Family Literacy and Colonial Logics

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Ontario Institute of Studies in Education
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Abstract

This thesis is located in my relationship to Treaty 4 land, the traditional land of the Cree, Saulteaux, Lakota, Nakota, Dakota and Métis people. It starts with me, a 5th generation white settler, learning to see myself as a treaty person. Intertwined with this awareness is my developing understanding of the way that the “myth of the fort” and “colonial frontier logics” (Donald 2009b, 2009c, 2012a) shape educational practice in Saskatchewan.

The focus of my research is family literacy programs, policy and research, and the assumption of deficit that I argue pervades this area of literacy education practice. As a community-based family literacy practitioner, working for many years mostly with New Canadians, I have wondered about a tension between the rhetorical commitment to strengths-based practice in the field and the ongoing presence/tenacity of deficit thinking in literacy practice. In exploring deficit thinking I have come to see how it is racialized and racializing (Valencia, 1997, 2010). As I explored in my study deficit thinking and race in family literacy work in Saskatchewan, I further came to recognize the significance of settler colonialism in shaping literacy practice. Eventually I understood, in a new way, that all family literacy
programs in Saskatchewan take place on treaty land, and that the people in the programs, practitioners and families alike, are “all treaty people.”

This analysis has been shaped by literature on race, whiteness and colonialism (Ahmed, 2007b; Donald, 2009c; Leonardo & Porter, 2010). I have been informed by the ways in which feminist poststructuralists (Ahmed 2002, 2006, 2007a; Pillow, 2000, 2003, 2004, 2015; St. Pierre, 2000) talk about power, subjectivity and discourse. Feminist genealogical approaches (Pillow, 2003, 2004; Tamboukou 2003b; Tamboukou & Ball, 2003) have directed me to explore the history of family literacy. The methods of Métissage (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009) and Indigenous Métissage (Donald, 2009b, 2012b) have informed how I have made sense of my research journey. Observing community programs in Aboriginal settings has led me to focus on how a robust understanding of respect might enable movement away from a racializing deficit thinking and towards ‘better’ relationships (Ahmed, 2002) or towards what Donald (2009c) calls “ethical relationality” in education practice and policy.
Acknowledgments

I am especially grateful to the practitioners and program participants who shared their ideas and experiences with me during this research. I feel very fortunate to have been welcomed into programs and organizations so graciously and openly. I am also grateful to the practitioners and families whom I have worked with throughout my time as a practitioner and researcher.

Thank you to my committee members, Tanya Titchkosky and Suzanne Smythe, for their insightful comments and also for their engagement with the ideas I was exploring. Thank you also to my external examiner, Dwayne Donald, whose comments and questions gave me much to think about and helped me understand my own research in a deeper way.

I am grateful to Nancy Jackson, my supervisor, for taking me on even though she was planning her retirement and for supporting me through many ups and downs. Nancy was always positive and open, pushing me just enough to help me see things in new ways, but never so much that I felt I couldn’t cope.

Thank you to Professors Kari Dehli and Guy Ewing at OISE and Jennifer Tupper at the University of Regina for introducing me to conversations and theorists that have shaped my work.

Thank you to fellow literacy workers who started ahead of me in doing a PhD at OISE, Tannis Atkinson, Sheila Stewart and Audrey Gardner. You showed me it was a thing that could be done.
A particular thank you the Faculty of Education at the University of Regina who gave me an academic home away from OISE and a chance to teach.

I am thankful for receiving funding throughout my program through the doctoral funding package, the Ontario Graduate Scholarship and the Doctoral completion award.

Thank you to friends in Regina who made this a good place to come back to. Who carpooled and looked after my children. Who talked with me over cups of coffee and glasses of wine and beer about parenting, politics and education and sometimes even my thesis. There are too many too name, but I am grateful for you all.

I am grateful to my family for supporting me in this journey. Thanks to Chris, my partner, for always being there to support and encourage me, for being interested, and for picking up the slack in our daily lives. Thanks to my children, Duncan and Stella, for being patient and funny, challenging and wise. Much that is in these pages starts with what I have learned from you and from being your mom. Thanks to my children’s grandparents for always being available to hang out with their grandkids when we all needed it most.

Thank you especially to my parents and siblings for being supportive and positive over a very long journey. Thank you my mom, Marilyn McEachern, for listening to my crazy ideas over the many years. And particularly thank you to my dad, Buzz Crooks, whose interest in ideas, storytelling, language, history, especially history of family and the place that we live, influenced me more than I ever realized.
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Prologue: the view from the window

This dissertation was written in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada. Regina is on Treaty Four land. Treaty Four territory includes the traditional lands of the Cree, Salteaux, Dakota, Nakota and Lakota people and the traditional homes of four communities of Metis people (Lebret, Fort Qu’Appelle, Willow Bunch and Lestock). Regina is the place that I moved to over seventeen years ago and I have lived here most of the time since. It is the place where my children were born and have lived most of their lives. It is the place where I started working as a paid educator in the field of adult and family literacy. It is the place where I started doing practitioner and academic research in literacy. It is the place where I have done the data collection and analysis and most of the reading and thinking that lead to the production of this 200 plus page document.

In order for me to do my PhD, my family moved with me across the country to Toronto. I did my course work while I was there but then, for various reasons, we came back to Regina. During the process of doing this research and writing this dissertation, I often regretted that I did not stay in Toronto while completing my program. I like Toronto. My partner and children like Toronto. And the environment of support and challenge that I found at OISE was hard to come by when we returned to Regina. I struggled to find others who were doing similar academic work. Although I eventually did find an academic community, for much of the time trying to do this work in Regina, I felt very alone.

To be sure, much of my isolation had to do with trying to do this thesis project with two fairly young, but rapidly growing - and then homeschooling - children. There were some opportunities to connect in Regina and I am forever grateful to the Faculty of Education at the University of Regina and to particular students and faculty members who supported me
and connected with me. Always though my ability to take advantage of such opportunities was limited by family responsibilities and that I guess is one reason why it made sense to return to Regina, where those responsibilities could be more easily shared between my husband and I, and where family members were somewhat closer.

