Beyond Reading and Writing: How Volunteer Tutors Develop Their Practice with Learners in Adult Literacy Programs in Ontario

by

Annie Tsz-Ying Luk

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto

© Copyright by Annie T. Luk 2016
Beyond Reading and Writing: How Volunteer Tutors Develop
Their Practice with Learners in Adult Literacy Programs in Ontario

Annie T. Luk
Master of Arts
Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto
2016

Abstract

Although volunteers account for a considerable portion of the instructors and tutors delivering adult literacy programs, volunteers are rarely the focus of research. Focusing specifically on the narratives of volunteers, this study fills this research gap by examining what the volunteers do in the tutoring sessions as well as their experience as volunteers. This study uses Bourdieu’s theory of practice as the theoretical framework to gain a deeper understanding of the rationale behind the volunteers’ role as policy actors in the policy process. Three volunteers from an adult literacy program in Ontario shared their experiences in this study from which four composite stories emerged: before and after volunteering; what happened during the tutoring sessions; relationships between tutors and learners; and contrasts. These composite stories highlight the dynamics between agency and structure, the importance of perspective in understanding the relationships and the potential for social and policy change through reflexive practice.
Acknowledgments

First of all, I must thank the three participants who graciously and generously agreed to take part in my study. You shared your stories with me without reservation. I could not have hoped for a better group of people to meet and chat about our experiences as volunteer tutors. I could not thank you enough because this study truly would not have been possible without you. I also need to thank the staff of the adult literacy program for helping me recruit the participants and providing me with the space to meet with them. It is not hard to notice how much you care about the learners, the volunteers and the community; and I will always be in awe by how you manage to do so much in the face mounting constraints and pressures from all directions. Although this study involved only one adult literacy program in Ontario and three volunteers, they do exemplify the many who work day in and day out in their efforts to help others by sharing what they have to strengthen their communities. To all of you out there, I thank you.

When I decided to return to school as a full-time student at the age of 44 after spending nearly 15 years working in finance and consulting, I had no idea what I was in for especially when I had zero background in the field of education. My decision was solely based on the gut feel after having volunteered as a tutor in various adult literacy programs since 2007 that there was something worth delving into. It did not take long for me to realize that it was the right decision after meeting people from all walks of life who share a passion for social justice and the betterment of our communities. Throughout my master’s studies, my assumptions of how the world would work were challenged and questioned on a regular basis. Reva, you have taught me not to take the viewpoints I have always carried around for granted. And for that, I will be forever grateful. Working with you on this thesis project has been a pleasure and a privilege. I cannot tell you how much I have appreciated your guidance and openness to share. I look forward to working with you in the future in whatever capacity possible. To my second reader, Marcelo, thank you so much for including me in your thesis group. It was great to have a forum to share ideas and stories with you and other students and be able to see my research from the community development angle. Your advice has been invaluable through my studies.

Finally, I have to thank my husband and my parents who never hesitate in supporting me through the many twists and turns I decide to take. I still don’t know what I want to be when I grow up but it hardly matters when I know you’re always behind me.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.................................................................................................................. iii

Table of Contents..................................................................................................................... iv

Chapter 1 Introduction and Context.......................................................................................... 1

1 Personal Context .................................................................................................................... 1

2 Research Question and Significance ...................................................................................... 2

3 How Adult Literacy Programs Work ....................................................................................... 5

4 Ontario’s Policy Context ......................................................................................................... 7

4.1 Provincial Funding ............................................................................................................... 7

4.2 Goal Paths .......................................................................................................................... 8

4.3 One-on-One Tutoring ......................................................................................................... 9

5 Organization of Thesis .......................................................................................................... 9

Chapter 2 Literature Review .................................................................................................... 11

6 Volunteer Tutors in Adult Literacy ....................................................................................... 11

7 Adult Literacy: Definitions .................................................................................................... 16

7.1 Definitions from International Organizations .................................................................. 17

7.2 Canadian Policy Definitions ............................................................................................ 18

7.3 Literacy for Social Change ............................................................................................... 20

Chapter 3 Theoretical Framework – Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice ........................................ 22

8 The Elusive Habitus ............................................................................................................... 24

9 Capital: The Have’s and the Have-not’s ............................................................................. 26

10 Policy as a Field of Practice ............................................................................................... 31

11 Altogether: (Habitus X Capital) + Field = Practice ............................................................. 34

Chapter 4 Research Design and Methodology ......................................................................... 37

12 Research Design: Narrative Interview ................................................................................. 37

13 Recruitment ........................................................................................................................ 39
13.1 Process ........................................................................................................................................ 40
13.2 Project Literacy: The Adult Literacy Program in which the Participants Volunteered .... 41
13.3 Participants .................................................................................................................................. 42
   13.3.1 Julie ......................................................................................................................................... 43
   13.3.2 Michael .................................................................................................................................. 44
   13.3.3 Sandra .................................................................................................................................... 44
14 Interview Process ............................................................................................................................ 45
15 Data Analysis .................................................................................................................................... 46
16 Ethics ................................................................................................................................................ 47
17 Limitations ........................................................................................................................................ 48
Chapter 5 Findings ............................................................................................................................... 49
18 Overview of the Composite Stories ................................................................................................. 49
19 Composite Story #1: Before and After Volunteering ................................................................. 51
20 Composite Story #2: What Happens During the Tutoring Sessions ........................................ 54
21 Composite Story #3: Relationships between Tutors and Learners .......................................... 58
22 Composite Story #4: Contrasts ....................................................................................................... 61
Chapter 6 Discussions and Implications ............................................................................................. 64
23 Answering the Research Question ................................................................................................. 64
24 The Stories Seen through the Thinking Tools ................................................................................ 66
   24.1 Composite Story #1: Before and after volunteering ............................................................... 66
   24.2 Composite Story #2: What happens during a tutoring session .............................................. 67
   24.3 Composite Story #3: Relationships between tutors and learners ........................................ 68
   24.4 Composite Story #4: Contrasts .................................................................................................. 71
25 Understanding the Thinking Tools through the Stories ............................................................... 71
   25.1 Dynamics of Agency and Structure ......................................................................................... 72
   25.2 Perspective and Relationships in the Field ............................................................................... 72
25.3 Habitus and the Reflexive Practice ................................................................. 74
26 Implications ......................................................................................................... 74
  26.1 Broadening the Policy Dialogue ................................................................. 74
  26.2 Support Mechanisms for Volunteer Tutors ............................................. 75
  26.3 Understanding and Nurturing the Relationships between Volunteers and Learners .... 76
27 Future Research Opportunities ........................................................................... 78
  27.1 The Forgotten Policy Actors ...................................................................... 78
  27.2 The Power of Volunteers ............................................................................ 78
  27.3 Neoliberalism in Adult Education Policy .................................................. 79
28 Personal Reflections ............................................................................................ 80
References ............................................................................................................... 81
Appendix A: Introductory Letter to Adult Literacy Programs .................................. 87
Appendix B: Introductory Letter to Volunteer Tutors ........................................... 93
Appendix C: Information and Consent Letter ...................................................... 95
Appendix D: Semi-Structured Interview Guide .................................................... 98
Chapter 1
Introduction and Context

This thesis project has its origins first from my personal experience as a volunteer tutor in adult literacy programs. My personal experience opened a window to a world I had not previously known and spurred me to ask a wide range of questions from what literacy and education are for to what a volunteer’s role could and would be in the policy process. Out of this personal experience emerged the following research question that anchors this thesis project: What do volunteer tutors do in their practice other than teaching learners reading and writing?

This chapter presents my personal context as related to the study and also includes background relevant to the research question. Part of this background is how adult literacy programs generally work in Ontario from the perspective of volunteer tutors. It should be noted that individual programs have their different approaches and nuances. However, the description of my observations and experiences of the way adult literacy programs work serves sufficiently for the purpose of this thesis in terms of overall context for understanding the relationships among different players in the field as well as their different perspectives. One of the significant players in the field of adult literacy is the Ontario provincial government (through Employment Ontario, an agency of the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, MTCU) because of the funding arrangement it has with the majority of the adult literacy programs within the province. Therefore, the provincial policy for adult literacy forms part of the larger context for this study. From the narrow personal context to the broad political context, we start to see the outline of a complex and nuanced policy web within which everyone is a policy actor with his and her own views and actions.

1 Personal Context

This thesis is the culmination of my experience as a volunteer tutor in adult literacy programs since 2007. In 2007, when I was looking for volunteer opportunities, I found myself wondering what skills I could offer as a volunteer. After seeing a posting for volunteer tutors from the Toronto Public Library for its adult literacy program, I thought that reading and writing would be the two skills that I could share with others. Since then, I have also volunteered for the Toronto District School Board and Frontier College working with dozens of learners from different walks
of life. My experience of working with learners as a volunteer tutor has never ceased to humble me particularly because I am always reminded how much I used to take the ability to read and write for granted and how little, if at all, I used to think about the challenges of navigating through the printed world. So much so that I did not even realize how much the world was wrapped in text much like the fish not being aware of its watery surroundings. Working with learners over the years has taught me what I previously assumed as common experience, such as schooling, career advancement, family support, etc., is not necessarily so common for everyone. This insight highlights how the blind spot of these assumptions, which often shape many government policies, could create inequitable conditions for those who do not fit neatly into the dominant discourse. Another lesson I learned from being a volunteer tutor is that the personal relationships between individual volunteers and learners form a critical part in shedding light on the blind spot I just mentioned. Meeting actual people from different backgrounds and experiences (as opposed to reading about them) highlights the contrasts in life experiences between the volunteer and the learner and brings a deeper appreciation of different perspectives and experiences. Further, in the one-on-one tutoring format, my experience shows me that the relationship between the volunteer and the learner is a foundational element of the overall learning experience for the learner. Although there is consensus in existing research literature on the importance of the relationships between learners and volunteers (as presented in the literature review section), little research has been completed to examine what the relationships actually look like and how these relationships develop and evolve from the perspectives of volunteers. Finally, my experience as a volunteer tutor has taught me that I have much power over what happens within each tutoring session and as such I develop my practice based on my understanding and assessment of the purpose of adult literacy programs and the needs of the learners. In this way, I can see that volunteer tutors are the day-to-day policy actors delivering adult literacy programs although how they work and develop their practice is rarely investigated in research or even shared among volunteers themselves. It is within the context of this personal experience and perspective that I position my thesis project to examine how the way volunteers work with adult literacy learners factor into the policy process.

2 Research Question and Significance

The research question of interest in this study is: “What do volunteer tutors work on with learners in adult literacy programs in addition to literacy and numeracy skills?” The rationale
behind this research question is that the work of volunteer tutors constitutes a significant aspect of adult literacy programs especially considering the high proportion of them in delivering adult literacy programs in Ontario (as well as elsewhere) and also the personal relationships tutors develop with learners. My personal experience tells me that there is much more than literacy and numeracy in the tutoring sessions (such as confidence building and personal connection), but little research exists to examine what is there. Extending from this question are a series of sub-questions explored in this study:

- How do volunteers recognize the need to work outside literacy and numeracy?
- What prompts volunteers to work beyond reading and writing?
- What is exchanged between volunteers and learners during and outside (if applicable) the programs?

These research questions seek to understand and gain insights on the practice of adult literacy by volunteer tutors both on the practical and the theoretical levels. On the practical level, since positive relationships (Belzer, 2006; Lynch, 2013; Sandman-Hurley, 2008) support learning for adult literacy learners, a further understanding of how the relationships are fostered and maintained would help program staff support and develop these relationships. On the theoretical level, the positions occupied by volunteers in the field of adult literacy policy demonstrate the potential symbolic power volunteers may have as agents and policy actors although few volunteers would see themselves as such. Volunteers despite not traditionally viewed as “policymakers” exercise their agency as policy actors inside and outside the structure of the provincial policies. This study presented an opportunity to examine what volunteer tutors would do in the policy process and to provide insights in how these policy actors who might not view themselves as such would exercise their agency in the process. As a volunteer tutor, I have seen the possibility of volunteers accommodating the specific needs of the learners and expanding their work beyond reading and writing as part of their practice. The work of the volunteers with learners presents an interesting perspective to examine how volunteer tutors as a policy actor develop their approach and see themselves within the field of adult literacy policy.

The significance of this study lies in the scarcity of volunteer tutors as a research topic in adult literacy and in education at large. Unlike much of the rest of education, adult literacy programs heavily depend on volunteers using the one-on-one tutoring approach (e.g., 60% of instructors
and tutors as reported by Ziegler, McCallum & Bell, 2009). Up-to-date information on volunteers in Ontario, unfortunately, is not available because MTCU no longer keeps track of staffing and volunteer statistics when working with transfer payment agencies (W. Weston, personal communication, June 29, 2015). The only publicly available volunteer statistics found are based on the 2004-05 fiscal year as reported by Community Literacy of Ontario (CLO) under a project funded by MTCU at the time (J. Beaudry, personal communication, June 23, 2015). Using data from MTCU’s information management system for the fiscal year 2004-05, CLO (2005) reported an annual average of 4,547 literacy volunteers in Ontario who contributed in total nearly 315,000 hours; the majority of these volunteers worked as tutors to adult learners (the exact proportion is not available). In addition, CLO also conducted a survey in January 2005 to understand the value added by volunteers in Ontario’s literacy organizations and found that an average community literacy agency had 3.4 paid staff and 57 volunteers in the year 2004-05 (CLO, 2005). Among the Anglophone literacy agencies which reported the highest number of volunteers, the vast majority (92%) of the agencies provided one-on-one and small group programs with learners evenly split into one-on-one tutoring and small groups (CLO, 2005).

Despite their prevalence, volunteers are rarely the subject of research in adult literacy; and when they are, much of the existing research tends to focus on volunteer management or operational levels (Ilsley, 1985). This leaves a gap to provide a more complete understanding of how volunteers work with learners in adult literacy programs, especially within a theoretical framework (Ilsley, 1985). This remains the case after Ilsley’s report from thirty years ago. In addition, volunteers are also rarely considered (even by themselves) as part of the policy process or dialogue in which their input or feedback is included. The focus on the work of volunteer tutors in this study attempts to acknowledge their role as policy actors and to gain an understanding of how they play their part in the policy dialogue.

Volunteers also present an interesting research topic in adult literacy for a number of reasons in addition to their high number as tutors and instructors. Volunteers are not paid staff and hence are less beholden to funding schemes and the power dynamics associated with employment. Volunteers do not typically have the same level of training in teaching as professional teachers and so are required to improvise based on their own life experiences to deliver the programs (Belzer, 2006; Lynch, 2013; Ziegler, McCallum & Bell, 2009). The one-on-one relationships formed between volunteers and learners are likely to be more personal than those between
teachers and classes of dozens of students allowing for the potential for learning to be customized in addressing the needs and challenges of individual learners (e.g., beyond the strict definition of literacy and numeracy or even the program objectives of further education and employment). As a volunteer tutor, I had first-hand experience of how learners appreciate the flexibility and the holistic nature of the learner-centred approach as well as the contrast with their prior experience in conventional school settings. The research question of this study brings to the forefront the perspective of volunteer tutors, and through the use of Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice as the theoretical framework, helps form a deeper understanding into how volunteers develop their practice and the role they play in the broader context of adult literacy policy.

3 How Adult Literacy Programs Work

My story of how I became a volunteer tutor would serve as an example of how adult literacy programs generally work in this province. The story presented in this section is a composite story from my experience volunteering at a number of different adult literacy programs in Toronto since 2007. However, it should be noted that my story is not necessarily representative of how every individual adult literacy program works in Ontario. The point of this section is to provide some illustrative background and context for the readers to understand the process of how a volunteer tutor enters into an adult literacy program. The story also helps introduce the different players within the adult literacy field from the perspective of a volunteer tutor.

After seeing the posting for volunteer tutors on the internet, I contacted the program coordinator listed on the posting by email. The program coordinator responded by asking me to send in my résumé as well as a completed application form. Still through email, the program coordinator set up an interview date and time to meet me in person. During the interview, the program coordinator and I talked about why I would like to volunteer and what my volunteer experience had been. After talking for about 30-40 minutes, she told me that I would be accepted into the program pending a police reference check. She told me that prior to working with a learner, I would need to participate in an orientation/training session.

The program staff conducts the orientation/training session for a group of new volunteers which lasted about six hours (in either a full-day session or multiple sessions over several evenings). The session covered discussions on what adult literacy was and the pervasiveness of adult literacy as an issue, through statistics from organizations such as the Organisation for Economic
Co-operation and Development (OECD). The session included discussions about some of the challenges facing the learners such as poverty, learning disabilities and social stigma associated with low literacy. The program staff introduced the provincial policy on adult literacy briefly with a focus on the learning goals for learners which are employment, secondary school credits, post-secondary education, apprenticeship and independence. After the completion of the orientation/training session, I waited for the program coordinator to contact me when I would be matched with a learner considered a good fit by the program coordinator.

After several weeks, the program coordinator contacted me to let me know that she had found a learner for me. We arranged for a date for the three of us to meet in person. At the first meeting, the program coordinator introduced us to each other. During this first meeting, the program coordinator read to the learner and me the various rules concerning how we were supposed to conduct ourselves during our tutoring sessions such as arrive on time, give advance notice if late or cancellation, etc. We were also discouraged from sharing too much personal information and socializing outside the program expressly for the protection of both learners and volunteers. The rationale behind these boundaries, as explained by the program coordinator, was that many learners may feel obliged to compensate their volunteer tutors for their efforts and some volunteer tutors would find it hard to say no when learners ask for help including borrowing money. The boundaries, therefore, would spell out explicitly things we would not do to minimize the possible ambiguity and confusion. The first meeting would be the only time when the program coordinator would be present. After the first meeting, the tutoring sessions would be entirely up to the learner and me to decide what to work on. I would meet with the learner for two hours a week at a time convenient for both of us. We would meet at the program office or a local public library branch.

From time to time, I would report back to the program coordinator in terms of attendance and provide occasional feedback on the learner’s progress and his/her general situation based on my observations and discussions with the learner. Occasionally, the program coordinator would ask me to check on the learner’s progress through the performance of specific tasks designed by the province. However, the program coordinator emphasized that such a check would only be performed when I felt the learner was ready for it. The program coordinator would also serve as a resource for materials for reading, writing and math as well as any other help that the learner would need such as housing, social assistance, etc. From my experience, the tutoring
relationships could end for a number of reasons including changes in my own schedule or the learner’s schedule, learners having to move, the completion of a specific goal (e.g., writing the GED) and lapses in the learner’s attendance. After ending a tutoring relationship, the program coordinator would match me with another learner and the cycle would start over.

4 Ontario’s Policy Context

In Ontario, many of the adult literacy programs are funded by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) through Employment Ontario. As such, the province has a considerable presence in the field of adult literacy policy. This section provides a brief overview of Ontario’s adult literacy programs in terms of funding structure and the policy objectives as outlined in various provincial policy documents.

4.1 Provincial Funding

Adult literacy programs in Ontario generally fall into two broad categories as far as funding is concerned: those funded by the province and those not. Programs funded by the province are delivered by school boards, colleges and community organizations on a fee-for-service contracting basis and thus subject to annual renewal and a termination clause with a six-month notice, which introduces an element of uncertainty for program staff (Essential Skills Ontario, 2014; MTCU, 2014). This funding arrangement also places adult literacy programs outside the K-12 and post-secondary structure possibly reflecting the province’s view of these programs being peripheral and more aligned as part of employment services than general education. A number of adult literacy programs not funded by the province are run by other community organizations relying on donations and other funding sources (e.g., the United Way and private foundations); and as such, these programs are not governed by provincial policies. It should be noted, however, that many of the programs funded by MTCU rely upon other sources of funding and donations for programs and services outside the mandate of the provincial funding arrangement.

Ontario’s Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) program is designed to “help adults whose skills fall below the Grade 9 level” (MTCU, 2012). More specifically, classes that are funded and overseen by Employment Ontario have the mandate to help learners get the training, skills and experience to achieve employment and connecting workers and employers (MTCU, 2013). The
programs funded by MTCU served 43,617 learners during the fiscal year of 2014-15 (MTCU, 2015). Nearly 30% of these learners took part in the programs across the province through community agencies with 40% at community colleges and the remaining 30% through school boards (MTCU, 2015). One-third of these learners had Grade 10 or less education and approximately 57% of them were unemployed at the time they participated in the literacy programs (MTCU, 2015).

