicative of their differing needs and expectations in class in comparison to mainstream ESL learners. Due to the fact that they need to develop the basic skills and strategies associated with producing and understanding print, as Li et al. (2012) have stated, ESL literacy students cannot rely on their reading and writing skills in order to learn English. A 2006 study involving ESL Literacy students conducted by Condelli and Wrigley produced results that corresponded with the views of participants in this study with regards to the factors that may affect their progress in class. The study addressed the link between prior education and development in both English language and literacy learning. They too found that participants with more educational experience exhibited more rapid development of these skills in the classroom. They also found that in classrooms where students' native languages were used for clarification, more rapid growth in both reading comprehension and oral communication was demonstrated.

This was reminiscent of Participant C and D's thoughts on how they believed having a translator in class would help them improve both their English language and literacy skills. As Participant D explained, she sometimes learns words in English that she cannot translate into Nepali and therefore has a more difficult time retaining the word due to the inability to associate it with something familiar. Li et al. (2012) have also raised the notion that having an instructor who speaks the same first language as the students would be an ideal situation as they could more readily help students make the connections between their first languages and English; however, they have also noted that this is often not the reality in language classes in Canada.

Aside from having a translator in class, Participant D mentioned that she had trouble finding help outside the classroom and that she believed she would benefit from additional instruction. As demonstrated by Participant C, instructors can be valuable sources of information for their students. Not only did her teacher provide her with the resources to obtain a low-income bus pass and Recreation Fee Assistance Card, she also helped her find a language program closer to her home and more accommodating of her mobility issues. While it is unlikely that students will find classrooms equipped with an instructor that speaks their mother tongue, instructors in LINC classrooms who are versed in the resources that are available to their students, could assist their students through information sharing. There could be tutors in the city who speak a student's first language or, for students like Participant D who feel that they have no one to turn to outside of class, there could be free community led programs specifically for people who are seeking a little extra help.

Another area of the study that corresponded with the literature was in regard to the intrinsic motives and dispositional barriers that participants in my study discussed. As Nussbaum (2004) examined, in the pursuit of education, women in particular may face resistance from external societal structures which can skew their own perceptions of the importance of education. The majority of the participants in this study reported early experiences where there were adverse views on educating females with emphasis being placed not on learning but on the expectations of traditional gender roles. Nussbaum (2004) stated that some women and girls may come to the conclusion that education is not part of the life that they *should* wish to lead. While the women in this study dealt with initial conflicting feelings and opinions, ultimately the majority of them came to value the opportunity to learn later in life and many were driven to

commit to and excel at their studies due to the perceived inequalities that they had previously encountered regarding their educations.

In coming to incorporate the role of student into their lives, in some way each participant experienced a re-definition of self. As Ullman (1997) has postulated, a person's social identity can be greatly impacted by a move to new country and many may experience a restructuring of their daily roles. She gave the example of a parent having to enlist their child's help in activities like paying bills or talking to the landlord because their children had acquired the language faster than they have. This situation was also distinctly described by Participant B who initially relied on her then nine-year-old son to help her fulfil adult or parental tasks such as going to the bank to pay the bills and filling out government or school forms. Participant G also described feelings of panic in watching her children excel beyond her in all three of the primary literacy and language skills: reading, writing, and speaking. However, once again, these experiences did not deter these participants from continuing on with classes, but further fueled their desire to vanquish the metaphorical beasts of English language and literacy learning.

With respect to both the realm of barriers and social identity, it was only later in the study, during the analytical process, that I realized I had stumbled upon an unintentional niche that holds relevance as both an observation and a limitation of the study. While I purposefully sought out female participants within a certain age group, six out of seven women were single: two were widowed, three were separated or divorced and one had never had a partner due to her religious beliefs. Out of the six who were single, five were single parents. When looking at what factors motivated participants to pursue classes, there is a possibility that their status as single women or single parents could have influenced both the tenacity at which they approached classes as well as the sense of urgency they may have felt due to the fact that they now had to

fulfill the role of sole provider. While this identity shift may have driven them to take classes, it also may have enabled them to take classes. As Participant H discussed, an unsupportive spouse was the reason many women in her community had not previously engaged in classes. She explained that often the man would fulfill daily responsibilities such as making money or paying bills, while the woman would be expected to stay home with the children. As single women, the physical barrier of an unsupportive spouse or of the imposition of gender roles was in a sense removed. As Participant B discussed, it was not that her husband discouraged her from studying, but while he was alive she never had to go anywhere alone. She was always accompanied and most of the time her world did not extend outside of her home. When he passed away, she had no choice but to start doing the essential everyday tasks on her own – in a new and unfamiliar country no less. The one participant who is married is Participant G and in contrast to Participant H's experience with men in her community, Participant G's husband was reportedly very supportive of her taking classes and he assisted her in finding various programs.