And we are from the Prairies; my husband, my two children and I were all born here. My ancestors were farmers in Saskatchewan and Manitoba; some of my aunts, uncles and cousins still are. And life seemed easier here, less hectic, more manageable. It felt like the right thing to do for our lives - to choose a supportive family environment over a supportive academic one while I tried to do this challenging and not always family friendly work (about family literacy). Besides, perhaps doing a PhD is always isolating.

I know now, although I didn’t realize it back when we decided to return to Regina, that this dissertation is not one I could have written in Toronto. It is a piece of work firmly rooted in the layers of this place. This became evident to me through a surprisingly slow and subtle process over the course of the research, but a few moments stand out in which the history of the place I live became visible to me in ways it had not been before. One such moment took place as I sat at a computer on the fifth floor of the University of Regina main library, trying to do some of my early analysis work and staring out the window at the view that is captured in the photograph below (Figure 1).
In the view from that window you can see swaying green prairie grasses and vast blue prairie sky. In the foreground is the landscape that leads to the main entrance of the library building. Underneath the overgrown junipers you can make out the outlines of a formal landscape design, influenced no doubt by centuries of traditional European collegiate landscape design valuing symmetry and a sense of permanence. But the landscape has also been shaped by the realities of its context on the Canadian prairies, including dry and extreme weather conditions, the presence of native species better suited to that climate (prairie dog holes dot the slopes that divide the space from the road) as well as a lack of investment in such spaces reflecting the degrees to which we value (or more often don’t value) such formal outdoor spaces. While other parts of the campus have been the focus of recent landscape renewal
which has paid attention to creating spaces that are useful in our climate, are low
maintenance, make use of native plant species and produce food, this space is as of yet
untouched.

In the background of the photograph is the skyline of the city of Regina. On the left,
downtown can be discerned with its modest office and apartment towers. On the right is a
more natural looking landscape of trees, grasses and water known as Wascana Waterfowl
Park or, more commonly, Wascana Marsh. The marsh forms the east end of Wascana Lake
and, unlike the more formal parts of the lake (off to the left but not clearly visible in this
view), it has been allowed to develop as a naturalized space. Both Wascana Lake and
Wascana Marsh are home to many indigenous wildlife species. But, in some ways, the lake
and marsh are not indigenous; as I will now discuss in some detail, they have come to exist in
their current iteration as a result of settler colonialism.

One hundred and fifty years ago, Wascana Lake didn’t exist and instead a fairly modest and
somewhat intermittent creek wandered through the prairie landscape. The creek was called
“Oskana-Ka-asateki” or "the place where bones are piled" by the Cree people who had lived
here for centuries/millennia before the Europeans arrived (City of Regina, n.d.). The name
referred to the bison skeletons that Cree hunters piled beside the creek believing that the
bison would stay in the area to be close to their ancestors (Coneghan, 2006). The city of
Regina’s first name was “Pile of Bones” and came from this traditional practice. But when
the city was incorporated the Pile of Bones name was discarded and changed to Regina in
honour of Queen Victoria. A page on the City of Regina website in a section of the site
directed to students and teachers states, “Pile of Bones wasn’t a good name for a town. So in
late 1882, it was given a ‘regal’ name. It became ‘Regina’ in honour of the reigning monarch,
Queen Victoria. The Queen’s daughter, Princess Louise, suggested the name” (City of Regina, n.d.). I have come to see such statements as clearly embedded in colonial frontier logics (Donald, 2009a, 2009c, 2012a), as I will explore throughout this thesis. This legacy can also be seen in the street names of the main intersection Regina, Victoria and Albert.

In the 1880’s Wascana Creek (as the Europeans came to call it) was dammed to create a reservoir for cattle and the railway (Friends of Wascana Marsh, n.d.). The lake continued to provide water for the city and, for a while, to be used to cool machinery at the power plant built along its shores. This had the interesting result of keeping some of the lake open throughout the winter and attracting new species of waterfowl (Wascana Centre, n.d.-a). As the City of Regina grew, Wascana Lake became a recreational spot for boating and other activities and in the 1930’s, during the Great Depression, relief work was created through the federal government in order to dig the lake deeper (by hand) so that it could better serve this purpose. Over the years the lake filled in and in 2003 money was dedicated by three levels of government to again dredge the lake to improve the water quality and make it more useful for water sports. This time huge machines were used and the project, known locally as “The Big Dig,” went on 24 hours a day for seven days a week during the winter while the lake was frozen. All that winter people lined up on bridges to watch the big machines work. In addition to eighteen million dollars, significant amounts of human and fossil fuel energy were invested in the project (CBC News, 2014).

Today, the park surrounding the lake, known as Wascana Park (or Wascana Centre Authority), is home to many important institutions in Regina. The legislature overlooks the lake and the park also contains the CBC, provincial natural history museum, provincial art gallery, several government offices and the Wascana Rehabilitation Centre. The park is an
important recreational spot for the city and also houses bicycle and walking paths, playgrounds, sports fields, formal gardens, a bandstand, speaker’s corner, and a totem pole. And on its southern edge sits the main campus of the University of Regina as well as First Nations University.

From the fifth floor of the U of R’s library, I can see the trees and gardens managed by the University. Beyond the University’s landscape I view the marsh and beyond that the creek winding its way eastwards through what I think of as the prairie; although I know it is actually farmland marked by roads and a century and a half of cultivation of non-native species.

Reflecting on this view from the window, I recognized that this land is always already colonized. But it is also always already Indigenous. Among the invasive caragana shrubs, the native willows grow (Wascana Centre, n.d.-b). Among the dozens of bird species one might see in the park there are local species that have lived here for centuries as well as those that have been attracted to the area by the lake that didn’t used to be there. And beneath, sustaining the plants and animals, is the soil and the rocks that have been here forever.

Sara Ahmed writes about orientation, and about the significance of what we are looking towards: “The objects that we direct our attention toward reveal the direction we have taken in life. If we face this way or that, then other things, and indeed spaces, are relegated to the background; they are only ever co-perceived” (Ahmed 2006, p. 546-547). For years (on and off) I have spent time working in the University of Regina library. Usually I sat with my back to the window and faced into the library, towards books and journals with some sense that
beyond them were windows looking out over the landscape. It was only recently that I really looked out that north-facing window and saw where I was in a new way.

