LINCing Literacies:

Literacy practices among Somali refugee women

in the LINC program

by

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Abstract

This thesis investigated the literacy practices of a group of Somali refugee women participating in Canada’s federally-funded ESL program LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada). Assuming that many Somali women arrive in Canada with limited experience with print literacy, and so encounter novel challenges in their settlement and learning experiences, I interviewed 4 Somali women about their uses and perceptions of the value of literacy in their lives and their experiences of learning to read and write in Canada. A cross-case analysis revealed how social forces constrain and enable the women’s literacy practices, shaping both how they access and use literacy, as well as the ways in which they understand and value literacy. Implications are outlined for ESL educators, researchers and policy makers.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Background

In recent years, Canada’s changing immigration policies have led to an increase in the number of refugees arriving, particularly from countries in East Africa. Many of these newcomers have limited experience with print literacy as a result of coming from primarily oral societies or due to barriers to education caused by conflict and displacement. Adult refugees from these circumstances are a unique set of learners with special needs and considerations. Many of these learners attend classes in the LINC program, Canada’s federally-funded ESL program for adults. Evidence of an increase in the number of ESL literacy learners can be seen in the development of specialized LINC Literacy classes. Such classes fill previous gaps in service for these learners and account for the fact that adult ESL literacy learners require focused time and instruction on concepts of reading and writing with particular reference to settlement and integration needs. Previously, ESL literacy learners might be served (in more limited ways) in either mainstream ESL classes for literate learners or in adult literacy classes for native speakers of English. Neither stream could hope to address the unique educational and settlement needs of ESL literacy learners. Such adult learners have the two-fold challenge of learning English and mastering print literacy, many for the first time in their lives. However, as research has noted, despite their increasing numbers, this population of learners is severely under-researched and therefore little understood.

As of yet, there is little understanding of the literacy development and practices of ESL
literacy learners. Moreover, this population has been seldom been addressed in the literature published within the framework of New Literacy Studies (e.g. Barton, 1994; Gee, 1996; Street, 1995), within which scholars view literacy as inherently socially-embedded and multiple, distancing themselves from traditional views that portray literacy as a static, autonomous skill. As literacy in this context is understood as a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991), it is believed to constrain and enable one’s access to social institutions, resources and power. If literacy is in fact multiple, we must ask how these learners use and value various literacies including English print literacies, home language literacies and technological literacies, and how they understand the value of these literacies in the communities in which they are settling. Moreover, if literacy is socially-embedded and constructed, it is particularly worth investigating its negotiation by marginal groups, such as refugee ESL literacy learners, who face complex social, cultural, linguistic and economic obstacles in Canada.

*Research questions and rationale*

My undertaking this research was a direct result of my work with Somali learners in the LINC program over the past few years. During this time, I have come to know a number of newcomer Somali women both as students and as friends, and have had the opportunity to share in on some of their experiences with and insights on literacy. Although I do not have first-hand knowledge of what it is like to navigate a highly text-based society as an adult with little experience with print literacy, I have seen many women do so with grace and unwavering resolve. Despite having never lived in such a highly literate society before, these women share a
strong belief that literacy and schooling was the path to a more stable life in Canada for themselves and their families. Nevertheless, I noted that their experiences navigating literacy in Canada varied widely from learner to learner and, inspired by recent research in literacy studies, I saw an opportunity to address my observations through formal research.

For this study, I set out to investigate how a group of adult refugee ESL learners use and value literacy. I have chosen to concentrate my attention on the Somali community in southern Ontario for a number of reasons. First of all, the Somali population as a whole is on the rise in Canada; Somalia is on the list of top ten countries of origin for the nation’s refugee program (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2007). Due to the relatively recent introduction of writing in Somalia, coupled with civil unrest and displacement that limits educational opportunities, rates of illiteracy are high among this population. It is estimated that in Somalia 49.7% of men and 25.8% of women are literate (CIA World Factbook, 2001). While there are no data on the specific literacy rates of Somali refugees, it is likely that this gender discrepancy extends to the diaspora population. Since the challenges associated with limited literacy skills then disproportionately affect Somali women, I have chosen to focus my research on female learners. Moreover, because my own personal connections to the Somali community are largely through a centre for immigrant women, I have established relationships with many Somali women, which facilitated the research process.

This thesis is based on case studies of four Somali refugee women, all of whom are students in the federally-funded adult ESL program known as LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada). In undertaking this study, I set out to address the following questions:
1) How do these learners use and value literacy?
2) What do their literacy practices tell us about the nature of literacy?

By studying the experiences of women from this unique population, I hope to shed light on the nature of literacy, which is increasingly understood as inherently multiple and socially-embedded. Gaining an understanding of how these learners use and value various literacies, and how their literacy practices reflect and shape their access to social institutions should in turn help to inform more relevant and engaging instructional practices that speak to learners’ current needs and future goals. Only by tapping into the purposes of literacy in the participants’ lives can educators hope to make education a more empowering and meaningful experience for both learners and instructors. Therefore, the goals of my investigating the literacy practices of these women are two-fold: firstly, to contribute to the academic discussion of the nature of literacy and, secondly, to derive implications that can inform educational practices and policies.

**Theoretical assumptions**

My research was informed by an extensive body of scholarly works outlined in the literature review in Chapter 2, but to orient this discussion, I first present some basic theoretical assumptions that underlie my work, particularly in regards to my understanding of literacy.

*Literacy as social and multiple*

The view of literacy assumed in this research is informed largely by what is known as the New Literacy Studies (NLS) movement (e.g. Barton, 1994; Gee, 1996; Street, 1995). Scholars
within the NLS challenge conventional views which portray literacy as a singular, autonomous, static skill to be acquired and applied. Failure to acquire adequate literacy skills has traditionally been viewed as an individual problem and a serious issue that leads to poverty, social exclusion, and limited access to institutions and resources. Hull (1997, p. 11) argued that these views, common to popular discourse on literacy, tend “to underestimate and devalue human potential and mis-characterize literacy as a curative for problems that literacy alone cannot solve.” Scholars within the NLS counter these traditional views and instead posit that literacy is ideological, recognizing a more dialectical relationship between literacy and social relations. Literacy here is understood not as autonomous and singular, but rather as inherently social and multiple. When investigating literacy among particular groups through ethnographies, NLS scholars use the terms literacy events and literacy practices (Street, 1984) to frame their findings on the diverse uses of reading and writing across domains, mediums and languages. While literacy events refer to actual instances of using reading and writing, literacy practices are more wide ranging, including participants’ literacy events as well as how they value literacy and how literacy is constructed in their communities. In my analysis, I make use of the concepts of literacy events (uses of literacy) and literacy practices (valuing of literacy) with this understanding in mind. Equally important to note is that while literacy within the NLS may refer to written, visual, or oral forms of communication, for the purposes of my study, the focus is on English print literacy.

In accordance with a view of literacy as socially-embedded and multiple, as developed within the NLS, I share the conception of literacy expressed in Geronimo et al. (2001, p. 7) as
“the many ways in which people use and understand print communication...based on a sociocultural perspective where literacy is embedded in, not separate from, other settlement and integration needs.” I acknowledge that newcomers to Canada who are acquiring English language skills have a unique investment in literacy, and that their settlement and integration process both shape and are shaped by their literacy practices. Moreover, as ethnic, linguistic, religious and political minorities, the participants’ literacy practices may both challenge and be constrained by inequitable power relations. Like Bigelow (2007), I consider English language literacy to be a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991) in the sense that, particularly for newcomers, literacy skills are needed to navigate institutions, systems, services and resources.

*Critical pedagogy*

My understanding of literacy in this research has also been informed by literature in the field of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogical perspectives are chiefly concerned with the role of power relations in teaching and learning contexts. Broadly, educational institutions, their employees and their curricula are posited to reflect societal power relations. With this understanding, teaching is never a neutral act, but rather always challenges or reinforces inequality. I take the stance that especially when working with groups who are traditionally marginalized on the basis of class, race, language, religion or ability, educators have a responsibility to acknowledge the inequitable relations at play outside of the classroom and to work against such patterns in the classroom. Educators and learners are then agents of social change engaged in dialogue and working towards the “collaborative creation of power”
Literacy instruction in particular has been addressed by critical pedagogy scholars such as Paulo Freire, who is considered the founder of the field. For Freire, literacy instruction must go beyond simply “reading the word” and acquiring technical, decontextualized knowledge, and instead needs to move towards “reading the world”, which involves understanding the larger social functions and relations that mediate texts (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Just as recent scholars in NLS argue that literacy must be understood as a social phenomenon, Freire and other critical pedagogy scholars and practitioners agree that literacy instruction must do its part to acknowledge the role of power relations inside and outside of the classroom. Following from this, an analysis of the literacy practices of newcomers must take into account how societal structures such as education systems and settlement policies both constrain and enable, and are sites of both domination and resistance (Giroux, 1981). Moreover, such an analysis must consider how literacy practices themselves both reflect and affect power relations, for instance, by acknowledging how literacy skills can constrain one's access to particular systems, but also how those systems can constrain one's access to literacy skills. While lacking literacy skills may not cause the social problems or create the inequitable conditions, I nevertheless understand that “access to literacy can be a significant, instrumental force in broad-based social change” (Luria, 2006, p. 239).

With the understanding of literacy outlined above and informed by works in NLS and critical pedagogy now established, I continue on to my literature review in Chapter 2, which further details the research that shaped the current study.
Chapter 2

Literacy, settlement, and learning

In this chapter, I review the published literature relevant to the proposed study in order first establish what is known in the field and then to highlight gaps in the literature that serve to justify my study. Given that this study focuses on a highly specific context and population (Somali refugee women in the LINC program in an Ontario city), about which little academic research has been conducted, my review of the literature serves to synthesize the research done in related areas in education, second language acquisition, literacy learning, immigration and settlement, gender, ethnicity and identity. I have organized the sections of the review as follows: the LINC program, the Somali community, ESL literacy, literacy studies, immigrant and refugee literacy practices, settlement and language learning, and gender and language learning.

The LINC program

In Canada, LINC is the federally-funded adult ESL program for newcomers. The intention of the program is to provide “basic language instruction in one of Canada’s official languages to adult immigrants ...so that they may acquire the necessary language skills to integrate into Canadian society” (Bettencourt et al., 2003, p. xiv). Prior to its introduction in 1991, language instruction for adults had also been federally-funded, but was highly localized and inconsistent in terms of program delivery and curriculum (Murray, 2005). In its current form, LINC follows a standardized curriculum and assessment framework known as the Canadian Language
Benchmarks (CLB) and subsequent guidelines which serve as a practical model for classroom instruction. This standardization and related additional services such as onsite childminding, transportation assistance, and part-time and home study options are marked improvements over previous language programs. However, while classes are free to landed immigrants and status refugees, the program continues to receive criticism for its eligibility criteria that limits access to classes. LINC is not open to pre-status refugees (claimants/asylum-seekers), nor is it open to those who have attained citizenship, which excludes a great number of those in need of language education (Burnaby, 2002).

LINC also differs from previous language programs for adult newcomers to Canada in that now the focus is on broader settlement and integration needs, rather than on citizenship or specific labour training. Early documents about LINC noted that it would "make a range of more flexible options accessible to a greater number of immigrants, regardless of their labour market intentions" (Employment and Immigration Canada, 1991, cited in Cleghorn, 2000, p. 43). While such a focus has opened up language training to many women who would have been excluded under the previous labour-oriented ESL programs, LINC has nevertheless been singled out for failing to realize its goals of promoting full participatory integration of all newcomers. Firstly, the program has been criticized for only providing “basic” training that is not adequate for full integration (Baril, 1993; Hart & Cumming, 1997). Currie and Cray (2004) noted the contradiction in the government’s language policy which asserts that “basic” language skills are essential for successful settlement. They argued that only a basic understanding of an official language is not sufficient for full settlement and participation in Canadian society. Moreover,
Cray and Currie asserted that LINC policy itself underestimates the high literacy demands of Canadian society and undervalues the importance of teaching reading and writing skills. Not only is literacy portrayed as relatively unimportant in the policy, but it is conceptualized as autonomous and static, rather than as multiple and social. The authors pointed out that many writing tasks suggested in the CLB guidelines are so trivial and decontextualized (e.g., copying pronunciation keys from the dictionary, practicing punctuation) that they do not capture “the ways that language skills are integrated and interrelated in real language use” (p. 58). The consequences of failing to provide adequate language preparation are severe when considering that the right to language education is “connected to the need to ensure equal opportunities of access to socially valuable skills and knowledge that are the key for achievement of social prestige, economic well-being and professional self-fulfillment” (Rubio-Marín, 2003, p. 69). Although LINC policy expresses a similar valuing of the importance of language learning for settlement and civic participation, Currie and Cray argued that the program requires that learners develop “such low levels of proficiency [that] they cannot be expected to enter fully into the activities of the nation” (p. 61).

Recent studies have noted not only contradictions within LINC policies but also a disconnect between LINC policy and classroom practice, specifically when considering the policy’s emphasis on learner-centredness, adult education principles, and authentic language, which often get overlooked by instructors. Looking at teachers’ responses to curriculum guidelines, Cray’s (1997, p. 34) study of a LINC provider in Ottawa found that:

Like all curriculum documents of this type, the LINC curriculum appears to have great
authority, coming as it does from an external source and seemingly comprehensive in its coverage. In the sense that it was both sanctioned and authoritative, it could be, and perhaps was expected to be, used by teachers to structure their daily classes. The curriculum, for all its weight and authority, was of little importance to the teachers. Importantly, Cleghorn’s (2000) institutional ethnography of a LINC program supported Cray’s finding that many instructors at small social service organizations have little pedagogical support and therefore there is little emphasis on following the guidelines. Other studies have found that while teachers sometimes refer to the guidelines, they largely follow a curriculum of their own design and oftentimes fail to apply the adult education principles present in the LINC guidelines (Khalideen, 1998; Thomson & Derwing, 2004). Since such research shows that LINC guidelines are often not reflected in classroom activities, more qualitative studies of particular programs and classrooms are necessary to determine what kind of curriculum is present in LINC classes. In regards to literacy, while the LINC curriculum states that the program seeks to address students’ “real world” language needs, it is worth investigating if and how LINC programs actually practice this aim and if students in turn feel prepared for out-of-school literacy demands.

The Somali community

Somalia, a predominantly Muslim country with clan-based social structures, is the cited homeland of an increasing number of new refugees to Canada. Refugees from Somalia first began arriving in Canada in 1988 after the collapse of government in the north-western region
of Somalia, followed by the outbreak of the civil war in the southern part of the country in 1991. From its beginnings in Canada, the Somali community was marked with struggle due to language and literacy barriers, lack of traditional support systems, cultural and religious differences, discrimination and, importantly, limited access to government resources due to asylum-seeker status (Affi, 2004). In recent years some additional support has been implemented for pre-status refugees, but restrictive policies in the 1990s contributed to a shaky start for the Somali community in Canada. It has been frequently noted that Somalis are among the most disadvantaged racial and ethnic minorities in the country due to a large number of social factors (Opoku-Dapaah, 1995). As cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities adjusting to a radically new culture, Somalis face an uphill battle as they struggle to adapt to Canadian society. Research on Somali refugees in Canada has found that the community faces social exclusion, overcrowded housing and high rates of unemployment (Affi, 2004; Danso, 2002; Israelite, Herman, Ahmed Alim, Abdullahi Mohamed & Khan, 1999; Opoku-Dapaah, 1995). The community has also drawn attention from educators in Ontario as research suggests that Somali youth have high rates of academic underachievement and dropout from schools (Brown, 2006).

Somali women in particular face a number of unique challenges in adapting to life in Canada. For one, many Somali women lost their husbands during the conflict in Somalia. This, compounded with a high divorce rate among Somalis in Canada, has led to a large proportion of female-headed households. In fact, it is estimated that most Somali women in Canada are single mothers and sole-providers for their families (Affi, 1997). Furthermore, due to the
casualties and separation caused by the conflict, many Somali women lack the familial support systems that they had back home, which serves to further limit their access to language education due to increased financial and childcare pressures. As refugees, many Somali women also face legal restrictions that limit their access to employment and educational opportunities that would provide them with increased access to linguistic resources (Israelite et al., 1999). Moreover, the especially low rates of literacy among Somali women complicate English language learning, given that they must simultaneously acquire both English language and print literacy skills (Hart & Cumming, 1997). Below I will outline the special challenges presented by these circumstances.