### **Limitations**

As mentioned, the fact that the women in the study, excluding one participant, were single can be seen as a limitation. As the study is looking at factors that encourage and motivate women to persist in classes, although it was unintentional, these women in particular may have been compelled by or enabled by a factor that women in relationships may not be able to relate to. Women in this study may have had less choice due to the increased necessity of their situations but they could have also had more opportunity. This phenomenon narrowed the diversity of my study's participants even further, as I was already working with a fairly specific demographic.

Another limitation to the study would then be the relatively small group of participants who participated in this study. I intended to gather information from four to six participants as I was working with a narrative framework and seeking substance over quantity. Although in the end I interviewed seven women, in the grand scheme of things and in witnessing the diversity of both experience and background even within this small group of participants, I feel as though the impact of the study would increase with the number of participants and the varied responses. In addition, the smaller number of participants narrowed the global perspective, as my participants originated from only three different countries: South Sudan, Bhutan and Pakistan. That is not to say that participants who were from the same country did not report significant differences in their views, understandings or upbringings; it *was* the distinct variances that lead me to believe that a more comprehensive perspective could be achieved by broadening the global reach.

Other limitations of the study include the participants' familiarity with me personally or by extension and the nature of the desired demographic itself. Due to the fact that I chose to recruit through word-of-mouth, some of my participants had worked with me in one capacity or another or had been introduced to me through people I had already established relationships with. Although I was not working with the participants in any capacity during the study and had not worked with them in a substantial amount of time, the previous relationships or second-degree associations could have influenced what participants decided to share with me. While this can be seen as a limitation it can also be acknowledged as an advantage. Having previously acquired a sense of familiarity with each other may have made it easier to gain participant trust and establish a rapport with them and this trust was most likely a fundamental factor in me being invited into their homes.

As the desired demographic was ESL literacy learners, it was understood from the



beginning that I may encounter some language barriers even though I intended on recruiting women who had a basic working knowledge of spoken English. While most of the participants did have a basic working knowledge, I did use a translator for some of the interviews. When working with the translator, I noticed that, for obvious reasons, the participants were much more comfortable talking through and to the translator and could express themselves more freely in their own languages. While I do believe I still managed to obtain the richness of their narratives it would have been that much more powerful to experience the fullness of their stories first hand. On the other hand, in using a translator I was able to speak with women whose opinions may otherwise not have been considered due to the language barrier and who are at the core of the demographic.

### **Implications for Future Practice**

Throughout the study implications for future practice emerged and acted as a constant presence on the margins. Some implications that have already been mentioned include the possibility for instructors to gain a more thorough awareness of available resources that may benefit their students. This corresponds with the notion of developing more specific learner supports, whether it be in the classroom or, awareness of what exists outside of the classroom. This could include more one-on-one help, increased acknowledgement of the possibility that ESL literacy students may be falling behind in the reading and writing portions of the lessons and implementing strategies to meet and address this possibility.

It has been acknowledged that teachers in LINC and ESL classes are often working with large class numbers and varied levels of ability and may not have time to get to know all of their students. However, a general awareness of the culture of the classroom could aid in providing a space where learners feel their differences and their competencies are being considered.

Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995) developed a framework for culturally responsive teaching that was made to be holistic in nature and responsive to cultural diversity. The framework consisted of four principle motivational conditions that could benefit any classroom with adult learners: establishing inclusion, developing attitude, enhancing meaning, and engendering competence. Through this framework they theorized that learner motivation could be enhanced by incorporating these four factors into lessons.

Another way to help ensure that ESL literacy learners are receiving valuable instruction would be to ensure that instructors themselves are equipped to deal with the unique needs of this demographic. As indicated by the literature it seems that instructors in the field may be lacking resources, training, and recognition, while also dealing with large mixed level classes. Specialized training to prepare instructors for working with this demographic, in conjunction with a more thorough understanding of the challenges that ESL literacy learners potentially face, may enable instructors to prepare materials that work to alleviate, as opposed to exacerbate, areas of difficulty.

### **Future Research**

Taking into consideration that this study focused primarily on those currently in classes, the most apparent route for future research would be to engage in a study of low-literacy women who are not currently in classes. Having come to a very basic understanding of the supports that are in place in Calgary to help facilitate participation in classes, understanding why women are not engaging would help level the playing field for this particular demographic. As this study only involved the experiences of women, a study of men who are classified as ESL literacy learners and their experiences with education could also provide a more encompassing narrative

of the experiences of ESL literacy learners as a whole, as would a study where the participants were more diverse in their family dynamics.