4.2 Goal Paths

In Ontario, a number of documents serve as government policy documents for adult literacy programs from the province’s perspective. The documents that provide a view of how the provincial government views adult literacy programs include the service agreement with program providers (MTCU, 2014), the service provider guidelines (MTCU, 2014) and the Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework (OALCF; MTCU, 2011a). These documents show the ministry’s vision for the programs: “Ontario will have the most highly educated and skilled people in the world in order to build the province’s competitive advantage and quality of life” (MTCU, 2014, p.1). Further to the ministry’s vision for adult literacy, the province is interested in five specific outcomes or goal paths (as they are called in the OALCF) for learners: employment; apprenticeship; secondary school credit; postsecondary; and independence (MTCU, 2011b, 2014). Two of the goal paths that learners may choose from are directly related to employment – i.e., employment and apprenticeship and two others for accessing higher education and obtaining more formal educational credentials (MTCU, 2014, p.25). These four goal paths are similar in the sense that they focus on the learners’ responsibility to acquire more skills, competencies and education in order to improve their situation and address their challenges. The remaining goal path, however, represents a departure from the rest. Independence offers a flexible and broad option for learners to access assistance in managing their “basic needs”, “personal health”, “personal issues and relationships” as well as “participating in community” (MTCU, 2014, p.25). The independence goal path is an exception to the overall emphasis on employment throughout the provincial policy documents.

These goal paths are intended to assist adult literacy program staff and instructors (paid and volunteer) to develop activities and identify learning materials. They also serve as the basis for the design of specific milestones to measure learners’ progress in the program. The achievement
of the goal paths by individual learners is also part of the reporting and accountability framework for the funding arrangement between MTCU and the programs. Although funding is not explicitly linked to the completion of the goal paths and milestones by learners, program staff understand the implicit importance of achieving them within a reasonable timeframe and their responsibility for demonstrating and delivering on these outcomes.

4.3 One-on-One Tutoring

As is common in other jurisdictions, many of the adult literacy programs in Ontario are delivered using volunteers in the one-on-one tutoring format (Belzer, 2006; Ziegler, McCallum & Bell, 2009). In addition, adult literacy programs are also delivered in traditional classroom format using teachers (both licensed and not). The classroom format is more commonly found in school boards and community colleges whereas one-on-one tutoring is more common in community organizations. As described earlier, volunteer tutors typically attend pre-service training prior to commencing work with learners. Beyond this pre-service training, volunteer tutors are largely left on their own to work with learners although they are encouraged to seek advice and support from program staff on an as-needed basis. Program staff of adult literacy programs are the link between provincial policy and the day-to-day practice involving the volunteers and the learners.

The one-on-one tutoring format places the learners in the centre of the learning process offering flexibility and customization especially when compared to traditional classroom instructions (Cranton, 2012). Examples of the flexibility include learners directing what they would like to work on, learners not being penalized for missing sessions or showing slow progress and tutoring extending over for a long period of time with no fixed end date. More importantly, however, the one-on-one format supports the establishment of personal relationships between volunteers and learners that may not be possible between a classroom teacher and up to thirty students.

5 Organization of Thesis

The rest of this thesis is organized in the following four chapters:

- **Chapter 2: Literature Review** introduces the ongoing research perspectives relevant to the research question. The research literature reviewed in Chapter 2 covers the role and the work of volunteers in adult literacy and what would be considered as literacy and as adult
literacy specifically. The literature review highlights the gaps in these conversations that this study tries to fill.

- **Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework – Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice** reviews Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of “theory of practice” and how it serves as the theoretical framework for examining the underlying considerations of volunteer tutors’ work with learners and also volunteers as policy actors in the field of adult literacy policy.

- **Chapter 4: Research Design and Methodology** describes the research design of the “narrative interview” used in this study as well as the rationale for selecting this particular design. The methodology used to recruit and collect the data from the participants of this study is also presented. The chapter introduces the adult literacy program where the participants volunteered, as well as the participants. The method of data analysis is also included in this chapter. The various limitations of the methodology are discussed at the end of this chapter.

- **Chapter 5: Findings** presents the themes emerging from the data collected for this study through a series of four “composite stories.” The composite stories continue the use of narrative as a research tool to showcase the volunteer experiences of the participants in this study. The four composite stories offer glimpses into and memorable highlights of participants’ stories recounting their experiences as volunteer tutors in the adult literacy program.

- **Chapter 6: Discussions and Future Research** connects the findings from this study to the ongoing conversations reviewed earlier in Chapter 2. Opportunities for future research are also explored in this chapter.
Chapter 2
Literature Review

The research question takes this thesis into a number of ongoing research findings about volunteers in the field of adult literacy. This chapter presents the review of literature on these findings. The first of these conversations is on volunteer tutors in adult literacy programs. As mentioned earlier, despite the wide use of volunteers in adult literacy, research on volunteers is scarce revealing many opportunities to explore what volunteer tutors do with learners, how volunteer tutors develop their practice and how the experiences of being volunteer tutors affect the volunteers themselves. The second of the conversations is what is literacy. The definitions of adult literacy could go as far back as a century ago. Various organizations have their own definitions indicating, perhaps, how fluid the concept of adult literacy is. This chapter presents a range of them illustrating the different perspectives from viewing adult literacy as a technical, cognitive skill to using adult literacy as a means to challenge social inequities.

6 Volunteer Tutors in Adult Literacy

The literature specifically focusing on volunteer tutors in adult literacy is rare. The literature research for this thesis only managed to find a limited number of studies. The literature review shows that the role of volunteers in adult literacy programs deserves more attention for a range of reasons, including: the high proportion of volunteers in adult literacy, the lack of understanding of how volunteers contribute to the learning process, how the personal relationship between volunteers and learners influence the learning process and ultimately the full spectrum of impacts volunteers may have on learners and on adult literacy as a social issue. This section presents a summary of the literature on the topic of volunteer tutors in adult literacy starting with a description of the use of volunteer tutors in adult literacy in terms of who they are and their level of involvement in adult literacy. The section also includes a summary of research studies on how volunteer tutors work with the learners in order to provide a glimpse of the ongoing conversation on this topic and opportunities for further research.

The use of volunteers in adult literacy programs is unique in that no other educational sector relies on volunteers to the same degree (Belzer, 2006; Ilsley, 1985; Ziegler, McCallum & Bell, 2009). About 60% of the adult literacy educators are volunteers (Ziegler, McCallum & Bell,
In Ontario, up-to-date statistics on volunteers for adult literacy programs, unfortunately, are not available because the province no longer keeps track of volunteer information in the programs (W. Weston, personal communication, June 29, 2015). The most recent statistics that are publicly available are more than ten years old from 2003-04. According to Community Literacy of Ontario (CLO) (2006), 4,854 literacy volunteers in Ontario contributed a total of 314,476 hours, which were equivalent to 161 full-time staff. The majority of these hours were provided by volunteer tutors in one-on-one adult literacy programs. CLO estimated on average literacy organizations had 3.4 paid staff and 57 volunteers. Although data are not available to calculate the exact percentage of volunteer tutors to paid instructors in Ontario, these rough statistics on volunteers suggest a similarly high number of volunteer tutors used in Ontario as seen in the Ziegler, McCallum & Bell (2007) survey for the US.

Following up their 2007 study, Mary Ziegler, Steve McCallum and Mary Bell conducted a large-scale quantitative study to examine the demographics of volunteer tutors in adult literacy programs in the US in 2009 (Ziegler, McCallum, & Bell, 2009). They were interested in understanding what the volunteer tutors would bring to the learners they worked with and whether there was difference between volunteer and paid instructors as measured by assessment tests in reading instruction and knowledge. The authors identified full-time and part-time instructors and volunteer tutors in four selected regions in the US and mailed the survey questionnaires to 944 potential respondents. Among the respondents, 126 were volunteers. Ziegler, McCallum & Bell reported positive correlation between years of experience teaching adults or adolescents (but not years of teaching children) and knowledge. Volunteers with teacher certification scored significantly higher than those without. The authors found no significant correlation between professional development resources (such as conferences, workshops, etc.) and the assessment results. Finally, the authors did not find any statistically significant differences among instructors based on their employment status (i.e., full-time vs. part-time and paid vs. volunteer). From these findings, the authors concluded that the diverse backgrounds of volunteers would need to be taken into account when designing professional development for them. They also suggested the use of free resources available for instructors to improve their knowledge about reading instruction. Although the study did not find any significant correlation with professional development resources, the authors encouraged program staff to provide incentives to encourage volunteers to participate in professional development.
The conclusion by Ziegler, McCallum and Bell (2009) reflects the general focus of research on volunteer tutors in adult literacy. Existing research into volunteer tutors in adult literacy programs is typically focused on the practical management of volunteers such as training, communications and coordination between program staff and volunteers (Belzer, 2006; Lynch, 2013; Sandman-Hurley, 2008; Ziegler, McCallum, & Bell, 2009). For example, Alisa Belzer conducted case studies of three tutor-learner pairs in 2006. Her research focus was what volunteer tutors and adult literacy learners would do together and what were the volunteer tutors’ strengths and challenges. Belzer (2006) found that tutors and learners both reported positive progress from the tutoring sessions although the progress was based on self-reporting and their own sense of success and satisfaction. She also found that the volunteers in the case studies adjusted their approaches, based in part on their training, to fit with what they saw as the learners needed. Belzer acknowledged the efforts of volunteer tutors and recognized the challenges facing them when situations were dissimilar to the training the volunteers had received. She argued that the potential of volunteers could be significant if only the programs could manage them better through training and ongoing support. She concluded that ongoing training is more important for volunteers than one-time pre-service orientation.

Kelli Sandman-Hurley (2008) conducted her research on volunteer tutors in adult literacy programs by looking at the teaching strategies volunteer tutors would use with learners who had reading disabilities. Similar to Belzer’s study in 2006, Sandman-Hurley used case studies of three tutor-learner pairs who were recruited from an adult literacy program. She found that tutors used their training to help with reading strategies; but more importantly, tutors built personal relationships with learners to enhance the sense of success with learners. The interpersonal skills required for establishing and maintaining the relationships, although not taught to the tutors during training, were found to be integral to the tutoring sessions. She also found that the tutors did not feel adequately prepared to work with learners who had reading disabilities and often had to rely on their personal experiences and training from elsewhere. Sandman-Hurley argued that learners with learning disabilities were dependent on the tutors they worked with to improvise to support their learning and so more ongoing support would be necessary for the tutors. Her results corroborated Belzer’s (2006) particularly as related to training being not adequate for tutors. Sandman-Hurley pointed out that effective training would
be crucial to help tutors feel confident when working with learners, which would lead to a positive relationship and learning outcomes for learners.

A more recent Canadian study by Jacqueline Lynch was published in 2013 looking at program areas that could best support learners with developmental or intellectual disabilities. Although the study did not specifically investigate the role of volunteer tutors, Lynch (2013) involved volunteer tutors in her case study. She conducted interviews with three learners, four tutors and two coordinators from a ten-month adult literacy program organized specifically for adults with developmental and intellectual disabilities. She found that the small class structure was supportive of learning. Also, she found that the way the tutors incorporated learning into the learners’ day-to-day living was appropriate and beneficial for this group of learners. Lynch reported that learners, volunteers and program coordinators had different goals in mind, which she recommended as should be clearly communicated and shared with each other. All three studies by Lynch, Sandman-Hurley and Belzer looked at adult literacy on the basis of literacy as a cognitive, technical skills that the volunteer tutors would teach to the learners.

Few studies examine adult literacy instructors and their experiences. Patricia Cranton and Brenda Wright (2008) interviewed eight adult literacy educators to understand how transformative learning could be fostered through creating a safe environment, building trust, overcoming the learners’ fears, identifying possibilities, promoting self-discovery and acknowledging learners as whole persons. Although this study was not specific to volunteer instructors or tutors, it offers insights on how instructors themselves could be transformed by the experience and how their practice would be shaped as a result. Each educator in this study interviewed for the study was specifically selected to participate because of her ability and experience in transformative learning. The educators were interviewed individually twice over a nine-month period to develop their own stories using metaphors and images as well as text. The researchers then constructed the educators’ narratives on transformative learning and sent them back to the educators for comments and review. Cranton and Wright (2008) used these narratives as source material to identify emerging themes on transformative learning. Cranton and Wright (2008) focused on the open-ended nature of the discussions between researchers and participants to provide space for the literacy educators to select relevant aspects of their stories to include. Their findings extended beyond the technical aspects of reading and writing and touched on how the educators actually became more than “just teachers” (Cranton & Wright,
They also acknowledged that both learners and educators could be transformed through the experiences especially when a safe and trusting relationship could be developed.

One of the common themes from these studies is that the value and the positive impacts of volunteers in adult literacy are recognized beyond their obvious virtue of being free-of-charge (Belzer, 2006; Lynch, 2013). Belzer (2006), Lynch (2013) and Sandman-Hurley (2008) specifically attributed the positive impacts to the personal relationships between volunteers and learners although none delved into how such personal relationships could be developed and what these relationships would look like. Cranton and Wright (2008) highlighted the factors that contributed to a positive learning environment and relationships but did not provide detail on the thinking underlying the adult literacy educators’ actions. While these studies point out that volunteers are not necessarily trained on how to build and maintain their personal relationships with learners, these studies suggested a natural development of the relationships is observed as one of the contributors to the sense of success reported by learners. Since personal relationships are considered a contributor to the success experienced by learners, these studies recommended training emphasizing interpersonal skills (Lynch, 2013; Sandman-Hurley, 2008) but did not specify the exact content of such training. Nonetheless, Lynch (2013) offered a conceptual framework to start thinking about the tutor-learner relationship. She suggested that literacy learning is “a social practice” (p.304) in that literacy education is based on the “social relationships” (p.304) developed between volunteers and learners and these relationships shape and provide meanings to the learning experience. She further recommended that the positive relationships between volunteers and learners could be extended with more “personal sharing activities” (p.322) in order for the participants to learn about each other as “whole person[s]” (p.322). The building and the maintenance of the personal relationships, Lynch argued, would be key to the tutoring process and therefore should be part of the training process for volunteers.

This literature review on the topic of volunteer tutors in adult literacy shows that research so far typically has the focus on the practical aspect and does not always have any explicit theoretical underpinning. The observation of a lack of theoretical and philosophical foundation in the research on volunteers in adult literacy, however, is not new. In 1985, Paul Ilsley prepared a report for the National Institute of Education in Washington, DC on the “growing field of literacy voluntarism” (Ilsley, 1985, p.1). Ilsley’s (1985) research design was a meta-analysis of existing materials (research literature and government documentation) from various sources to
discuss the state of research on a new field, which combined volunteerism and literacy. Ilsley (1985) found that much of the research up to then was based on conventional wisdom and experiential insights with little emphasis on the examination of philosophical underpinnings. He also said that the definitions of adult literacy and volunteerism were not always clearly stated in research. Ilsley concluded that significant involvement of volunteers would help reduce illiteracy. He specifically urged further research to be based on theoretical and philosophical frameworks (although he did not specify which frameworks). The rationale behind his position was his belief that the support of theory and philosophy would strengthen further understanding of what would be needed to reduce illiteracy, the role of volunteers in the process and the possibility of “social unrest” (p.40) rising illiteracy may lead to. Despite the passage of thirty years, my literature research for this thesis found the same research gap.

7 Adult Literacy: Definitions

With a research question examining what volunteers do in their tutoring sessions with learners, I implicitly attempted to understand what volunteers would consider literacy to mean. Many of us think of literacy as skills that we would learn from school including reading printed text, answering comprehension questions and learning grammar in order to write (Elish-Piper, 2007). As such, the literature review includes this section on various definitions on adult literacy from international organizations to the Canadian government (the Ontario policy context has already been discussed in the previous chapter) to practitioners and researchers. The selection demonstrates how a range of definitions have changed over the years. This section also shows that definitions are very much a function of the perspectives of those providing the definitions and as such how the definition of adult literacy is a fluid concept and a social construct (Elish-Piper, 2007). The international definitions and the definitions from the Canadian government highlight the broad context and the dominant policy discourse on adult literacy. On the other hand, others like Myles Horton who founded the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee in 1932 and Paulo Freire who worked with Brazilian peasants believed that literacy should be more than reading and writing and literacy could be a way to bring a community together to collaborate and to fight against oppression (Elish-Piper, 2007).
7.1 Definitions from International Organizations

At the end of 2012, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) concluded the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNESCO, 2013a) in support of the Millennium Development Goals. The initiative used the slogan “Literacy as Freedom” which highlights UNESCO’s attempt to define literacy as a human right (UNESCO, 2013a). The United Nations recognizes that “literacy is critical for promoting and communicating sustainable development and improving the capacity of people to address environment and development issues” (UN, undated). While UNESCO and many other international organizations acknowledge the importance of adult literacy, there is little consensus on how to define it. Historically, literacy was thought of as a skill that once someone has attained it, he or she has it for life (UNESCO, 2013b). UNESCO’s Second Global Report on Adult Learning and Education included adult literacy data from 114 countries and found “no global consensus” on the definition of literacy (UNESCO, 2013b). How adult literacy is defined depends on the languages, cultural context and the economic structure of the particular countries. Even within UNESCO, the definition of adult literacy has evolved through time illustrating the changing understanding of adult learning and its implications:

- **1958** – “A person is literate who can with understanding both read and write a short simple statement related to his/her everyday life” (UN, undated) although the meaning of “a short simple statement” was never specified (UNESCO, 2013b).

- **1978** – “A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his/her group and community and also for enabling him/her to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his/her own and the community’s development” (UN, undated).

- **2003** – “Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve his or her goals, develop his or her knowledge and potential and participate fully in community and wider society” (UNESCO, 2013b).

It is interesting to note how the definition has shifted from a focus of reading and writing to a more inclusive range of abilities and the linkages between the adult learner and his or her
community and the broader society. This demonstrates the acknowledgement of literacy being a much more complex “basket” of skills which serves to push for various countries to strive for providing a set of comprehensive learning opportunities that correspond to the “basket” of skills. However, the focus of literacy from UNESCO’s perspective remains firmly around the printed text.

Like the UNESCO 2003 definition, the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competences (PIAAC) conducted by the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines literacy in terms of three components (Statistics Canada et al., 2013, p.8):

- Literacy – “ability to engage with written text”
- Numeracy – “ability to engage with mathematical information”
- Problem solving in technology-rich environments – “ability to use digital technology, community tools, and networks”

Although the focus on digital skills is recent, the competency of problem solving was first included in OECD’s conceptualization of literacy in 2003, and highlights the need for more complex skills sets to navigate through daily living with confidence (OECD & Statistics Canada, 2011). This inclusion further crystallizes the concept put forth by UNESCO – that literacy is not simply a matter of reading and writing, but rather a matter of a more complex set of skills and competencies necessary to analyze critically and act appropriately on information.

Although there is little consensus on the definitions of adult literacy, it appears that the evolving nature of the definition shows the shift towards an emphasis on an individual’s ability to live independently, to participate fully in society and to realize his or her potential. In particular, the area of problem solving in the PIAAC survey highlights that the basic level of reading and writing (as how many of us still think of literacy) is simply not sufficient to help reach objectives such as those set forth by the United Nations Literacy Decade.

7.2 Canadian Policy Definitions

Adult literacy and basic education has existed in Canada since as early as 1859 when the YMCA offered educational resources to adults for learning reading, writing and arithmetic (Taylor,
In 2010, UNESCO reported global adult literacy rate at 84% from 114 countries among which Canada reports a high literacy rate at 97% (Hammer, 2012). This is likely to be aligned with how many Canadians think of our own country; we live in a developed nation where education is accessible and encouraged and so adult literacy level should be high. However, it is important to think further about what we actually mean by literacy and what is measured in a survey like UNESCO’s. To demonstrate the contrast, Canada’s first literacy survey in 1987 found that 24% of its adult population was considered functionally literate (OECD & Statistics Canada, 2011). Subsequent surveys continue to identify a high level of adults in Canada who struggle on a day-to-day basis with literacy. These survey results highlight the importance of seeing literacy in social and economic context in order to understand the challenge.

One of the major challenges for adult literacy programs in Canada from the perspective of divergent definitions is the fact that the delivery of adult literacy programs and services is within provincial and territorial jurisdictions (HRSDC, 2012). Another factor is that Canada does not have a national strategy for adult literacy despite ongoing advocacy from grassroots organizations such as the Canadian Literacy and Learning Network (CLLN, 2012). The result is, as noted in the evaluation report of ALLESP (HRSDC, 2012), that Canada has an “uncoordinated, fragmented and disconnected” approach to adult literacy programs. Although the federal government played an indirect funding role, it had significant influence in setting the tone on what would be considered as fundable for adult literacy programs.