**ESL literacy**

The educational experiences of Somali refugees are unique in that many from this population have arrived in Canada with limited experience with print literacy. For some, this may have been a result of interrupted schooling due to conflict and displacement. Furthermore, up until recently, Somali society had been a largely oral culture; the Somali language had no written form until 1972 when it was adapted to the Latin alphabet. Prior to that, English had been the official language of school and government, Italian the language of higher education, and Arabic the language of religious study. Today Somali is the official language of school and government. While educational and religious domains are infused with print, home life in Somali culture is still principally oral (Masny & Ghahremani-Ghajar, 1999). Furthermore, due to the government collapse in 1991 and ongoing civil conflict, access to education within the
country has been severely compromised. Many refugees were displaced in various countries prior to arriving in Canada and as a result had limited and/or interrupted schooling opportunities. The maintenance of oral culture coupled with restricted access to education has then meant that literacy rates in the country remain low. As of 2001, only 25.8% of women and 49.7% of men were literate (CIA World Factbook, 2001).

Adult English language learners with limited print literacy – commonly called ESL literacy learners – are a unique set of learners with special needs and considerations. Their limited familiarity with concepts of literacy presents an added obstacle to the settlement experience. Not only must they learn English, but they also must learn to read and write for the first time in their lives in a largely unfamiliar language. In this way, these learners must travel “a journey twice as far” (Gunn, 2003). These learners require special support that is not generally provided by traditional ESL classes or literacy classes for native speakers. While the lack of familiarity with the English alphabet would clearly alienate these learners in a mainstream ESL class, there are a number of other skills that instructors take for granted with literate learners. Learners may need to be made aware of conventions of literacy that would not need to be made explicit in other circumstances. For those least familiar with print, learners may first need to understand that alphabetic print forms represent message and meaning, that two-dimensional pictures represent concrete objects, and that English print moves from left-to-right and top-to-bottom (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2000). Many aspects of reading and writing are entirely novel for these learners, from writing on lines and the use of page numbers to writing one’s name on school papers and the use of capital letters and punctuation. Even the
inconsistent use of typefaces on class materials can cause confusion. For example, learners may be familiar with “♂” but not “a” or “♀” and not “g”. Collier (1987, 1989) notes that acquiring academic writing skills can take many years longer for those with limited experience with print literacy than for highly literate learners. As Barber (2003) pointed out, even as learners from high oracy backgrounds move beyond literacy programs into mainstream ESL classes, the challenge of mastering writing conventions often halts their progress. Observing this, Barber oversaw the creation of a special-focus writing class for Horn of Africa learners who struggled with word formation (non-standard spelling capitalization), sentence formation (long sentences, indirectness) and organization (repetition, similarity to speech). Without such focused instruction, Barber argued that these learners may never catch up to their peers.

Other scholars have also made suggestions for creating a productive learning environment for these learners. Bell and Burnaby (1984) and Auerbach (1992) contend that effective initial instruction must focus on oral language skills, build on prior knowledge, incorporate relevant and authentic language uses including technology, provide L1 scaffolding where necessary, and critically acknowledge the inequitable power relations outside of the classroom that may limit the learners’ access to power and resources. Scholars like Cummins (2001) have also advocated for the benefits of incorporating L1 skills into the ESL classroom with literacy learners as a linguistic and cognitive tool, and as a means to affirm student identity and increase literacy engagement. Literacy engagement (Guthrie, 2004) here refers to the enjoyment, intrinsic desire to read, and being “active and energized in reading” (p. 4) that characterize the orientations and attitudes of people with high levels of literacy achievement.
According to Cummins, one way to trigger literacy engagement is to maximize on learner’s prior knowledge. For ESL literacy learners, this would mean using their L1 to build literacy skills.

Despite their increasing numbers, this population of ESL literacy learners have been largely ignored in published research (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004). In many ways, ESL literacy presents a grey area between standard ESL for literate immigrants and adult literacy programs for native speakers of English. It is difficult to assess how many learners from this population are currently being served by publicly-funded ESL classes, family literacy programs, faith-based organizations, libraries, community colleges or adult literacy centres (Florez & Terrill, 2003). In Ontario, for example, the LINC program offers an ESL literacy program, however, many learners instead receive instruction from non-ESL adult literacy programs (Geronimo, Folinsbee & Goveas, 2001). While the existence of specialized programs for these learners is evidence of a growing ESL literacy population, as of yet there is still little understanding of the literacy development and practices of these learners since research with this population is scarce and individual situations vary greatly.

*Literacy studies*

In recent decades, research in the field of literacy has been experiencing a major shift with respect to understandings of reading and writing. Whereas traditional views have seen literacy as an autonomous skill set to be acquired and applied, increasingly scholars and educators have begun to regard literacy as inherently multiple and social. Scholars advocating this conception of literacy form part of what is known as the New Literacy Studies (NLS)
movement (e.g. Barton, 1994; Gee, 1996; Street, 1995). Street's (1984) book *Literacy in Theory and Practice* marked an important turning point in changing understanding of literacy. He showed through an in-depth analysis of literacy practices in an Iranian community that conceptions of print vary widely from context to context as they are embedded in social institutions and practiced in unique ways by different social and cultural groups. Street argued that, because they are embedded in a particular social context, literacy practices are not autonomous but ideological, in that they reflect and reproduce societal power relations. This view of literacy has been influenced by social reproduction models (i.e. Bourdieu, 1991; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) which argue that social and cultural capital are keys to accessing power, status, and privilege in societies. Social capital here refers to “intangible social resources based on social relationships that one can draw upon to facilitate action and to achieve goals” (Coleman, 1990, p. 302). Conversely, cultural capital refers to a wide range of privileged types of knowledge, skills, preferences, and understandings that are passed down through generations. With this understanding, social institutions reproduce the culture and discourses of dominant groups, which in turn serve to shape participants’ access to power and resources. Consequently, those who do not take up dominant discourses may struggle to access social and material benefits. In this sense, literacy can be understood as a type of cultural capital in that literacy skills are needed to navigate various institutions and systems, and lacking literacy skills can limit one’s access to such resources.

However, as noted by Luke (2003), poststructuralist frameworks move beyond ideas of a simple linguistic hegemony towards instead recognizing the role of individual agency and
exploring the complex relationships between language, power, literacy and schooling. Many NLS scholars seek to unveil the ways in which literacy practices, including common beliefs about literacy and illiteracy, both reflect and reproduce inequitable power relations. Under traditional autonomous views of literacy, those deemed “illiterate” have been considered disadvantaged because they lack literacy (Lankshear, 1987). Rather than recognizing how various forms of oppression work in tandem to limit an individual’s access to power and resources, illiteracy has been viewed as an individual problem. Street (2001, p. 7) observed that literacy research has a task to do in “making visible the complexity of local, everyday literacy practices and challenging dominant stereotypes and myopia.” When conducting research with traditionally marginalized groups, this task may include, for example, challenging the public discourse that parents in these groups are unable and unwilling to contribute to their children’s academic success due to their own “illiteracy” and lack of understanding of the importance of education. In this spirit, NLS scholars continue to expose the often hidden dialogue between literacy and power, asking whose literacies count, how literacy is used and valued by diverse groups, and how social structures like schools can reproduce or challenge inequitable power relations.

Scholars within the NLS stress not only the social and ideological nature of literacy, but also its inherent complexity and multiplicity. Recent studies of literacy practices have demonstrated the complexity of local or vernacular literacies practiced across multiple life domains. For instance, Barton and Hamilton (1998) unveiled how one British community used various literacy practices for a wide range of purposes including managing the household, learning, relaxing, reflecting and communicating with others. Importantly, each instance of
literacy was not autonomous, but connected to a broader function in the participants’ lives. Texts and purposes for reading and writing can then be seen as tied to the sociocultural and sociolinguistic context within which they take place. Moreover, uses of literacy in different domains require separate skills sets and understandings. Within this framework of literacy as multiple, school-based literacies are only one kind of practice, and they may or may not align with out-of-school literacies. However, as Street (1993) argued, it is more often than not school-based literacy that defines what counts.

The New London Group (1996) used the term multiliteracies to refer to multimodal forms of communication in a technological age, as well as the situation of increasing linguistic and cultural diversity due to local diversity and global connectedness. An understanding of literacy as multiple has particular implications for educators working with minority language groups, whose literacy practices, like their wider cultural practices, are often rendered illegitimate and subordinate. The New London Group (1996, p. 88) noted:

> Classroom teaching and curriculum have to engage with students' own experiences and discourses, which are increasingly defined by cultural and subcultural diversity and the different language backgrounds and practices that come with this diversity.

If the marginalization of culturally and linguistically diverse individuals is perpetuated by failing to meet their out-of-school needs, it can then be counteracted by having their own needs, experiences, and discourses acknowledged in schools. As argued by Barton and Hamilton (2000, p. 8), literacy instruction in particular must be “purposeful and embedded in broader social
goals and cultural purposes.” An understanding of learners’ uses of literacy in the community can then serve to inform more relevant and authentic curriculum and classroom instruction, which can in turn disrupt “the almost perfect correlation between marginal status and academic underachievement in literacy” (Purcell-Gates, 2007, p. 198).

Scholars such as Street (1995) and Luke (2003) have advocated for ethnographic field work in diverse communities in order to illuminate the deeply complex and social-embedded nature of literacy and to inform instructional practices. There is a need, they argue, to assess everyday literacy practices and demands in order to determine what would be effective and appropriate instruction. That is, because literacy is socially constructed and its uses vary widely between different contexts, it is impossible to posit a singular model for effective literacy instruction. Only by discovering the meanings and uses of literacy of individual learners can educators hope to foster “the development and delivery of literacy instruction that is taken up and actualized by students” (Purcell-Gates, 2007, p. 215). With this in mind, below I outline some of the relevant studies that have recently been conducted in this vein, particularly among immigrant and refugee populations.

Immigrant and refugee literacy practices

In light of understanding literacy as social and multiple, there has been a call over the past two decades to investigate local practices of literacy in various contexts. Several studies of immigrant and refugee communities highlight the complex linguistic and identity negotiations that emerge when learners confront literacy in a new context. Early to adopt a view of literacy
as social and multiple, Weinstein-Shr (1993) presented a study of the literacy practices of two
Hmong men who were refugees to Philadelphia. Her investigation revealed how the strong
clanship connections in the Hmong community both shaped their literacy practices and were
transformed by the introduction of literacy. The two men navigated and used literacy in very
different ways, which were tied to their social roles within their community and clan. This study
insightfully highlighted the dialogic relationship between social relations and literacy practices.
In a similar vein, Klassen (1991) explored the literacy practices of Spanish-speaking newcomers
to Canada, bringing attention to the specific life domains that characterize their uses of literacy.
His study highlighted both how the participants successfully navigated literacy demands in
various domains and how literacy for them was associated with feelings of inadequacy,
exclusion and lack of access. Klassen called into focus not only the inherently social nature of
literacy, but also its complexity and multiplicity across languages and contexts.

More recently, Perry (2007) investigated conceptions and uses of literacy by a group of
Sudanese refugees in the United States. By surveying both school- and community-based uses
of literacies through observation, interviews and document analysis, the researcher uncovered
varied use of English, home language and technological literacies to meet the learners’
academic, economic, social, religious and political goals and needs. It is worth noting that the
participants were adolescent male and were highly literate before arriving in North America.
Nevertheless, the findings point to the complex and socially-embedded nature of reading and
writing practices and highlight the need to further investigate the uses and purposes of literacy
in refugee communities.
There have been a few studies dealing specifically with the literacy practices of Somali refugees. For instance, Masny and Ghahremani-Ghajar (1999) presented a study of Somali-Canadian children, investigating how the knowledge the students brought to school was consistently devalued in activities around reading and writing in the classroom. This, the researchers contend, contributes to low levels of achievement and should be rectified by concerted efforts to include the learners’ knowledge and voices into the classroom. Similarly, Arthur (2003) documented how Somali girls, who were learning to read and write in English before doing so in Somali, negotiated literacy in one setting in England. The study draws attention to how English versus Somali literacies are socially valued in different ways and constructed as part of the learners’ identities.

The above studies illuminate how knowledge and literacies are inherently complex and socially-embedded, an understanding of which can in turn be used to inform relevant and authentic classroom practices. Knobel (1999) noted the importance of examining the relationship between schooling and students’ current lives and future goals, insisting that educators ask themselves what an effective relationship between these elements might be. In the context of her study of two refugee women language learners in an adult ESL program, Warriner (2004, p. 193) responded:

One way to explore this issue is to ask how the curriculum and pedagogy have already been modified to meet the perceived "needs" of students and how they could be further modified to serve the students ... [W]hile a number of useful modifications have been made to the curriculum to involve the "real" needs and firsthand experiences of
the students in the program, it is still worth asking what additional changes would improve the educational situations of the students in general and, in particular, the students who are refugees.

Importantly, most ethnographic research on literacy has focused on literate adults or young children, and not on ESL literacy learners. As emphasized by Bigelow and Tarone (2004), adult ESL literacy learners represent an especially under-researched population. As such, there is an opportunity to broaden knowledge about the nature of literacy by investigating the experiences of adults who are new to reading and writing. The experiences of Somali refugee women in particular offers a fresh perspective on the social nature of literacy given their multiple identity positions as cultural, linguistic and religious minority women. Furthermore, given that Somali refugee women face numerous obstacles to accessing English language skills, by understanding the uses and purposes of literacy in these learners’ lives, educators can hope to engage in more authentic classroom practices that speak to learners’ current needs and future goals.

Settlement and learning

Because Somali newcomer women face a number of settlement challenges outside of the classroom it is important to consider the complex layers of pressure experienced during their settlement processes and their relation to learning. Adkins, Sample and Birman (1999) outlined three types of stress common to refugees during resettlement: migration stress, acculturation stress, and traumatic stress. Migration stress occurs as a result of the sudden upheaval caused by war, conflict or natural disaster. Finding oneself in a new country means
being confronted with enormous challenges and uncertainties. Furthermore, being separated from family and home communities, refugees may lack the usual means to cope with such a stressful event. Secondly, acculturation stress comes from the differences encountered between a newcomer’s home culture and that of the new country. These differences can manifest themselves in daily life tasks, such as taking public transit or shopping at the market, as well as in broader domains such as values around government or childrearing, for example. For those with children who adapt quickly to the new culture, this can be a source of unease for parents who feel that their family’s cultural identity is being threatened (Ullman, 1997).

Furthermore, as linguistic and ethnic minorities, many refugees face racism and exclusion which can contribute to feelings of isolation and can discourage learning or adaptation. Silver (1999) suggested that certain classroom activities can promote strategies for dealing with cultural adjustment, such as story exchanges and dialogues about learners’ own cultural backgrounds and differences from the new culture.

Many Somali refugees have experienced extreme events such as war-related violence and torture, so the role of collective trauma is a strong force in this community (Nur, Dalal, & Baker, 2005). Two studies report an incidence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder at 47 to 48% among Somali refugees (Onyut et al., 2004; Onyut et al., 2009). In the classroom, it has been observed that adult learners who have experienced trauma can display inattention, crying, behavioural disruptions, sudden changes in progress, as well as frequent absences (Horsman, 1998). Metikos Debeljacki’s (2007) Master’s thesis found that refugees in LINC programs were disproportionately challenged by lack of financial resources, difficult domestic situations,
traumatic stress and health concerns. Due to the multiple stressors on refugees during settlement, it is recommended that those working with these populations develop lists of community resources in order to stay connected with local mental health professionals. However, since concepts of mental health are “laden with cultural bias” (Adkins, Sample & Birman, 1999), staff need to be cautious when involving outside professions and so may wish to discuss such issues with the learner and perhaps family or other community members before proceeding. Nevertheless, it is clear that the effects of stress and trauma on refugees can be significant and must be monitored by those working with these populations.

*Gender and learning*

Recent scholarship on language and gender has shifted away from traditional views of gender as binary, inherent and fixed towards a more nuanced understanding of gender as a “system of social relations and discursive practices” (Pavlenko & Piller, 2001, p. 29). Under this view, heavily informed by poststructuralist and feminist approaches as in Weedon (1987), gender is viewed as one aspect of social identity that interacts with others like race, class, culture, religion, sexuality and ability, all of which are mediated by societal power relations. Recent research in this vein has concerned itself with gender as jointly constructed in particular communities of practice (Eckert & McConnell-Gient, 1992, 2003). Unfortunately, most academic research concerning language and gender has to date focused on monolingual native speakers of English. However, given newcomer women’s complex identity positions as ethnic,
cultural, linguistic and often religious minorities, an analysis of their experiences can certainly shed light on understanding the relationships between language, power and gender. Recent studies of immigrant women's language learning experiences have begun to acknowledge these intricate relationships.