As Ahmed (2006) observes “[w]e can consider perhaps how one's background affects what it is that comes into view, as well as how the background is what allows what comes into view to be viewed” (p. 547). With my whiteness “trailing behind” me (Ahmed 2007b), I worked for many, many hours in this library and looked many, many times at this view before I thought about the history described here and its meaning. The white space I inhabited invisiblized our colonial settler history and invisiblized Indigenous people; but we/they were and are always there. Looking out the window from the Euro-centric location of the university it never occurred to me to think in this way about the place in which I am located. But through the journey of this research it became impossible for me not to begin to see how I and the place where I live and work are products of this colonial history and how it is this colonial history that has led me to being here.
Chapter 1: Place, space and identity in my research/family literacy

Introduction: place, space and identity

This thesis starts in a particular place, this place – Regina, Saskatchewan – Treaty Four land. It also starts with me, a fifth generation white settler, descendant of homesteaders, or very near homesteaders, living in this place and learning to see myself as a treaty person (Tupper, 2012) and to see this place and the things we do here in new (to me) ways. Looking out the window of the University of Regina library that day, early in my analysis, I recognized layers of history and identity shaping the land, the way the land is both Indigenous and Colonized/Aboriginal and Canadian. This view has shaped my analysis as I have come to recognize, retrospectively and going forward, that our relationships, including our relationships in family literacy programs, are shaped by the histories that shape that land. This recognition was intertwined with my beginning understanding of the ways in which the “myth of the fort” and “colonial frontier logics” (Donald 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2012a) shapes educational practice in Saskatchewan.

What is family literacy and what is the research problem?

The field of family literacy focuses on the ways that families learn together as part of their daily lives. Family literacy policies provide for (community-based) programs that engage adults (and sometimes children) in activities that support literacy learning within the context of the family. The dominant approach to family literacy programs takes as its starting point the idea that there is a particular set of practices that parents can adopt in order to support
their children in school and, for the most part, the discourse of family literacy does not question the practices of schools themselves.

In the early 2000s I worked as a community-based adult literacy and English as an Additional Language (EAL) practitioner. As part of my job, I began to plan and facilitate family literacy program facilitator and it was in this context that I noted a tension between the rhetorical commitment to strengths-based practice in the field and the ongoing presence/appearances of deficit thinking in (my) practice. Community-based literacy organizations, such as the one I worked in, are generally committed to participant empowerment, community development and social change (Malicky, Katz, Norton, & Norman, 1997). Family literacy programs in these contexts tend to start from a perspective that aims to be learner-centred (planned in response to the needs of individual learners in the program) and strengths-based (emphasizing and building on the strengths that learners bring with them). However, as explored through the thesis, this perspective does not prevent these programs from being shaped by and reinscribing deficit thinking, which in this context might be defined as an educational discourse that works to blame parents and families for their children’s (potential) school failures “rather than examining how schools and the political economy are structured to prevent students from learning optimally” (Valencia & Black, 2002).

My focus in beginning this research was on the tenacity of deficit thinking in family literacy work despite an often explicit rejection of deficit-based practice and a commitment to strengths-based approaches and empowerment of families. By exploring family literacy work in a particular place, Saskatchewan, Canada, the place that I lived and worked, I hoped
to come to understand this tension and begin to imagine other ways of doing family literacy that might avoid deficit thinking.

**Thinking About Theory and Methodology**

Feminist theory had shaped my thinking before I even entered the field of adult and family literacy and it was actually my experiences in feminist theory classes that first peaked my interest in community-based literacy work. In particular, I was informed by the ways in which feminist poststructural theories discuss power, subjectivity and discourse. My very first theoretical conceptualizations of the problem of deficit thinking in family literacy work were already shaped by these influences.

As a practitioner, my attention was often drawn to the tensions between the ways in which (some) programs and/or practitioners professed a commitment to empowerment while at the same time they often reproduced the regulatory discourses that govern the field. Attention to discourse and language highlighted for me the ways in which the language of family literacy was different from the language of adult literacy. For example, whereas family literacy tends to talk about strengths-based practice, adult literacy tends to talk about learner-centred practice (the differences between these will be discussed below). Attention to subjectivity guided me to look at the way mothers are constructed in the field of family literacy and the ways in which my own identity (as white, as middle-class, as a mother) was implicated in my work as a practitioner and researcher. Attention to power highlighted questions about where words comes from, and whose worldviews they privilege.

Coming to the research as a practitioner myself and having had some past experiences with practice based research (Horsman & Woodrow, 2006), I was interested in creating research
that was connected to and was informed by practice, that is to ‘real’ work in the field. I hoped that my research might have an actual impact on the field. At the same time, as poststructuralism and feminism had been so helpful to me in beginning to understand systems of structural inequality, I wanted to continue to do research that was informed by these theories. And I was interested in and hopeful that there was a way for these two perspectives to meet.

The third influence on my early thinking about deficit thinking and family literacy work came from New Literacy Studies (NLS). New Literacy Studies, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two, is a diverse body of research that is characterized through its understanding of literacy as a social practice, or set of social practices, rather than as a discrete and measurable set of skills (Street, 2003). NLS research is mostly ethnographic work which looks closely at the literacy practices of families or communities in particular contexts (e.g. Hamilton & Barton, 1998; Heath, 1983; Taylor, 1983). It also has some connection to critical approaches to discourse analysis such as the work of Gee (2012). Some scholars have criticized NLS for being too narrowly focused on the ‘local’ at the expense of acknowledging the larger power structures that shape people’s experiences of literacy (Brandt & Clinton, 2002; Reder & Davila, 2005). As a practitioner, my first impressions of NLS were that it resonated with how I thought about literacy within the context of my work; that is, within NLS literacy was described as being about much more than about reading, writing and the ways literacy is defined in school. Instead, the meaning of literacy lay in the way it was used in the context of everyday life, within the context of relationships. NLS research also reflected the belief that many community-based practitioners hold that all learners, regardless of their ‘reading level,’ use literacies that are valuable to them in their
own lives. While I did not think I wanted to do an NLS style research study, I found that the approach to understanding literacy resonated with me and I thought that other community-based literacy practitioners might also connect with this perspective.