The definitions used by the federal government are generally oriented towards employment and job training. As shown in the website of Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC; previously known as Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, HRSDC), literacy and essential skills are defined as “needed for work, learning and life”, “the foundation for learning all other skills,” and to “help people evolve with their jobs and adapt to workplace change” (ESDC, 2015). While the ESDC definition includes elements that are commonly seen in the international definitions, the definition also specifies ongoing learning or skills upgrading needs as related to occupations (ESDC, 2015). Furthermore, the examples of learning highlight the federal government’s focus on employment and job training (ESDC, 2015):

- “Training in job-related health and safety;
• Obtaining and updating credentials; and
• Learning about new equipment, procedures, products and services.”

When comparing the federal government’s definition to the definitions from international organizations, it is interesting to note two differences. First, the federal government’s definition is more focused on the outcomes literacy and essential skills are intended to lead to as opposed to what literacy and essential skills entail. Both the UNESCO and the OECD definitions provide detail on the components that make up literacy whereas the Federal Government does not even mention reading, writing or numeracy. It does, however, include references to how specifics within literacy and essential skills need to be viewed within the context of specific occupation. This suggests that the federal government sees literacy and essential skills as relevant only when they help lead to the specified outcomes. Speaking of desired outcomes, second, there is a difference in terms of what literacy and essential skills are intended to lead to. The difference perhaps highlights the federal government’s objective in seeing literacy and essential skills more as a means to an end (which is employment or better employment) as opposed to learning as an end in itself as in independence, community participation and self-improvement, towards which the international examples appear to be more geared. These differences could suggest that the adult literacy programs in Canada are likely more focused on getting people employed and the economic benefits (rather than the community, social or self benefits). In order to meet these funding criteria, adult literacy service providers could need to design their programs and services to demonstrate how higher literacy levels could lead to employment.

7.3 Literacy for Social Change

As seen so far in this section, many practitioners and researchers in adult literacy define literacy as a cognitive skill in terms of deciphering printed text in order to communicate and to receive information (Greenberg, 2013). However, there are others who believe that literacy is more than the technical capability to read and write for daily living (Elish-Piper, 2007). This section touches on two such perspectives – the Highland Folk School’s and Paulo Freire’s approaches – to illustrate how adult literacy could be defined as more than reading and writing and as a way for social change.
Myles Horton and others founded the Highland Folk School in Tennessee in 1932 (which inspired the establishment of the Citizenship Schools in the 1950s) in an attempt to bring about social change through adult education (Kates, 2006). The origin of the Highland Folk School was to support and empower grassroots communities to come together to work on the challenges they were faced with including civil rights and poverty (Levine, 2004). Education provided by the School included literacy as well as leadership and confidence development (Levine, 2004). In the 1950s, racial inequality became the driving force for some who were working with the Highland Folk School and thus the Citizenship Schools were established to help the black community in the Southern US to strengthen their electoral power (Kates, 2006; Levine, 2004). Literacy classes such as those hosted by the Highland Folk School and the Citizenship Schools supported numerous African Americans to pass the requisite literacy tests in order to register to vote and also to study curricula that challenged white supremacism and celebrated black history, laying the foundation for the subsequent civil rights movement (Kates, 2006).

Paulo Freire, one of the major educational philosophers in the 20th century, advocated that literacy must go beyond the development of technical skills and bring awareness of human rights and learners’ own capacity for social change (Freire, 2007). Freire (2007) saw that literacy was a means for people to engage in dialogues and to question their situations in order to initiate changes. As a result, his approach to adult literacy was built specifically around the objective of liberation and fostering love and respect among each other (Freire, 2007). Freire’s definition of adult literacy (2007; St. Clair, 2010) also differed from other definitions in that he placed much emphasis on what learners themselves could bring to the classroom in terms of their experience, knowledge and capability for action. This approach to learning was a radical departure from the “banking” conception of education that many literacy educators tend to rely upon (Freire, 2007). Both these examples offer brief glimpses into the possibilities for adult literacy when it is defined and approached beyond simply teaching reading and writing.
To contextualize this study, I selected Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice as the theoretical framework to guide the development and the analysis of the experiences of volunteer tutors. This chapter presents the discussions of the three thinking tools from Bourdieu’s theory of practice, namely habitus, capital and field. Each of Bourdieu’s thinking tools offers a lens and opens up a conversation for understanding why we as a society organize ourselves and interact with each other the way we do. The selection of Bourdieu’s theoretical framework supports the examination of the volunteer experience on different levels. On a personal level, the concept of habitus highlights our understanding of how the world influences our behaviours and expectations through day-to-day life. The presence and the influence of habitus are especially highlighted when we enter into a field that is unfamiliar to us and when we meet people who do not share the same habitus. In addition, habitus is far from being static and an understanding of how habitus shifts helps support our further understanding of how changes in our habitus connect with changes in society. The concept of capital supports an understanding of the interaction and the relationship between individuals especially through social and cultural capital. Finally, the concept of field offers a way to understand how the policy dialogue works with different policy actors in the mix using their agency and symbolic power.

I selected Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice as the theoretical framework for this thesis because the thinking tools of habitus, capital and field support an examination of how we make decisions in day-to-day living from the personal, interpersonal and social perspectives. Placing the perspective of volunteer tutors in adult literacy programs in the centre of this theoretical framework (which has not yet been used in this context), this study uses Bourdieu’s theory of practice to delve into the experience of volunteers when they enter into an unfamiliar field of adult literacy. The way volunteer tutors would approach the tutoring sessions with learners or develop their practice can be seen as how the volunteers are guided by their habitus in the field of adult literacy. On a personal and interpersonal level, the volunteers and the learners establish their relationships and what they will work on together during the tutoring sessions based on their individual habitus as well as the capital each possesses. Quite possibly, the tutoring sessions are where the volunteer tutors help the learners enhance their educational capital. The relationships between volunteer tutors and learners could also present the potential of enhancing
the learners’ other forms of capital as well. On a social level, Bourdieu’s theory of practice places the volunteer tutors in the broader context of adult literacy policy as a field. Although rarely seen as such (even by themselves), volunteer tutors are policy actors and are an integral part of the adult literacy policy. In a time when adult literacy policy is narrowly focused on linking literacy education to employment, the way volunteer tutors develop their practice presents an interesting perspective to see what they actually do with the learners during the tutoring sessions and their rationale behind their practice.

In the late 1970s, Pierre Bourdieu put forth his theoretical framework to answer “the question of how stratified social systems of hierarchy and domination persist and reproduce inter-generationally without powerful resistance and without the conscious recognition of their members” (Swartz, 1997, p. 6). Over the last several decades, much research and debate has taken place on how Bourdieu’s theoretical framework could be applied to support our understanding of ourselves as society through the relationship between agency/structure and inequality as linked to education (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014; Wacquant, 2008). The three thinking tools of Bourdieu’s theory of practice—habitus, capital and field—are “internally linked to one another as each achieves its full analytical potency only in tandem with the others” (Wacquant, 2008, p.223). The theory of practice recognizes the long and often invisible and unquestioned socialization process that shapes our habitus as well as its malleability through our experiences and encounters with others in different social milieus or fields (Wacquant, 2008). Differences among us, according to Bourdieu’s framework, are viewed by others based on the volume and the composition of the capital we possess. This capital also contributes to the shaping of our habitus as well as our trajectory through life (Wacquant, 2008).

When applied to the context of volunteer tutors in adult literacy programs with volunteer tutors at the centre, the multi-layer and multi-directional theoretical framework offers a window to understand the experiences of volunteer tutors in the way they develop their practice and their relationships with learners as well as how volunteer tutors see themselves as policy actors. Bourdieu’s concept of habitus highlights how who we are and how we see the world significantly influences how we behave and make decisions through life. Bourdieu posited that much of habitus is developed through socialization within one’s family and surroundings and his discussions around habitus support an in-depth examination of what each of us brings with ourselves, consciously or otherwise, when we interact with others and in society. In the case of
volunteer tutors, habitus guides our expectations of what literacy and education are for and thus what is supposed to take place during tutoring sessions. The concept of capital, according to Bourdieu’s framework, explains what each of us have to work with as we enter into society and highlights the inequality facing some of us because we have different economic, social and cultural capital. Since volunteer tutors bring with them more capital than learners, the theoretical framework illustrates how unequal capital may influence the development of the relationships between them. The perspective of field broadens to examine how we as a community and as a society see each other, interact with each other and exercise our agency. The field of adult literacy policy supports further understanding of how volunteer tutors develop their practice with the context of policy as the overriding structure. It is important to note that although these concepts have been laid out individually, they are relational and overlap to a certain degree (Wacquant, 2013). Loïc Wacquant (2008, 2013) and Jason Edgerton & Lance Roberts (2014) asserted that it is fruitless to take Bourdieu’s concepts apart because the crux of the theoretical framework lies in the relational nature of the concepts. Honouring this critical intersection of the thinking tools, the review of literature on habitus, capital and field goes through each of these concepts and then brings them together into a coherent theoretical framework for this thesis.

8 The Elusive Habitus

Habitus is a frequently used concept from Bourdieu’s theoretical framework, especially in educational research; so much so that Diane Reay titled her 2004 article “‘It’s all becoming a habitus’: Beyond the habitual use of habitus in educational research” (Reay, 2004, p.431). Karl Maton (2008) called it “an enigmatic concept” (p.49). Nearly forty years since Bourdieu (1977) introduced it as a concept related to “systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structure” (p.72), debate around what habitus is and what habitus does still rages on as seen in a special edition of Body & Society published in June 2014. Despite all the different viewpoints on habitus, there is agreement that habitus is a central concept to Bourdieu’s theory of practice (Maton, 2008; Reay, 2004). For the purpose of this thesis, the literature review of habitus as a concept is focused on how habitus is shaped through socialization and how habitus could help understand how we formulate our worldview and our actions. Also, as a starting point, habitus in the context of this thesis is considered as having both an inner aspect of our dispositions as well as an outer form that we exhibit our choices and preferences (Moore, 2008).
Pierre Bourdieu (1977) introduced the concept of habitus in his attempt to explain the relation between structure and agency. Our initial conditioning or socialization through family primarily supports the formation of our individual habitus. This habitus shapes our thoughts, perceptions, expressions and actions (Crossley, 2013). As individual habitus become homogeneous among different individuals who share similar socialization, a class or collective habitus would come into shape. While the homogeneity of habitus among individuals within the same class becomes a structure and a limiting factor for agency, agency could still have an effect since the class habitus is formed by agency contributing to it. As such, habitus is multi-layered. Despite this rather linear and process-oriented description, the relation between individual agency and group structure is more nuanced and complex. The dynamics between individual and collective habitus shed light on the complexity of how habitus regulates our thinking and behaviours both on the individual and collective levels. These dynamics are also especially interesting when habitus is used to explain agency and opportunity since habitus is at once liberating and constraining.

According to Bourdieu, habitus is both structured and structuring. In that, he refers to habitus as the result of our upbringing and socialization while at the same time it also influences how we behave in the present and move forward into the future (Maton, 2008). Because habitus is structured by our past through socialization by family and community, habitus has both individual and class or collective aspects. The collective habitus is shared among those in the same social “class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, occupation, nationality, region and so forth” (Maton, 2008, p.53). In other words, our social relations with others contribute to our habitus as much as our own individual circumstances. Habitus shapes our practices including how we exercise our agency. When we enter into a field, we rely on our habitus to guide us to behave and interact with others and to get the “feel for the game”. As such, habitus also helps us form our expectations and structures our practices in the field (even a new field).

The studies by Diane Reay (2004) and Terry Lovell (2000) showed how habitus simultaneously allows for and constrains agency and opportunity. Both Reay (2004) and Lovell (2000) discussed the tension between constraint and freedom/choice within habitus. The empirical data in these two studies demonstrate circumstances in which individuals do have opportunities and agency to exercise our freedom while staying within constraints imposed by habitus and highlight the complex relationship between individual and collective habitus within the context of the multiple identities we possess.
Diane Reay (2004) discussed the “multi-layered” nature of habitus; habitus functions on a differentiated manner on an individual level and when a group of people share similar habitus, a collective habitus can be observed (p.434). She examined the use of habitus in educational research to look for some insight in this dynamic relationship between agency and structure. The “vagueness and indeterminacy” (p.433) in both individual and collective habitus as well as their continual process of influencing each other forms the basis of Reay’s suggestion of how habitus allows for agency and freedom. However, Bourdieu’s point of habitus being a constraint remains valid since the combination of individual and collective habitus gives us the lens to see a range of opportunities that our individual habitus considers or the collective habitus allows us to consider as possible (Reay, 2004). As Reay (2004) stated, “choice is at the heart of habitus…but the choices are limited” (p.435). Further, she described agency as being “bounded by a framework of opportunities and constraints … in external circumstances” as well as “by an internalized framework that makes some possibilities inconceivable, others improbable and a limited range acceptable” (p.435). From the perspective of agency, Bourdieu pointed to the possibility of agency at play because of the “vagueness and indeterminacy” of our habitus (Reay, 2004, p.433). Although our habitus may limit what we view as possible or thinkable options, research showed that when faced with unfamiliar situations, habitus could initiate change (Reay, Davies, David & Ball, 2001; Reay, 2004; Thomson, 2008).

This combination of self-selection and external limits is highlighted in the examples presented by Terry Lovell (2000) in which working women have the motive and the means to pass as working men. Lovell recognized the opportunities taken by the women had been created by the fluidity and the instability stemming from the different positionings and identities the women had managed to take on out of their own motives, necessity and initiative. In addition, the men around these women also occupied to some degree overlapping positions and identities, which allowed the women to slip into an expanded repertoire.

9 Capital: The Have’s and the Have-not’s

The second concept from Bourdieu’s theory of practice is capital including economic, cultural and social. Various forms of capital, according to Bourdieu (1986), are the foundation of how the social world functions with respect to the amount and composition of the different forms of capital one possesses (Swartz, 1997). In a capitalistic society, the possession of capital
determines the advantages one has in his or her position in the world and hence the likelihood of future success (Bourdieu, 1986; Chevallier & Chauviré, 2010). While most of us are most familiar with economic or financial capital (as in dollars and cents), Bourdieu (1986) introduced other forms of capital that play significant roles in the functioning of the social world – namely, cultural and social capital.

**Economic capital** is the “most material” of capital, which also ultimately connects the other forms of capital together (Bourdieu, 1986). Economic activities in a capitalistic society are based on mercantile exchanges in which individuals are focused on maximizing their profit or attaining economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Economic capital may take on various forms, many of which are essentially inputs that could be converted into money and profit and some may be formalized in society as property rights (Bourdieu, 1986; Chevallier & Chauviré, 2010; Huvila, Holmberg, Ek & Widén-Wulff, 2009). The most notable form of economic capital in the context of education is human capital, which is defined as skills and knowledge possessed by individuals that could be converted into labour and then wages and salaries (Dwiningrum, 2013; Huvila et al., 2009). Human capital is typically embodied in technical skills, literacy, work experience, seniority and work habits (Behtoui & Neergaard, 2011; Manguvo, Whitney, & Chareka, 2013).

Economic and human capital have been the dominant focus and the ultimate objective for many educational programs, including adult literacy (Albright, 2006). Investments in human capital are linked to better employment, higher pay, even better health (Jeanotte, 2003). Extending from this notion of investing in human capital, the virtue of lifelong learning becomes the foundation for many educational programs, particularly those targeted to adult learners who are faced with challenges associated with changing work environments and competition from globalization (Jorgensen, 2004). However, Bourdieu (1986) cautioned that the emphasis on using education to develop human capital misses how education itself contributes to the perpetuation of inequality through social reproduction.

Bourdieu (1986) defined **cultural capital** as the inherited understanding of how to present oneself in society and how to relate to each other. Cultural capital, according to Bourdieu (1986), can be converted into economic capital and is significantly tied to educational success. Bourdieu (1986; p. 243) asserted that cultural capital can present itself in three different states:
(1) the embodied state – “in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body”; (2) the objectified state – “in the form of cultural goods”; and (3) the institutionalized state – “a form of objectification...as...in the case of educational qualifications.” The embodied state of cultural capital manifests itself in how we carry ourselves and how we relate to others in terms of demeanor and deference (Hallett, 2007). Our demeanors and deference signify which group or class we belong to and which we do not and thus influence the interactions with others (Bourdieu, 2013; Wacquant, 2013).

Bourdieu (1986) argued that the embodied state of cultural capital is the underlying factor that determines how the other forms of capital function. Because the embodied state of cultural capital is mainly reproduced within family through long-term unconscious socialization that is particular to one’s social class (Bourdieu, 1986; Kraaykamp & van Eijck, 2010), it is at times not even recognized as capital and hence its value becomes ever more elusive and indefinable to those who do not possess it (Bourdieu, 1986). Also, the embodied state of cultural capital does not possess similar material or institutionalized qualities as other forms of capital with respect to its visibility. As such, it cannot be easily and explicitly codified, taught or shared. The reason is that those who possess it are often not even aware of their possession of it or they tend to view the values of their cultural capital as simply the given rules of life (typically shared with those in the same class or group) (Bourdieu, 1986; Dumais, 2002; Greenbank, 2006). It is this symbolic, elusive and indefinable nature that makes the embodied state of cultural capital the centre of Bourdieu’s argument about class distinction and struggle because by definition the embodied state of cultural capital is exclusive and only available to those already in the group (Bourdieu, 1986; Wacquant, 2013). The power of the embodied state of cultural capital is symbolically exhibited through one’s practices and uses of capital in various fields.

The embodied state of cultural capital is linked to the objectified and the institutionalized states of cultural capital because the former establishes our habitus, our demeanor and deference as well as our understanding of which cultural goods or what education is considered valuable and useful (Bourdieu, 1986; Hallett, 2007). Cultural goods, as in the objectified state of cultural capital, are dependent on economic capital for their acquisition and on the embodied state of cultural capital to understand which goods to acquire (Bourdieu, 1986; 2010). Therefore, it is important to emphasize that the mere demonstration of the objectified state of cultural capital (e.g., attending museum exhibitions or playing a musical instrument) does not necessarily help
understand the implications of the embodied state of cultural capital that underpins such
behaviours (Kim & Kim, 2009; Kraaykamp & van Eijck, 2010). As Bourdieu (1986; 2013)
pointed out, the objectified state of cultural capital represents only the material properties of
cultural capital and does not present the full picture of how cultural capital impacts on social
inequalities. Further, the possession of the objectified state of cultural capital and even vast
quantities of economic capital do not always translate into the embodied state of cultural capital
as in nouveau riche versus old money (Swartz, 1997).

Educational qualifications, as in the institutionalized state of cultural capital, allow individuals to
turn their educational achievement into economic capital, which in turn supports further
acquisition of cultural capital provided that the educational qualifications are seen as valuable,
sufficiently rare and difficult to obtain (Bourdieu, 1986). Otherwise, the educational
qualifications may not yield the profit as anticipated (Bourdieu, 1986) as seen in the complaints
of parents and students that a university degree no longer has the cachet it used to (Côté and
Allahar, 2006). The discussion of the institutionalized state of cultural capital in the form of
educational attainment is often based on the notion of education as a means to neutralize various
social inequality issues as seen in today’s political discourse (Traub, 2000). However, such a
notion does not take into account that education is far from being a provider of equal
opportunities and that it also plays a role in reproducing inequalities among students (Collins,
behavioural signals underpinned by the embodied state of cultural capital allow teachers to
differentiate students and that schools inherently reward students who know how they ought to
behave. Students are expected to exhibit urban, middle-class behaviours and tastes (Kramsch,
2008). However, since such behaviours and demeanors are not taught in school but brought with
students based on their family, community and social backgrounds, students who are simply
unaware of this expectation inevitably fail to appease their teachers and get good grades
(Kingston, 2001). In this sense, education not only does not remedy the inequalities but
perpetuates them (Collins, 2009; Edgerton & Roberts, 2014; Kingston, 2001). Therefore, the
focus on encouraging students to attain as much education as possible while ignoring the
systemic biases favouring a specific social class is unlikely to help address social inequalities in
any meaningful way.
Social capital, based on Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of practice, refers to social relationships or “connections” that, again like cultural capital, can be converted into economic capital. The value of social capital depends on the number of relationships that one can reliably call upon to bring about benefits (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu’s concept of social capital refers to the symbolic power individuals have to influence others to extract benefits (Chevallier & Chauviré, 2010). The benefits of possessing social capital can be material – as in profiting from being able to leverage a relationship – and symbolic – as in privilege by association (Bourdieu, 1986). It is important to clarify that membership in a group (family, workplace or neighbourhood) does not translate into social capital in a straightforward, manner (Bourdieu, 1986). The connections in social capital require long-term investment and nurturing and depend on the sense of mutual obligations and recognition of those being part of the connections (Bourdieu, 1986). The investment and nurturing require time and energy and skills to know how to develop and maintain such relationships (Bourdieu, 1986). As a result, social capital is very much specific to the person who possesses it and is built on the cultural capital one has. The appreciation for and access to the right connections and the competence to maintain and nurture these connections are inextricably linked with the embodied state of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Therefore, social capital like the embodied state of cultural capital cannot be explicitly codified, taught and shared with others (Bourdieu, 1986).