Pavlenko and Blackledge (2001) presented an extensive volume on language learning and gender, seeking to dispel many myths about immigrant women as language learners. As the authors note, one central concern to the discussion of women’s settlement experiences is access to linguistic resources. They contend that in the literature, newcomer women have been universally characterized in two contradictory ways. Some studies present women as cultural brokers, who are sensitive to the demands of the linguistic marketplace and are therefore fast and effective L2 users (Gal, 1978; Nichols, 1983). Conversely, other studies portray women as guardians of culture who, due to restricted access or symbolic resistance to the dominant culture, tend to be less proficient L2 users (Dabène & Moore, 1995; Hill, 1987). Cameron (1992) and others have attributed immigrant women’s limited access and power to patriarchal traditions that require that women are the protectors of culture and tradition. However, as Pavlenko, Blackledge and the other contributors to the volume have argued, the experiences of all newcomer women cannot be filed neatly into one of these two categories. Studies of women’s language learning experiences paint an incredibly complex picture detailing how gender and language interact and play out in learners’ lives.

Importantly, recent studies highlight how newcomer women’s access to majority language education can be constrained by the gender expectations of both their home
community and the majority culture. That is, when immigrant women have limited access to education, it is not always due only to “traditional” expectations of their home culture that require them to prioritize childrearing and private sphere relationships. Rather, various forces in the new country can present strong obstacles to language learning to immigrant women. This directly correlates to their short-term language proficiency, but in their long-term investment in learning the language (Norton, 1995). On one hand, women’s status as mothers and housekeepers, in combination with lack of daycare, can limit access to formal education and employment (Cumming & Gill, 1992). Scholars on gender and language have argued that “inequitable relations of power limit the opportunities L2 learners have to practice the target language outside the classroom” (Norton, 2000, p. 12). Since newcomer women tend to be employed less frequently than men, they tend to have less access to the target language. When women do work outside of the home, there are oftentimes limited opportunities for L2 use either due to the type of work they are engaged in or due to social constraints. For instance, Goldstein’s (1997) study of Portuguese workers in a Toronto factory found that L1 use was a crucial tool on the production floor for displaying solidarity and support among the all-female employees. The workers were heavily invested in maintaining strong relationships with their “sisters”, who provided emotional and material support for each other and their families. These immediate and tangible rewards far outweighed the benefits of using and improving their English, which would provide only a distance hope of potential promotion and increased job security.

Many studies of immigrant women have also noted also that their linguistic capital
(Bourdieu, 1991) is often ignored by societal institutions such as schools. Blackledge’s (2001) study of Bangladeshi mothers at a British school shows how white, middle-class teachers consistently devalued the mothers’ knowledge and contributions. Despite the fact that many were proficient and literate in multiple languages, the women were consistently portrayed as “illiterate” and incompetent caregivers due to their limited English proficiency. Moreover, their contributions to their children’s education in terms of providing them with Bengali and Arabic language instruction were not recognized. These kinds of reports demonstrate how “inequitable social structures ... are reproduced in day-to-day social interaction” (Norton, 2000, p. 13). Social interactions that deny immigrant women’s voices reinforce distance between them and the target language community, which in turn limits their opportunities for language development and their investment in language learning. Moreover, studies of this sort demonstrate the strength and effects of deep-seated prejudice and challenge “dominant stereotypes and myopia” (Street, 2001) by countering public discourse that portrays immigrant and refugee parents as unable or unwilling to contribute to their children’s schooling (Lopez, 2001). Nevertheless, although it appears clear that gender affects how and why learners acquire and use a new language, still more research is needed to clarify how gender interacts with other social factors to shape language learning experiences, particularly among immigrant and refugee women.

Martha Bigelow and Somalis in Minnesota
While the publications surveyed in this review deal with language and literacy learning, settlement, refugee experience, gender and the Somali community in varying combinations, recent work from Martha Bigelow has dealt simultaneously with all of the above. In addition to her more empirical research on language acquisition among ESL literacy learners, Bigelow’s recent work has adopted a more interdisciplinary focus, using case studies to highlight the role of identity, settlement, educational institutions and policies, and religious and ethnic minority status in language learning, especially among Somali adolescents settling in the U.S. For instance, Bigelow (2007) featured a case study of a Somali teenager in a Minnesota high school navigating formal education and print literacy for the first time in her life. The study focused on the role of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991; Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977) in the girl’s journey through high school. The study demonstrated how, on one hand, the student successfully completed high school by utilising the social capital she had access to (particularly a fiercely strong family unit) while, on the other hand, Bigelow reported on the ways in which the school failed to provide adequate opportunities for the student to develop cultural capital, namely, adequate literacy skills to fulfill her goals. More recently, Bigelow’s (2010) volume *Mogadishu on the Mississippi* has highlighted five years of research with the Somali community in Minnesota, focused on adolescent ESL learners. The volume thoroughly assesses relevant research in the field and details Bigelow’s own on-going work with the community, drawing on themes of settlement, gender, ethnicity and identity, and investigating how these factors play out in literacy and language learning. Of particular relevance to my present thesis research, one chapter presents a study of the experiences of four newcomer Somali girls in a large public high
school. All four girls arrived in the U.S. with little to no experience with print literacy or formal education, and were acquiring literacy for the first time in English. The study highlighted the girls’ struggles and triumphs in the public school system and documented their literacy practices, on the one hand, focusing on how they used previous knowledge and acquired cultural capital to succeed in school, and on the other hand, pointing out where the school system may be failing to meet their immediate and long-term needs. Throughout the volume, Bigelow grapples with how researchers and educators can contribute to advocacy that is in line with the needs of the community and stresses the centrality of education in broader social justice agendas in regards to settlement issues.

While much of Bigelow’s work is of clear significance to my study, it differs in a number of key ways. Firstly, the participants in Bigelow’s work were high school-aged, whereas I have focused on adult learners. The language learning and literacy experiences and trajectories of those migrating to North America in their early- to mid-teens seem quite distinct from those arriving as adult learners in their 20s, 30s or 40s like the women in my study. Moreover, Bigelow was interested specifically in how U.S. public schools meet or fail to meet the needs of these particular learners in the high school setting. Conversely, here I am interested in the experiences of Somali women in the Canadian government-supported LINC program for adult ESL learners. In other words, due to the specifics of the location, educational institutions, and age-group of the participants in Bigelow’s study, conducting similar research in different contexts may be rewarding in terms of highlighting the role that these variables play in shaping language learning experiences. I am not aware of any prior studies that have focused on the
experiences of Somali women in the LINC program, so I hope this perspective provides a welcome addition to the available literature. Where Bigelow’s research addressed the lack of research on adolescent ESL learners with limited print literacy, I hope to address the gaps in parallel research concerning adult learners.
Chapter 3

Method

In this chapter, I provide information on the method and procedures I employed in conducting the present study. First, I present a rationale for using a case study approach. Next, I describe how the data were collected and then analyzed.

A case study approach

For this research, I used a case study approach to collecting, analyzing, and presenting data. Merriam (1988, p. 16) described a case study as “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit”, noting that case studies are “particularistic, descriptive and heuristic”. Typically, observations and interviews in a case study allow a researcher to describe a specific environment in detail with the goal of gaining insight into how its participants make sense of their situation. In presenting a holistic, intensive account of a sample of participants’ literacy practices, I use the women’s own words to vividly describe their experiences. The heuristic nature of this type of approach allows me to try to “bring about the discovery of new meaning, extend the reader’s experience or confirm what is known” (Merriam, 1988, p. 13). Rather than setting out to verify a proposed hypothesis, I adopted an emergent, exploratory technique for studying groups whose experiences have been relatively unexplored in the literature, as is the case with Somali refugee women in Canada. Given this situation, a case study approach allowed me to introduce new information and
insights from this group of participants, and connect it to what is known about literacy, language learning and settlement.

Stake (1988, p. 258) referred to the object of analysis for a case study as a bounded system, “emphasizing unity and wholeness of that system, but confining the attention to those aspects that are relevant to the research problem at the time.” However, he noted that while no single study could exhaustively describe any “bounded system”, case studies allow instead for the diversity and complexity of a participant’s individual experiences to surface. With my intent to investigate the particular experiences of Somali refugee women with literacy and settlement, the case study approach allowed me to highlight the complexities of the situation at hand. I was able to explore the various issues affecting this group by consulting a sample of participants with common defining characteristics but different levels of proficiency, educational backgrounds, and investments in literacy learning. Being small-scale and exploratory, I do not suggest that the findings of my study will necessarily be representative of Somali women’s experiences in Canada or even of a single program or city. Rather, I have aimed to present the diverse insights of a particular group of women whom I have come to know in recent years in order to highlight the diversity of their experiences. Nevertheless, while my study particularly focuses on Somali women, it is hoped that the interpretations reached in the study may shed light on the situation of other female refugee ESL learners and, more broadly, on literacy, language learning, and settlement experiences.

After presenting individual cases of the participants, I present a cross-case analysis of the data I collected from them. By doing this, I aimed to synthesize the detailed information
gathered from each individual case to interpret the broader picture exhibited by the data as a whole. I have displayed data in tables that allow for direct comparisons across cases as well as to complement the narrative text, which alone can be a “weak and cumbersome form of display” due to being dispersed and sequential rather than simultaneous (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 91). I also compared and contrasted the cases to highlight general themes within the data and to comment on their relations to issues in the published literature on literacy practices and refugee settlement. To interpret the findings and their significance, I then address their implications for literacy studies and for practices and policies in adult ESL education.

Research setting and participants

My research took place within the context of settlement ESL and literacy instruction in Ontario. As informants for the study, I recruited four Somali refugee women who have been involved in ESL classes at the same LINC provider in a large city in Ontario. The Settlement Centre (a pseudonym) is an organization that offers LINC classes as well as employment training and other settlement services. While the services are accessible to both men and women, they are largely aimed at women, who in turn make up the vast majority of their clients and all of their staff. The participants in my study were all Somali women who were currently taking LINC classes at the Settlement Centre. They ranged in age from mid-20s to mid-40s, had been in Canada from two to nine years, and had been taking LINC classes for at least two years. Most of the participants had limited literacy skills before coming to Canada, but one was highly literate in Somali upon arrival.
While a larger sample may have been preferable, the decision of focusing on 4 participants was justified for a number of reasons. At the outset of data collection, I had intended to recruit participants from a variety of classes and levels. However, when the first 4 participants I recruited were all from the same LINC level 1/2 class, I thought I could use this as a way of refining the “bounded system” of my case study. Rather than attempting to account for the experiences of all Somali refugee women in this community, I would instead focus on only on women from this class. For the purpose of a Master’s thesis, I felt that limiting my sample to the experiences of Somali women in this particular class would produce a more realistic and effective analysis. At the time of data collection, 5 out of approximately 30 students in this LINC level 1/2 class were Somali women, 4 of whom agreed to participate in the study. The fifth woman was not comfortable conducting an interview in English. This student, who had been a teacher of Somali before coming to Canada, likely would have offered unique insights into the nature of literacy by sharing her experiences as a language learner and former teacher. However, since at this point I had already decided to proceed without a translator and submitted an ethical review with this decision, I had to exclude her from the study.

In the city in which this research was conducted the Somali community represents a significant and growing number of newcomers to the city, and in particular, to the neighbourhood in which the Settlement Centre is located. For example, at the high school closest to the Settlement Centre, the local school board reports that Somali is the primary language of students other than English. The number of Somali women in each class at the Centre varied greatly based on LINC level. In the more advanced level 2/3/4 class, there were
no Somali women registered at the time of the study. (However, two of the participants here spent half days in this class.) In the Literacy class, on the other hand, Somali women regularly made up most or all of the enrolled students. Due to these learners being recently arrived refugees, they did not have sufficient oral English skills to conduct interviews in English. Moreover, because these learners were very new to literacy, they likely would not have had as much to contribute to my research in terms of their experiences with literacy in Canada. For this reason, the learners in the level 1/2 class made ideal participants: They had been in Canada and navigating literacy in and out of school for several years, which allowed them to reflect on their diverse experiences in meaningful ways, presented in the subsequent chapters of this thesis.

**Data collection and analyses**

Before beginning the study, I sought administrative consent from the Settlement Centre to recruit participants and conduct interviews on the premises (Appendix A). Next, using the recruitment script shown in Appendix B I made announcements to small groups of women at the Centre. Once willing participants identified themselves, we made arrangements to conduct an interview. Due to the limited literacy skills of many of the participants, I opted for oral consent rather than written consent forms. Participants were read the consent information (Appendix C) prior to the interview and indicated their consent orally, which I digitally recorded at the beginning of the interview.

I employed interviews as my primary data source for this research, believing that
conversing with the participants was the best way to gain insight into their personal experiences with literacy as language learners and newcomers. My interview protocol (Appendix D) was adapted from the instrument developed and used by Purcell-Gates (2007). The interviews were semi-structured in nature, meaning that while I had a list of intended questions and topics for discussion, as the interviewer I was flexible to new information and directions that emerged during the course of the interaction with the participant. According to Merriam (1988, p. 78), the semi-structured interview allows the researcher to “respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging world view of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic”, which I tried to do during the interviews.

Each participant was interviewed once or twice, with the total interview time ranging from 30 minutes to 1.5 hours. All of the interviews were conducted in English with only the participant and I present. I opted to conduct the interviews in English since the participants, although English language learners, had high oral language skills, and I do not have sufficient abilities to converse in Somali myself. Since I had a rapport with the participants prior to the study (which will be explained below), I felt confident in their abilities to conduct an interview in English, and I felt that proceeding without an interpreter would allow us to communicate with our established familiarity and comfort.

I digitally tape-recorded the interviews and took notes throughout. The notes and interviews were transcribed verbatim (retaining grammatical inaccuracies, as appear in quotations below), except for one interview which due to technical problems was erased from the recorder. As a result, my notes taken during that interview were the primary source for
information on that participant (Fawzia). I processed the data soon after each interview by typing up notes, transcribing the interviews, and scanning for key themes that were emerging. As I synthesized the data by interview, I began to create individual profiles for each participant by organizing the data into the following headings: background (migration story, prior experience with literacy/education), uses of literacy (outside of school, navigating institutions, home language literacy, technological literacy), valuing of literacy (position as refugee, independence, vulnerability, parent-child relations, family support), and learner needs (goals, next steps, suggestions).

In my presentation of these case studies, I relied heavily on direct quotations from the interviews. I did this for a number of reasons with regard to both the participants and the reader. Using direct quotations, on the one hand, allowed the participants to literally speak for themselves as much as possible. Given that the aim of the study was to gain insight into the personal learning experiences of the women, using their actual words was essential to creating an accurate portrayal. Using direct quotations also allows the reader to develop a more direct connection to the participants by reading their own words, permitting the audience to sense and interpret qualities of the data for themselves. In this way, I hope that using direct quotations facilitates a dynamic relationship between the participants and potential readers of this thesis.

When all of the individual case studies were drafted and finalized, I began a cross-case analysis of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 1994). While individual case studies can be rewarding for the detailed accounts they produce, “multiple cases allow for greater opportunity
to generalize across several representations of the phenomenon” (Green, Camilli & Elmore, 2006, p. 123). The goal here was to analyze all of the profiles with a wider lens, taking a step back from the detailed case studies to look at the broader picture painted by the data. Here, I draw largely on concepts from my theoretical framework work concerning literacy practices. I identify the differences and similarities between the participants’ experiences, comment on common themes in the data. After formulating an analysis of the data, I conducted a member-check by meeting with each of the participants and orally presenting them a summary of my findings. At these meetings, which were tape-recorded, I encouraged the participants to offer comments and evaluate the accuracy of my interpretations of the data. Conducting a member-check is a method commonly used in qualitative research as a means to internally validate the accuracy and completeness of a researcher’s interpretations, as outlined by Lincoln & Guba (1985). I felt that conducting such a member-check was an important step in this research, particularly given my "outsider" status in the Somali community, which will be discussed in detail below.

Role of the Researcher

I first began working with Somali refugees while working in LINC classrooms over the past few years. I came to know the particular women in the study while volunteering for the Settlement Centre in September 2008 as an assistant in a LINC level 1/2 class. While none of the participants were students I was actually teaching at the time of the study, I have known these women for up to two years both as students and as friends. As a result, I have had the opportunity to get to know them in and outside of the classroom, which has allowed me to
share in their insights on literacy learning and settlement experiences. Moreover, having worked in LINC classrooms in various capacities at the Settlement Centre and other providers over the past few years, I feel that I have been able to use this knowledge to supplement my interpretations of the interview data from the participants and to draw conclusions relevant to my research questions.