Informed by these various, sometimes overlapping, sometimes contradictory perspective, I began to plan my research. Influenced by my interest in poststructuralism and by the critical discourse analysis approaches of some NLS scholars, I became interested in genealogy as a research approach. Reading the work of Wanda Pillow (2003, 2004) and Maria Tamboukou (1999, 2003b), I saw a way to connect my feminist perspective with genealogical research. But also informed by desire to stay connected with the field and by the importance of ethnography to NLS and my growing understanding of literacy as a set of social practices, I was also interested in ethnographic approaches. Tamboukou and Ball’s edited collection (Tamboukou & Ball, 2003) helped me think about combining genealogy and ethnography in my work. Reading in the area of NLS I also came across the work of Rebecca Rogers (2003). Her ethnographic study of the literacy practices of an African American family in New Jersey drew more explicitly on critical discourse analysis than other NLS work. She also engaged more directly with discussions of power including relationships of race and gender, and the ways in which schooling and school literacy could be used to reproduce existing systems of inequity, all of which were of interest to me as I began to explore the tenacity of deficit thinking in family literacy work.

So drawing on both genealogy and ethnography, I designed a study that I hoped would help me explore how deficit thinking and strengths-based models were tangled together in family literacy work in the community-based programs in Saskatchewan, Canada. As described below, I planned to use a combination of interviews with key informants, participant
observation and textual analysis of key documents that I identified as informing family literacy in the field.

And so, with a plan in hand, I began my fieldwork. I was never quite sure that the methodologies that I had chosen quite fit with what I was doing. As described by St. Pierre, data collection, analysis, interpretation and writing about the whole process happened simultaneously from the beginning were all jumbled together. The experience of data collection always seemed to exceed the language that I saw as available to describe it (St. Pierre, 1997). And my thinking and approach to textual analysis was becoming increasingly influenced by Ahmed (2002, 2006, 2007s, 2007b) whose work did not quite fit the methodologies I had chosen either.

And then, through my observations in the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting (TAP) program (described below), something in my perspective shifted. This experience took me in directions I did not expect. When I began my research, I had held myself separate from the ‘problem’ of deficit in family literacy practice and had hoped to critique it from the outside. As I began to realize, at first gradually and then through the more dramatic experience described in Chapter Four of ‘losing my chair’ in the TAP program, that I was embedded in and shaped by my position in colonial relationships, the focus of my research shifted. I began to look back at my research (data) thus far, as well as my own experiences as a practitioner through the lens of this experience and see it all in new ways.

One of the results of this shift in perspective was that the data collected in interviews and to some extent observations, particularly my observations of the Family Literacy Introductory Training workshops, was not as directly relevant to the thesis that I ended up writing as I had
expected. While the interviews and notes from my fieldwork informed my perspective, I did not find many direct chunks of data that seemed to describe what I was trying to put into words. This was partly due to the fact that I had started out asking different questions but it was also because the way in which I experienced this shift something was something that I felt, rather than observed, at least consciously. The experience of losing my chair and beginning to ‘see’ colonial frontier logics (Donald, 2009c) was an embodied experience grounded in what St. Pierre (1997) calls “transgressive data,” particularly emotional and sensual data and was difficult to translate into dominant research discourse. I have done my best to describe that experience in empirical terms, mostly by describing what I saw and heard. But sometimes the experience simply exceeded my ability to describe it.

To make sense of what I had experienced in the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting program from a theoretical perspective, I began to explore the work of Dwayne Donald, particularly his notion of “colonial frontier logics,” an idea that I begin to explore in some detail in Chapter Four. In reading Donald’s work, I also felt a resonance in his descriptions of his own research journey (Donald, 2009c) and the methodology that he called “Indigenous Métissage.” Métissage as an approach to research, is described by Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers and Leggo as a counternarrative to the grand narrative of our times, a site for writing and surviving in the interval between different cultures and languages, particularly in colonial contexts; a way of merging and blurring genres, texts, and identities; an active literary stance, political strategy, and pedagogical praxis…We braid strands of place and space, memory and history, ancestry and (mixed) race, language and literacy, familiar and strange, with strands of tradition, ambiguity, becoming, (re)creation, and renewal into a métissage. (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 9)

Indigenous Métissage, Donald’s approach to métissage, focuses specifically on Aboriginal-Canadian relationships (Donald, 2009c), which became increasingly central to my work
through my research process. Although I am reluctant, as a non-Indigenous person and as someone who did not start her research with Aboriginal-Canadian relationship in mind, to claim Indigenous Métissage, I felt an affinity to Donald’s description of the approach. His commitment through the approach to decolonization, ethical relationality, and the importance of place (Donald, 2012b) helped me think about my data differently and moving forward, I began to see these as significant commitments important to de-centering deficit thinking in family literacy. The metaphors he uses of the fort, pentimento, and the braid have been useful in making sense of my research.

As I have said, my research did not turn out in the way that I expected, and perhaps too for readers it will seem a little surprising. I hope that in writing here I can share what I have learned. I also hope that I can give some sense of the journey.

**Research as story; narrative as method**

When researchers come to view themselves as storytellers, they become conscious of the ways in which their autobiography influences how they make sense of their lives and experiences. They realize that their personal stories cannot be easily differentiated from the larger research stories they wish to tell. (Donald, 2012 p. 548)

Much of this thesis takes the form of a narrative, a story about family literacy and deficit in a settler colonial context, but also about me and my journey as literacy practitioner and researcher, as mother and as white settler. It is about how I got here, to my thinking today. Slowly I have come to see that these understandings/this narrative are part of a methodological conversation – and part of how I have seen/experienced methodology as emerging/emergent (Davies, 2010; Donald, 2012b; St. Pierre, 2013). But it is more than that. It is about the way in which my personal narrative and experience intertwines with this
research story and about recognizing the ways in which the research narrative is also my personal narrative.