Since Bourdieu first introduced his theory of practice, a number of researchers (Andrews, 2011; Coughlan, Swift, Jamal & Macredie, 2012; Godoy, Reyes-García, Huanca, Leonard, Olvera, Bauchet, Ma, St. John, Miodowski, Rios, Vadez & Seyfreid, 2007; Kim & Kim, 2009; Kraaykamp & van Eijck, 2010; Marzuki, Ahmad, Hamid & Ishak, 2014) have attempted to operationalize and quantify the concepts of social capital as in dollars and cents for economic capital. The quantification and measurement of social capital places the focus on the material or objective properties of social capital, as opposed to their symbolic nature (Bourdieu, 2013). This positivist approach tends to isolate Bourdieu’s framework into separate parts – i.e., only looking at one aspect of social capital and rarely together with habitus and field (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). The attempt to quantify social capital runs alongside the notion of social capital as a way to build a personal or community network of connections to extract values and benefits as characterized by Putnam and Coleman (Andrews, 2011). Social capital is quantified in the form of the number of friends or associates one has, the level of civic participation (e.g., voting and
volunteering) and the number of gifts given and received (Andrews, 2011; Dumais, 2002; Godoy et al., 2007). However, these measurements do not and cannot penetrate into the core of why social capital is critical in contributing to social inequality – i.e., our habitus and embodied cultural capital in understanding how social capital works. Although incomplete discussions and misplaced focuses are some of the issues with the positivist approach, the main problem with the positivist approach is its implicit suggestion that individuals themselves need to act themselves to acquire cultural and social capital and to address the inequalities (e.g., go to more cultural activities and give more gifts to people). The inherent disadvantages associated with existing class structures in the form of Bourdieu’s concepts and the perpetual pressure of social reproduction through systemic biases are presented as something that individuals could work on rectifying on their own.

All in all, Bourdieu’s theoretical framework takes into account the combination of different forms of capital in the field and how the combination confers different levels of power. Habitus is the underlying factor that drives the use and the usefulness of the capital. Habitus supports us in the recognition of the field and thus the matching between capital and the field.

10 Policy as a Field of Practice

Bourdieu’s theory of practice consists of the concept of field as “a configuration of positions comprising agencies (individuals, groups of actors or institutions) struggling to maximize their positions” (Maton, 2005, p.689). Within the field, the positions of agents are relational to each other in a hierarchy based on their capital (Maton, 2005). Through viewing policy as a field, the analysis makes the invisible power of policy visible (van Zantan, 2005). The analysis of the agents’ practices in the field offers a glimpse into “the arbitrary nature of the context of the field and so reveal[s] the workings of social power” (Maton, 2005, p.696). The production of policy documents becomes “a site of contest between bureaucrats, policy advisors, politicians and ‘spin doctors’” (Thomson, 2005, p.768). The field involves the “reinterpretations, negotiations and resistances” of the agents or policy actors in different positions playing “micropolitics” (van Zantan, 2005, p.671).

Stephen Heimans (2012) talked about how those on the ground level “can remake policy as ‘street level bureaucrats’” (p.3). The agents’ practices become a form of appropriation – “a form of creative interpretive practice necessarily engaged in by different people involved in the policy
process” (Levinson, Sutton & Winstead, 2009, p.768). The power relations among the different agents are embedded in their language as well as their practices, which form the policy cycle that “produces possibilities and constraints on the daily lives of policy makers and teachers and students” (Heimans, 2012, p.6). Bourdieu’s theory of practice suggests that the interaction between agency and structure provides us an understanding of how we interact with each other in society and also how individuals play a role in shaping our “organizational and institutional context” (Horvat, 2001, p.201).

From the perspective of different policy actors, Bourdieu’s concepts could be helpful in conducting research on educational policy (Lingard, Taylor & Rawolle, 2005; Rawolle & Lingard, 2008). Specifically, as Shaun Rawolle and Bob Lingard (2008) pointed out, “Bourdieu’s work helps with considerations of education policy as text, produced in a field of policy text production with its specific logics and implemented in a field of professional practice with its different logics of practice” (p.729). The analysis of the policy as a field of practice and struggle provides the context to locate the discussion of agency and structure and the dynamics generated through symbolic power.

The application of Bourdieu’s (1986) thinking tool of field on adult literacy programs allows for an examination of the dynamics between agency and structure with a view of policy being the field in which different agents are placed. In the context of adult literacy programs, learners, program staff and volunteers may actually understand the breadth of factors for successful learning better than the data sources used by the province (Parkdale Project Read [PPR], 2006). By placing learners in the centre of deciding what and how to learn, volunteers as well as learners themselves can see the need to understand and counter the disadvantages as related to class structure. The result is that volunteers exercise their agency to broaden the official policy mandates to include non-academic, non-employment related objectives. The non-academic indicators or outcomes – such as self-esteem, finding one’s voice and connecting with others – learners would like to work on as found by the PPR (2006) study are more related to habitus, cultural capital and social capital than economic or human capital. The “safe, supportive program environment in which patient staff and peers helped build confidence” (PPR, 2006, p.15) appears to counter the unequal treatments that teachers may exhibit as described by Kingston (2001) and Kramsch (2008). The positive learning environment may even mirror the socialization process that Bourdieu talks about (Bourdieu, 1986). Learners pointed out that the
positive environment and the relationships they establish with program staff and volunteers supported their interest in learning and they contrasted how the experience with adult literacy programs was different from their previous experience in schools (PPR, 2006). It would appear that the learning environment and the relationships among program staff, volunteers and learners could counter the class reproduction that the learners may have experienced in their past and thus learners would feel that they could actually learn without being judged. Learners could also be supported through the removal of the pressure to conform to specific timelines or assessment structures, and the focus of learning on the learners’ own objectives, all of which were reported by the learners as helpful strategies (PPR, 2006). Despite the structure imposed by government policy and the lack of official power, volunteers (along with learners and program staff) have the potential to exercise agency (Powell & Colyvas, 2008).

On the other hand, adult literacy policy as articulated in the provincial policy documents “(a) defines reality, (b) orders behaviour, and (sometimes) (c) allocates resources accordingly” (Levinson, Sutton & Winstead, 2009, p.770). The province’s symbolic power is exhibited through its documents as they specify what the programs are intended to do for learners and the characteristics the learners are expected to have in order to qualify for certain goal paths. Language and power are intertwined, according to Bourdieu (1992), because “language itself is a social-historical phenomenon” (p.4) and the power embedded needs to be recognized. The policy as a form of discourse (Bacchi, 2000) demonstrates the power disproportionally wielded by the “political or technocratic elites” (Levinson, Sutton & Winstead, 2009, p.774). Bourdieu (1989) talked about how symbolic power is conferred based on the dominant group’s ability to present the “official discourse” and to impose a vision of how people should interact with each other. The power is derived from the definition of the value of different forms of capital and how the composition of the capital is translated into positions within the field (Bourdieu, 1992; Dumais, 2002; Thomson, 2008). In the case of the province, three dimensions of power are evident through its policy documents on adult literacy programs: decision making (especially in relation to funding for programs); agenda setting (laying out the goals for different learners); and controlling meaning and definitions (Hallett, 2007). Further, as James Albright (2006) pointed out, literacy as a “social field” where power and capital circulate because the human capital discourse specifies how literacy education is linked with cultural, social and economic benefits (p.109).
This is consistent with Carol Bacchi’s (2000) approach to discourse as “the purpose of concepts or categories is ‘to influence the evolution of ongoing practices’” (p.45). Bacchi (2000) talked about the use of discourse analysis through the lens of a social deconstructionist to identify sources of power and seek to challenge them. She highlighted the importance of using discourses to initiate change and pointed out how policy discourses frame and create the problems as well as solutions (Bacchi, 2000). The power to define the players within the field of adult literacy and their interactions as the official discourse is on the side of the province with its ability to provide funding for the programs (Bourdieu, 1989; Hallett, 2007). However, as Bourdieu pointed out, the relationship between agency and structure is mutually reshaping, dynamic and fluid and by no means binary (Bourdieu, 1977; Lovell, 2000; Horvat, 2001). An example of this within the adult literacy context is the divergent discourses found in policy (i.e., the independence goal path in the OALCF presents a much broader view of what literacy education would be for) could be used to accommodate or even subvert the dominant discourse on economic capital and employment to counter the class reproduction effects of education. The different policy discourses highlight the dynamic relationships among different policy actors and the nuances between agency and structure that could be found inside the policy web (Joshee, 2008). The independence goal path as an example demonstrates an exception to the overall emphasis on employment throughout the policy because it is not tightly connected to human capital or institutionalized capital like the others (Bourdieu, 1986). Based on my discussions with program staff, independence is usually used as a catch-all goal for many learners who do not have any plans for employment. How program staff and volunteers have exercised their agency to make their own interpretations of independence and to use it to support learning objectives that are not related to employment or further education could be viewed as an example of enacting divergent discourses found within policies (Joshee, 2008).

11 Altogether: (Habitus X Capital) + Field = Practice

Jason Edgerton & Lance Roberts (2014) asserted that Bourdieu’s theory of practice needs to be examined as a whole, instead of separate parts. If the different forms of capital are resources, they are only useful or valuable provided that the person possessing them understands how to use them and where to use them highlighting the relational aspect of Bourdieu’s theoretical framework (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014; Wacquant, 2013). Capital by itself does not necessarily confer value unless the capital is recognized and understood by those sharing the same field – the
foundational concept for class distinction and group formation (Wacquant, 2013). Habitus, according to Edgerton & Roberts (2014, p. 195), “is the learned set of preferences or dispositions by which a person orients to the social world.” While habitus refers to the internal understanding of oneself and its orientation in the external world, field in the external world is bound by the “formal and informal norms governing a particular social sphere of activity” (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014, p. 195). Field is defined as “the structure of the social setting in which habitus operates” and where practices take place based on habitus and where different forms of capital is used and exchanged (Swartz, 1997, p. 117). We may occupy many different fields as Claire Kramsch (2008) pointed out, and fields are far from being monolithic and fully autonomous. We adjust our habitus according to the field to maximize our position or status in the field (Kramsch, 2008). As mentioned earlier, habitus is closely linked to the embodied state of cultural capital and shaped by long-term socialization by family and characterized by the socio-economic background of the individual (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). Habitus underlies our behaviours and demeanors and most importantly our understanding of the capital we possess and what to do with it (Bourdieu, 1986; Hallett, 2007).

In order to leverage the capital, one must possess the habitus matching the field (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). The way habitus and field are connected with the different forms of capital is the knowledge of how one is expected to behave and how such behaviours would further contribute to the security of the capital possessed. This essentially forms an endless cycle and how social reproduction occurs where those with capital knows how to acquire, maintain and use it while those without capital may not even be aware of what it is that they are missing (although they are likely to be keenly aware of missing something, other than economic capital). However, although habitus and field underpin who we are and how our capital works, habitus and field are not static (Du mais, 2002). One of the criticisms against Bourdieu’s theory, considering how habitus could only be formed through long-term socialization and within one’s social class, is that it is too deterministic and it eliminates any potential effect of agency (Kingston, 2001; Kramsch, 2008; Sullivan, 2002). Alice Sullivan (2002, p. 163) went so far to say that “Bourdieu’s theory has no place not only for individual agency, but even for individual consciousness.” However, although influenced by the social conditions, habitus does change (Collins, 2008) as outlined by Kramsch (2008) drawing on her own experience in conforming to those around her who belong to the same class. Bourdieu (2010) pointed out that agency is not
confined by an individual’s capital or habitus at the time. As Bourdieu (2010, p. 103) put it, “the relationship between initial capital and present capital...is a statistical relationship of very variable intensity.”
Chapter 4
Research Design and Methodology

This study employed narrative interviews to collect and analyze data in order to identify themes emerging from various sources to help gain an understanding of the practice of volunteer tutors with their adult literacy learners in addition to reading and writing activities. The data source for this study was the interviews with volunteers selected purposely for their broad scope of practice that, according to the staff of the adult literacy program where they volunteered, would go beyond reading and writing.

I interviewed volunteers using an approach based on the narrative method (Atkinson, 2007; Chase, 2003; Craig & Huber, 2007; Creswell, 2015; Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007; Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The reason I chose narrative interview as the research methodology was to take advantage of an approach that supports an in-depth exploration of what volunteer tutors work on with adult literacy learners and their rationale behind their practice. My decision to limit the number of participants to a small one was to enhance my ability to develop rapport between the volunteers and me in order to delve into their narratives and their practice with learners. The narratives of volunteer tutors provided insights into the work of crucial but often overlooked policy actors in adult literacy programs. This chapter describes the research design and methodology for conducting interviews with volunteer tutors, including recruitment and interview questions. I also include the description of the data analysis methodology used in this study linking the empirical data to the theoretical framework discussed in the previous chapter. In addition, this chapter also discusses the ethical issues concerning the conduct of this study as well the limitations from the research design.

12 Research Design: Narrative Interview

In order to gain an understanding of the role and the practice of volunteer tutors in adult literacy programs, I conducted interviews with volunteer tutors to gather narratives and perspectives on their work, practice and rationale. I interviewed three volunteer tutors to develop an in-depth narrative inquiry built on establishing rapport and a relationship between the volunteers and me. This was a conscious effort to use a form of interview that is different from the more conventional question-response approach; the narrative approach changes the dynamics between interviewer and interviewee by acknowledging and sharing the power between interviewer and
interviewee through supporting the participants in directing their own storytelling (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). I chose narrative interviews to give volunteers a direct way to insert their voices and to choose their stories, which are rarely heard or included, into the policy dialogue.

The interview is one of the commonly used research methods for qualitative research (Creswell, 2015). In choosing narrative interviews for this study, I considered interviews as a social practice in which people engage in conversations to produce knowledge and to create meanings together (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Through the use of narrative interviews, I explored the volunteers’ perspectives to gain an understanding of what they would consider as the most relevant (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). The narrative approach differs from the question-response interview methodology and is intentionally distinct from what Bourdieu described as “tape recording sociologies” as cited by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009; p.7). The narrative approach also provided the participants the opportunity to steer the discussions and select the details to connect their stories (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). Unlike the traditional question-and-answer approach, the narrative account is the result of the researcher supporting the participants in constructing their stories (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007).

The understanding of how power is concentrated in the researcher dispels the illusion of conventional interviews being “open and free dialogue between egalitarian partners” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.33). Bourdieu (2004) suggested that instead of artificially assuming the position of observing from afar, it is more important to understand one’s own perspectives and acknowledge and incorporate them into the research itself. My personal experience as a volunteer tutor helped reduce the distance and make the discussions with the participants conversational sharing of stories, instead of questions-and-answers. Further, the use of the narrative approach enhanced my ability to acknowledge my own stories as I encouraged the participants in this study to share theirs. While the power imbalance is difficult to eliminate entirely, the narrative interview design reminded me of it and how the power balance may impact on the knowledge produced from different research methods. As already discussed, the structuring of the narrative interview as used in this study shifted the responsibility of what and how to tell the stories to the participants even though I had retained the power to select the topic areas (Chase, 2003; Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007).
I used narrative interviews to learn about and understand the individual experiences of volunteer tutors who had extended their work with learners to include more than reading and writing as mandated by provincial policy. Of specific interest to me was to examine the factors and the experiences of the volunteer tutors that contributed to their social and personal interactions with learners (Creswell, 2015). In maintaining the narrative nature of the interviews in this study, I consciously asked the participants in choosing their own stories and in so doing, we co-constructed the understanding and the meanings of how they had worked with learners (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007). The focus was to present a space to the participants to share and explore their personal experiences and feelings, especially those that had given meaning to their practices (Atkinson, 2007). The methodology of narrative interview, as opposed to the conventional question-response format, invites participants to share their stories instead of reports (Chase, 2003). The research design of this study took cue from Susan Chase’s (2003) study where she asked participants to select and recount their life stories instead of being elicited by the researcher. The narrative interview approach in this study also incorporated the storytelling aspect described by Robert Atkinson (2007) who discussed how storytelling is natural among us and how our life stories reveal the subjective meanings in our experiences.

The research design for this study included the following techniques as gleaned from a review of studies using narrative interview: (1) multiple interviews with participants; (2) conscious efforts in establishing relationships with participants; and (3) sharing my own stories (Chase, 2003; Cranton & Wright, 2008; Creswell, 2015; Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007). Although narrative research has not been specifically used to understand volunteers in their roles as policy actors in adult literacy programs, Patricia Cranton and Brenda Wright (2008) used narrative inquiry with adult literacy educators (paid) in a study similar to this one. The research techniques used in this study were in part modelled after the Cranton and Wright (2008) study supplemented by the steps in narrative research as described by Creswell (2015) and other narrative studies such as that by Cheryl Craig & Janice Huber (2007).

13 Recruitment

This section provides details on the recruitment process of the participants for this study. I give background on the adult literacy program in which the participants of this study volunteered and the participants themselves I have used pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.
13.1 Process

Given the study’s objectives, I requested the adult literacy program staff to select three participants who were known for having included learning and support activities going beyond reading and writing for the learners. The volunteer coordinator of the adult literacy program identified and forwarded the information about the study to potential participants by email and instructed them to contact me directly if interested in participating. The small number of participants was designed to support an in-depth discussion using the narrative approach to explore and understand what they were doing as volunteer tutors and their rationale for establishing their practices. The findings from this project are not intended to be generalizable but instead to provide insights on how volunteers act in ways that support, extend or subvert policy as it is constructed in official documents.

I identified the program through my personal contacts, and I had no prior knowledge or relationship with the program (i.e., never volunteered there or even visited the program before). An initial meeting with program staff took place in July 2015. Prior to the meeting, an introductory letter was sent to the program staff to provide initial information on the research study (Appendix A). At this initial meeting, I provided the background to the study and the research methodology. I also shared my own experience as a volunteer tutor and how this study had come about through my own experience and through my research of not finding the voice of volunteers in research literature. At this initial meeting, the executive director agreed to participate in the study and the volunteer coordinator would assist me in the recruitment of participants.

Once having agreed to participate in the study and received the various materials on the study from me, the volunteer coordinator initiated recruitment of participants on my behalf. Based on our conversations about the study, the volunteer coordinator identified and selected potential participants from the program’s volunteer roster. The volunteer coordinator sent a broadcast email (which I drafted; Appendix A) to select volunteers to inform them of the opportunity to participate in a research study and to solicit interest. The email contained the volunteer recruitment letter (Appendix A) which outlined the purpose of the research project and the volunteers that the study sought to recruit. Interested volunteers were asked to contact me directly. When contacted by a potential participant, I provided another volunteer recruitment
letter (Appendix B) with further details on the purpose of the research study. Once an individual agreed to participate by email, I contacted him or her to schedule an in-person meeting at a location convenient for her or him. All the participants chose to meet at the adult literacy program office where they volunteered. I met with each participant individually for the study.

In compliance with the ethics protocol of the University of Toronto, I provided each participant the information and consent letter (Appendix C) during the first interview. The letter presented in writing information on the study as well as the protocols for the interview including the voluntary nature of their participation and how the information they provide would be protected with anonymity. The information and consent letter also provided each participant the contact information of myself as well as my thesis supervisor. All participants signed their consent forms to indicate their agreement to participate and their understanding of the conditions around their participation. I also provided each participant a copy of the information and consent letter for record keeping.