At the same time, however, I fully recognize my “outsider” status as a researcher with the Somali community. As a Canadian-born, native speaker of English, I share neither a refugee experience nor an English language learner identity with the participants, nor do I share their ethnic and religious minority status. Moreover, since the participants knew that I am an ESL instructor and that I am involved with the Settlement Centre where they were currently taking classes, it is possible that the participants could be hesitant to reveal unfavourable accounts of their learning process or negative classroom experiences for fear that I may be offended or that I may inform their instructors. To account for this, participants were ensured that their identities would be protected and that pseudonyms rather than their real names would appear in the thesis. Although my prior relationships with them could have potentially prevented the participants from being completely forthcoming, I believe that I was able to gain valuable insights due to my knowing and having a rapport with the participants before the study began.
Chapter 4

Participants’ literacy practices

In this chapter I present case studies based on data from each of the four interviews. I focus on the content of each interview, relying heavily on direct quotations from the participants themselves. The data are organized and presented by themes that emerged from the interviews, which I discuss here only as they relate to each participant’s case. In the cross-case analysis in the following chapter I delve into how these themes played out across the cases, highlighting differences and similarities between the participants. Below, each case is presented by parallel themes starting with background information, then moving on to literacy practices (uses and valuing of literacy), followed by accounts of the learners’ needs and future plans.

Halimo

Background

An animated and compelling speaker, Halimo is a lively woman in her 40s who is known around the Settlement Centre for her out-spoken nature and for her strong commitment to her studies. Born and raised in Somalia, she arrived in Canada in 2006 after living in refugee camps in Kenya for more than 15 years. Having only a few family members and no children in Canada, Halimo lives alone and is fiercely independent. She faithfully attends full-time LINC classes from Monday to Friday, often staying late at school to study. While officially placed in the LINC 2 class, Halimo spends half of her days in a more advanced Level 2/3/4 class. A few nights per week, she works as a cleaner at the Settlement Centre. Halimo has completed three sewing
courses through a local settlement agency and often spends her weekends making dresses for friends and acquaintances. In the short-term, she hopes to continue taking LINC classes and to further pursue clothes-making, while in the long-term she has dreams of working as a secretary or a nurse.

Prior experience with literacy

Growing up in Somalia, Halimo had never been to school, largely due to financial constraints. In her clan, she reported, those without much money were unable to attend school. Despite having no experience with formal education, however, Halimo did have some experience with literacy before coming to Canada. As a child, some of her family members were literate and print was often around her, like in her aunt’s office where she helped out from time to time. However, Halimo did not learn to read and write herself until she was in refugee camps in Kenya as an adult. There, having quickly learned oral Swahili, she worked as a translator and learned to read and write some Swahili. This familiarity with print literacy and especially with the Latin alphabet served to ease her transition into formal education in Canada.

Experience with the LINC program

Halimo began in the LINC program in 2008 and had, at the time of my interview, taken classes at three separate LINC providers. At the first school, Halimo felt that she was not making sufficient progress because the lessons were repetitive and unchallenging.
I start 2008, but when I start, I’m not go really many times to school because I saw that school I go, no learn. They start “Today tomorrow, today tomorrow, today tomorrow.” Then I think about it when I ask I need the test, how can I move on ... they say “Okay, take the test.” But when I ask what my test is going on, they say, “No problem, stay here!” They start again, “Tomorrow today, tomorrow today…”

After asking her friends about better schools in the area, Halimo moved to another LINC provider. These classes were not satisfying for Halimo either, and because the school was further away and she was not provided bus tickets, it was a financial burden for her to attend these unrewarding classes. Still eager to learn after two unfulfilling experiences at LINC centres, Halimo finally landed at the Settlement Centre in a Level 1/2 class in 2008, which she has been attending full-time for more than two years. It is a large class with 30 learners registered, which is well over capacity. At least two days per week Halimo arrives early and stays late to study, resulting in a 10-hour school day.

Long days! I’m back to class, I stay here, I learn again, do my homework. 6:30 I leave here. Sometimes I leave 4, because two days, I repeat my lesson until 6:30. ...

Sometimes I go early. But two days, I give honestly, for my personality, I have to stay here, do my homework.

Clearly a dedicated student, Halimo enjoys her classes and feels as though she is learning a lot; however, she was disappointed to not be advancing to the Level 3 class as she entered her third year of full-time study at the Centre.
Uses of literacy

Outside of school

While Halimo faithfully attends full-time classes at the Centre, she also makes great efforts outside of school to practice her literacy skills. She is a frequent patron of the public library system. On her first visit to the library in Canada, there was a worker who spoke Swahili who helped Halimo to get a library card and showed her how to find and check out materials. All of the materials she checks out are in English, although there are some Somali language and bilingual Somali-English books at the library. For Halimo, using the library is primarily a means to continue to practice school-based literacy skills outside of school, particularly in the summer when there is a two month break from LINC classes. She checks out ESL materials like grammar and spelling practices, cassette tape activities, and instructional videos, as well as storybooks to practice her reading. Due to a keen interest in health and medicine, Halimo also checks out many books about the body and healing. She says, “I read how can you, even if you think someone is sick, how can you help, or if your kids to help.” She can also read the newspaper, but does not do so on a regular basis and jokes that she has some trouble with comprehension: “I can read like the newspaper, it’s not all because some words I’m not understand. If I say I know all the words, that’s wrong!” To practice her writing skills, outside of school Halimo works on grammar and spelling exercises that she has done in school in a given week. Furthermore, Halimo does her own free writing journals, where she writes about her future goals:
I write some sentence, like “will be”. How can I, when I go the school, when I finish the school, how can I work, or how can I help the people, or how can I do the volunteer.

Using the public library as her primary resource for materials, Halimo reads a range of texts from ESL textbooks and storybooks to books on health and newspapers. While most of these texts serve to provide reading and writing practice, the two latter types of texts are also for her entertainment and gaining information. Conducting her own grammar drills and free writing practice, Halimo is an autonomous and disciplined learner who knows how to take advantage of available resources to improve her literacy skills.

Navigating institutions

As a refugee to Canada, Halimo has learned that if you are unable to read and write well in English, navigating various institutions and levels of government can be extremely daunting. Meeting basic settlement needs and accessing services requires high literacy skills that learners like Halimo lacked upon arrival to Canada. When asked about the kinds of literacy tasks newcomers need to perform, Halimo responded that being able to fill out forms is important on many occasions, such as going to medical appointments, dealing with immigration matters, accessing resources like social assistance and subsidized housing, and receiving employment and educational consultations. Halimo pointed out, however, that not all these forms are the same. Some are straight-forward and she can fill them out herself, while others are much more difficult and require different skill sets:
Yeah, how can you fill the paper is more important for us because sometimes you and fill out the housing [form], something like that. That’s important because everything has a skill. You don’t like to do, but you have learn before, how can read, how can write. If you like, if you read everything, you understand, it’s no problem because you read and then you understand how questions they ask you. ...Sometimes they ask, “Are you work?” Something like that. “You go to school?” My house is [subsidized] housing. When they update, they ask me the report card for the school, then they ask me if I work, they ask me if I move, some things like that they ask me sometimes. But you can answer! You can give the paper.

Paper work regarding subsidized housing for Halimo is a task that she can complete independently. She can fill out the forms and submit the required documents without outside help. Even if it is unpleasant and tedious to learn to fill out different forms, it was worthwhile for Halimo because it has meant that she can complete the paper work, which in turn ensures that she has safe and affordable housing. Other kinds of forms, however, are more difficult for her and she does require assistance with them:

Sometimes I need the, you know, sometimes the form, telephone, government, or from Immigration, something like that is very hard for me.

Forms from the government on immigration and status matters as well as bills from utilities companies can be complicated and unpredictable. When she requires assistance, Halimo enlists the help of neighbours and friends. While she is able to complete all of her daily tasks like
paying bills and filling out forms with some assistance, Halimo would feel more fulfilled and secure if she could complete them independently, as will be further described below. Her sense of frustration with institutions and their administration was conveyed in Halimo’s remarking, “Nobody give you his time ... even Immigration, even school, even doctor.”

**Native language literacy**

Although Halimo could not read or write in her native Somali before coming to Canada, since acquiring decoding and encoding skills in English, she has also begun to learn to read and write in Somali. Her uncle, who was a teacher of Somali back home, recently arrived in Canada and has been tutoring Halimo. Because Somali uses the Latin alphabet and has similar spelling conventions to English, learning to read Somali has come relatively easily to her. The primary use of Somali literacy for Halimo is to communicate with family in Somalia via email. Before, when her family would send her emails in Somali, she would have to find someone to read them to her and to respond. Now, however, she can read them herself, although she still requires some assistance to offer written responses in Somali. Nevertheless, being able to read and write in Somali is a source of pride and fulfilment for Halimo since most of her family and friends are overseas. Although learning to read and write Somali has been useful and satisfying for her, Halimo insists that learning English literacy first is the preferred way:

Before I learned Somali, it’s very hard learn English. Because the people learn English
before the Somali, they confused the letter, but me, I start English, no confuse. ... And that’s why I’m not confused, I know what means Somali and what means English.

As Halimo points out, English and Somali use the same alphabet of 26 letters, but there are differences, notably the names of letters and their pronunciation. The similarities may facilitate learning these languages relative to, for example, Arabic or Chinese, but the differences, according to Halimo, can cause confusion and impede learning. For this reason, she is glad to have learned English literacy first.

_Technological literacy_

Halimo used to have a home computer, but it recently stopped working and she does not have the money to get it fixed. However, she has frequent access to the computers at school and at the public library. Currently, she is able to use the computer to perform simple word processing and typing practice and, as mentioned above, she can use email, but does not use the Internet for any other purposes. While she would like to improve her computer skills, Halimo notes that her instruction on computers in her LINC class is limited to 1 or 2 hours per week. During this time, the class does typing exercises and plays language games that involve spelling and grammar practice.

_Value attached to literacy_

_Literacy in Canada_
As an adult newcomer who had limited literacy skills before coming to Canada, Halimo places a great deal of emphasis on the importance of becoming literate when settling in a country that is not your own:

You have to think, how can you learn? How can you be strong? How can you, the goal you need, you do? But some people doesn’t think. ...Because it’s not inside. If the inside, you have to be patient, you learn something new in that country. Because it’s not your country! ... Because when you’re patience and go to school, someone go to school, then record in his mind, “I have to go to school, I have to learn. I have to learn, I have to finish my school if God will.” Then, you get your goal you need, in my opinion. But I don’t know, some people!

Throughout our interviews, Halimo made impassioned pleas advocating for the importance of school for immigrants and refugees. She was quick to link determination and hard work to becoming literate, which she expects would in turn lead to achieving one’s goals of attaining a steady job and a more stable position in Canada. Halimo was particularly insistent on the need for newcomer women to attend school and gain an education in Canada:

I think the other women like from Somalia, Kenya, other country, they have to go to school then help yourself, your kids. But I saw some people doesn’t go to school. But that’s not good for us, women! I talkin’ about women! They have to, must, the women immigrant, the women immigrant, they have to go to school! If you have kids, even five
months, six months, you can get daycare. You can go to school. You can learn. Because nobody help you! Even your kids.

Despite what in Halimo’s mind is an obvious connection between English literacy and success in Canada, she noted that some newcomer women do not attend school. Sometimes this may be due to childcare needs, but she notes that there are daycare services in many schools that make attendance possible for women with young children. Failing to attend school in order to take care of your children can backfire, as Halimo argues that not even your children will help you to navigate the high literacy demands of Canadian society. Since no one can help a person with everything, it is necessary for each woman to become literate herself, emphasizing the need for independence, a theme that reoccurred throughout the interviews.

*Independence*

As a woman who lives alone and has little family in Canada, Halimo prides herself on being independent and able to conduct her life without asking for much help from others. When asked what kinds of problems those with limited literacy skills face, she was quick to point out that the lack of independence and constant need to rely on others can be isolating, draining, and humiliating:

Oh my god! They have many problem. I have – they have many problem. Because you have appointment, or even you new to Canada, they haven’t, nobody give the chance. When you call someone you say, “I don’t know what is going on. I need the Immigration.
You come with me please, you can translate.” Some people they say, “Oh I’m sorry, I have appointment” or “I have job” or “I’m busy.” Some people tell you, “Why you no go to school? You need a translator? You can translate yourself! Go to school! Learn!” … And some people say, “Why you no go to school? You no have any parent?” Why you ask me my parent? I ask you to helping me.

As an adult newcomer with limited literacy skills, Halimo notes that women risk embarrassment when asking for help, as some people may interrogate them about their background and make them feel inadequate. When those with very limited skills require assistance with everyday tasks like shopping, paying bills and dealing with social services, asking for help is a daily occurrence. Even finding friends who are willing to help, however, can only get a person so far:

When you no understand language, when you say to somebody, “Come help”, maybe that person doesn’t help you! Maybe they help you, but not enough help. That’s why I think I go and I learn some English.

For Halimo, becoming literate in English was one way to live more independently and to avoid relying on others who would, at worst, humiliate her or, at best, only help her minimally. Being able to conduct her daily tasks alone was therefore a major motivation for Halimo to continue improving her literacy skills. She maintained that while there may be external forces motivating an individual to go to school, that motivation to learn must ultimately come from within:

It’s not government, it’s not your social worker, it’s not your father, it’s not your kids, just you!
Helping others

While becoming more independent and not relying on others for help motivated Halimo to improve her literacy skills, being able to help other newcomers was another incentive for her to keep studying. In many ways, Halimo views herself as a helper to the newcomer community and to Somalis in particular:

Then if they are someone no understand English, they need to translate someone, I can translate because, before when some people no read and no listen good and no speak good, but now I like to help my people because even the people at home, I can say “Go to school.” Because nobody give you his time! Because you need, even Immigration, even school, even doctor. Even you learn something, you understand someone. That’s why I tell them, my friends.

Having been in Canada for a few years and having gone to school put Halimo in a position where she could counsel more recently-arrived Somalis on the importance of pursuing an education in Canada. Moreover, having become literate in English, she could offer material help with literacy through tutoring and translating for other community members. While she herself required assistance with some tasks, Halimo prided herself in being able to help others whenever she could. For Halimo, continuing to study and broadening her literacy skills then means that she will be able to assist more newcomers, within the Somali community and beyond.
Vulnerability

As someone who arrived in Canada with limited literacy skills, Halimo recognizes the vulnerable situation of individuals in such a position. When one cannot read and write, and is not familiar with the conventions of a new culture, Halimo observed that a person can be misled, lied to, stolen from, or worse:

How can I communicate or how can I read the paper that someone give me? You give me the paper say, “We kill you tomorrow.” You sign. I say, “What does, you say something?” But I write. “This paper, what is going on?” “They say they kill you tomorrow!” I sign, because I don’t read. That’s a problem, for someone, or everyone. You have to go to school! You say, “Sign this paper, I take money your account.” I don’t know what this is. I sign, you take. That’s a problem for me or a problem for you? It’s mine! It’s my problem.

In this extreme example, Halimo argued that literacy can be a matter of basic survival, both physically and financially. Again emphasizing her own agency, she maintains that the consequences of not being literate – in this case, being killed or defrauded – are ultimately her responsibility and hers alone. She continued:

That happened. That has definitely happened, because you no read and you no write. “Sign this! You sign!” What’s going on after? Because the people is not same. Your fingers not same. Different, definitely. See? My fingers - different. Personality, intelligence - different. You can’t say the people are all same. You can’t say people all
bad, you can’t say all people is nice. Definitely different personality. ...My insides, you doesn’t understand what this means. Your inside, I don’t understand what it is. ...You have to go to school! You have to learn something.

Here, Halimo indicates that there is a particular vulnerability associated with being in a new country and a new culture, and that those who do not read and write are particularly at risk. She recognizes that her “fingers” (race, appearance) and “insides” (beliefs, values, experiences) may be very different from many people she encounters in Canadian society. Going to school and becoming literate is then a means to counteract one’s lack of cultural understanding and to defend oneself against those who might take advantage of newcomers.