In telling these stories, I also try to be conscious of the ways in which my personal stories are located within a larger context.

This storied concept of who offers important insights, but also must be expanded beyond a singular preoccupation with identity to include the particular context from which a researcher addresses and interprets. Who cannot be separated from where. (Donald, 2012, p. 549)

**Metaphors for/and methodology**

As I have been working with bringing this thesis/story to completion, I have struggled a little bit with voice and with trying to follow the various threads, trying to weave the various bits together - so occasionally I find myself trying to think of a metaphor that might describe the process and the product: some kind of picture that might let me see where I am going and help me know how to say what I want to say in the given moment… For example,

- Often I know where I am and I can see where I want to go with the ideas I am immersed in but I cannot see how to get from here to there. In those moments, I sometimes envision the process of writing my research as a meandering stream with twists and turns that are sometimes difficult to anticipate but are an essential part of the journey.

- I have also thought about the writing of my research as layered. Sometimes I think about those transparency layers that you used to see in encyclopedias – the ones that showed the layers of the earth or the systems of the human body. Another way of thinking about the layers of my research appears in Donald’s work and the notion of pentimento (Donald, 2004). Donald uses this concept to explore how the history of Indigenous people in North America has been painted over with European interpretations. The idea
of pentimento comes from art and refers to the layers of paint on a painting and how in some places you can see through to what is below. It reminds me of the first time I saw some famous painting in real life – Starry Night I think is one – when you get close enough to see in some places a build up of paint but in some places you can see all the way through to the canvas. One of the interesting aspects of pentimento as a research method as described by Donald is that the purpose of scraping away the layers is not to find something ‘pure’ or true underneath. “Rather, the idea of pentimento operates on the acknowledgment that each layer mixes with the other and renders irreversible influences on our perceptions of it” (2004, p. 24).

• Metaphors of weaving and quilting are sometimes used to describe (feminist) qualitative research. As a knitter, I have sometimes thought about knitting and research/writing – the process of following a pattern and not really knowing what it is going to look like in the end – the dropping of stitches, picking stitches back up, making of new stitches – the fancy footwork you do to turn a heel – also knitting in the round so that you keep coming back to where you were. All of these describe my research processes in different ways.

• Knitting in the round is actually knitting in a spiral and often during this project I have thought about the spiral and the way in which the writing keeps coming back on itself revisiting something that I have already talked about but with a new lens. The spiral is also a very popular concept or metaphor in adult education, specifically popular education. Connected to the process of praxis, or reflection and action, the spiral suggests that we continually revisit our perceptions and assumptions and use what we learn to inform new actions.
• The idea of a braid is another metaphor used in qualitative research and my memories of French braiding hair when I was a teenager sometimes appeared in my mind during the research and writing process. From Wikipedia:

In the simplest form of three-strand braid, all the hair is initially divided into three sections, which are then simultaneously gathered together near the scalp. In contrast, a French braid starts with three small sections of hair near the crown of the head, which are then braided together toward the nape of the neck, gradually adding more hair to each section as it crosses in from the side into the center of the braid structure. The final result incorporates all of the hair into a smoothly woven pattern over the scalp. (French Braid, n.d.)

Like knitting or weaving the metaphor of the French braid describes the ways in which I have tried to bring in different strands (or threads) as I tell the story of this research. This description also brings to mind the physicality or embodied nature of research that I explore drawing on the notion of “feminist genealogy” (Pillow, 2003, 2004) in Chapter Three.

Later in my thesis writing journey, as I began to explore Dwayne Donald’s work in more detail, I began to see the connection between my research and his use of “Indigenous Métissage.” Donald describes Indigenous Métissage in several ways including as “a research sensibility that imagines curriculum and pedagogy together as a relational, interreferential, and hermeneutic endeavour” (Donald, 2009c). Through Donald, I discovered, the book *Life Writing and Literary Métissage*, by Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers and Leggo (2009), which continues to shape my thinking about how the threads of this thesis might come together.

**Study Design and Fieldwork**

The research for this thesis took place in Saskatchewan on Treaty Four and Treaty Six land. Although, as discussed above, the thesis was written in Regina, observations and interviews took place in several locations in Saskatchewan. I took many factors into account in deciding how to approach the research. I wanted the study to be a reflection of the state of the field in
Saskatchewan, and also to have relevance as far as possible to other Canadian provinces. The context for family literacy work in Saskatchewan is similar in some ways to other Canadian provinces. For example, the common family literacy models such as Literacy and Parenting Skills, Come Read with Me, and Storysacks are similar to those used in other provinces (Kennedy 2008; Shohet 2012; Thomas & Skage, 1998). However, there are also some ways in which Saskatchewan is different from other provinces including its small and dispersed population, large geographical area and large Aboriginal population. Furthermore, family literacy programs in all Canadian provinces are informed by multiple policy and funding contexts (e.g. adult literacy and early childhood education programming and funding pools) that often differ significantly at the provincial level.

It was also important to consider the role of key organizations in the field. The Saskatchewan Literacy Network has been a leader in the field, has worked closely with the provincial government in implementing family literacy programming and policy and has brought together family literacy programs and practitioners across sectors including community based program and the k-12 system. Further, it has continued to be actively involved in family literacy work during recent years when some provincial literacy coalitions have stepped back from family literacy due to changes in provincial and federal funding and policy priorities. So my research plan needed to reflect their prominence in the field.

Finally it was important to acknowledge my own positioning in the field. Due to my history as a family literacy practitioner in Saskatchewan, I had professional and sometimes personal connections with almost every practitioner interview participant and organization that I worked with. I recruited participants for interviews drawing on my knowledge of and connections in the field. The programs where I observed were identified through my own
knowledge of the field and through conversations with key informants. Where relevant, I have tried to describe the ways in which my relationships to programs and individuals have shaped my research.