13.2 Project Literacy: The Adult Literacy Program in which the Participants Volunteered

Project Literacy (a pseudonym) where the participants in this study volunteered was located in a mid-sized city in Ontario approximately 100 kilometres from Toronto. The program offered one-on-one tutoring with volunteer tutors and group sessions with paid instructors. It was a community based organization and had no formal affiliation with any public institution such as a school board, library or local college or university. Started in the 1980s, the program had over 100 volunteers on its roster at the time of the study. Similar to many other adult literacy programs in Ontario, this program was funded in part through Employment Ontario and in part through donations. Since it received funding from the province, the program was subject to various provincial policies and procedures with regard to program delivery and statistical reporting. An executive director oversaw the day-to-day operations of the program. A volunteer coordinator was responsible for recruiting, training and matching volunteer tutors. The volunteer coordinator assisted in the recruitment of participants for this study.

The program office was close to downtown accessible by public transit and surrounded by ample parking. The office was on the second floor of a commercial/residential building with a layout that included a series of desks and chairs separated by partitions where the learner-tutor pairs
could work in a semi-open space. All tutoring sessions normally took place at the program office although exceptions were made for learners with limited mobility. The one-on-one tutoring sessions at this program were typically on a weekly basis and lasted one to two hours.

After expressing interest in becoming volunteers, individuals were interviewed by the volunteer coordinator to assess their suitability. The coordinator shared the program’s requirements for volunteers with all potential volunteers to provide a clear understanding of commitment and expectations. Volunteers, once accepted into the program, would go through a police check and the initial orientation and training session. The initial training covered specific boundaries that the program had put in place for the volunteers and the learners. Examples of these boundaries included not to borrow or lend money from each other, not to share personal contact information with each other and not to meet outside the program office. According to the program staff the rationale for these boundaries (which are common among adult literacy programs from my own experience), was to protect both learners and volunteers recognizing how the relationship could become very personal and thus potentially expose the vulnerability of either party. Program staff would emphasize to both learners and volunteers that they should consult staff for any assistance beyond literacy and numeracy. As a result, program staff and volunteers strived to maintain a balance between working with learners holistically and staying within these boundaries.

In addition to the initial training, program staff would invite volunteers to participate in various workshops as they became available. One of the workshops that had been offered was Bridges out of Poverty, which aimed to provide volunteers an opportunity to understand the challenges facing those living in poverty.

13.3 Participants

Three participants were selected and recruited for this study by the volunteer coordinator at the adult literacy program. They individually contacted me by email to indicate their interest in participation. The participants are only identified by either pseudonyms or numbers in this report in order to maintain their anonymity. All three participants had been volunteering at the program for approximately two years at the time of the study. They were all university educated and long-term residents of the city where the program was located. Their motivation to volunteer was primarily to give back to the community.
In order to protect the anonymity of the participants, the participants described in this section are given pseudonyms whereas numbers #1-3 are used for attributing quotes or specific points in the rest of this report. The use of pseudonyms here allows for the introduction of the participants as people instead of subjects, without sacrificing their anonymity. Where singular pronouns are used to refer to one of the participants, only the feminine pronoun is used for all the participants irrespective of the actual gender of the particular participant in order to avoid the linking of the specific discussions to any of the participants and to enhance the protection of anonymity of the participants.

13.3.1 Julie

Julie moved to this city about thirty years ago and was still running her own business at the time of the study. She found out about the program when she was volunteering for a community information organization years earlier. She first started as a front desk volunteer at the program since she was concerned about being not sufficiently qualified as a tutor. Eventually, she transitioned to become a tutor after being encouraged by the program staff. She had been volunteering since April 2013 and was working with the same learner from the beginning. The learner was on provincial disability benefits. They would typically meet once a week for slightly more than two hours (which was longer than the typical session length for the program). She acknowledged much of her work with the learner was around confidence building in addition to reading and writing.

At the time of the study, Julie’s learner had not come to the program for several weeks. Julie expressed concerns about the learner’s well-being and speculated that the learner might be going through a rough patch. She was aware of the learner’s fragile self-esteem and had been working on building up the individual’s confidence since they had been matched. Her approach was through creating a safe environment and showing the learner that even she did not know all the answers herself. When asked about accountability metrics for her work in the adult literacy program and the program in general, she articulated the difficulties in reconciling being able to report and measure outcomes with the important but intangible benefits gained on the individual basis from the learner’s perspective. She suggested that provincial officials should see instead the personal growth and the sense of community within the adult literacy program as goals and objectives for the province.
13.3.2 Michael

Michael was a retiree who had been living in this city for more than forty years. He heard about the program through an information session presented to retirees at his previous workplace. He had been volunteering for two years and was currently working with the second learner. He met with the learner once a week for an hour and a half mainly to work on numeracy skills.

At the time of the study, Michael had worked with two different learners. One of the early themes from the discussions with Michael was the frustrations and uncertainty he felt in his volunteering efforts. His frustrations stemmed mainly from the lack of tangible improvement in literacy skills in the learners. He was unsure whether the reason was his lack of ability or experience in teaching or the learners’ inability to learn. Despite his frustrations, he had continued to volunteer and did not have any plans to quit the volunteer position. He reiterated his decision to stay in the program despite the lack of noticeable improvement in their literacy and numeracy skills. He lamented today’s lack of economic opportunities for those without high school diplomas thus depriving the learners their chance to contribute to society through their labour. Regardless of his trepidations, he firmly believed in the value of the adult literacy program in helping learners as part of the community and for personal growth.

13.3.3 Sandra

Sandra started looking for volunteering opportunities after her children left home and had been volunteering for just over two years and had only worked with one learner until recently. She worked at one of the local post-secondary institutions as a researcher. She held weekly tutoring sessions with a focus on spelling because the learner’s reading capability was fairly high.

Sandra finished her work with the learner in the Spring of 2015 when the learner stopped coming to the program. At the time of the study in the Summer of 2015, Sandra was about to be matched with a new learner. Sandra found it most difficult to describe the relationship between herself and the learner. It was in part because the learner was the same age as her and she was struck by how lives could be vastly different depending on people’s upbringing and life circumstances. She was conscious of the limits of what she could do to help and carefully navigated the boundaries set by the program between tutors and learners. Nonetheless, she saw herself as a resource for the learner beyond the strict definition of literacy education as long as she remained
comfortable offering assistance. The emotional impact of the volunteering experience was something she had not previously anticipated, but she remained optimistic about her efforts in tutoring learners and was looking forward to meeting her new learner in the coming weeks.

14 Interview Process

The interviews with the volunteer tutors took place in at the office of the adult literacy program where the participants volunteered. Each participant was interviewed on three separate occasions in the months of August and September 2015. Each interview lasted approximately an hour.

At the first interview, I talked about my own experience as a volunteer tutor working with learners and recognizing the need and the importance of working with learners holistically and extending learning activities beyond reading and writing. During subsequent interviews, I shared my own stories with the participants when their stories would overlap my experiences as a volunteer tutor. The rationale behind the sharing of experience between the researcher and the participant was to support the development of rapport and was consistent with the storytelling and narrative method (Chase, 2003; Creswell, 2015; Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007). I also briefed the participants on the University’s ethics protocol, with which this study was required to comply, in terms of the voluntary nature of their participation and the confidentiality protection for the information they would provide. Gift cards as token of appreciation were given to the participants at the conclusion of the first interview.

I shared the semi-structure interview guide with the participants at the first meetings and asked them to use it as a guide to think of stories that they would like to share based on their experiences as volunteer tutors. I conducted the interviews in this way to allow for flexibility and to explore themes and issues brought up by the participants. The interview guide, which is included in Appendix D, covered the following four broad areas:

- Background on volunteer experience;
- Goals for the learners;
- The learning activities during the tutoring sessions; and
- The volunteer-tutor relationship.
I used semi-structured questions as prompts to the participants to ask them to recount their experiences of becoming volunteer tutors in adult literacy and their stories about developing their practice and learning activities with and for the learners. The questions as shown in the interview guide were intentionally broad to offer a space for the participants to convey their views and perspectives. I encouraged the participants to tell stories that stood out for them within their own experiences as volunteers. I used a free-flow format allowing the participants to follow their own thoughts and present their stories. Questions that I asked were largely for clarification and more in-depth understanding.

After the completion of the third round of interviews, I thanked each participant and asked for permission to conduct any follow-up questions by telephone or e-mail. One of the participants emailed further thoughts on our discussions several days after the last round of interviews. All the interviews, except the first, were audio-recorded. I made notes immediately after the first interviews to highlight the key points raised during the interviews while transcripts for the subsequent interviews were prepared using the audio-recordings. Two of the participants received a copy of the notes/transcripts created from the interview after each interview for their review while one declined the offer to review. Feedback and comments from the participants on the notes/transcripts were incorporated afterwards. These notes and transcripts were the basis for data analysis.

15 Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study was completed in two stages. For both stages of the data analysis, I used NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software package, to help identify emerging themes and collect quotes for the preparation of this thesis. The first stage of data analysis involved a review of the interview notes and transcripts for emerging themes among the participants. I then framed these themes into composite stories from the three participants to highlight their shared and unique experiences. The data analysis at this stage supported my understanding of what the participants worked on with the learners during the tutoring sessions and how the participants came to decide on the learning activities. Additionally, I also looked for stories related to how the participants came to understand the broader context of the learners’ challenges which then led to the participants incorporating activities not strictly related to literacy education. After the second round of interviews, I shared early versions of the
composite stories. The participants offered their impressions of these composite stories, further input into the stories and elaboration to clarify and expand on the stories. I incorporated these final discussions into the composite stories that are presented in the Findings chapter.

With the composite stories identified, I proceeded to the second stage of data analysis. I reviewed the composite stories to answer the research questions and to link the stories to the research conversations and the theoretical framework. The interview notes and transcripts were analyzed to identify the concepts highlighted in each of the composite story. This exercise allowed for an in-depth understanding of why and how the participants developed their practices as well as their experiences as volunteer tutors. Three themes emerged from this second-stage analysis. These themes offered an opportunity to further our understanding of Bourdieu’s theory of practice and the applicability of the concepts of habitus, capital and field in the context of volunteer tutors in adult literacy.

16 Ethics

This project presented relatively low risk in terms of group vulnerability and potential harm to the participants. Nonetheless, there were some ethical issues to be considered:

- Data collection: All the interviews were audio-recorded (except the first one) with the consent of the participants. All the raw data collected including consent forms and communications with participants – paper, electronic or otherwise (i.e., anything with identifiable information) were stored in a locked cabinet kept inside my home office and/or in the University’s encrypted server. All raw data will be destroyed within 12 months after the completion of the thesis (anticipated as April 2017).

- Privacy protection: Identifiable information was only accessible by my thesis supervisor and me, both of whom were familiar with the ethics protocol. As soon as interview notes had been completed, the identity of the participants was delinked. The interview notes were also reviewed to remove any identifiable information on the participants, individuals they were working with (including learners and program staff) and the adult literacy programs with which they volunteered. Interview notes without any identifiable information will be kept for five years after the completion of the thesis (anticipated as April 2021) for preparing publications and possible use in future studies.
• Data management: As mentioned earlier, all data in paper form were stored in a locked cabinet inside my home office while electronic data were kept on the University’s encrypted server.

• Publication: Only pseudonyms and numerical identifiers were used for the volunteers interviewed, and the program with which they volunteered was only identified as a literacy program located in Ontario. No identifiable information has been or will be included in this thesis or any of the papers prepared based on this thesis. Generic descriptions of the participants and the adult literacy program where they volunteered are used in all publications including the thesis paper.

17 Limitations

I framed this study based on my own personal experience as a volunteer tutor in various adult literacy programs in the Toronto area. In designing the research methodology, I consciously kept the discussion topics broad and the questions open for the participants to share their own experiences. While I would share my own stories with the participants during the meetings, I maintained an open atmosphere by showing my genuine interest in finding out what their stories were.

The research design of narrative interview was predicated on the establishment of rapport and relationship between the researcher and the participants. While attempts were made through multiple interviews over a period of time, the time constraint imposed through a master’s degree program made it difficult to let the relationships develop naturally over a long period of time. This time constraint on relationship building (over three meetings in about eight weeks) may have impacted on the comments solicited from the participants. Had more time been available, more interviews could have been conducted and the relationships with the participants would have more of an opportunity to develop and flourish.
Chapter 5
Findings

The multiple discussions with the participants in this study provided the opportunity for the volunteers to share their experience, emotions and musings on what being a volunteer tutor in an adult literacy program meant to each participant. The openness of the participants offered a window to understand the rewards of volunteering as well as the struggles and the frustrations encountered by the volunteers. Through the discussions, the participants shared their perspectives, stories and expectations working with learners which underpinned how they had developed their practices as well as how they came to change their views and deepen their understanding of adult literacy. This chapter presents a summary of the findings from this study through four composite stories around the themes that emerged from the discussions with the participants. Each composite story combines the discussions with all three participants highlighting the commonality and divergence found among the participants’ stories. The use of composite stories not only focuses on the themes emerged from the participants, but also purposefully obscures the individual stories of the participants in order to decouple their stories from their identities. The storytelling format also continues the narrative methodology used for the collection of the data in this study and lays the foundation for further exploration using the theoretical framework in the Discussions chapter.

In order to maintain anonymity of the participants, the composite stories in this chapter refer to the participants by number (instead of the pseudonyms given in the previous chapter) and all singular pronouns used in the composite stories are female regardless of the actual gender of the particular participant.

18 Overview of the Composite Stories

The three participants in this study shared many stories from their experiences as volunteer tutors. A number of themes coalesced after the first two rounds of meetings which were further explored in the third and last round of meetings with the participants. These themes emerged as a result of the way the semi-structured interview guide was designed and also the stories that the participants brought to the discussions. Although the composite stories are presented as separate stories in this chapter, some of the underlying themes overlap illustrating the nuances and
complexities of the participants’ experiences. The composite stories are summarized in the following brief overviews:

- **Composite Story #1: Before and after volunteering** – The participants in this study shared their understanding of adult literacy and expectations of being a volunteer tutor before they had started as volunteer tutors at the program. These discussions highlight the changes in the participants before and after meeting the learners and having worked firsthand with individuals who struggled with literacy. The participants reflected how their understanding of the learners’ situations deepened when they could see the many challenges facing the learners. The personal encounters also served as a reminder for the participants themselves on how little they had actually known about those living in less favourable socio-economic conditions. None of the participants said that anything could have quite prepared them for the experience, either practically in terms of tutoring or emotionally when hearing stories from the learners they worked with.

- **Composite Story #2: What happens during a tutoring session** – The participants talked about how they were catering the learning activities specifically to the needs of the learners. They took the learner-centred approach seriously and supported the learners to direct what and how they would learn. They looked for learning approaches that would work for the learners instead of strictly replicating their own educational experiences. This suggested that the participants recognized that the traditional educational did not and would not work for these learners. In addition to the reading, writing and numeracy activities, the participants also offered assistance to the learners in various daily living tasks such as setting up a new tablet, reviewing schedules and keeping track of job applications. The participants’ decision to expand the scope of their tutoring sessions to include other activities indicated the participants’ acknowledgement and understanding of getting through day-to-day living should take priority over the strict definition of literacy education. This may reflect as well a broader view of the participants in their role as tutors and also in literacy. As one participant pointed out, she saw herself as a resource that the learner could tap into when needed because the skills sets and knowledge she could offer may not be readily available or accessible by the learner elsewhere. The participants reflected upon the complexities of poverty and its related challenges; and while they acknowledged the importance of literacy in anyone’s life, they also pointed out that literacy
was only one of the many challenges facing the learners. Literacy, by itself, would be unlikely to help solve all the problems facing the learners. The participants discussed how literacy played a role in the learners’ lives and pondered the relationship between literacy (or learning and education in general) and other factors contributing to improving the learners’ living conditions.

- **Composite Story #3: Relationships between tutors and learners** – The participants had difficulties describing the relationships they had with the learners. They did not find it easy to label the tutor-learner relationship and only managed to note what the relationship was not. The relationship, according to one of the participants, was not one of teacher-student because they were not just delivering a curriculum and they could pay more attention to the learners’ needs outside the learning materials. Neither was it of parent-child because the learners clearly were no longer children and also the participants did not feel that they should bear the responsibility of a parent for the learners. Nor was it friendship because the participants did not socialize outside the literacy program. In fact, they were asked by the program not to as a way to protect both the volunteers and the learners. The discussions on the relationships revealed many nuances and challenges beyond simply telling tutors to develop positive and personal relationships with the learners to facilitate learning.

- **Composite Story #4: Contrasts** – The participants throughout the discussions remarked on the differences between themselves and the learners. The differences in socio-economic status were discussed in terms of challenges in day-to-day living, experiences in upbringing and the life paths taken by the participants and the learners. The participants noted how they became more aware of what they had previously taken for granted, including post-secondary education, stable family life and support, progressive career paths and relative comfort with personal financial situations. The personal connections with the learners highlighted to the participants how the taken-for-granted path might not be available or possible for some in the community.

19 **Composite Story #1: Before and After Volunteering**

The first of the composite stories is about the expectations of the participants before they had started volunteering as tutors at the program and how these expectations changed after they met the learners. When talking about their experiences as volunteer tutors at the adult literacy
program, the participants shared their initial expectations of what they had thought they would be doing as tutors and also the various unexpected experiences they had as volunteers. The contrast of the participants’ “before” expectations and “after” experiences highlights how little many of us would know about adult literacy and how personal encounters with learners can replace intellectual and abstract concepts of what poverty and literacy mean. The participants’ “after” experiences also shed light on how personal encounters with adult literacy learners could bring a new insight into the participants’ own assumptions and advantages.

Before starting their volunteering, the participants had thought that their work as tutors would be focused mainly on improving the learners’ reading, spelling, writing, math and perhaps some computer skills as Participant #1 said, “I thought it was all going to be basically reading.” The participants also expressed concerns about their lack of teaching qualifications and experience since none of them had worked as professional teachers in the past. The lack of specific degrees was also a concern for one of the participants; Participant #1 was concerned that her lack of a math degree would be a problem. The participants felt to varying degrees that they had not been fully prepared to be tutors for the learners. Participant #1 said, “I was just basically like a baby; had no idea of what to do and so I just basically played it by ear.”

The concern of not being qualified as tutors was connected with the lack of understanding of adult literacy, as Participant #1 said, “so it was actually a shock to me to come in and sit with them and see that all my education and all that I’ve got. I’ve got [multiple] degrees. You don’t even need a tenth of a degree. You just basically need sort-of to be … to have a sympathetic attitude.” Prior to becoming volunteer tutors, the participants in this study admitted that they had not known much about adult literacy having been able to read and write for virtually all of their lives. Participant #2 found it “pretty shocking … how widespread a problem it is.” After volunteering for a period of time, the participants gained a different perspective on adult literacy and particularly the statistics about the high proportion of people who struggle with literacy. Participant #1 summed it up: “I really had no idea. I didn’t really believe the figures that were given. Twenty to twenty-five percent of people who are … I didn’t really believe that. And I don’t know why I didn’t. I have some dyslexia, but I managed through. So what was adult literacy? I didn’t know. I really didn’t know.” Although the participants’ understanding of adult literacy might have been enhanced through the personal contact with the learners, the participants were unable to describe what adult literacy meant to them. As Participant #1
struggled to use disability as a metaphor for literacy but pointed out that, “you can’t see the disability, but it becomes obvious. Not in a good, obvious way because you think what’s wrong with you.”

The participants also talked about not knowing who the learners would be and why they would have problems with literacy. After working with the learners, the participants’ understanding of why someone would struggle with literacy appeared to deepen as Participant #2 said, “there are many reasons why there’s poor literacy.” Participant #1 further suggested that the educational system may not work for everyone: “I think there are a lot of people who get lost by the wayside in school.” It was a sentiment echoed by Participant #3 who said, “these are people who have been failed somehow.” However, Participant #2 also cautioned that any learner’s experience might not necessarily be representative of all the learners and it was difficult to tell why learners become learners: “My general perception is that the majority of the learners at a place like [the Program] face multiple and complex challenges – but I just wouldn’t want you to think that what I’ve described about my learner and [the learner’s] situation (and how we’ve responded, accordingly) is typical.” Nonetheless, the consensus among the participants was that the learners should not be faulted for the difficulties facing them.