*Parent-child relations*

While Halimo does not have any children living in Canada, as a mother she can sympathize with the position that many immigrant women with limited literacy find themselves in when settling in Canada. She pointed out that it is not only strangers that can take advantage if one cannot read and write, but even one’s own children. When children attend school and quickly become fluent in English, they are often in charge of facilitating communication between their parents and their teachers. But as Halimo notes, such arrangements are not always reliable:

Okay, who translates? Your kids. And your kids lie! ... We need to tell them, how can communicate with the teacher and the kids. You say, “What he say teacher? Mom, he
say ‘He come to class, he come’” He doesn’t say like that! ... And the kid’s a liar! ...How can you feel, you’re a mom? How can you feel? You feel ooooooh! [pained moan]

Halimo indicates that parents who cannot read and write may be misled by their children, which can be hurtful, embarrassing and destabilizing to the parent-child relationship. Moreover, such parents feel unable communicate with their children’s teachers and therefore unable to help their kids with their studies:

“What do you do? What do you do?” “Mum, I work my homework.” [laughter] Nothing homework! Computer game, they play game or they talk to friends. Homework is here, he show them the parents, but it’s not homework. ...When you learn, you know homework your kids. You know everything. You know the rules.

When parents learn how to read and write, however, they cannot be so easily lied to and can help their children because they “know the rules”:

But if you understand, you understand what teacher say, you can communicate to teacher, you know how can your daughter or your son learn, how can he need help, how can he, the good way to learn, and if he no learn, you know that.

Halimo for this reason advocates that women with school-aged children in particular need to become literate for reasons related to their position as mothers.

*Position as a refugee*
Halimo notes that becoming literate and “knowing the rules” are also important outside of school in other domains. As a non-citizen in particular, knowing the rules means being aware of the procedures and conventions of the Canadian bureaucracy. For a refugee to navigate various levels of government and social services, even strong oral English skills are barely sufficient for conducting one’s affairs in Canada, where the literacy demands are high:

If they give you appointment, okay, you speak, but you can’t read the paper! Even if it’s emergency, even something happen to you, how can you know?

Being able to “read the paper” is necessary to understand the information given to refugees at appointments for immigration, social services, health care, housing and employment, and educational consultations. As a refugee, it is also important to be literate to become familiar with the laws and the history of Canada, which is necessary to pass the citizenship test:

You have to know the history of Canada, and who is the present top of Canada... You can say the name, but you need to read the whole story. Because when you go to Citizenship, they give you the test. Okay, they give me this test but I don’t know ... if wrong or if real. But they need to read, really how can you understand what you no understand?...But you have to try! You have to read. But if I never read, how can I try? I come there, I say I don’t know. How can I get?

Getting citizenship, Halimo notes, can only come after one has acquired sufficient literacy skills and is essential to establishing a stable position in Canada. Additionally, she states that her
position as a refugee to Canada obliges her to feel she should give back to the government and society, which can be accomplished through learning English and getting a steady job:

They help you, important help for you. Then if you understand everything, then you can take a course for a job, you can go to school long time, you can take a teacher, you can take a doctor, you can take a nurse or secretary, anything you need. But, if you stay home, home don’t give you food! The government give you food. Even if you work, like you work the part-time or full-time, you help even government because they take GST and PST and they take the ...employment insurance. Even you help, they help you and you have to help even. How many people that walk the wheelchair that are working?

But if you say, “Government give me a sponsor, I’m gonna stay here.” Who you wait!? Nothing. Government say, “Go learn!” They help you. They give you a sponsor, they give you everything, but you go out, you go to school, your kids, yourself. And then after that, you go and help other people. That I think is a good idea, that people do that.

In this passage, Halimo distanced herself from those who she believes take advantage of social services. Instead, she advocates that refugees in particular should feel an obligation to go to school, to become literate and to work because they have been sponsored and supported by the government. Moreover, when the government offers ESL classes and job-specific training, Halimo argues that newcomers should take full advantage and acquire all the education and skills they can so they are better able both to support themselves and to give back.

Learner needs and goals
In the short term, Halimo believes that she needs to continue taking LINC classes until she is able to “finish her project”. She recognizes that her oral English skills far exceed her literacy skills, a fact that is preventing her from graduating to the next level of school. Having taken three courses on sewing and clothes-making, she hopes to pursue more training and to continue making clothes for friends and acquaintances. Halimo notes that she is not prepared for the next course, however, which requires more literacy skills that the previous courses did not. While clothes-making is her immediate interest, in the long-term Halimo has lofty goals of becoming a secretary or a nurse. Growing up with two aunts who were successful professionals planted the seed at a young age for Halimo to pursue these lines of work. It is not clear whether Halimo recognized the extremely high literacy demands of these two professions, but she did recognize that her literacy skills would have to improve greatly in order for her to pursue either career path. For instance, if Halimo chose to train as a secretary, she was quick to point out that she would need to work extensively on her computer skills. While school-based literacy skills will be necessary for Halimo to pursue further job training, she also needs more help to perform other literacy tasks such as filling out government forms and paying utilities bills, as indicated from the discussion above. Given the importance that she puts on independence, being able to perform these kinds of tasks without frequent outside assistance would be a source of fulfillment and security for her.

When asked what could be done to help learners like herself to improve their literacy skills, Halimo responded without hesitation that there should be an after-school homework
club where strong readers could help those who struggle with literacy and strong speakers could in turn help those who struggle with oral English:

Because someone is good reading, is good writing, spell, but speak? Nothing! Some people speak, listen good but still need writing and spell and reading. Because if you understand how can reading come up and spell is good, maybe definitely speak. We need to. ...I think, you know, if I get the some people to help us for the homework, homework groups...that definitely help the people.

Being in a very large mixed-level class of close to 30 learners, Halimo recognized that every learner has their own individual strengths and weaknesses. She has observed that learners like her who had limited experience with print literacy before coming to Canada often have strong oral language skills. These differences in strengths among learners in the class would, as Halimo argues, lend itself well to a peer-to-peer learning program.

**Ayan**

**Background**

Ayan is a dedicated and hard-working single mother in her mid-twenties. She arrived in Canada in 2005 and currently lives with her four-year-old daughter and her older brother, who came to Canada a few years before she did. Although born and raised in Somalia, before coming to Canada Ayan lived in refugee camps in Kenya for a number of years. There, she attended school and worked in her friend’s hair salon. Influenced by this experience and ever-
dedicated to establishing a stable life for her daughter, Ayan dreams of opening her own salon in Canada. Like Halimo, she was officially placed in the LINC 2 class but spends half of her days in a more advanced Level 2/3/4 class at the Centre. In addition to full-time LINC classes, Ayan is currently taking job-specific training courses offered by the Centre.

*Prior experience with literacy, formal education*

Unlike other participants in this study, Ayan had a great deal of experience with formal education and print literacy before arriving in Canada. Between instruction in Somalia and in refugee camps, she had become fully literate in Somali and had begun to learn some English while in Kenya. When she arrived in Canada, however, Ayan quickly realized that the English she had learned in the camps would not be sufficient to thrive in Canadian society. Nevertheless, Ayan was thankful for the head-start she arrived with, particularly her knowledge of English and significant experience with literacy and formal education.

*Experience in the LINC program*

Five months after arriving in Canada, Ayan began in the LINC program in the Level 1/2 class. However, she quickly had to take a break due to the birth of her daughter. Once her daughter was old enough for on-site daycare, she returned to the LINC program but at a different centre that was closer to her home. When asked about the differences between the two schools, she indicated that the first school was sufficient for her as a beginner, but that her
current school is better for her current needs, not only because it is closer to her home and her
daughter’s school, but also because the classes are more challenging and helpful:

Before I was coming to Canada, [the other school], it was nice. I was a little bit
newcomer in Canada. But right now when I’m coming [this school], it’s good for me right
now. ...Right now I’m much better, I’m much better. ...because I saw in even this class
when I was coming, right now we get the graduation for this year ... and my teacher, she
take me testing, right now she take me test, and she told me, “It’s much better than
before when you were coming.”

In short, Ayan was satisfied with the progress she was making in her classes, although like the
other women participating in my interviews, she would remain in the LINC 1/2 class in the
coming school year. Ayan is, however, pursuing additional courses outside of LINC, such as job-
specific training and short-term skills-focused ESL courses, but notes that she can only do so
when child-care is provided.

**Uses of literacy**

*Navigating institutions*

Like the other women in this study, Ayan recognizes the high literacy demands of living
in Canadian society and understands that she needs literacy skills to deal with a number of
institutions and structures outside of school. By and large, Ayan seeks little assistance with
literacy tasks, including those having to do with official institutions and financial matters. When
dealing with various kinds of appointments, such as for health care and immigration matters,
Ayan can handle the literacy demands independently, never requiring anyone to accompany her to translate or act as a scribe. When asked about phone, hydro and other utilities bills, as well as banking, Ayan proudly said, “I can do it by myself.”

While Ayan prides herself in being about to conduct most of her affairs independently, she admits that there are times when she requires assistance. Like many newcomer language learners, Ayan reports that various types of bureaucratic forms give her the most trouble:

Most of the time, forms, yeah. So right now when I was applying for citizenship, my older brother, he help me and we do it both of us, and I sent it there.

Fortunately, Ayan has help around whenever she needs it from her old brother, who has been in Canada longer than she has. Having her brother’s assistance in completing literacy tasks that are just beyond her reach has meant in this case that Ayan achieved an important goal in applying for citizenship, which is crucial for her to establish a more stable future for herself and her daughter in Canada. While she is grateful to have her brother’s help, Ayan still insists that she will always try first to complete the task herself before seeking assistance and asks her brother to guide her rather than to complete the task for her.

Outside of school

When asked what kinds of reading and writing she does outside of school, Ayan noted that as a full-time student and a full-time mother, she does not have as much time to study as she would like. However, she sometimes practices her lessons from class afterschool or on the
weekends. Additionally, Ayan tries to find time to frequent the public library, where she mostly checks out books to read to her daughter:

    Sometimes, my daughter right now, she told me, “Mummy, I like storybooks.” And so I try to read her for storybook. And sometimes I read my homework. You know, mum at home, if you have children, you’re busy busy! [laughing]

Having few hours to spare as a single mom, Ayan maximizes her time by reading to her daughter, which serves as reading practice and entertainment for both mother and daughter. This is all done in English, although Ayan does value her native language literacy skills, as described below.

*Native language literacy*

    Unlike the other participants in this study, Ayan was literate in Somali and experienced with formal education prior to coming to Canada. Ayan noted that because English and Somali use the same alphabet, the challenge of learning to read and write in English was eased by her prior knowledge: “The alphabet is similar. I was trying to understand a lot here. That’s a little bit helping for me. It’s similar.” With so much to learn in a new country, Ayan was thankful that she was comfortable with the Latin alphabet, which meant one less obstacle to acquiring English literacy skills in Canada. Although reading and writing in English has taken priority over doing so in Somali since arriving in Canada, Ayan still maintains her native language literacy skills in some important domains of her life, which are highly connected to her use of technology.
Technology and Somali language use

As a woman in her mid-twenties, Ayan is highly technologically literate and keenly aware of all the latest trends in electronic communications. With her cell phone equipped with a ring-tone of a popular Somali dance song about motherhood, Ayan is, like most of her peers, always connected through her cell phone and the Internet to her friends and family, both in Canada and abroad. She is active on Facebook, frequents Somali language message boards and chatrooms, and relies heavily on email for communicating with family and friends overseas:

People back home, most of the time it's back home. My friends, we talk on email with each other and I have Facebook too. Facebook, email, that's all I do most of the time. And we have SomaliNet, yeah we have SomaliNet. It’s many people, everywhere around the world, they come one room and they talk to each other in Somali. Most of the time I just look around and watch the way they’re talking. Most of the time I’m quiet and I don’t write anything. I just read and I see the way they’re talking to each other and when they ask me something then I try to write some in Somali. Right now, I’m a little bit I forgot Somali because right now I’m interested more in English so right now I try to not forget Somali! [laughing]

Since coming to Canada and focusing on learning English, Ayan has had limited opportunities to practice her Somali literacy skills in daily life in Canada. However, the Internet provides Ayan with a continuous supply of reading material and numerous forums of communication that help to maintain her native language literacy skills. She notes that SomaliNet is a very popular site among both Somalis back home and throughout diaspora communities. With some gentle
prodding about the topics of discussion on SomaliNet, Ayan admitted with a giggle that while sometimes they talked about music or politics, “most of the time they are like boys and girls with relationships maybe!” For Ayan, forums like SomaliNet serve as entertainment, but also as a means for keeping in touch with the larger Somali community even after being away from her native country for so many years. Using Facebook and email, on the other hand, are ways to maintain personal relationships with close friends and family who are abroad, while also allowing her to network and socialize with new friends and acquaintances in Canada.

Technological literacy is then essential to maintaining and expanding Ayan’s personal relationships and social circles, and serves to encourage the maintenance of her native language literacy skills.

**Values attached to literacy**

*Independence*

As an extension of her role as a mother and provider for her daughter, Ayan greatly values her independence and links being able to do tasks independently with being a hard-working and dedicated mother. She told me an impressive story of how bold she has been in acting independently, even when she was very new to Canada and had limited English language skills:

Yeah, I do remember one day, my daughter, she get sick and went to [name of] hospital and she get surgery. And I was there on that day and I was a couple of months in Canada and the doctor she told me, there was two doctors, and one of them, he told me, “Do
you need to translate somebody for you? I can call [an organization] and they can bring you one person and they can translate that person for you.” And I say to him, “That’s okay. I’m fine. I’m gonna understand when he told me.” And he say to me, “Oh, that’s good.” And he left and I was waiting for the visitor’s room, so he called me and we went to private room and he told me something and I understand. ...I was a newcomer then and my daughter she get surgery and nobody is here with me, just my brother, and he go to the work, and that day I have appointment for my daughter and I go by myself. …and [the doctor] told me, “You’re good, you’re working hard!” I say, “I have to. If you have a child, then you have to work hard.”

Even after only a few months in Canada, Ayan was deeply committed to conducting her affairs independently, navigating an unfamiliar healthcare system – with its intricate and often convoluted paperwork – without any outside assistance. As this story shows, while she does have her older brother to go to for help in times of need, Ayan understands that he cannot always be able to come to her aid. For this reason, she takes it upon herself to learn all that she can to equip herself with the skills she needs to provide for herself and her daughter, which, as she argued above, requires hard work. Literacy skills in particular are key to this goal, as Ayan indicates here:

Reading, writing, that’s really good because that is, if you don’t know, like I saw like, if you don’t know anything, that’s reading and writing, better to do and learn and do it and to making something by yourself, being Miss Independent! [laughing] I try to do that right now, that’s nice. Before I was right now thinking about it, before when my
daughter, she was young and I was trying to make my daughter, to take care of her and
do something with her, make something. I was trying to do before, the way I do right
now it was much better right now. And I say it’s not too bad because my daughter,
she’s grow up, she’s a big girl. She go to school by herself and me too, I go by myself,
and I try to work hard and learn something.

In this passage, Ayan creates a dichotomy between those who “don’t know anything” and those
who “learn something” and gain independence by learning to read and write in English. She
notes that after leaving school to take care of her daughter, she returned her studies in order to
become “Miss Independent”, a reference to a popular American pop song. Elsewhere in the
interview Ayan continued to distance herself from those who “don’t know anything”, referring
to those who do not know how to read and write:

> Life is like this room. If you turn out the light, it would be dark, right? [laughing] Your
> life is dark, it’s not light. I see that! [laughing] Because if you, [can’t write] anything,
you’re zero. That’s why I don’t want to be like the others, so I always try to work hard
and try to do something. …So if you don’t know how to read and how to write, it’s dark!

In this poetic analogy, Ayan equated illiteracy to being in a dark room, where the room is one’s
life. If you cannot read and write, she says, you’re “zero”. Seeing the problems associated with
limited literacy skills serves as a motivation for Ayan to seek ways to “keep the light on”.

For Ayan, keeping the light on means taking advantage of any kind of education or training that
she can access in an effort to learn more, become more independent, and take control of her
life.
Family support

Not only does Ayan’s older brother provide help with challenging literacy tasks, but he and other family members and friends provide important emotional support for her in pursuing her educational goals. People like her brother and her aunt set an example for Ayan and have consistently supported younger people in their family to pursue their studies:

Yeah, they support of us. My auntie, I saw her, she always support for her children, and my older brother always support for me. I say my next king is for him! [laughing]

Everytime he support for me, he say, “Ayan, do this, do this.” So yeah, always he support for me.