Taking all this into consideration, and informed by the theoretical and methodological considerations described above, my study design included five components. First I collected and analyzed documents both directly related to my research sites and to the climate of literacy work in Saskatchewan more generally. (These are discussed primarily in Chapters 2 and 3.) Secondly, I conducted *semi-structured interviews with five key informants* who did not work at any of the programs where I planned to observe. The purpose of these interviews was to understand their thoughts about the tensions between strength and deficit or empowerment and regulation in their experiences of family literacy work.\(^1\) These key informants included leaders in the field in Saskatchewan at a provincial and regional level. Three of the key informants worked in urban centres, one worked in a smaller centre serving a large rural area, and one woman worked in a smaller centre serving a large northern area.

Three of the women were white settlers. One practitioner was a woman of colour born outside of Canada. One was an Aboriginal woman. I did not ask any participants specifically about their gender, race or ethnicity. Aspects of their identity sometimes came up in interviews with practitioners and during observations. I have identified Aboriginal\(^2\) and newcomer participants as such when that information was provided in an interview or during

\[\text{References}\]

1. The Research Ethics Board at the University of Toronto approved my research. Pseudonyms have been used for all individuals, organizations and programs.

2. When referring to the first inhabitants of Canada, I mostly use the term Aboriginal. When appropriate I have used more specific terms, including First Nations, Métis and Cree. I have also used the term Indigenous to refer more broadly to first peoples and the lands on which they live.
my observations. For the most part, I have assumed that participants who were white and spoke English without a noticeable (to me) accent were Canadian born. I feel that including these assumptions, while identifying them as assumptions, is preferable to choosing not to talk about racial and ethnic identity. As I will discuss in Chapter Three, our hesitation, as white settler Canadians, to discuss race serves to invisibilize and reinscribe racist and colonial power relationships that shape family literacy programs (Leonardo & Porter, 2010).

Thirdly, in order to learn more about the policy and training context of family literacy work in Saskatchewan, I observed two occasions of a training workshop, “Introduction to Family Literacy.” This one-day workshop was developed by the Saskatchewan Literacy Network in partnership with some of the key regional literacy hub organizations. Currently the introductory training is a pre-requisite for all other family literacy training offered by the SLN or the regional hubs. The workshops that I attended were hosted by two different literacy hub organizations and facilitated by staff who have taken train the trainer courses offered by the Saskatchewan Literacy Network. The workshops took place in two different locations. The first workshop I attended was in a rural area and almost all of the participants were from small towns in the region. The area includes several First Nations and Métis communities and although there were no participants from the First Nations, several of the organizations (mostly schools and early childhood centres) served large numbers of Aboriginal families. The second workshop was in an urban setting although some of the participants did come from nearby rural areas.

I had not participated in an introductory workshop before as this type of training was developed after I began working in the field; and in both workshops, I engaged as a participant. However, in both cases, I had prior professional relationships with the facilitators
and was treated in a way that sometimes positioned me more as an expert in the field than as a participant in the training. After observing the trainings, I interviewed facilitators from both workshops.

Of the over twenty participants in the two workshops, one identified as male. All except one of the participants, a recent newcomer, appeared white. The three facilitators (the first workshop was co-facilitated) were white settler women. As will be discussed in Chapter Three, this contrasts to the usual identity of participants in family literacy programs who are much more likely to be Aboriginal and non-white newcomers, usually women.

The fourth study component of my study was participant observation in three community-based family literacy programs offered by two different organizations in urban settings in Saskatchewan. I chose programs and organizations based upon their long history working in the field (each had been doing family literacy programs for over fifteen years) and their explicit commitment to learner-centred and strengths-based approaches to family literacy work. All of the programs were “Direct-Adults” programs; that is the facilitators worked directly with parents while children were cared for in a separate room. The three programs were Families Learning offered by the Community Literacy Program, READ offered by the Children’s Centre and the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting program also offered by the Children’s Centre in partnership with another community based organization. I will describe each of these programs in detail below.

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3 Nickse (cited in Kerka, 1991) developed a widely used typology for family literacy programs that included Direct Adults-Direct Children, Direct Adults-Indirect Children, Direct Children-Indirect Adults, and Indirect Adults-Indirect Children. The last of these refers to programs that attempt to reach adult and children without any direct interaction – e.g. through family reading kits that can be borrowed from a library.
Finally, during all of these data collection activities I also kept a reflective journal, not only about the research experience, but also about the intersections of this journey with my own life as a mother and literacy practitioner, connecting both and present and past experiences. These reflections became increasingly important to my emerging analysis, and some of this material appears as stories throughout the thesis.

In the following three sections, I give a detailed description of the three community-based programs where I conducted my participant observation.

**Participant Observation in Programs**

**Families Learning at the Community Literacy Program**

The Community Literacy Program (CLP) offers several programs for adults who wish to improve their literacy skills in English and those who are learning English as an Additional Language. Families Learning is a family literacy program offered by CLP. It is for newcomer mothers and their pre-school aged children. The program is offered one morning a week for two hours throughout the school year. Participants are provided with transportation. Once everyone has arrives, the program starts with a brief circle time or song for mothers and children. Then the mothers and children separate. The children participate in informal play-based activities with early childhood workers. These activities are intended to support the development of the children’s social and language skills. The mothers participate in an English as an additional language program built around family literacy themes (see next paragraph for more information). Usually while I was observing some of the younger children, including infants, stayed in the adult program room with their mothers throughout the program. The separate adult and children program time lasts for about an hour and a half. The last twenty minutes of the session is an informal coffee and snack time.
Following the philosophy of CLP, the adult portion of the program is learner-centred; that is, participants are seen to be the experts on their own learning needs and decisions about the content of the program are made in partnership with the participants. Partly as a reflection of this, and in contrast to most family literacy programs in the provinces (such as the READ program described below), the program does not have a set curriculum. Topics and activities in the Families Learning program vary according to the needs of the learners but the focus is on English language development for participants through learning about topics related to family literacy and learning. This is interpreted quite broadly. Themes while I was observing included Canadian citizenship, mosquito safety, environmentally friendly cleaning products and community activities for families.