Participants talked about the emotional responses they experienced since becoming volunteer tutors. The participants said that they were not quite prepared for the emotions they felt through volunteering. Both positive and negative emotions were expressed by the participants. Positive feelings of having lent a helping hand might be expected as Participant #2 talked about how satisfied she felt when the self-doubt in the learner disappeared through the course of a tutoring session. On the other hand, varying degrees of frustration were also shared among the participants when they would find themselves repeating lessons with the learners who would appear to be making little progress. However, despite the frustrations, being able to adjust their expectations of the learners (e.g., gaining confidence instead of looking for improvement in doing long divisions) seemed to be related to the ability to cope with the frustrations and to maintain positive rewards from the volunteering experience. This could be summed up by one of the quotes from Participant #1: “I don’t get a lot of the feel-good thing. But I feel that I’m doing something of value personally. Whether I’m making a big difference, I don’t know. But I like the idea of community project and trying to improve literacy, trying to improve people’s quality of life; I think that’s what this is all about.”
The participants also talked about another unexpected source of emotional experiences; it was from seeing how the learners struggled with limited financial resources and other challenges in life. The participants admitted that they did not know anyone with challenges similar to those facing the learners. Participant #2 said, “I think I’ve sort-of always had through different jobs, different experiences that I’ve had some understanding of the complexity of social issues. But it’s different to read about it and to actually work with a person who’s living it. … It’s been a very humbling experience. Certainly I go home very thankful for what I have.” The emotional impact was especially poignant for one of the participants who shared considerable similarities with the learner: “When people are in the exact cohort, you have a sense of what their life could have been life. If it’s not in space, it’s the same time. It’s mind boggling.”

20 Composite Story #2: What Happens During the Tutoring Sessions

The participants met with the learners they worked with on a weekly basis for one-and-a-half to two hours. They generally allowed the learners to determine what should happen during any given tutoring session. The participants also talked about a number of factors that would influence what would happen at the tutoring sessions. The most important to the participants was the immediate and pressing tasks that the learners would need to complete from day-to-day living or work. This consideration, according to the participants, would take priority over whatever the learning goals were supposed to be for the learners. Another deciding factor would be the mental state of the learners at the start of the tutoring session. If the learners appeared to be distressed, the participants would try to talk through the issues that might be bothering them. The learning goals of the learners as agreed upon with the program staff were generally secondary considerations. Although the learning goals are prescribed by the provincial policy, none of the participants had much knowledge of the policy itself never having seen any government documentation. Regardless of their lack of understanding of the provincial policy, the participants made their own interpretation for their roles as tutors with the central objective to support the learners. The participants talked about how they decided on the learning activities with the learners based on what the learners said they would like to work on and the participants’ own assessment of how to best support them. While reading and writing were part of the learning activities between the participants and the learners, they also did much more with the learners. Overall, the participants saw themselves as resources to help the learners through many
of their day-to-day tasks such as setting up a new tablet or completing training for work. The participants also actively worked on boosting the self confidence of the learners based on their beliefs that self-confidence could help unlock the learners’ potential; as Participant #2 said of the learner she worked with as “…very bright. But it’s kinda locked in because of this lack of confidence”.

Since all three participants firmly believed in centring the tutoring sessions around the learners’ needs, they also talked about having done a wide range of activities that would not strictly be defined as literacy education, including helping a learner get her driver’s licence back, keeping track of the learner’s job applications, completing work training modules, writing work reports, setting up computers and tablets, reading novels and creating meal plans. When discussing how the activities during their tutoring sessions ended up expanding beyond reading and writing, the participants talked about the importance of focusing on the needs of the learners and a pragmatic approach to helping the learners get things done. None of the three participants thought the way the learning activities would encompass a broad range as anything extraordinary. Participant #3 put it succinctly; she saw herself as a resource for the learner “to get [things] done.” Although our discussions were focused on the literacy needs of the learners, the participants also connected literacy to other aspects of the learners’ lives. They made a point that literacy is only one part of someone’s life. Literacy may be important, but by itself would not address all the challenges facing the learners. Participant #2 pointed out “literacy is secondary to” other aspects of life such as building up the learner’s confidence and self assurance that would allow the learner to use the literacy skills. This was a sentiment echoed by another participant.

However, the participants also noted that the limits to what the volunteers could help with. This was something that the participants were aware of in terms of the boundaries set by the program as well as their own personal comfort level. As Participant #3 said, “there are other services and resources for other problems so you have to be really clear. Like I can’t help you find an apartment.” While program boundaries were diligently observed by the participants, the participants exhibited their flexibility in focusing on the needs of the learners by going beyond what would be typically characterized as literacy education.

The program boundaries, according to the participants, were not usually part of their conscious decisions in running tutoring sessions. However, on occasions, when they would see the learners
taking the sessions a bit too far off the tangent, the participants would use the program boundaries as an excuse to refocus the sessions. An example is when one of the participants saw her lengthy conversation with the learner about the difficulties around the learner’s housing situation was not going to resolve the issue for the learner, the participant brought up that the learner should speak to the program staff instead because volunteers were not supposed to assist in searching for housing. All three participants also mentioned how the conventional literacy related activities could serve as an escape or comfort zone for learners so they would not need to deal with their day-to-day problems for a short time.

Although the participants stated that the learning goals mandated by government policy only exerted secondary influence on what would happen during a tutoring session, the way the participants saw the learning goals offered an interesting insight into the rationale behind how the participants came to develop their practices and include the activities they chose for the tutoring sessions. The discussions of learning goals and learning activities led to a broader discussion on literacy and what literacy could do for the learners as well as the reasonableness of the learning goals as mandated by the provincial policy. Two of the learners (Participant #1 & #3) had a high school diploma as their learning goal while the other learner had a learning goal to improve her spelling (which actually was not one of the learning goals specified in the OALCF). Participant #1 & #3 both said that it would be unlikely for the learners they worked with to meet their selected learning goals. The participants realized this soon after having started tutoring. They admitted that they would not expect the learners to meet them during their tutoring relationship if ever at all.

However, the two participants reacted differently to the unlikely learning goals. One participant expressed concerns for the learner since all employment now requires a high school diploma and that would mean the learner’s goal of becoming more financially independent would be extremely difficult to achieve. The participants expressed concerns for the learners if they were to be told about the elusiveness of the learning goal. One of the participants reflected on this uneasy: “I feel bad for [the learner] but [the learner’s] not going to be able to … graduate from high school … it’s not going to happen. … [Staff] I think knows [the] present goal is not going to be … not going to work but how do you tell [her] … without [her] being totally gutted?”

Overall, this suggests the participant put the concerns about the wellbeing of the learner ahead of
the formal learning goals. The participant considered the learning goal as unreasonable for the learner.

the other participant changed in her mind what the learning objectives should be and subsequently the learning activities they would do during the tutoring sessions. She first commented on how bright the learner was and then continued to talk about the importance of building up the learner’s self-confidence. This participant saw the role of tutoring as building up and supporting the learner and making sure that the learner would have a positive self-view. Accordingly, this participant proceeded to base the learning activities around these objectives and would look for signs of enhanced self-confidence as progress in the learner.

The discussions around learning goals also led to discussions about the purposes of literacy and education. The participants acknowledged the accountability aspect for government funded programs and the need to report outcomes. While they firmly believed in the value of the tutoring sessions to the learners, they were at loss in trying to find measurable, observable accountability metrics to fit the tutoring sessions and their value. The participants talked about difficulties in reconciling their understanding of accountability measures and their experiences and recognition of the importance of assisting the learners in less tangible ways such as understanding how to handle cash (example from Participant #1), sharing life stories and lightening up the spirits (Participant #2) and reading the Bible at church (Participant #3) of the learners through the tutoring sessions. As Participant #2 said, “we do live in a structured society. And I understand that. I’d be like any taxpayer screaming for accountability too. So I get that. I don’t know how to translate the certainty that I have that this [program] is helpful. And the rewards that I have when we go from someone who’s full of self doubt and saying I can’t do that to someone who’s laughing and smiling. I don’t know how to translate that for someone else. I know it because I’ve been experiencing it.”

Although the participants did not see significant progress on conventional measures for educational accomplishments, they believed that literacy always served a purpose for the learners. Participant #3 said, “education and knowledge always serve a purpose and it provides those people with a link to another circle of resources and friends.” The participants talked about a wide range of purposes for literacy and the value that literacy could bring to the learners. For example, Participant #1 pointed out that education could support personal growth, which
governments should support. Participant #3 pointed out the importance of literacy for becoming engaged citizens: “…like understanding the election issues. Understanding how to vote. … Being an engaged citizen. … It doesn’t mean that people here are telling people how to vote or what to vote but to help understand what people are talking about in the news and why they’re talking about it. I mean this is important to develop engaged citizenry.” Participant #2 also said that literacy would be able to help the learner “to be on a more level playing level when it comes to opportunities.”

Although the learning goals, as directed by the OALCF, were one of the considerations for the participants in determining the activities during a tutoring session, none of the participants said they had any familiarity or knowledge about the provincial policy on adult literacy. They remembered being told a bit about the provincial policy at the initial training sessions; however, they could not recall much detail about it. When asked what they would say to the government officials in Queen’s Park about adult literacy, the participants expressed deference to the expertise of the government officials. the participants did not see themselves as policy actors (in other words, they did not view their personal interpretations and approaches to the tutoring sessions as part of the policy process or dialogue), however they did offer suggestions to those formulating policies in Queen’s Park. Participant #1 said, “I’m thinking too that there are these great minds up in Queen’s Park who are formulating these. They’re all intelligent people. They’ve all got degrees. They’re all successful people in one way or another. I don’t think they know people like [the learner]. I don’t think they know people in here and how many of them there are. And so, it’s like this is a shadow community.” Echoed by the other participants, the participants offered the suggestion that government officials should meet the learners to gain a better understanding of the challenges facing them. Such a comment reflects how the participants found themselves with a different, personal understanding of the learners’ situations after becoming tutors and meeting the learners.

21 Composite Story #3: Relationships between Tutors and Learners

The relationship between a volunteer tutor and the learner is a significant factor in whether the pairing would be considered as success. As any matchmaker is likely to say, matching people up to see if they fit is more art than science. There is no formula, and volunteer coordinators often
rely on experience and intuition. The discussions around relationships in this study explored what relationships were like between the participants and learners as well as how they went about establishing a working relationship with the learners.

Participant #2 and #3 both remarked that they started out with the learners although their experiences were quite different from each other. One participant and the learner she worked with just “clicked” right from the start because they shared the same interest in home organization. This shared interest became the starting point for building the relationship. The other participant admitted that the start of the relationship with the learner was a bit “rocky”; she surmised this was because the learner was disappointed at not getting a teacher as tutor. Despite this, this participant believed that the initial disappointment dissipated after the learner realized she could actually help with her reading and writing.

Once the tutoring sessions between the participants and the learners were underway, they continued to develop their relationships as tutors and learners. The program boundaries (which were set for protecting both the volunteers and the learners from potentially being taken advantage of) would mediate or limit how the relationships between volunteer tutors and learners would develop. One of the participants had to tell the learner that she could not share her phone number because the program had told her not to and that all communications were to be through the program staff. This response, according to the participant, was taken as an insult by the learner; nonetheless, she stood firm on this and was not comfortable with providing her contact details to the learner. This resulted in the participant wondering if that particular response might have made the relationship with the learner a bit awkward.

Participant #3 pointed out that the discussions during this study around the relationship with the learner were the most difficult. It was, as Participant #3 pointed out, because the relationship was not like any other relationship she had outside tutoring. She could not quite describe what the relationship was and so proceeded to compare the relationships in other aspects of life to the tutoring relationship to highlight what the relationship with the learner was not. The discussions shed light on how nuanced the relationship between tutors and learners could be. Participant #3 said that the role for the tutor would not necessarily be similar to that of a teacher. The focus for tutoring is more about supporting learners instead of working through specific curriculum or lesson plans. The activities beyond literacy education were also examples of how the
relationship between tutors and learners would not be comparable to that between teachers and students. The tutoring relationship was not professional or work-like in the sense that the tutor was not paid and was not bound by conventional employment constraints such as performance reviews. Participant #3 understood that the tutoring was performed on a best effort basis and the continuing involvement in the program would not be contingent on the progress made by the learner. The tutoring relationship was not friendship because it was clear that she and the learner were not friends and could not exactly be friends with each other. Further, all three participants said that they had actually never run into the learners within their normal circle recognizing that they moved in different circles despite living in the same small city. Finally, Participant #3 emphasized that the relationship with the learner was definitely not like a parent-child relationship. Although Participant #3 was prepared and willing to help and support the learner beyond the reading and writing as would be expected within literacy, she pointed out that she could not be fully responsible for all aspects of the learner’s life like a parent with her child.

Participant #2 echoed this last point noting the limits of what the volunteers could help with. Both participants recognized that literacy could only be seen as one of the challenges facing the learners. Both participants pointed out that although they and the program staff could provide assistance to the learners, the program was ultimately designed to support literacy education and there would be limits on the extent of assistance the learners could access. However, Participant #2 pointed out that the onus to seek out the necessary support was unfairly placed on the learners and the government and service agencies could perhaps coordinate better to improve access.

The participants used some of the stories that the learners had shared with them to highlight the development of the relationships between the participants and the learners. One of the participants recounted a story to demonstrate how the tutor-learner relationship had evolved through time with the learner becoming increasingly more comfortable with her tutor: “But in terms of how our relationship evolves, there’s been a couple of sort-of landmark moments when she shared something. One of the first ones was after we’d been meeting for a few months, she just said out of the blue I wasn’t sick this morning when I came. I said oh there’s been the flu in the past few days or something. No, and she said, I always get sick before I come to this because I’m so anxious. I felt terrible. And I just immediately thought what am I doing wrong and that this is so tense and so anxiety producing. And she said no it’s the fact that it’s school and I have such terrible memories of school. So we were able to talk about that. And we decided we
wouldn’t call it school. And we just kinda discussed and remarked on that. Because I think at school she had challenges and was a bit of a challenge and I don’t think she was treated with a lot of patience or understanding. And was put down a lot. She’s been put down a lot in her life. Been abused a lot. That was just oh my goodness… Like I would never have dreamt that. I was so pleased that she told me that.”

Participant #1 and #3 had ended their tutoring relationships with two learners. One of them would regularly assist the learner she was working with at the time in preparing work reports that the learner would submit to her employer. They would also discuss various workplace challenges facing the learner. The other participant actually had further contact with the learner outside the program. The learner contacted her to ask for help with the setup of a new computer. Although the participant was concerned this might lead to other requests, she decided to help outside the purview of the program. Both participants explained their decisions to go beyond reading and writing with a simple statement that they could help so they did. This is perhaps the most straightforward way to sum up how the participants developed their practices to include more than what is traditionally defined as literacy education.

22 Composite Story #4: Contrasts

The final composite story is about the way the participants contrasted their own lives and experiences with the learners’. One of these contrasts was the complexity of the issues facing the learners. The participants said that it did not take long to discover that literacy was only one of the challenges facing the learners. Among the other challenges were severe financial constraints, uncertainties around housing, disabilities, employment (or the lack thereof) and low self-esteem. Participant #2 said, “it’s very obvious at time that people are also dealing with physical disabilities or that people are dealing with poverty. It was just a real eye opener because I started to realize pretty quickly even before I started working with my learner that all those things go hand in hand.” Participant #3 also echoed, “people’s problems are complex. … Low levels of literacy is only one of many problems.”

Another comment from the participants that reflected the awareness of the complexity was the discussions of the attendance of the learners. One of the participants noted that the learner was able to come more regularly to the program when she was employed leading the participant to believe that a level of stability in the rest of the learner’s life might be a pre-condition for
learning to happen. She also speculated that when other challenges started to overwhelm the learner, literacy ended up taking a backseat and so the learner stopped coming to the program.

The participants also placed literacy in the context of socio-economic background of the learners. The participants mentioned their own awareness of the difference in socio-economic backgrounds between themselves and the learners. The participants commented on the fact that despite living in a small city, they had never run into the learners in their usual social circles. Participant #2 further said that it was surprising how divided the city was along socio-economic lines when the city was not large by any measure: “You realize pretty quickly although we live in the same city and it’s not that big a city, somehow we move in different circles. I’ve never bumped into [my learner] on the street. We move in different paths. And you know, [City] is not big enough to be really segregated to be like rich and poor areas. Neighbourhoods are really mixed but it’s really driven home to me that you know for myself and my friends, we just don’t see a lot of this.”

Another indication of the contrasts in socio-economic status was found in the participants’ relationship with books and reading. Two of the participants expressed their own love of books as part of their motivation to volunteer as tutors and to share with others, and they had thought being tutors would mean reading with the learners. One of the participants spoke of her surprise when she realized how different the upbringing the learner had against her own in that the learner did not grow up in a house full of books: “What I find hard to imagine is how you grow up without books. … There are all these books that I’ve read along the way that have helped shape the way I think, everything. And how do you get through life without those? … It’s hard to imagine someone going through life without ever having read a book.”

All three participants commented on how much they had previously taken their own educational and life path for granted. Their assumption had been that everyone would go through school the same way as they had. Although intellectually they knew not everyone would go through all levels of education, it remained a revelation to them when they actually met the learners. Participant #2 said that the encounter with the learner left her with questions about what we as a community and as a society would need to do for those who did not end up on the “expected” path. The contrasts between the participants and the learners not only shed light on the participants’ understanding of how difficult the challenges were facing the learners, but the
contrasts also allowed the participants to see how they had enjoyed various privileges and advantages which was something they would not have recognized without the volunteering experience.
Chapter 6
Discussions and Implications

The composite stories not only portray the experiences of the participants in this study, but they echo my own experience as a volunteer tutor. The conversations with the participants offered me an opportunity to reflect on how I have developed my practice as a volunteer. Although the number of participants in this study was small, the common experience shared by the participants suggests a possibility of the approaches volunteer tutors use to help and support the learners may stem from beyond their own personal, individual background and have origins on a collective level. Before connecting the composite stories to the theoretical framework, this chapter first discusses on how the composite stories have answered the research question. The discussions around the research question lead into the examination of the way the participants approached their role and their practice.

The second section reviews each composite story to link it to Bourdieu’s thinking tools of habitus, capital and field. The purpose of the second section is to allow us to understand the volunteer tutors’ experiences through the lens of the thinking tools. The third section of this chapter looks more closely into each of the concepts within the theoretical framework and to see how we can gain a more in-depth understanding of how these concepts work in light of the participants’ stories. This section goes through each concept and attempts to contribute to the conversations on habitus, capital and field as well as the intersection of all three concepts together. The final section of the chapter is focused on the implications we can draw from this study (which are both practical and theoretical). Future research opportunities and my personal reflections through the completion of this study conclude this chapter and this thesis.

23 Answering the Research Question

To recap, the research question that set the course of this study was “what do volunteer tutors work on with learners in adult literacy programs in addition to literacy and numeracy skills?” The answer, as seen through the composite stories from the participants, is it depends on what the learners need. The composite stories from this study show that literacy and numeracy may have been the reason for the learners to join the adult literacy programs and may have been what the volunteer tutors thought they would be addressing. The actual activities during the tutoring sessions vary widely depending on the learners’ situations, interests and needs which may also
shift over time. The following reviews the sub-questions and discusses the answers gleaned from this study:

- **How do volunteers recognize the need to work outside literacy and numeracy? What prompts volunteers to work beyond reading and writing?** The face-to-face meetings between the participants and learners made the participants realize that the learners would need more than a narrow and more technical notion of literacy and numeracy to navigate day-to-day living situations. Seeing how the learners were faced with day-to-day challenges, the participants – even with acknowledgement of the importance of literacy and numeracy and the fact that they were in an adult literacy program – quickly recognized the higher priority of ensuring the learners’ day-to-day challenges could be addressed. When the learners shared their stories with the participants, the participants gained an understanding of how broad the challenges were facing the learners. Although the participants understood that what they could help with would be limited and would unlikely be sufficient in addressing all the learners’ struggles, the participants also saw that they had more to offer to the learners than teaching them reading, writing and math. The recognition of what the participants had and what the learners did not have brought forth the participants’ decision to assist the learners in their full range of capacity, instead of only focusing on the cognitive side of literacy and numeracy.