From the moment she arrived in Canada, Ayan was greatly influenced by older family and community members who tried to instil in her an understanding of the importance of learning to read and write in Canada:

I remember a long time ago, one guy, just he was a family friend, and he told me,

“Ayan try to how to, learn to read and write, that’s really important for you if you have, if you go to the doctor, you have to keep your secret because when you told somebody ‘Go come with me and translate with me’, that’s a little bit bad because, it’s good for you, how to read and how to write.” Because the day he told me until right now, I really try to learn how to read and how to write.
As Ayan indicated above, she was inspired by the words of a family friend to improve her literacy skills. Bringing a translator along to places like the doctor’s office can be not only inconvenient, but it can also violate one’s level of personal privacy:

Yeah, since he told me that because it’s good, your secret, if somebody told, your doctor, somebody told him, that’s a little bit bad. If you don’t know anything, and your family can help you, that’s good, but you have to always keep your secret and learn something.

While those who “don’t know anything” may have to resort to using translators, for Ayan that is not an acceptable option. Particularly when she values protecting her own and her daughter’s privacy, and particularly when dealing with private matters like healthcare, having the skills to navigate appointments independently was the only option suitable for Ayan.

*Parent-child relations*

As a young mother, Ayan understands the role that literacy skills play in raising a child and instilling in them a sense of commitment to their studies. Addressing lack of literacy skills among many in Somalia, she noted:

I saw many people, their children go to school and they take homework and they coming home, and their parents don’t know anything. I saw many people like that in Somalia, they have, mom and dad, they don’t learn anything, just the mum, she’s taking the children and the dad, he’s working or he’s bringing the children something, food, clothes, money. So mum, she’s taking the children, right? And the children, they are
going to school and they are bringing, they are taking school for homework, and nobody can help the children. That’s too bad.

Economic circumstances and fulfilling family roles, Ayan noted, can serve as obstacles for pursuing education. When parents are then unable to read and write, Ayan argued that their children suffer from a lack of support at home when they are of school-going age. She observed that this continues to be a problem in the Somali community in Canada:

Yeah, here too. So they have to, if your child goes to school and his teacher bring him homework, and child, if you say, talk to him, to the child and told him, you have to learn and you have to check his or her bags,...when they coming home, they put it in bags, or in their room, and they go in to play and they don’t learn anything. And so, if you give him, your child, how to learn and how to read, more time, so it’s good.

Ayan argued that when parents “don’t know anything”, their children “don’t learn anything”, both because they lack support at home and because their parents cannot know whether or not their children even have homework, so it may not get done. Not only do limited literacy skills stand in the way of helping one’s child with homework, but they also interfere with communicating with teachers:

Even your child, if you go to the school and they give the children a letter and they say, “Go bring your mom this letter,” or you go the school for teachers, they can call you and you have to talk to them, and they can tell you how’s your children, how to learn some things, if he’s not learning or if she’s not learning, and so that’s really nice because even children when they are going to school, taking homework and they bring the
homework home and you have to make, helping your child how to do homework.
In this passage, Ayan links being able to communicate with one’s child’s teacher to being able
to guide and help the child with his or her studies. Another way to help one’s child in school,
she notes, is to read to them at home:

I saw, my teacher, many times she told me, “Ayan, try to read many times to your
daughter.” I say, “Oh, okay,” because I know you help your daughter and learn how to
read.

Encouraged by her own teacher, Ayan now makes an effort to read aloud to her daughter,
which in this case, serves as practice for both mother and daughter. With her daughter about to
enter kindergarten this year, Ayan feels prepared to communicate with teachers and to help
her daughter with her homework and communicate with her teachers.

Learner needs and goals

In the short-term, Ayan plans to continue taking LINC classes for the next couple years,
in order to continue developing the kinds of skills she needs for taking care of herself and her
daughter and establish herself professionally. She recognizes that while her English speaking
skills are relatively high, she still needs to work on her reading and writing skills so she can
better deal with the high literacy demands faced in Canada. At the time of the interview, Ayan
was just about to start a one-month job-training course offered through the Centre. With many
choices of courses, such as training to be a child-minder or a chef, Ayan chose the hairdressing
course:
The next few years? If I learn hairdresser, that’s good for me! That’s good for me. If you learn how to do hairdresser, if you even go make the salon, your own salon, that’s good for you.

Having seen and worked in her friend’s salon in Kenya, Ayan has a good idea of the demands of this particular job, whether she decides to work in someone else’s salon or to open her own. While this is her current goal, she often uses her connections at the Centre and other local settlement organizations to find out about new programs. With a high degree of confidence, motivation and commitment to her studies, in addition to a willingness to try new things and seek out additional courses and training, it is very likely that Ayan’s literacy skills will continue to improve and adapt to her and her family’s changing needs and goals.

**Fawzia**

**Background**

Like the other participants in this research, Fawzia spent most of her life in Somalia, followed by many years in refugee camps in Kenya before coming to Canada. Having arrived here in 2002, she had been in the country for the longest out of the women in the study. Fawzia attends full-time LINC classes and works as a cleaner at the Centre one or two nights per week. Although she was assessed as LINC level 2, Fawzia struggles a great deal with reading and writing but has strong speaking and listening skills. A middle-aged woman, she lives with her husband, who is a busy working man, and for her future plans, Fawzia intends to work as a cashier.
Experience with literacy

Before coming to Canada, Fawzia had little experience with literacy. She had attended some schooling as a girl in Somalia but jokes that she had no interest in being in the classroom, preferring to stay at home with family members or play outside with her friends. At least when she was child, she noted that school was mostly for boys where she was from. Having attended little school in her home country, Fawzia does not read or write in her native Somali. When she arrived in Canada in her 30s, she therefore had few literacy skills to draw on.

Experiences with LINC

Much like the other women, Fawzia began taking LINC classes shortly after arriving in Canada. However, after only three months in the country, she was diagnosed with cancer, which quickly derailed her plans. As a result, she left school and for the next four years was in and out of hospitals and exhausted from countless rounds of chemotherapy. This left her isolated and with limited English skills even after many years in the country. She began LINC classes again in 2005, but quickly had to leave again when her cancer reappeared. After making a full recovery, however, Fawzia finally returned to LINC classes in 2006. She noted with a hint of embarrassment that she has been in the same level 1/2 class for a long time, despite attending full-time classes for four years. Reading and writing are her weak points, but she observed that writing is especially difficult. While she has covered the same material in her classes repeatedly, Fawzia suggested that she has learning and memory problems that prevent
her from making much progress with reading and writing. She links these issues to the years of chemotherapy she endured when battling cancer during her first few years in Canada. With such difficulties learning, Fawzia’s experience in the classroom has often been unfulfilling and frustrating. In a very large class with up to 30 students registered, Fawzia gets little attention from the instructor and often feels that she is falling behind. Nevertheless, she credits her instructor for what progress she has made and insists that she is doing her best given the circumstances.

**Literacy practices**

**Outside of school**

While Fawzia is quick to note the importance of being able to read and write to perform daily tasks outside of school, she is not confident in her own abilities to do so. While the other women in the study, including her classmates, feel that they can navigate many literacy demands outside of school, Fawzia lacks this assurance and stated that she requires assistance for a great number of tasks. Whether dealing with doctors, banks, government offices, utilities companies or the library, Fawzia requires someone to come with her to act as a translator and scribe, which is a source of inconvenience and even embarrassment. The discomfort caused by this dependence, however, serves as a strong motivator for Fawzia to continue studying, with the hope that she will one day be able to perform these tasks by herself.

Despite her limited functional literacy, Fawzia has made some significant improvements
over the past several years. When she first arrived in Canada, Fawzia recounted that she needed assistance for even the most basic tasks like taking public transit and shopping. With minimal familiarity with literacy upon arrival in Canada, and even less familiarity with English literacy, both the literacy and numeracy demands of such tasks proved too challenging for her. When confronted with such challenges, Fawzia would enlist the help of her husband. He continues to help her when she needs it, but because he works long hours to support their family, he is not always available to offer assistance. For this reason in particular, Fawzia notes that she needs to improve her reading and writing skills so that she can be more independent, instead of waiting for her husband’s help.

**Learner needs and goals**

In the short-term, Fawzia plans to continue taking LINC classes as a means to improve her reading and writing skills. As noted above, Fawzia hopes that what she learns in class will help to prepare her for out-of-school literacy demands so that she no longer has to rely on others for navigating various institutions and tasks. A focus on writing in particular would be helpful in her case. Related to her learning and memory problems, she would also like her LINC classes to continue throughout the summer. Otherwise, Fawzia said that by the time September comes around, she will have forgotten everything that she learned the previous year and so have to start again from scratch. Consequently, Fawzia would like to have a shorter break, to continue classes straight through the summer, or to have some other program to fill the ten-to-twelve weeks of holidays.
In addition to these suggestions, Fawzia would also like to gain more computer skills. While she has access to a computer at home, she needs help to use it and only then can she perform simple word processing. Fawzia noted that working on her computer skills may help her to prepare for her future goal of working as a cashier. Conversely, if she chooses not to pursue such a path, Fawzia thinks she may instead take sewing classes and work as a seamstress. Furthermore, she hopes to apply for citizenship in the next two or three years, though she notes that she will require a great deal of preparation for and assistance with the test. Fawzia also expressed concern that while attaining citizenship is a major goal, she knows that it will disqualify her from programs such as LINC that give her the skills she needs to reach other goals. In the meantime, however, Fawzia will continue with LINC classes in the hopes of improving her literacy skills, despite the challenges she faces with memory and learning difficulties.

**Warsan**

**Background**

The oldest of the participants, Warsan arrived in Canada in 2007 in her 40s. She came with a daughter, now in her early twenties, who recently moved to Alberta. Warsan now lives with her two nephews, the sons of her sister, who are both young adults. Known for her humour and positive attitude, Warsan has a reputation around the Settlement Centre and beyond for her ability to brighten up a room. Unlike the other women participating in the study, Warsan has left school several times to pursue full-time employment opportunities. She told
me she intends to leave school again in the next few months in order to open a home daycare centre.

Prior experience with literacy

Before coming to Canada, Warsan had some experience with print literacy and formal education. As a child, she attended school in Somalia for six years. She explained, however, that because a great deal of time has passed and she does not read and write frequently in Somali, it is something that does not come easily to her:

Yes, I go to school in my country but no finish high school. I finish grade six in Somali.

Now it’s no comfortable because I forget long time. When I’m young I go to school, but long time, long time, long time I’m no go to school. I’m married, I have children and many things, so sometimes I forget. It’s hard, a little bit hard, but still I read and I write.

But it’s a little bit hard. It’s hard. But still I read Somali, I write.

While Warsan observed that her Somali print literacy skills are not well developed, she equally acknowledged that having previous experience with literacy, and particularly with the Latin alphabet, made her experience learning English significantly easier than for other some learners.

Experience in the LINC program
Since arriving in Canada in 2007, Warsan has taken classes at several different LINC centres. She started classes at a provider near her home, which all of the other participants also attended before coming to the Settlement Centre. Warsan stayed there for less than a year before leaving to pursue full-time work as a house-keeper. After working for eight months, she returned to school, this time at the Settlement Centre both because it was easier to travel to and because it had a good reputation in her social circle: “Some people tell me this school is good. People learn many things – that’s why I came here.” Although there are other LINC providers that are closer to her home, Warsan insists on travelling to classes at the Settlement Centre because of its good standing in the community as well as her previous positive experiences there. Through the Settlement Centre and another social service organization, Warsan has also been taking other courses outside of the LINC program, including ones on financial literacy and business owning, which directly relate to her goals of starting her own home daycare centre.

**Uses of literacy**

*In school*

When asked about her reading and writing habits and abilities, Warsan responded with hesitance. She feels discouraged at the length of time she has been in Canada compared to the slow results she sees in the classroom and beyond. Warsan believes that considering she has
been in Canada and studying on and off for three years, her literacy skills are not where they should be. In class, she struggles to keep up with the lessons:

I practice my paper the teacher give me. I review my paper, I writing, I reading, because I want to understand something the teacher give me. Yeah, I practice. My sheet the teacher give me, I practice, writing, reading. I practice this.

Warsan insisted that while her speaking and listening skills are adequate and can develop with practice, literacy skills are significantly more difficult to develop, even when she studies hard and practices difficult lessons:

It’s hard. Sometimes you read, but you no understand what is it. This word, you no understand what it means. For me, it’s easy, I listen to the people talking. Maybe I catch a little bit. I catch a little bit. I listen today, tomorrow, this I understand. But writing and reading, I don’t like it. It’s hard.

The difficulty associated with reading and writing quickly drains Warsan’s enjoyment and engagement in literacy tasks. Despite the discomfort caused by reading and writing in school, however, Warsan still tries to work on her trouble spots, which she consistently listed as grammar, spelling, and question formation. Considering the ubiquitous presence of literacy in her life in school and outside of school, it is unfortunate that Warsan has had such negative associations with it. However, her aversion to reading and writing is completely understandable considering the barriers Warsan faces as an adult learner who had limited experience with literacy before coming to Canada.
*Outside of school*

Despite an aversion to reading and writing, outside of school, Warsan appeared to be quite capable in terms of her literacy skills. She has navigated various systems and programs outside of the LINC program for some time. Part of her success may come from the strong support of her two adult nephews who live with her. Having this kind of assistance readily available to her at home is undoubtedly a source of security. Generally, however, Warsan reported that she is able to independently complete more frequent and predictable tasks like paying utility bills:

I understand phone bills, I understand. But sometimes the business paper, some word I no understand, so I ask the boys. Phone bills, I understand. I know phone bill, my address, a little bit I understand.

While Warsan reported never using computers in LINC classes, she explained that she once had a computer, but she threw it away when it stopped working properly. She did not use it very much, and could only do so with the assistance of her daughter. Aside from listening to Somali newscasts online, Warsan had little use for her computer and did not, for example, have an email account or use the internet. Unlike some of the other participants in this research, Warsan seemed largely uninterested in technology and digital communication, perhaps as a result of living in Canada for many years without using them.

*Native language literacy*
While Warsan was not highly literate in Somali before coming to Canada, having had some experience with reading and writing served her well when adapting to English print literacy. She explained that in particular Somali and English sharing the same alphabet facilitated the otherwise daunting task of learning to read a new language:

The first day is hard. You know my language, Somalian language and English, the alphabet is the same, so it's easy for me the time I starting school.

Being familiar with the same alphabet before arriving in Canada in this sense lessened the burden of learning English for Warsan. She noted that she also uses Somali print as a memory aide when in class:

Sometimes they helping me Somali. Because sometimes the teacher say a word I no understand. I understand this time, I write in Somali because I want to remember.

Warsan has been using her native language literacy skills as a learning tool for developing English literacy. While she insisted that having previously learned to read and write in Somali helps her in many ways, Warsan also reported certain problems that she believes stem from her knowledge of Somali print. Namely, she confuses some of the letters that represent different sounds in English compared to Somali. Spelling is a constant worry of Warsan’s, and one that she attributes to her confusion with Somali spelling conventions. However, she recognizes that her problems with literacy would be much more serious if she had no prior experience with print:
It’s good and it’s bad. Some people, no reading and writing Somali. Better for me.

Because no write before Somali. So it’s better for me, just spelling. Some people no go to Somali school, and no understand ABC. Yeah, some people it’s very hard, but you understand ABCs a little bit, they help me.

Aside from using Somali as a memory aide, however, Warsan seems to have little use for Somali print in her day-to-day life. When asked what she reads in Somali, she reported only once taking a Somali language book from the library. Having little use for Somali print in her everyday life, and having only limited literacy in Somali in the first place, Warsan reported that neither her Somali nor her English literacy skills are strong:

    Somali and English is broken! [laughing] Both broken. Because one you take this way, one you take this way!

In other words, Warsan feels that since her literacy skills are weak in both languages, focusing on one will be to the detriment of the other. It is for this reason, in addition to the low functional value of Somali in her everyday life, that Warsan has choosen to focus on developing English literacy skills.

Values attached to literacy

Learning as an adult
More than any of the other women, Warsan emphasized the learning difficulties particular to adult learners. During the interview she asked me why I chose to work with adults when it is, according to her, so much easier to teach children:

Adult, you adult? Head, too much things! And the tongue is tight. No easy like children.

Children, everything is wake up. Everything is fresh. But my head’s not fresh!

Not only does Warsan believe it is more difficult to learn to read and write as an adult, but she noted that the process can be significantly longer. While Warsan’s adult children have been in Canada for as long as she has, she observed that their English is much better than hers, which she attributes to her age:

Now I am old. I came to Canada when I am old. My kids are old. My children grow up. I learn English slow, slow. Because I no understand fast English, that’s why I long time I go to school.