Fourteen mothers attended the program while I was observing. Most attended regularly. The participants were from at least nine different countries, spoke at least seven different languages, and their comfort with and knowledge of English varied greatly. The facilitator was a white settler woman who grew up in Canada and whose first language is not English. The facilitator has a background in English as an Additional Language education with newcomers and was new to family literacy at the time of the observations and interviews.

I observed the Families Learning program for six sessions. During my observations of the program I was introduced to the participants as a teacher as well as a researcher. I had worked with this organization in the past and the participants were also informed of this connection. During sessions I sat beside the participants and sometimes joined them in pair or small groups activities. I spoke to the participants and staff members informally during break times. I interviewed both the facilitator and her supervisor (also a white settler woman) who is a former facilitator for the program twice each for between an hour and an hour and
half each time. I also did group interviews with three groups of four or five learners. These interviews were done during the program time in a nearby room. The group interviews lasted about thirty minutes. All of the participants in attendance the days I did the interviews chose to participate.

The Children's Centre and the READ program

My observations in programs offered by the Children’s Centre were pivotal in shaping the way I have begun to think about family literacy work in a settler colonial context. The Children’s Centre is an early childhood and family support centre that works with low-income families with young children from a variety of backgrounds. Services at the Centre include a full-time pre-school and two different home visiting/support programs for ‘vulnerable’ (a term used by one of the organizations major funders) families with children ages 0-6. As part of their work, the Centre provides educational programs/workshops/classes for parents and caregivers of children registered for any of their services. Since the Centre’s inception in the 1970’s, the majority of children and families participating in programs have been of Aboriginal descent. Recognizing this, and acknowledging the structural inequalities rooted in colonialism that have created this reality, the Centre has been firmly committed to culturally appropriate programming, including Cree language programming (the most common Aboriginal language in the community), and to collaboration with the community. For example, the organization works closely with Elders and aims to have Aboriginal people comprise the majority of both board and staff members. The organization is committed to using a strengths-based model that values the contributions of parents and other family members to children’s lives. At the centre of this model is the valuing of respectful relationships.
During my research, I observed two programs offered by family support workers of the Children’s Centre. The first program was based on an off-the-shelf family literacy curriculum offered to parents and caregivers in families registered with the centre called READ. The READ program is a family literacy program intended to empower parents by helping them learn more about the children’s literacy development and how they can support their children to succeed in school. The program content is described in more detail in Chapter Five. The Children’s Centre offered the program over six two-hour evening sessions. I attended five. Transportation and childcare were provided to all participants who requested.

In addition to observing the program sessions, I was invited to attend some planning meetings. I also volunteered to arrive before each session to help set up. Usually during the sessions I sat with the parents and participated in or helped out with activities (e.g. cutting out pieces for crafts or taking flip chart notes). At breaks I chatted to participants and facilitators. Beside the five two hour sessions I observed and the planning meetings I participated in, I interviewed the program coordinator, who was also one of the facilitators, twice as well as two other staff members at the organization who were involved in family literacy work there. Each interview lasted about an hour. I also completed short interviews (about 20-45 minutes) with three program participants who volunteered to meet during the day at the Centre. Staff members helped set up these interviews.

Participants in the READ program were all registered with other programs at the Centre and so had been labeled as being in “at-risk” circumstances. At-risk was a term that the organization used cautiously never to refer to the children or families but only to the circumstances that shaped their lives. There were eleven regular participants who were all women. One of the women’s male partner attended two of the five sessions I observed. Two
of the participants were non-white recent immigrants who spoke English as an additional language, four were Aboriginal (five including the dad), four were/appeared to be white women and one was/appeared to be a person of colour. I assumed that these participants were Canadian born.

**The Traditional Aboriginal Parenting Program**

The second Children’s Centre program that I observed was an Aboriginal parenting program offered in partnership with another inner city community-based organization. Unlike most of the Centre’s programs, the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting (TAP) program was open to families not registered with the Children’s Centre and it was offered off-site at a family drop in centre in a low-income neighbourhood.

The opportunity to observe in the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting program was unexpected and came a few months after my other data collection was completed. I had extended my data collection period in hopes of observing an Aboriginal version of a popular family literacy program that the Children’s Centre often delivered and had planned to offer a few months after my first observations there. But the organization decided to postpone the family literacy program in favour of another program that they felt would better meet the needs of their current families. As I discussed this with the program coordinator, she mentioned, almost as an afterthought, that she was involved in piloting the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting (TAP) program as a new outreach program and that I might be interested in

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4 Like the term “at-risk”, the term inner-city can be indicative of deficit thinking. See Chapter Two for more discussion of this issue.
attending it. The program was a parenting program based on the traditional parenting practices of First Nations people living in the Plains regions.

The Traditional Aboriginal Parenting program was developed for and by Aboriginal people. The program is focused on reviving/reclaiming traditional Aboriginal parenting practices and supporting Aboriginal parents today in understanding the value of those practices. The curriculum is rooted in an understanding that Indigenous communities in what is now called Canada/North America had functioning systems of/approaches to child raising, education, medicine and social welfare before Europeans arrived/interfered. It also acknowledges, as a basis, some of the ways in which European and Canadian colonizers actively worked to eradicate such practices within Indigenous communities (See Grass, 2015).

There were ten regular participants in the program: nine women, including the teenage daughter of one of the participants who was not a mother herself, and one man. All of the participants were Aboriginal. The two facilitators were Aboriginal women: one was Cree and one was Métis. A Cree elder also offered support and shared her teachings with group. She attended three of the six sessions. Unlike the other programs I observed, where I had some role as a practitioner, in the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting program I was invited by the facilitators to observe in the position of a parent participant. More details about this program, including the significance of my positioning as a parent participant and as a white settler will be discussed in Chapter Four. Moving on from descriptions of my fieldwork, in the next section I will discuss the ways that different aspects of my identity shaped my experiences and emerging understandings of my data.
Researcher’s Positionality

Both my engagements with feminist methodologies and what I learned in my fieldwork have impressed on me the importance of positionality or of locating myself in relation to place, to my research and to others. In the following sections I describe who I am and how I came to be here, both in terms of how, as a practitioner, I came to be researching deficit thinking and family literacy and how as a mother and a white settler, I came to understand my relationship to family literacy practice and research in new ways.