- **What is exchanged between volunteers and learners during and outside (if applicable) the programs?** The exchanges between the participants and the learners during the tutoring sessions are described in Composite Story #2 and again, they would depend on the needs of the learners but also the comfort level of the participants and the program boundaries. These exchanges represented a wide range of meeting individual needs of the learners who would take an active lead in determining what should take place within each tutoring session. As one participant aptly put it, the volunteer tutors would act as resources for the learners. The role of resources ranged, as the participants shared their experiences in this study, from dealing with work-related issues and demands to setting up new electronic devices to building up self-esteem and confidence to face the world and all the challenges. The participants talked about the stories the learners shared with them during the tutoring sessions which gave the participants a much deeper understanding of the day-to-day lives of individuals with struggles in literacy. However, the participants indicated
that the relationships with the learners were confined to the tutoring sessions because of the boundaries program staff put in place. Although the participants did not (or elected not to) have any outside contact with the learners, they observed too that they had never run into the learners by chance outside the program noting how they probably moved in different circles despite the small size of the community where they all lived.

The answers to the research questions from the participants’ composite stories serve as an opening for further exploration to understand what we can learn from the participants’ volunteer experiences.

24 The Stories Seen through the Thinking Tools

The composite stories presented in the findings chapter provide us with portholes to see what volunteer tutors do in the one-on-one tutoring sessions with the learners and more importantly, why and how they develop their practice. The thinking tools from Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice—namely, habitus, capital and field—can help us gain an in-depth understanding especially when the composite stories indicate a level of commonality among the participants in this study which may suggest broader influence at work as opposed to purely individual choices.

24.1 Composite Story #1: Before and after volunteering

The before and after experiences of the participants in this study highlight how their habitus contributes to their prior expectations of what a volunteer tutor would and should do versus the adjustments they would make after becoming volunteer tutors. Many of the expectations formed before the participants commenced their volunteering experience reflect the participants’ worldview of what education had meant to them and their own educational experiences. Despite their prior expectations, the three participants in the study demonstrated their readiness to abandon their previous notions of what literacy education should be and placed the focus of what to do during the tutoring sessions squarely on the specific needs of the learners. This suggests that while habitus may have a role in formulating our approach to a new situation based on our previous experience, habitus is by no means stagnant and unchangeable. Pragmatism and the recognition of the learners’ needs overrode the participants’ own preconceived notion of literacy education. It may be argued that the flexibility seen in the participants is part of their habitus.
It is also interesting how the participants underestimated the capital they possessed before they had started working as volunteer tutors. This could be interpreted from a number of perspectives. It may suggest that the participants underestimated their place in the field of education compared to others because the field was unfamiliar to them. This may reflect the value they placed on the teaching profession or the match of credential and profession as they had experienced in their own career development highlighting their understanding of the value of educational capital. We may also see this as evidence of the participants’ habitus when entering into an unfamiliar field. The unknown field of adult literacy illustrates how the participants had to rely on their habitus to guide their expectations. For example, the descriptions of what they expected to do during a tutoring session are likely the reflection of how they had experienced education themselves. Upon recognizing their capital, the participants proceeded to make use of what they had to support the different needs of the learners.

24.2 Composite Story #2: What happens during a tutoring session

The highlight of this story is how the participants exercised agency in determining what should happen during a tutoring session as a policy actor in the field of adult literacy irrespective of the mandated learning goals for the learners. The agency of the participants illustrates how the participants’ habitus may have guided them to share the capital they had and influenced change in the field of adult literacy policy. The exercise of agency perhaps indicates the security the participants could derive from their habitus in the sense that they were confident with their decisions, they could defend their decisions and they were not concerned about any repercussions. Although they might not see themselves as policy actors, their actions would suggest that they were. One of the examples of the participants’ agency is the fact that they elected not to focus so much on the learning goals as selected from the provincial policy documents. It demonstrates the priority the participants gave to the learners as opposed to official edicts from the province. This suggests the participants’ decision in reordering the hierarchy of positions in the field by placing the learners above the province.

The participants’ agency was also mediated by other policy actors in the field of adult literacy. Most directly was by the staff of the adult literacy program where the participants volunteered. Program staff played an active role in facilitating the learner-centred approach through the use of the one-on-one tutoring format and providing volunteer tutors the flexibility and latitude to
decide what learning activities would take place. Program staff emphasized the individual needs and circumstances of learners which offered the opening for volunteers to vary their practices depending on the learners. In addition, program staff also mediated between the volunteer tutors and the understanding and interpretation of the provincial policy. Since the participants professed to have little knowledge of the provincial policy, they relied on what the program staff had shared with them. It is important to note that the program staff also had much to do with placing boundaries around the participants’ agency. The program boundaries as designed and enforced by the program staff placed constraints on what the participants could do with the learners. The participants all observed the boundaries diligently and thus demonstrated the duality of agency and structure. The participants exercised agency when it made sense for them to do so and deferred to the structure of the program at other times. For example, Participant #1 met up with the learner she was no longer working with outside the program to set up a new computer while Participant #3 would refuse to share her personal phone number with the learner. The decision between agency and structure is not necessarily always obvious or even consistent pointing to the fact that there may be other factors at play.

Another policy actor that mediated the participants’ agency was the learners. The interactions between the participants and the learners highlighted the differences in the capital each possessed. The differences may have spurred the participants’ desire to share and help the learners because the participants perceived the learners as more immediate and real than anyone or anything from Queen’s Park as official policy or even to some extent the program staff. By sharing their stories and situations with the participants, the learners presented to the volunteer tutors what the volunteers could do to help. The dynamics among these policy actors were also dependent on the personal relationships established by the participants and the comfort level on how much they could do to help.

24.3 Composite Story #3: Relationships between tutors and learners

There are two ways to look at the third composite story through Bourdieu’s thinking tools. The first puts in the foreground the capital and the nuances about sharing capital between the participants and the learners and places in the background the habitus and the hierarchy in the field. The second way examines the balance between structure and agency.
The relationships between the participants and the learners illustrated the nuances in how much the participants would share their capital with the learners they worked with. The descriptions provided by the participants in this study highlighted the limits of the relationships between tutors and learners and also how much of our capital we may be prepared to share with others or help other accumulate theirs. While there is little question about the generosity of the participants in extending help to the learners, the limits around this generosity tell us much about the environment of adult literacy programs and the participants’ habitus.

Regardless of the best intention of all concerned and the practice of making the programs learner-centred, the environment of adult literacy programs as a field still places individuals in the field in different positions depending on their capital and power. Power dynamics exist despite how much we deny their existence. It is interesting that the participants found it difficult to acknowledge the power positions they had over the learners although they did recognize their relative privileges. Despite the participants’ difficulty in accepting the power imbalance, it remains that the learners in any adult literacy programs would depend on the program staff and the volunteer tutors they work with for help not only for literacy challenges but also for day-to-day living in many cases. On the other hand, the program staff and the volunteers have much less to lose should they choose to end their involvement in the adult literacy programs for whatever reason. It is within this context that the composite story on the tutor-learner relationships could shed light on how we relate to each other in the field based on capital and power.

From the perspectives of the participants, their relationships with the learners were mediated by two factors: (1) the boundaries set by the program staff which all three participants had chosen to observe and (2) the learning goals selected from the provincial policy which the participants elected not to always focus on. The way the participants worked with these two mediating factors in establishing their relationships and tutoring sessions with the learners demonstrates the nuances in the tug-and-pull between structure and agency.

The program boundaries and how the participants chose to respect them could be interpreted as the structure of the program as a constraint to how the participants developed their relationships with the learners. However, that would overlook the participants’ own choice to honour the program boundaries. While the program staff would discourage the participants to cross the
boundaries, the participants would not exactly be faced with any serious repercussion if they did. What is interesting is that the participants chose to not exercise their agency to break the boundaries. The explanation of this decision may lie in the participants’ habitus in an unfamiliar field working with learners whose habitus was recognized by the participants to be different from their own. The participants deferred considerably to the program staff seeing that the program staff had more teaching qualifications and experience as well as knowledge in other social and community services that would help the learners. This deference to the program staff, along with the program boundaries, appeared to be the limits within the participants would exercise their agency in broadening their learning activities from beyond the strict confines of the learning goals for the learners. It should be noted that the latitude and flexibility was clearly endorsed by the program staff in the sense that the participants were encouraged to place the learners in the centre of determining the learning activities as well as the tacit acknowledgement between the participants and the program staff with respect to the unlikely achievement of the learning goals for the learners.

The deference the participants showed to the program staff contrasts even more sharply with the agency the participants exhibited with respect to their own interpretations of the learning goals and the learning activities. Viewed separately, the deference and the agency of the participants would suggest an odd inconsistency. However, the agency against the mandated learning goals for the learners should not be seen in isolation from the participants’ relationships with the program staff. An argument could be made the agency is possible very much because of the structure put in place by the program staff and the deference the participants had for the program staff. The participants saw the program boundaries less as structural constraints on their decisions and their agency, but more as a sign of the program staff’s support for and protection of them as volunteer tutors. When the boundaries are seen through the lens of support and protection from the perspective of the participants, it could be argued the program boundaries offered the participants a sense of stability and certainty around the tutoring sessions and the relationships with the learners. In addition, the program staff continued to provide the participants with ongoing support to focus on the learners’ needs as opposed to the “official” learning goals. The program staff through the boundaries and support would create an environment for the participants to feel comfortable and confident to exercise their agency to expand the learning activities to beyond the strict definition of literacy education.
24.4 Composite Story #4: Contrasts

The participants’ experiences shed light on the contrast between the collective habitus they likely shared with their circles of friends and families and that of the learners. The participants talked about the contrasts between them and the learners not only in terms of the way they approach day-to-day living but also in terms of the capital they possessed. Although the participants talked mainly about economic capital and educational capital, they also noted the lower level of social capital and cultural capital the learners had in the form of people who could offer help as resources within their network and self-confidence in knowing how to negotiate various situations. This story highlights the connection between capital and habitus, especially collective habitus. The participants also commented on the contrasts between themselves and the learners in terms of segregation in the fields or social circles in which the different players participate or socialize. This points to the formation of collective habitus through the homogenization process as individuals with similar backgrounds congregate. The participants talked about the contrasts with the learners let them see how similar they were with the people with whom they worked and socialized. The contrast story also tells us how social reproduction is present in many aspects of life around us so much so that we rarely see it because we would take it for granted. The congregation and homogenization process for the collective habitus have the tendency to make us think and feel and assume that what we have is normal and average and nothing to remark upon. The participants’ encounters with the learners on a personal and regular basis led the participants to recognize their sharp contrasts with the learners and most importantly, to understand how external factors would play into determining the learners’ situations. All these contributed to the participants’ own acknowledgement of privileges and advantages resulting in a comfortable existence.

25 Understanding the Thinking Tools through the Stories

The insights provided by the composite stories suggest three themes for further understanding Bourdieu’s theory of practice: the antinomy or dynamics between agency and structure; our perspective on how we see other players in the field; and the inextricable relationship between habitus and reflexive practice.
25.1 Dynamics of Agency and Structure

The approach the participants in this study took to develop their practice illustrates the antinomy of agency and structure. Instead of duality, agency and structure are engaged in a dynamic relationship pulling and tugging the way the participants thought about literacy and the learners they worked with as well as their decisions to centre their practice with the learners. What is interesting as shown in the experiences of the participants in this study is that there are multiple structures to work within. The different structures from program staff and from provincial policy documents represent the different viewpoints on adult literacy according to the various players within the field. The relationships among these different viewpoints and the work that the volunteers would decide to do with learners provide a way to delve into the dynamic interaction of agency and structure (Horvat, 2001). The participants showed their agency in making their own interpretations of what their role should be, how they would support the learners and ultimately what purposes literacy education would serve. At the same time, their agency was limited by the structure put in place by the program staff. The broadening of the definition of literacy education did not lead to confusion and uncertainty for the participants because it was tempered with the program boundaries set in place to clearly specify what would not be expected from volunteer tutors. This echoes Reay’s (2004) understanding of the possibility of agency and the dynamics between stability and flexibility. What the participants could do to help with the learners would be considered as within the realm of possibilities whereas the program boundaries would spell out what they would already consider as outside of this realm. The clear declaration of what is outside the realm of possibility offered a sense of certainty that the participants could rely on when they might encounter pressure to extend beyond what they would be comfortable with.

25.2 Perspective and Relationships in the Field

The volunteers’ perspective as policy actors in the field of adult literacy highlights the dynamics with the learners, the program staff and the provincial policy. This perspective appears to be a crucial part in how the volunteers would develop their practice in the tutoring sessions. More specifically, the distance or the closeness of the relationships between the participants and the other policy actors in the field had an impact on how the participants prioritized the different interests and viewpoints on what should take place during the tutoring sessions. The experiences
of the participants in this study suggest that the participants would feel closest to the learners they worked with and thus chose to give the learners the highest priority in terms of deciding what learning activities to include in the tutoring sessions. The participants’ practice was very much shaped by their experiences with the learners and the specific needs of the learners. Next came the program staff who as far as the participants were concerned provided support and guidance to the adult literacy programs in which they volunteered. The participants also had firsthand experience with the program staff to trust the program staff’s judgment and to know that the interests for serving the learners were aligned. This is where the structure of the program as designed and implemented by the program staff appears to offer the participants the environment they needed to exercise their agency and judgment to develop their practice as they see fit. Furthest from the participants were the government officials who had prepared the adult literacy policy documents mandating specific learning goals, etc. We could see from the participants in this study that the government policy staff had the least effect on how the participants developed their practice.

The participants could see that the province would have the most power in the field because of the volume and the composition of the capital as well as the province’s ability to control the capital adult literacy programs could have. Irrespective to the power hierarchy in the field of adult literacy policy based on capital, the participants added the dimension of personal relationship and distance in the way they navigated in the field. One way to look at this additional dimension is that the personal relationship and distance between the volunteers and other policy actors in the field may add social capital to both the learners and the program staff and thus enhancing their degree of influence on the volunteers. Another way could suggest that personal relationships trump the hierarchy in the field based on capital and so the power hierarchy in the field depends on more than simply capital. Either way, the perspective of the specific policy actors and the relationships they have with other policy actors in the field may have an influence on how the hierarchy and the positions in the field are understood. This also suggests that the value of capital may be dependent on the specific perspective of the policy actor in the field.
25.3 Habitus and the Reflexive Practice

Habitus is the invisible hand that guides us through life telling us what is “common sense”, how to behave and what to expect as “normal” in social relations. The narrative inquiry methodology used in this study appeared to have initiated the participants into a reflexive practice through discussions of the participants’ initial expectations, experiences and stories. The stories highlighting the mismatch between their expectations prior to becoming volunteer tutors and their experiences as tutors as well as the contrasts in life experiences between themselves and the learners served as a forum for the participants to reflect upon why they had certain expectations and why their life trajectory has turned out to be different as the learners’. As much as the meetings with the participants dwelled on their impressions of what the learners needed, we talked much about how the participants felt themselves as volunteer tutors and what literacy education meant to them. The otherwise invisible habitus became more visible leading the participants into questioning the validity of the normative expectations of pursuing education and securing employment. More importantly, the participants began questioning the community’s responsibility and relationship with those marginalized. This transformation suggests that once habitus becomes more visible, we begin to understand the assumptions we have for granted as well as the privileges and advantages we have enjoyed – thus the beginning of a reflexive practice.

26 Implications

The findings and the conclusions from this study have practical as well as theoretical implications. The analyses included in this study based on Bourdieu’s theoretical framework offer a rationale in addressing a number of broad based programmatic issues.

26.1 Broadening the Policy Dialogue

Although volunteer tutors are rarely included in the policy dialogue with government officials or even program staff or community advocates, the findings in this study point to the potential benefits of bringing volunteer tutors into the conversation. First, the stories shared by the participants illustrate the richness of their experiences as volunteer tutors in an adult literacy programs. The participants asserted that their experiences as tutors could be of much value in the policy dialogue to bring further understanding into how to work with adult literacy learners.
They also believed that direct experience working with learners would benefit those who have the responsibility of setting program parameters and making funding decisions by humanizing the policy dialogue. As far as the participants were concerned, the abstract and obscure concept of adult literacy became much more concrete, real and human when they could see and interact with the learners. The experience informed the participants in a wide range of issues related to accountability measures, community support, economic conditions, etc. deepening their understanding of the issues facing the learners from intellectual to tangible. They also realized how policy decisions could affect individuals on a personal level as opposed the unnamed masses.

Second, this viewpoint also disrupts the conventional understanding of a linear policy process. By suggesting that government officials should meet and work with learners, the participants saw the policy process as more fluid than linear with different policy actors interacting with each other influencing each other’s thinking and actions. The participants also asserted the value of direct input from learners into the policy dialogue, another player that is often neglected in the process. By placing a high value on what the learners could bring to the policy conversation, the participants changed the way the hierarchy would be normally organized in the field of policy.

Although the actions of the participants in this study remained within the tutoring sessions between themselves and the learners, the potential of the influence on the policy dialogue by the volunteer tutors could expand if they would venture outside the programs and start advocating more actively together with the learners.

26.2 Support Mechanisms for Volunteer Tutors

One of the themes arising from the discussions with the participants in this study is the sense of uncertainty around the way the participants were developing their practice. While the uncertainty offers space for agency and innovation, it could also induce anxiety and confusion. The initial training and the occasional conversations between program staff and the volunteers may be insufficient to put the volunteers’ mind at ease. In order to find a way to help the volunteers, it is important to first understand this sense of uncertainty. The theoretical framework used in this study offers a way to look at the situation. Bourdieu’s theory of practice suggests that the participants’ sense of uncertainty around their practice is related the volunteers’ entrée into an unfamiliar field. The unfamiliarity is more so than starting a new job or moving
into a new town because (1) their habitus being mismatched to the unfamiliar field of adult literacy makes them feel out of place and (2) their misrecognition of their capital gives them a feeling of inadequacy. The sense of uncertainty is compounded by the actual lack of teaching experience, understanding of adult literacy as a subject matter and personal experience with anyone struggling with literacy. The initial training usually addresses these issues; however, the participants’ discussions in this study show that sitting through an orientation or training session before starting volunteering is quite different from working in flesh-and-blood with the learners. As the participants expressed their sense of uncertainty through the narrative approach used in this study, they also expressed an interest in a forum to meet other volunteers to talk about their experiences and to find a way to validate or share their experiences and their own practices.

It is possible that initial pre-service training could specifically address some of these issues. For example, volunteer tutors could work through mock tutoring sessions in order to get a concrete sense of what may happen during a tutoring session (with the caveat that every learner is different from each other). This could serve to provide reassurance to new volunteers that they do indeed have the skills and experience to work with the learners. A sense of confidence and a better understanding of what to expect prior to the commencement of actual tutoring sessions are likely to help ease the mind of the volunteers. Current volunteer tutors could also be part of the initial training to share their stories. The power of their stories could serve to prepare new volunteers in the way they would experiment and explore different approaches to develop their practice with the learners. Ongoing support groups for volunteer tutors may benefit some of the volunteers who are ready to share their stories with others. Comradery among volunteers could be developed to alleviate the sense of uncertainty and to strengthen the initiative for community development. Whether the support groups are facilitated by program staff or by one of the volunteers could depend on the specific dynamics among the volunteers themselves.

26.3 Understanding and Nurturing the Relationships between Volunteers and Learners

The participants’ descriptions of the tutor-learner relationships suggested more nuances and complications than simply asking volunteers to develop a positive, personal relationship with the learners to facilitate learning. The complicated nature of the relationship between tutor and learner demonstrates the dynamics when individuals in different positions within the field meet
and work together. The complexity in the relationships can be understood through the concept of capital in Bourdieu’s theory of practice. The different positions occupied by the volunteer tutors and the learners based on the volumes and compositions of the capital they each possess are reflected in their diverse socio-economic backgrounds. As the participants pointed out themselves, most of the relationships they have had in their lives are with individuals who share similar background, upbringing, life experiences and thus capital and position in society. The lack of commonality with the learners, as far as capital is concerned, presents a challenge to volunteer tutors in terms of how to relate with the learners. Much of their experiences and stories suddenly become foreign at best or boastful at worst. This commonality is critical in building the tutor-learner relationship as seen in one of the participants in this study who managed to find a common interest with the learner and could proceed to develop a mutually beneficial relationship from there on. Without the comfort to connect through shared experiences or interests, awkwardness could become a factor in building and nurturing the tutor-learner relationships.