While determination and hard work are necessary to improve one’s English and develop adequate literacy skills, Warsan contended that there are nevertheless limits on how far adults from limited literacy backgrounds can go in terms of employment prospects and educational opportunities. Even unlimited time, Warsan argued, may not help some learners to develop adequate literacy skills. When discussing the fact that Halimo has dreams of becoming a nurse, Warsan expresses clear scepticism:
[laughing] I don’t know! Me and Halimo, it’s very hard for English. Very hard. I don’t think she go nurse. First you speak English, writing and reading is good, then after you go. Maybe she go be PSW [Personal Support Worker]. A little bit after you learn this school, after you go.

Classes in the LINC program can prepare a learner for other kinds of training, but Warsan argued that for those with limited literacy skills prior to coming to Canada, the literacy demands necessary for some career paths are simply too demanding.

Warsan also went on to highlight how adult learners struggle to balance school, with its long-term promises of a more stable future, and full-time work, which offers more immediate rewards. She noted the set hours of her work as a childminder will mean she may be unable to attend school once her home daycare starts up:

Because I’m watching the children. I can’t come to school. They need a whole day, you stay the children! You can’t come to school. Maybe I stay one year or two year, after I forget English, they I come back to class! (laughing) Maybe I stay home daycare long time. Maybe school. If I comfortable the daycare, I stay long time. But if I’m not comfortable, I see that’s it’s too hard, I can’t, then I come back my school. I think another things.

When asked what her other choices would be if the home daycare did not work out, Warsan was quick to once again emphasize her limited options:
I don’t have choices! Because before I starting the daycare, I try to get job, but I look many places, I can’t found it. So that’s why I want to try daycare. Before I look everywhere, I look for job, I look in cleaning, I look in housekeeping, but I can’t found it.

Even when searching for employment opportunities that do not require a great deal of English skills, Warsan nevertheless found it impossible to find suitable work. Furthermore, she expressed doubt that more schooling would necessarily open more doors for her, despite her determination:

I want to push myself. Yeah, I want to push myself to go to school. But me, I coming school. ...I read a little bit. But I am no like writing and reading. And sometimes I say, “Now you are old. Why you write and why you read? You no go college. You no go get good job. Why you push yourself?” But I say, “You have to push yourself because you want to speak people, you want to live in Canada – so you have to know English.”

In this passage, Warsan clearly expresses the conflict that she feels as an adult learner of English in Canada. On the one hand, Warsan acknowledged that her options for educational and employment opportunities are limited by her age and her abilities with literacy. On the other hand, however, she recognized that participation in Canadian society and navigating Canadian institutions requires English language skills. For this reason, Warsan feels that she should push herself to continue with her studies, even though reading and writing are difficult and unenjoyable to her. She continued:
Yeah, it’s hard to balance because before I start the school at [another centre], I working eight months, then I come here, I learn maybe six months, something like that. Then I go babysitting because you need something help for your life. They say, “You go to school!”, but you need something help.

The fact that Warsan has left school several times to pursue full-time work reflects the conflict that she feels regarding the importance of English literacy in Canada. It also reflects how difficult it can be to balance immediate financial security with investments in schooling that may or may not pay off in the long-term. Warsan noted that it is expected that she, as a newcomer, spend time developing her English skills, but she does not feel as though she is adequately supported to do be able to do so.

**Parent-child relations**

As an adult learner, Warsan can also see the investment in language learning as a parent. Although her children are now grown, Warsan can nevertheless relate to parents with school-aged children and so stresses the importance of being literate in order to help one’s children:

You have children, it’s important you go to learn school English, because you need to help your children. Yeah, that’s important. But I know many Somalis, they live in Hamilton maybe 15 years or 20 years – they know English very well. They no need their
children help – they help children! Parent help children. But children no need to help parent with English because you speak very well and go to school.

Here, Warsan makes reference to the frequently cited role reversal that often takes place when the children of recent immigrants learn English more quickly than their parents, putting the children in a position of power. Learning English and going to school is one way to lessen this possibility or to avoid it altogether by maintaining the normal dynamic of parents helping children.

Li teracy for newcomers

Like the other participants, Warsan was quick to link literacy skills to life in Canada, in terms of both inclusion in general public life as well as in terms of employment opportunities and financial stability. When asked why literacy is important to newcomers to Canada, she responded:

Because, life! Life – you no speak English very well, you no have life in Canada. You won’t understand. Because you can’t speak people very well, you can’t get job. You no understand the people what they’re talking about. That’s why I need to learn English.

In the Somali community in particular, Warsan reported knowing many Somalis with limited experience with literacy prior to coming to Canada for whom literacy is now very important. Like Halimo before. She said she no write, never go to school. Before she come to
Canada, she never writing and read. She start here. But now her writing is good, very good.

People like Halimo, according to Warsan, are models of how adult literacy learners can succeed through hard work and determination. They are many other women, however, who arrived with literacy skills already and continued their education in Canada, making of whom pursue nursing, as Warsan noted. These examples, both of Halimo and other women in nursing, support Warsan’s belief that literacy is very important to the Somali community in Canada.

When asked what she would tell a newcomer from Somali with limited literacy skills, she said:

“I tell her go to school! I tell her, “You come to Canada and you can’t read and you can’t read? You go to school!” Some people say “It’s not important! I’m old! I can't read, I can’t write.” But some people they like it, some people they don’t like it.

Here, Warsan expressed a voice slightly contrary to views above, where she was arguing against those who insist that they are too old to learn to read and write. She noted, however, that some may like it more than others, and may in turn do better. Once again, we see Warsan’s conflict emerge: She acknowledges the importance of literacy and its accessibility to older learners yet at the same time expresses her dislike of reading and writing and stresses its inaccessibility due to her age and educational background.

**Learner needs and goals**
While Warsan would like to continue improving her literacy skills, the demands of finding stable employment have been weighing on her, and she has chosen to leave school again. Instead of leaving for temporary work like before, Warsan has this time done the appropriate research and made the necessary arrangements to pursue a more stable career path by opening a home daycare centre. To do this, she first needs to be certified as an Early Childhood Educator (ECE) and pass all of the necessary checks. She described the lengthy process involved:

First, I take the three months for program babysitting, daycare class. After I finish, I take the one day CPR. Then I go apply another company they called Today Family, I talking about this company. They give me form, I fill out the application. So I finish the application, I go back. So I waiting, I wait now. They coming to check my house. Friday in the morning, they check my house. After they finish, they give me paper, I go the test TB. And then I go police test, police check.

Warsan’s ability to navigate this process speaks volumes about her determination and capacity for research and planning. She mentions that she will be completing the ECE program at a local immigrant service provider, instead of the local college’s program, which requires LINC level 5/6. Warsan noted that the program she will take is not as highly regarded as the local college’s ECE program, but that it is an option that will get her to the same end point of being certified to open a home daycare. Warsan is grateful for the existence of this program since she would otherwise be excluded from even receiving training because her LINC assessments are much
lower than necessary for the college program. Moreover, it is likely that the course at the immigrant services organization will provide the necessary language support given that most or all of its students will be English language learners.

When asked about other future plans, Warsan expressed that she would like to attain her citizenship in the next year. Since she will not be in school at this time, it will not affect her study plans. However, if Warsan chooses to come back to school, which she considers a possibility, she will have to make other arrangements since LINC classes are not open to citizens. Nevertheless, despite reporting no preparation for the citizenship process in her LINC classes, she feels confident that she will be able to complete the application and pass the test as necessary. With her high level of determination and successful use of resources, it is likely that Warsan will attain citizenship with ease and begin her home daycare as planned in the next year.

**Member-check**

After conducting the main interviews with the participants and analysing the data, I conducted a member-check where I met with each of the women again to present my analysis to them and gather their feedback\(^1\). This was done in order to confirm the accuracy and completeness of my interpretation, providing an extra layer of validity to the findings. Since the participants are literacy learners, the findings were presented to them orally during tape-

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\(^1\) Due to unforeseen circumstances, only three of the four participants were able to take part in the member check. The fourth participant, Ayan, recently stopped attending school and could not be contacted.
recorded meetings. I present the women with the information displayed in Table 1 (found below in Chapter 5) based on their interviews and summarized the themes and patterns that emerged through my cross-case analysis. The participants were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with my interpretation of the data and were encouraged to offer corrections and clarifications where necessary.

As a whole, the participants expressed support and confirmed the accuracy of the data and analysis presented to them. They largely verified the personal details of their literacy practices and agreed with how I had interpreted the data. One of the women, Halimo, offered minor corrections concerning her personal literacy practices by clarifying that her ability to use Somali literacy independently is still quite limited. Where I had previously understood that she could read and write emails independently in Somali, she clarified that she can read them but has trouble responding without assistance. The appropriate changes were made in the main text of this participant’s profile. Aside from this correction, the participants supported both the accuracy of the data and the appropriateness of my interpretations.
Chapter 5

Cross-case analysis

Based on the profiles of the four participants detailed in Chapter 4, this chapter addresses the themes that emerged across the cases, comparing and contrasting the participants’ experiences. Specifically, I consider how the findings answer the major research questions guiding the study:

1) How do these learners use and value literacy?

2) What do their literacy practices tell us about the nature of literacy?

Table 1 presents an overview of the women’s literacy practices under five major categories: self, family, Somali community, educational institutions, and Canadian society. These categories may not be mutually exclusive, but their interrelated nature highlights key distinctions while addressing the participants’ multiple identity constructs as individual women, family members, Somali community members, refugees to Canada and future citizens.

Self

On the level of the individual, all of the participants expressed a strong attachment to the value of literacy as related to one’s independence. While some felt more self-sufficient than others, they all associated high literacy skills with being independent. Halimo strives to be able
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Self</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Somali Community</th>
<th>Educational Institutions</th>
<th>Society – Participation and Inclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Halimo</td>
<td>need to provide for self – fiercely independent</td>
<td>family has supported her to pursue studies, help from uncle</td>
<td>became literate in Somali after coming to Canada in order to communicate with friends and family overseas via email</td>
<td>no school in Somalia due to financial barriers, displacement experiences in Canada mixed – changed schools several times extra courses on clothes-making</td>
<td>“you know the rules” – literacy necessary to navigate immigration, social services, etc. balancing full-time school with desire to work; difficulty finding suitable employment plans to apply for citizenship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayan</td>
<td>providing for family and protecting privacy by doing tasks alone</td>
<td>family has supported her to pursue studies, support from older brother and aunt</td>
<td>Somali print literacy helpful for learning English, necessary to communicate with friends and family overseas engages in online Somali diaspora community support from local Somali community to pursue studies</td>
<td>attended school in Somalia experiences in Canada mixed – changed schools several times extra courses on financial literacy, business-owning</td>
<td>literacy necessary to navigate institutions like immigration, health care, banking, etc. plans to become business-owner preparing for citizenship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fawzia</td>
<td>learning and memory difficulties, long absence from school due to health issues feelings of inadequacy around literacy</td>
<td>family has supported her to pursue studies, help from husband</td>
<td>does not have use for Somali print in Canada</td>
<td>attended some school in Somalia experiences in Canada mixed – changed schools several times discouraged at school, little attention in large class extra courses on clothes-making</td>
<td>literacy needed to conduct daily tasks, but she needs assistance with most tasks feels unprepared for citizenship requirements plans to work as cashier in future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warsan</td>
<td>memory difficulties, attributed to age feelings of inadequacy around literacy</td>
<td>family has supported her to pursue studies, help from nephews</td>
<td>admires those in local Somali community who are literate in English uses Somali print only as memory aid - “English and Somali is broken”</td>
<td>attended some school in Somalia experiences in Canada mixed – changed schools several times courses on financial literacy, business-owning</td>
<td>literacy needed to participate in society, engage with people difficulty finding suitable employment, balancing work, school, finances plans to leave school, start business and become citizen</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
to perform tasks independently because she cannot rely on others and they can make her feel inadequate for having low literacy skills. While Warsan and Fawzia think it is better to complete tasks on their own, they ask for help when necessary. Ayan, on the other hand, avoids asking for help and strives to be “Miss Independent” in order to protect and provide for her family. The more dependent the women felt on others to perform daily tasks, the more they expressed feelings of inadequacy around literacy. While Ayan and Halimo conveyed confidence with their abilities with literacy both in and out of the classroom, Fawzia and Warsan did not share this assurance. Due to a long absence from school and memory difficulties from health issues, Fawzia lacked confidence in her abilities to navigate print in her daily life and felt ill at ease while at school. Warsan, though slightly more confident, similarly reported memory difficulties which she attributed to her advanced age. This, she noted, makes learning literacy skills extremely challenging and makes being in the classroom ultimately unrewarding. We can see here how these individual factors such as age and health can shape a learner’s ability to access literacy.

Family

The role of the women’s families in their experiences with literacy was also prominent in their interviews. All of the women indicated that their families supported them to pursue their studies. For Warsan, her older brother and aunt were her main supporters, while for Halimo it was her uncle, for Fawzia her husband, and for Warsan her two nephews. These individuals offered the women not only encouragement for them to go to school, but also physical
assistance with literacy tasks as necessary. The women also emphasized the centrality of literacy for families with young children. Warsan and Halimo, who are mothers of grown children, insisted that newcomer parents need to be literate in English in order to maintain an appropriate parent-child relationship where parents can help children and where children cannot mislead parents. They, like Ayan, also noted that literacy skills are important for helping children with their homework and for communicating with teachers. Those with minimal literacy skills, they argue, are unable to help their children in school and require assistance with all kinds of tasks. For women like Ayan who have young children in school, their role as a mother shapes not only their motivation for pursuing an education, but also the kinds of literacy tasks that they engage in. We can see proof of this in Ayan’s mention of reading storybooks with her daughter, as well as performing caregiver tasks like dealing with health care forms and papers from her child’s school.

Somali community

Being part of both the global and local Somali communities has also shaped the literacy practices of the women in this study. Having come from a country with a strong oral culture and a recently developed writing system makes the Somali community unique from other established immigrant groups in that many Somali newcomers do not have native language print literacy skills upon arrival in Canada. For example, Halimo had no experience with Somali literacy before arrival, while Warsan and Fawzia had minimal experience, and Ayan was highly
literate in Somali. They all argued that learning English literacy was easier for learners who were already familiar with the Latin alphabet, even though it can sometimes cause confusion with spelling. However, Somali print skills were more highly valued to some of the participants than others. Fawzia, on one extreme, attached no significance to Somali print literacy and seemed unaware that the other women used Somali print on a regular basis. Warsan reported using Somali print only as a memory aid. She noted that as an older learner without much schooling before coming to Canada, literacy skills in neither language are strong and as a result, she struggled with both and expressed a great dislike for reading and writing.

For Ayan and Halimo, their use of Somali print has been maintained or developed after resettlement, and has been entirely mediated by technological communication. Due to the massive displacement caused by conflict in Somalia, their family and friends are spread out across the globe, creating the need to maintain connections transnationally. With the use of print-based digital communication at an all-time high globally, it is no wonder that the internet has become the preferred method for communication for many in the diaspora. For Halimo in particular, this has created a need for Somali print that had never existed before for her. While she represents an individual case of Somali literacy development when abroad, this example when coupled with Ayan’s maintenance of Somali literacy may indicate a trend towards strengthening position of Somali print in the diaspora. As long as Somali users continue to produce and respond to electronic texts, the internet offers an avenue to promote Somali print literacy by providing a limitless resource of authentic texts - one that Ayan and Halimo have been profiting from and contributing to. This case certainly serves as an effective example of
the socially-constructed nature of literacy, showing how global forces like conflict, displacement, resettlement and the existence of digital communication can shape individual literacy practices.

*Educational institutions*

The women’s experiences with educational institutions, both in Canada and prior to arrival, have similarly shaped their literacy practices. Initially, the women’s access to formal education and literacy had been constrained by their gender, given that women are only half as likely to be literate in Somalia. Before coming to Canada, Halimo reported never having been to school as a result of her family’s financial situation. Meanwhile, Fawzia and Warsan, did attend school for several years as children, but did not continue due to lack of interest and family commitments. For these three, having little or no experience with schooling and print literacy would, in some ways, serve to constrain their ability to access English literacy skills in Canada. However, Fawzia and Warsan, being familiar with Somali print literacy, brought with them knowledge of the Latin alphabet. Halimo, who developed literacy skills in Swahili while living in Kenyan refugee camps, similarly had this experience to draw on. For Ayan, on the other hand, who had gone to school straight through high school in Somali, her prior experience with both the Latin alphabet and formal education would certainly ease the transition into the highly text-based society found in Canada.