Having discussed the various roles of ESL instructors and the potential directions that ESL literacy instruction could go in, it is important then to acknowledge potential areas of research involving instructors of students in this demographic. A preliminary search for information regarding ESL literacy teachers and their experiences in the classroom as well as resources for these teachers results in what is largely an outdated foundation of literature with the most immediate information seemingly situated in the early to late 90's. As an instructor's job is both to facilitate learning and to provide supports and resources for their students, it would then be beneficial to work on bridging the gap between what instructors know and what they would like to know in order to better their practice. Examining what they believe their perceived limitations are regarding training, resources and professionalism within the field as well how they perceive and address challenges like class size and classroom dynamics, could allow for a more holistic understanding of where and how the field of ESL literacy instruction could be improved.

## **Conclusion**

For this research study, my incentive was rooted in the pursuit of coming to understand what leading factors encourage and motivate refugee women with little to no prior formal education, who face numerous and multidimensional barriers to learning, to persist in LINC classes in Calgary. The women in the study raised several factors that were both measurable and immeasurable in nature. Returning once again to how literacy has been conceptualized in Canada, as not only the ability to read, write, understand, and communicate through multiple modes in diverse contexts but also the ability to "achieve his or her goals, develop his or her

knowledge and potential and participate fully in community and wider society” (Richmond, Robinson & Sachs-Israel, 2008, p. 18), is to recognize the fundamental elements that have guided these participants.

In hearing their stories, it became evident that these women were not simply motivated to engage in classes but were intrinsically invested in their learning. Whether their investment was rooted in defying the voices of inequalities past or in fulfilling a lifelong desire, or simply in wanting to expand their social and personal networks, each participant had something they wanted to achieve in their pursuit. An insight of equal importance was that not only did participants believe that they had something to gain from classes, they also believed that they had something to lose in not participating. In her theories on the connections between identity and investment in learning, Norton (2013) has come to recognize that those who do invest in learning a new language do so with the belief that they will gain valuable symbolic and material resources. She has classified symbolic resources as friendship, education, and the benefits of the language itself with material resources being the more tangible rewards like money and real estate. Together these resources influence a learner’s cultural capital which in turn influences their future desires and sense of self.

For the women in this study, the desire to pursue English language and literacy learning was commensurate with the desire to increase their cultural capitals. Participants like B, G and F saw English language and literacy learning as a foundational step in their future educational endeavors while Participant C sought the social benefits and Participant D connected learning more with material resources. Participant H associated learning not only with the fulfillment of basic needs but with the attainment of a more comfortable livelihood and Participant A advocated for education as a key component of leading a self-sufficient life. Participants

endeavored to find better jobs, achieve financial stability, build a better future for themselves and their families, take advantage of opportunities not previously available to them and to not only integrate into their communities and the wider society but to participate in all that was offered. Just as they were invested in their learning, they were also invested in developing their societal memberships. Taking into consideration that these women came to Canada as refugees from countries experiencing turbulence and instability with some having reported spending years in refugee camps, they have experienced a sense of displacement which may make their desire to cultivate a sense of belonging that much stronger.

When more clearly illustrated, the factors that motivated these participants are likely not so different from factors that motivate traditional and non-traditional learners alike to pursue further education. However, traditional learners, being those who have general educational backgrounds, often have a clearer path and a more thorough understanding of how to engage in classes as they have acquired the foundational skills to do so. Although the path may be longer and more winding for ESL literacy students who lack that basic foundational knowledge and who are not only learning a new language but acquiring basic literacy skills simultaneously, participants in this study have noted in various ways that the value of the pursuit, for them, has outweighed the challenges.

Once again, as Wlodkowski (2008) has stated, adults interpret competency as the ability to become effective at what they value. Even Participant D, who reluctantly approached the idea of engaging in classes came to realize that the experience held significant value and just as “I just do” or “My English bad” were common phrases encountered throughout the study, so was “I need it” in regard to why the women had engaged in classes at all. This value was in large part realized through the application of what they were learning to real life contexts, through

receiving feedback from family, peers, classmates and instructors and through noticing improvements in their own abilities – whether it was in recognizing words on a page that had meant nothing to them previously or in being able to go into a store and ask a question.

In approaching this study narratively, I hoped to emphasize the voices of members of an understudied demographic in order to gain an authentic and detailed perspective into their journeys from their home countries to Canada to the classroom. In sharing their experiences, successes, challenges and goals, they provided valuable insight into what motivates them to pursue, engage in and persist in their classes in Calgary and in doing so they verified the importance and relevancy of the pursuit. Their resourcefulness and abilities to adapt were repeatedly demonstrated as was the ability to acknowledge and accept the challenges that accompany English language and literacy learning. While there is still much ground to cover in the field of ESL literacy I hope that this study lends relevance to others of its kind in an attempt to improve understanding and promote transparency into a group of learners who have a lot to say but may lack the platforms to do so.

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