As part of the discussions in this study, the participants mentioned their understanding of the advantages and privileges they had enjoyed growing up in stable households with loving family and a clear trajectory to work through the education system to obtain post-secondary education. Although the participants in this study did not feel that they were in a more powerful positions than the learners, their keen awareness of their own advantages and privileges (especially when compared to the circumstances and life experiences of the learners) suggests that this could be the first step in recognizing and acknowledging the differences between the volunteers and the learners. The tutoring sessions and the relationships between the volunteer tutors and the learners in this sense could be positioned as a way for the learners to gain more capital. Adding the understanding of the different forms of capital, the recognition by the volunteer tutors that they do possess more capital could lead to the focus of learning activities and the development of their relationship on social capital (e.g., being a resource for the learners as seen in the participants in this study) and cultural capital (e.g., how to present themselves in confidence and get along with coworkers, etc.) in addition to educational capital (e.g., any formal credentials).
27 Future Research Opportunities

Since this study was designed as an exploratory study to examine the work volunteer tutors to do with adult literacy learners, the findings point to further opportunities for research:

27.1 The Forgotten Policy Actors

This study sheds light on how volunteers played their roles as policy actors in the context of adult literacy in Ontario. Government or funding agencies may view the policy process as linear and unidirectional from governance to implementation. The stories shared by volunteers in this study show that volunteers, even though their role and capacity in the policy process as unpaid staff is often overlooked, could play an active part. Research of policy as a field in Bourdieu’s theoretical framework brings a different perspective to examine how the different policy actors use their capital to establish positions. Policy research has the potential to extend into the policy actors such as the educators and the learners in adult literacy programs that are not typically part of the policy dialogue and yet have critical roles with their personal lives and relationships at stake.

None of the participants in this study knew much of the provincial policy on adult literacy. However, when asked what they would tell the officials in Queen’s Park, all provided their views that a better understanding from the ground level and from the perspectives of the learners was needed. Although the participants expressed their deference to those working on policy at the provincial level in terms of their experience and knowledge on the subject matter, the discussions with the participants from this study suggested that volunteers would have much to offer in the policy process.

27.2 The Power of Volunteers

Although not a focus of this study, many of us carry a stereotypical image of volunteers as a benign, gentle and compliant group is perhaps worth re-examining. The participants in this study demonstrated their self-awareness and understanding of the power they possessed and how they could use the flexibility they have to respond to the needs they observed from the learners they worked with. This study highlights the potential space for researching into the symbolic power volunteers may possess in the context of adult literacy programs. However, volunteers are prominent in many aspects of social and community services that are funded by various
government sources. The dynamics between volunteers on the ground level and the policy from the political and bureaucratic perspectives present future research opportunities to examine the policy process beyond pieces of documentations that are produced by official government sources. One limitation of this study is that the three participants came from more-or-less the same background; they are likely to describe themselves as middle class, middle-aged, well-educated and part of the dominant culture. They are by no means representative of all the volunteers. Volunteers come from all walks of life and they all contribute to their communities regardless of how much or how little capital they may possess. Nonetheless, the power of volunteers as policy actors is one that merits further research.

27.3 Neoliberalism in Adult Education Policy

Although none of the volunteers said they had much knowledge of adult literacy, the global and dominant discourses on adult literacy and the representations of learners can be seen through the participants’ descriptions of their expectations prior to actually volunteering. The discussions more than hinted at the influence of neoliberalism when looking at their initial understanding of adult literacy as a concept and the activities they had originally expected to be doing with the learners. Despite these initial impressions, the participants reported how their understanding of adult literacy and the learners’ situations changed almost immediately after meeting with the learners and seeing on a personal basis the learners’ circumstances. At this juncture, the participants offered an interesting glimpse into how they attempted to reconcile the dominant discourses on adult literacy with their own personal observations. The difficulties expressed by the participants demonstrated such a reconciliation would be no easy task. Interestingly, the participants’ attempts veered towards softening the economic undertone of the global discourses and reflected their views that the learners are part of the community and so entitled to assistance from the rest of us irrespective of any economic or monetary outcomes.

The dominant neoliberal discourse in adult education policy is perhaps more pronounced in adult literacy with many of the learners also struggling with poverty and employment. The prevalence of the neoliberal discourse is generally researched and examined within policy documents issued officially by the province. The extent to which the neoliberal discourse has permeated into the other policy actors could offer and what other discourses are active among policy players other than the province would be of interest.
Personal Reflections

This thesis project started with my personal experience as a volunteer tutor and the stories shared with me by the participants deepened my understanding of what being a volunteer tutor means. Like the participants in the study, I never had any opportunity to speak in-depth with any other volunteer about our experiences in adult literacy. Listening to the stories brought forth by the participants made me realize part-way through the study what a privilege this was. This sharing was made possible because of the narrative methodology as well as the participants’ knowledge of my own volunteer background. Despite my thoroughly positivist background through education and professional career, this thesis project offered me insights into understanding that my own views can greatly enhance the research I do and that it is not necessary to suppress my own voice in the process. Further, hearing stories from my fellow volunteers has helped strengthen my personal conviction of literacy education that should mean more than getting a job. Thus, my commitment to continue working on adult literacy in whatever capacity is renewed.
References


Ministry of Training, Colleges & Universities (MTCU) (2011b). *An Introduction to Goal Path Descriptions for Practitioners and Learners*. Toronto: MTCU.


Ministry of Training, Colleges & Universities (MTCU) (2014). *Agreement Template for Service Providers under the Literacy and Basic Skills Program*. Toronto: MTCU.


Appendix A: Introductory Letter to Adult Literacy Programs

[on OISE letterhead]

RE: Beyond Reading and Writing: How Volunteer Tutors Work with Learners in Adult Literacy Programs in Ontario – Master’s Thesis Research Project

Dear Staff at Adult Literacy Program:

My name is Annie Luk, and I am a graduate student at OISE/UT (who is also a volunteer tutor). I am writing to you in the hope that you would be willing to assist in the recruitment of volunteer tutors in your adult literacy programs to participate in an interview as part of my Master’s research. This research project will be conducted under the supervision of Dr. Reva Joshee, a faculty member at the University of Toronto. My thesis research is looking at what volunteer tutors do with adult literacy learners beyond reading and writing. This research will help illustrate how volunteer tutors respond to the needs of the learners they work with and develop their practices that often go beyond reading and writing skills. I am seeking your help to identify three volunteer tutors from your program who, as far as you know, are working with the learners on activities more than reading and writing (e.g., assisting a learner in securing housing, applying for post-secondary education, discussing work related challenges, etc.).

This research is important due to the prevalence of the use of volunteers in adult literacy programs in Ontario. This information is useful in developing a more in-depth understanding of how volunteers and learners develop their relationships and the importance of non-literacy related activities in supporting the overall growth of learners. The information could also contribute to the development of training materials for volunteer tutors in your adult literacy programs in order to highlight the personal aspect of learning and literacy. The adult literacy programs where you volunteer will receive a summary of the study supporting their understanding and insight into what the volunteer tutors work on with adult literacy learners and how the volunteers develop their practice. This understanding and insight could help inform the programs’ training materials for future volunteers. The potential benefits to the scholarly community include bringing a new perspective to adult literacy research. The perspective of volunteers is not a common one among adult literacy researchers even though volunteers are a significant part of adult literacy programming.
Interviews with volunteer tutors will be completed in-person, at their convenience, to discuss their own experience of working with learners. Interviews will be take place over late summer and early fall and each will last approximately one hour. The number of interviews will depend on the availability of the volunteers and the rapport established between myself and each volunteer. However, it is anticipated to be no more than three interviews in total. The interview topics will include descriptions of the activities volunteers do with the learners and the rationale behind developing the activities that go beyond reading and writing. A list of the interview topics will be provided to the volunteer tutors for review before the interview.

There are no known risks to the volunteer tutors or your organizations for assisting with this project. Benefits of participation include receiving a summary of the results upon completion of the study. I will also discuss the results with you in person in order to assist you to understand how the findings could help improve the training and other aspects of your program. With the permission of the participants, the interviews will be recorded and stored electronically on a secured server accessible only by myself and my thesis supervisor, and will be destroyed once the interviews are transcribed. Participation in the interview is entirely voluntary, and the participant may decline to answer certain questions or withdraw from the study at any point without consequence. The responses will help provide a more complete understanding of the work volunteer tutors do with learners. As a token of appreciation, the volunteer tutors will be compensated with a $50 gift card from Chapters Indigo which is given to them even if they decide to withdraw from the study before completion.

In order to protect the privacy of the participants, we would ask that you simply provide the attached letter to potential volunteers that you have identified and allow them to make their own decision by contacting me directly. For ethical concerns, we also ask that you do not inquire the potential volunteers you have identified and given the attached letter to with respect to their decision on participation in the study.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me by email (annie.luk@mail.utoronto.ca) or telephone (416-357-3540). You may also contact my thesis supervisor, Dr. Reva Joshee at (416) 978-1222 or rjoshee@oise.utoronto.ca. If you have any questions related to your rights as a participant in this study or if you have any complaints or concerns about how you have been treated as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Ethics at the University of
Toronto, ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273. Please keep a copy of this letter for your records.

To indicate your consent to participate in the study, please provide your signature below. Thank you for your time and consideration. Your participation is much appreciated in this research.

Sincerely,

Annie Luk
MA Student – Educational Leadership & Policy
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE)
University of Toronto
252 Bloor Street West
Toronto, ON M5S 1V6

------------------------

_______________________  ________________________
Administrator’s signature  Administrator’s name (printed)

_______________________
Date
Script for Approaching Potential Participants (to be used by program staff)

Our program has been approached by a master’s student at the University of Toronto to help with her thesis project. She is interested in looking at what volunteer tutors do with the learners especially in addition to learning how to read and write. We know that you have been doing much more than reading and writing with your learner(s) so we thought you might be interested in participating. Here’s a letter from the researcher providing more details on the study (handing out the attached letter) and so if you’re interested, you can contact her directly. You should not feel obliged in any way to participate because we’re talking to you about the study. The decision to participate or not is entirely your own and you don’t even need to let us know what your decision ends up being.
Letter for Potential Participants to the Study (to be handed out by program staff)

[To appear on OISE/UT letterhead]

RE: Beyond Reading and Writing: How Volunteer Tutors Work with Learners in Adult Literacy Programs in Ontario – Master’s Thesis Research Project

Dear Volunteer Tutor:

You have been identified by the adult literacy program you currently volunteer for as a potential participant in a research study examining the work tutors do with learners in adult literacy programs. Please note that the decision to participate is entirely your own and you do not need to inform the program staff of your decision whatsoever. It is completely your choice whether you would like to take part in this study or not. This letter is intended to provide you with more information on the study.

This research project will be conducted under the supervision of Dr. Reva Joshee, a faculty member at the University of Toronto. My research is looking at what volunteer tutors do with adult literacy learners beyond reading and writing. This research will help illustrate how volunteer tutors respond to the needs of the learners they work with and develop their practices that often go beyond reading and writing skills. You have been identified as a potential participant in this study by your program because they believe your work with your learner extends to more than literacy and numeracy.

This research is important due to the prevalence of the use of volunteers in adult literacy programs in Ontario. This information is useful in developing more in-depth understanding of how volunteers and learners develop their relationships and the importance of non-literacy activities in supporting the overall growth for learners. The information could also contribute to the development of training materials for volunteer tutors in the adult literacy programs where you are currently volunteering in order to highlight the personal aspect of learning and literacy.

The interviews with you will be completed in-person, at a time and place at your convenience, to discuss your own experience of working with learners. Interviews will be take place over late summer and early fall and each will last approximately one hour. The number of interviews will depend on your availability and the rapport established between yourself and me. However, it is
anticipated to be no more than three interviews in total. The interview topics will include
descriptions of the activities volunteers do with the learners and the rationale behind developing
the activities that go beyond reading and writing. A list of the interview topics will be provided
to you to be interview prior to the start of the interview.

There are no known risks to you for assisting with this project. Benefits of participation include
receiving a summary of the results upon completion of the study. The interviews will be
recorded and stored electronically on a secured server accessible only by myself and my thesis
supervisor, and will be destroyed once the interviews are transcribed. If interested, you have the
option to review the transcript of your interview for further comment and correction.
Participation in the interview is voluntary, and you may decline to answer certain questions or
withdraw from the study at any point without consequence. The responses, however, will help
provide a more complete understanding of the work you and other volunteer tutors do with
learners. As a token of appreciation, you will be compensated with a $50 gift card from
Chapters Indigo which is given to you even if you decide to withdraw from the study before
completion.

If you have any questions or are interested in participating, please feel free to contact me at the
address below, by email (annie.luk@mail.utoronto.ca) or telephone (416-357-3540). You may
also contact my supervisor, Dr. Reva Joshee at (416) 978-1222 or rjoshee@oise.utoronto.ca. If
you have any questions related to your rights as a participant in this study or if you have any
complaints or concerns about how you have been treated as a research participant, please contact
the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Toronto, ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-
946-3273. Please keep a copy of this letter for your records.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Your participation is much appreciated in this
research.

Sincerely,

Annie Luk

MA Student – Educational Leadership & Policy
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto
252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, ON M5S 1V6
Appendix B: Introductory Letter to Volunteer Tutors

[on OISE letterhead]

RE: Beyond Reading and Writing: How Volunteer Tutors Work with Learners in Adult Literacy Programs in Ontario – Master’s Thesis Research Project

Dear Study Participant:

Thank you for contacting me with an interest in participating in my research project. I am writing to you to provide further information on the project in hopes that you would be willing to participate in an interview as part of my Master's research. This research project will be conducted under the supervision of Dr. Reva Joshee, a faculty member at the University of Toronto. My research is looking at what volunteer tutors do with adult literacy learners beyond reading and writing. This research will help illustrate how volunteer tutors respond to the needs of the learners they work with and develop their practices that often go beyond reading and writing skills. You have been identified as a potential participant in this study by your program because they believe your work with your learner extends to more than literacy and numeracy (e.g., assisting a learner in securing housing, applying for post-secondary education, discussing work related challenges, etc.).

This research is important due to the prevalence of the use of volunteers in adult literacy programs in Ontario. This information is useful in developing more in-depth understanding of how volunteers and learners develop their relationships and the importance of non-literacy activities in supporting the overall growth for learners. The information could also contribute to the development of training materials for volunteer tutors in the adult literacy programs where you are currently volunteering in order to highlight the personal aspect of learning and literacy.

The interviews with you will be completed in-person, at a time and place at your convenience, to discuss your own experience of working with learners. Interviews will be take place over late summer and early fall and each will last approximately one hour. The number of interviews will depend on your availability and the rapport established between yourself and me. However, it is anticipated to be no more than three interviews in total. The interview topics will include descriptions of the activities volunteers do with the learners and the rationale behind developing
the activities that go beyond reading and writing. A list of the interview topics will be provided to you to be interview prior to the start of the interview.

There are no known risks to you for assisting with this project. Benefits of participation include receiving a summary of the results upon completion of the study. The interviews will be recorded and stored electronically on a secured server accessible only by myself and my thesis supervisor, and will be destroyed once the interviews are transcribed. If interested, you have the option to review the transcript of your interview for further comment and correction. Participation in the interview is voluntary, and you may decline to answer certain questions or withdraw from the study at any point without consequence. The responses, however, will help provide a more complete understanding of the work you and other volunteer tutors do with learners. As a token of appreciation, you will be compensated with a $50 gift card from Chapters Indigo which is given to you even if you decide to withdraw from the study before completion.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at the address above, by email (annie.luk@mail.utoronto.ca) or telephone (416-357-3540). You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Reva Joshee at (416) 978-1222 or rjoshee@oise.utoronto.ca. If you have any questions related to your rights as a participant in this study or if you have any complaints or concerns about how you have been treated as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Toronto, ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273.

Please keep a copy of this letter for your records.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Your participation is much appreciated in this research.

Sincerely,

Annie Luk
MA Student – Educational Leadership & Policy
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto
252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, ON M5S 1V6
Appendix C: Information and Consent Letter

[on OISE letterhead]

RE: Beyond Reading and Writing: How Volunteer Tutors Work with Learners in Adult Literacy Programs in Ontario – Master’s Thesis Research Project

You have received this information and consent letter because you indicated a willingness to participate in an interview regarding your experience working with adult literacy learners as volunteer tutors. We are interested in interviewing volunteer tutors to learn more about what you do with learners beyond reading and writing and how you develop your relationship with the learners. The interviews will include questions about your background and general experience as a volunteer tutor, the learning goals you have developed with learners, the learning activities you have carried out with learners and how you establish your relationship with the learners you work with.

We anticipate a total of no more than three interviews, each of which will take no more than 60 minutes to complete.

There are no known risks or benefits to your for assisting with this project. As participants in this study, you will at no time be judged or evaluated and at no time will be at risk of harm. Also, no value judgments will be placed on your responses. Participation in this interview is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time during the interview, without negative consequences. You may decline to answer any question(s) during the interview. Notes will be taken during the interview, and an audio recording will be made with your permission. Notes and recordings will be stored in a secured office controlled by the researcher, and will be destroyed at the end of the research project. As a token of appreciation, you will be compensated with a $50 gift card from Chapters Indigo which is given to you even if you decide to withdraw from the study before completion.

You will be provided a copy of this information and consent letter.

If you have further questions regarding this research or would like to schedule an interview, you can contact me by email (annie.luk@mail.utoronto.ca) or telephone (416-357-3540). You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Reva Joshee at (416) 978-1222 or rjoshee@oise.utoronto.ca. If
you have any questions related to your rights as a participant in this study or if you have any complaints or concerns about how you have been treated as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Toronto, ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273.

Sincerely,

Annie Luk
MA Student
Educational Leadership & Policy Program
Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE)
University of Toronto
252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, ON M5S 1V6

Dr. Reva Joshee
Associate Professor / Thesis Supervisor

Annie Luk
MA Student

Dr. Reva Joshee
Associate Professor / Thesis Supervisor

Educational Leadership & Policy Program
Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE)
University of Toronto
252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, ON M5S 1V6
Beyond Reading and Writing:

How Volunteer Tutors Work with Learners in Adult Literacy Programs in Ontario

Consent to Participate

Annie Luk, MA Student, OISE/UT

I acknowledge that that topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any question that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I have received an information sheet that explains the purpose of the interview and agree to participate. I know that I may ask, now and in the future, any questions that I may have about this project. I understand my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the interview at any time. Only the researchers involved in this study will have access to the notes, and if permission is given, audio recordings from my conversation. This information will be destroyed in a timely fashion once the study is over. I will be given a copy of this consent form for my records.

Yes □ No □

I agree to be recorded during our interview.

□ □

I have received a copy of the consent form.

□ □

I would like to review the transcripts of my interviews when available.

□ □

Name (please print) _____________________________________________________________

Signature __________________________________________

Date _________________________________________________________________________

To review the transcripts and/or receive a copy of the results, please provide your mailing or email address.

____________________________________________
__________________________________

Contact Information: Annie Luk

Email: annie.luk@mail.utoronto.ca | Telephone: 416-357-3540
Appendix D: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. Introduction: My name is Annie Luk. I’m a graduate student at the University of Toronto doing research in adult literacy and volunteers. The project I’m working on now tries to see what volunteers do with the learners in addition to reading and writing. I’d like to talk to you about your experience as a volunteer tutor in the adult literacy program. The interview will last about an hour. The interview will be audio-recorded with your permission and then transcribed. Once I have the transcript done, I’ll send it to you for review. You can let me know if there’s anything you’d like to correct or if there’s anything that you’d like to add.

2. Consent and Confidentiality: Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary. All the information you provide here will remain confidential. Your name or the adult literacy program you volunteer for will not be identified with the information you provide. Do you have any question before we start?

3. Semi-Structured Interview Questions:

1. Background questions on volunteer experience – including:

   • How long have you volunteered in adult literacy programs and with the learners you’re working with?

   • Which other programs have you volunteered at?

   • What first motivated you to volunteer? What is keeping you motivated to volunteer?

   • What other volunteer experience do you have?

   • How would you describe your work and your relationship with the learners?

2. Learning goals – including:

   • What is your understanding as the learning goals of your learners?

   • Are you aware of the provincial goal paths for learners? What is your understanding of the goal paths?
• How do the goal paths align with your perspective of the learning goals?

• How did you come to the settle on the learning goals you’re working on with learners?

• Why do you feel it’s important to do more than reading and writing?

3. Learning activities – including:

• Can you describe a typical tutoring session with your learners?

• Why have you included these activities in your tutoring sessions?

• What are some of the activities you have done that go beyond reading and writing?

• What are some of the memorable stories of learning activities or accomplishments?

4. Volunteer-learner relationship – including:

• Can you describe your relationship with the learner(s)?

• Why do you think your relationship with the learner(s) has lasted this long?

• How do you think your relationship with the learner influences the learning goals, your work with the learners, the way the learners work?

5. Anything else that the interviewee wants to add