The women’s experiences with educational institutions in Canada would continue to shape their literacy practices. In particular, their experiences with LINC classes have been mixed
and each of the participants had been to several LINC providers prior to arriving at the Settlement Centre. At other locations, the women reported poor teachers, repetitive lessons, and lack of provisions like transportation assistance and childcare. The women came to the Settlement Centre due to its high reputation in the community and while they generally praise the Centre and their teachers, they continue to deal with overcrowded classrooms that limit the amount of time and assistance they receive from their instructors. Meanwhile, outside of LINC, the women pursue other learning opportunities such as workshops and courses related to their long-term goals ranging from working as seamstresses to becoming entrepreneurs. The kinds of courses the women take are confined to those that offer language support, as well as child-minding and transportation assistance. While women like Warsan are excluded from college-level courses that require high literacy skills, the existence of alternative courses offering similar certifications allow women to pursue their employment goals. Similarly, Ayan is only able to take courses that offer child-minding. In this way, the women’s access to education is constrained by their linguistic, financial and family situations.

*Canadian society*

As refugees to Canada, the women’s literacy practices are also shaped by their participation in broader Canadian society. In terms of both motivation for acquiring literacy skills and the kinds of actual literacy tasks they perform, the women all expressed how literacy is essential for navigating Canadian institutions. Whether finding their ways through the health
care system, dealing with Citizenship and Immigration or accessing social services, the women here all stressed that these tasks could not be done independently without having adequate literacy skills. In their interviews, the women mentioned not only the need only access services and deal with Canadian bureaucracy, but also the desire for social inclusion and civic participation. This includes, on one hand, finding suitable employment as well as becoming full citizens. Warsan struggled the most with employment, noting that despite having improved her literacy skills to some degree, she was still unable to find any work. While this has caused her financial trouble as well as emotional strife, it has also caused her to strike out on her own and start her own business, which has the potential to be quite beneficial for her. Meanwhile, others like Halimo and Fawzia have managed to find some employment that requires little literacy skills, such as janitorial work. On one hand, jobs like these often provide low compensation and do not offer opportunities to expand on one’s skills. Nevertheless, the existence of such jobs provide some form of employment and also allow these women to gain the much-desired Canadian work experience they will require to procure future employment. The women here, particularly Warsan, struggle to decide between investing in education, with its long-term promises of gainful employment, and working full-time, with its immediate benefits of relative financial stability.

In terms of citizenship, all of the women intend to apply in the next year or two. However, only some of them feel that they are currently prepared to do so with reference to the literacy skills required to study for and take the test. Equally importantly, the women will have to consider the pros and cons of attaining citizenship, since LINC classes as well as other
some other programs are not open to Canadian citizens. Once the women obtain citizenship, they will therefore have their educational opportunities limited. Here, the women’s political status as refugees in Canada on one hand gives them access to free literacy instruction, but on the other hand, their access to it depends on them staying non-citizens and maintaining an unstable position in Canada. As a result, their choice to attain citizenship or to remain non-citizen will certainly continue to shape how these women access and use print literacy.
Chapter 6

Discussion and Implications

In the above section, I have explored how the Somali refugee women in this study use and value literacy, addressing the themes that appeared throughout the cases and comparing and contrasting the participants’ experiences. As ethnic, linguistic, religious and political minorities, it was expected that the experiences of these specific participants, with their multiple identity constructs, would serve to shed light on literacy as a socially-embedded phenomenon. What emerged from the data were some of the ways in which their literacy practices are both constrained and enabled by various social factors. That is, a number of individual, social, political and economic forces both constrain their access to literacy as well as enable and produce uses of literacy.

The findings from the women’s experiences shed light on the nature of literacy as social and multiple. As demonstrated above, the women participate in a number of English language, Somali language and technological literacies in various domains at school, at home and in the community. Their reasons for using print literacy range widely from completing bureaucratic tasks like applying for citizenship, to procuring utilities and social services, accessing health care, practicing school-based literacies, communicating with family overseas as well as reading for interest and pleasure. While their abilities with literacy vary across tasks and across participants, it is nevertheless clear that for each of the women literacy is not a singular, autonomous skill but rather one that is inherently multiple and socially-embedded.

Nevertheless, while I have outlined how the participants’ literacy practices are constructed by various social factors and structures, I contend that they also challenge inequitable power relations and unfavourable dominant discourse on refugee women and the
Somali community. As per Street’s (2001) suggestion, literacy research has a task to do in “making visible the complexity of local, everyday literacy practices and challenging dominant stereotypes and myopia” (p. 7). In the participants’ experiences, we find ample evidence to counter the deficit discourse on immigrant and refugee women as unable or unwilling to help their children in school, as discussed by Bigelow (2010) and Lopez (2001). The women here attached great importance to literacy in terms of helping one’s children in school by assisting with homework and communicating with teachers. They showed not only a great valuing of helping one’s children in school, but also insight and awareness in terms of how to do so. The women here also counter the discourse that learners with limited print skills cannot understand the significance of literacy. On the contrary, although not always comprehensible, print is nevertheless ubiquitous in their lives and they attach great significance to it. They have found ways to make it meaningful and use print for a variety of purposes across diverse domains in their lives. The findings here also counter the myth, as presented by Blackledge and Pavlenko (2001), that immigrant women, particularly Muslim women, are always discouraged from pursuing education due to the “traditional” values of husbands and other male relatives. In fact, the women here all reported being supported by family members, both male and female, to pursue their studies. Lastly, but importantly, the women here also challenge the assumption that one must be highly literate and schooled in order to lead a productive and successful life in Canada. Women like Warsan, who is leaving school to start her own business, demonstrate how alternative paths can be equally fulfilling. While becoming literate in English in Canada can certainly, as we have seen above, contribute to one’s sense of independence and one’s ability
to access particular resources and services, more schooling may not always necessarily lead to more employment opportunities or financial stability.

**Implications for ESL education**

From the analysis and discussion above concerning the nature of literacy, here I will outline a number of implications for ESL educators, researchers and policy makers. If literacy is socially-embedded and one’s ability to access it is constrained and enabled by various social forces, it is only natural that we should seek to minimize the constraints and maximize the factors that enable.

At the policy level, there are a number of steps that could be taken to minimize barriers for learners. Firstly, the LINC program as well as other settlement programs should seek to consistently allow for the provision of transportation assistance and child care, which can make or break one’s ability to access literacy instruction. Moreover, there may be a benefit to limiting classroom sizes, as high needs learners in large classes can easily become lost and discouraged. In reference to the eligibility criteria for LINC students, the exclusion of newcomers who have attained citizenship is certainly a force that can constrain a learner’s access to literacy education, as can be seen with these participants. This policy adds an unfair burden, particularly to literacy learners whose learning trajectories may be significantly longer than for previously literate learners. Adult refugee learners, who may have been transient for many years or decades, may be anxious to attain citizenship so that can develop a more stable life
and sponsor family members. Learners are forced to decide between an immediately more secure position in Canada or access to literacy training and long-term investments in education. By adjusting this policy, literacy instruction would take into account the various forces weighing on refugee learners and may enable them to fulfill important goals, instead of constraining their life choices.

In the classroom, educators should seek to tap into genuine motivations for using literacy. For these learners, for instance, the use of technology allowed for the maintenance and/or development of Somali language print skills, providing genuine opportunities to engage with literacy and fulfill important needs by doing so. For other learners, tapping into their roles as mothers and the literacy tasks associated with this identity may be another way to make instruction speak to learners’ needs. The findings above also suggest that educators must be cognizant of the various demands weighing on adult refugee students when planning for the future, particularly those who are literacy learners. Encouraging or pressuring students to stay in school, with the promise of better employment opportunities in the long-time, may not be realistic or productive for all learners. It is therefore suggested that adult ESL educators are mindful of the time investment that is required for literacy learners to advance to higher education, and that they in turn become aware of alternatives to continuing in general ESL training.
Concluding remarks

The above profiles of Halimo, Ayan, Fawzia and Warsan are hopefully only the beginning of a long dialogue between learners, educators, researchers and policy makers. Somali refugees in Canada are in a process of rapidly changing and adapting to a new culture and language, and the experiences expressed by the participants here offer great insight into the nature of literacy as social and multiple. For newcomers in particular, access to literacy is constrained and enabled by various social forces, and is embedded in, not separate from, larger settlement needs.

Believing that research must inform action in the community in which it was carried out, I intend to continue to work with the Somali community and work as an advocate in my community to minimize barriers to literacy education. I plan to organize a study group for the participants and other women who wish to work on their literacy skills in an alternative setting. As per the suggestions expressed by the women above, the group will be used as a space where each learner’s strengths can contribute to her peers’ learning. We may also explore the use of Somali print literacy through reading and creating relevant texts in order to maximize on the connections between decoding and encoding across languages and to promote literacy engagement.

It is my hope that the participants here and other learners can engage with literacy and formal education in ways that they find satisfying and empowering for themselves and their families. Educators, researchers and learners must work together to create space for dialogue
that informs practice and policy in ESL education and settlement services, with a focus on minimizing barriers and maximizing engagement and agency. For me personally, this research is only the first step in creating such a dialogue that has already contributed to my development as an educator and researcher, and that I hope will contribute to future research, practice and the larger movement towards equity and social justice in and through education.
References


Appendix A: Administrative letter of consent

Dear Administrator,

I am a Master’s student at the University of Toronto in the Second Language Education program. For my thesis, I am conducting a study entitled LINCing literacies: School- and community-based literacy practices among Somali refugee women. The purpose of this study is to better understand how Somali women in the LINC program use and value literacy, with the hope of gaining insight into how to best serve this unique population.

I plan to interview participants about their experiences of learning to read and write in Canada and their uses of literacy in school and outside of school. Since many of my participants will be students at your school, I would like to ask permission to conduct the interviews on the premises.

Involvement in the study is entirely voluntary and uncompensated, and you may choose to withdraw at any time. I do not anticipate that any harm will result from participation in the study. Importantly, the purpose of this study is not to evaluate teachers’ professional competence or evaluate program success. Moreover, confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible and the name of the school will not appear in any report or publication of the research. Any data generated from participation in the study will be safely stored in a location that only the researcher has access to.

Please sign below if you wish to take part in the study. If you have any questions or concerns, you can contact Melanie Pothier at XXXXX or her supervisor, Dr. Alister Cumming at XXXXXX.

I, ____________________________ (name), consent to participate in the LINCing Literacies study. By signing, I indicate that the details of the study have been explained to me give and that I grant permission for Melanie Pothier to conduct interviews at ____________________________ (school).

Signature ____________________________ Date ____________
Participant

Signature ____________________________ Date ____________
Researcher
Appendix B: Recruitment script

Hello,

My name is Melanie Pothier and I am a student at the University of Toronto studying Education. I am working on a project called *LINCing Literacies* about Somali women. The purpose of the project is to understand how Somali women in the LINC program use reading and writing in school and outside of school.

I would like to talk to you if you are a Somali woman who arrived in Canada as an adult, and if you previously attended LINC Literacy classes. If you volunteer to participate in the project, I will ask you to talk to me in English for about 30 minutes. I will ask you questions about learning to read and writing in Canada, and about how you use literacy in school and outside of school. Our conversation will be tape-recorded. I may ask to talk to you again at a later date for about 1 or 2 hours so you can tell me more details about your experiences.

I will leave my phone number so that you may contact me if you would like to participate or if you have any questions.

Thank you for your time.
Appendix C: Informed consent for participants

Dear Participant,

I am a student at the University of Toronto studying Education. For my program, I am doing a project called *LINCing Literacies: School- and community-based literacy practices among Somali refugee women*. The purpose of the project is to understand how Somali women in the LINC program use reading and writing in school and outside of school.

I would like to talk you in English about your experience of learning to read and write in Canada and ask you how you use literacy in school and outside of school. We will talk for about 30 minutes and I will tape-record our conversation. I may ask to talk to you again at a later date for about 1 or 2 hours. I also hope to attend community functions to see how you use reading and writing outside of school. I do not expect that any harm will come from participation in the project.

Involvement in the project is voluntary. You may choose to not answer any question or withdraw from the project at anytime. If you choose to withdraw, I will destroy all records of your participation. Confidentiality will be provided as much as possible. Your name will not appear in any report of the project. All record of your participation will be safely stored in a place that only I will have access to. If you would like to talk to my advisor Dr. Alister Cumming, please let me know and I will give you his contact information.

If you agreed to participate in the study and you understand the rules explained to you above, you can say “yes” into the tape recorder and we will begin the interview.
Appendix D: Interview protocol
(adapted from Purcell-Gates, 2007)

Demographic information

I. Where were you born?
II. What countries have you lived in?
III. Age range: 18-25  26-35  36-50  50+
IV. Who do you currently live with?

Historical literacy practices

I. How long have you been taking LINC classes?
II. Before you came to Canada, what was your experience with literacy? What kinds of
    reading/writing activities did people in your household/community participate in?
    (Use prompts from above.)
    For each text/practice mentioned, elicit information about the purpose, social
    context, other participants, and how important, enjoyable or fulfilling it was.
III. Before arriving in Canada, what was your experience with schooling? If you went to
    school, what kinds of reading and writing activities did you do? (e.g. reading –
    textbooks, novels, dictionaries, short stories, worksheets, poetry, picture books,
    information books, math books, etc.; writing – short stories, spelling practice,
    poetry, reports, work sheets, journals, essays/compositions, etc.)
    For each text/practice mentioned, elicit information about the purpose, social
    context, other participants, and how important, enjoyable or fulfilling it is.
IV. When you arrived in Canada, what was your first experience with school here?
V. How did you feel about learning to read? About learning to write?
VI. Do you think that your first experiences at school helped prepare you for the kinds of
    things you read and write now?

School-based literacy practices

I. What kinds of texts do you read at school? (e.g. textbooks, novels, dictionaries, short
    stories, worksheets, poetry, picture books, information books, math books, etc.)
    For each text/practice mentioned, elicit information about the purpose, social
    context, other participants, and how important, enjoyable or fulfilling it is.
II. Which of these texts do you particularly like? Dislike? Find difficult? Boring? Examples?
III. What kinds of texts do you write at school? (e.g. short stories, spelling practice, poetry, reports, work sheets, essays/compositions, journals, etc.)

For each text/practice mentioned, elicit information about the purpose, social context, other participants, and how important, enjoyable or fulfilling it is.

IV. Which of these texts do you particularly like? Dislike? Find difficult? Boring? Examples?

V. Do you use computers at school? If yes, what for?

Out-of-school literacy practices

I. What kinds of things do you read in your life (outside of school)?

For each text/practice mentioned, elicit information about the purpose, social context, other participants, and how important, enjoyable or fulfilling it is. Ask which language these activities take place in if unclear.

PROMPTS

- For daily tasks?
- For personal care/health?
- For political/civic participation/voting?
- With your children, spouse, other family, friends or co-workers?
- For official purposes like getting a visa/work permit?
- For paying taxes?
- At work?
- For entertainment?
- For relaxation?
- For information?
- For shopping?
- For worship/religious purposes?
- For using computer/Internet?
- For group/community activities?

II. What kinds of things do you write in your life (outside of school)?

For each text/practice mentioned, elicit information about the purpose, social context, other participants, and how important, enjoyable or fulfilling it is.

PROMPTS
• For daily tasks?
• For personal care/health?
• For political/civic participation/voting?
• With your children, spouse, other family, friends or co-workers?
• For official purposes like getting a visa/work permit?
• For paying taxes?
• At work?
• For entertainment?
• For relaxation?
• For information?
• For shopping?
• For worship/religious purposes?
• For group/community activities?

III. What kinds of reading/writing activities do you see your family /other community members engage in (outside of school)? (Use prompts from above as necessary.)

IV. Do you use computers outside of school? If yes, where and what for?

V. Are there reading/writing tasks outside of school that you need help with?

Conceptions of literacy and future goals

I. Do you think the reading and writing you do at school is similar to or different from the reading and writing you do outside of school?

II. Do you think that the reading and writing you do at school prepare you for reading and writing outside of school? Why or why not, or in what ways?

III. How important is literacy to you? Why?

IV. How important is literacy to your family/friends/community members in Canada?

V. How would your life be different if you could not read or write?

VI. What are your future goals? What part does literacy play in those goals?