I am a practitioner

My research began with my own work as a community based adult literacy and EAL practitioner. Working in several different contexts with learners of diverse backgrounds, I became interested in family literacy because I felt that it had the potential to support some adult learners in developing their own literacy skills in the context of their lives and everyday practices, in particular the significant part of their lives as parents. It seemed an exciting and potentially empowering approach to literacy learning for parents, an impression that was reinforced for me as I read about community-based programs such as Elsa Auerbach’s work on participatory approaches (Auerbach, 1992).

Immersed in the day-to-day realities of working in an adult literacy program, including marginal funding and my own lack of job security, I witnessed the challenges faced by many of the adult learners with whom I worked. These challenges, including struggles with poverty, illness, violence and addiction, were intertwined with their daily experiences of literacy. I don’t want to suggest that all adult literacy learners are poor or that all poor people experience or perpetuate violence and addiction. As an adult literacy worker I worked with people from diverse social, economic and cultural backgrounds who wanted to improve their
literacy skills. However, many learners in literacy programs where I worked did experience multiple challenges – multiple markers of marginalization. I encountered the realities of literacy work along with the dominant discourses of literacy work and these discourses shaped my thinking and my practice. These discourses were always already there, active in the field before I entered it, constituting what literacy work was and was not. They were rooted in discussions of IALS scores (International Adult Literacy Survey) and learning disabilities and linked learners’ life skills with their abilities to succeed in education and in life. During this time, moments would arise when the dominant ways of ‘doing literacy’ didn’t feel right: for example, in conversations with colleagues about the connection between life skills and literacy or at moments when I would find myself using IALS stats to defend my work to funders and the public.

When I was first introduced to family literacy, I felt the approach had great potential to support learners in adult literacy programs who were also parents. However, there were also things that bothered me about the dominant conversations in the field. I worried that adult learners did not get enough attention as learners in their own right in family literacy programs and I cringed at comments I heard made by some involved in the field. I would sometimes hear practitioners exchange stories about parents that emphasized the ways that they saw literacy learners failing as parents. Once, an administrator who supervised family literacy program staff described to me why he felt family literacy’s emphasis on children's learning was the approach that his organization should take to literacy work; in his words, it was often “too late” for the adults anyway.

I found some allies in the field, particularly those working from a more community development or popular education perspective and those who acknowledged and tried to
challenge the impact of structural inequality in their work. But even so, the common sense understandings we based our work on did not always seem sensible to me. In conversation with colleagues (including those I considered sympathetic) I struggled to find language to express my concerns. I found myself constantly responding to comments with “yes, but….”

Of all my concerns, two particularly stood out. First, I felt that much of what we promoted in family literacy programs was class-based and culturally specific. Many of the practices that we encouraged families to engage in (in particular ways) such as storybook reading seemed to me to be part of one particular way of doing literacy, a way that worked for many middle class Euro-western families and that were congruent with Euro-western approaches to schooling, but I was not sure I agreed that these practices were the only or best way to support children’s literacy development. Second, although I was not yet a mother myself, I felt sure that the mothers who came to the programs I facilitated had more on their minds than how to read books to their children. I suspected that, at times at least, they even had more on their minds than the needs of their children. I thought they might have needs of their own, outside of their roles/identities as mothers, that they also came to the program to address. In my master’s research I tried to explore this suspicion. During the process of researching and writing my thesis I also became a mother myself. These two experiences immersed me in the complexity of the subjectivity of mothers and the layers of identity mothers bring with them to family literacy programs.

I am a mother

In addition to my experiences as a practitioner, my own experiences as mother are also important in how I think about my research and how I think about what theory has to do with lived experience. Becoming a mother in the midst of writing my masters’ thesis about
mothers in family literacy programs has shaped my life as an academic and a literacy practitioner. I think it is also important that my experience of being a graduate student has been shaped profoundly by my experience of being a mother.

As I began my PhD at OISE, my family entered a new phase of our relationships with schools. My son entered grade one, a new stage in formal schooling, and my daughter entered her first year of formal schooling (in Ontario), junior kindergarten. I also returned to school full time and was trying to figure out my role as mother/full-time student while my husband took my place as part-time worker/at-home parent. I struggled to find mental and physical space to do the kind of ‘deep thinking’ my program demanded of me and at the same time to be ‘present’ as a caring and supportive mom to my five and six year-old children.

Our year in Toronto turned out to be full of ups and downs for all of us, particularly regarding our relationships with my children’s school, and I viewed it all through the lens of poststructural and critical theories about schooling (and vice versa for that matter). In class, I would draw on examples from my families’ experiences with school to help me explore critical and poststructural theory. At home, I would view our experiences through critical and poststructural lenses. The layers of my life were experienced separately, yet simultaneously, and continue to be. As a former family literacy practitioner and researcher, as a graduate student and as a mother, I experienced tensions and paradoxes as well as connections and consistencies. For example, as I tried to help my son with his at-home reading program I was reminded of the ways in which schools privilege academic literacy practices over family literacy practices and also of one way that schools regulate parents and mothers in particular. As I wrote a critique of the way a family literacy program narrowly constructed mothers, I
was reminded of the ways in which I reproduced such constructions in my own practices as a mother (Griffith & Smith, 2005).

As we have moved forward in our education, my children, husband and I have found that school was not always such a great fit for us and two years ago, towards the end of my field work, we began homeschooling/unschooling. Our explorations of unschooling (ironically as I began instructing in a teacher education program) have challenged me to think about how children learn and what they need and this has led to a lot of questioning of the common sense ideas that inform schooling and family literacy work particularly notions of developmentalism and children’s subjectivity (Cannella, 1999; Spatig, 2005; Walkerdine, 1993). My experience supporting my children’s learning tells me that a lot of the rhetoric in family literacy is not necessarily true. You can do (and be) all the ‘right’ things and your children still may struggle with school literacy. And you can choose a different path, a path that challenges conventional understandings of schooling, and your kids might just be (better than) okay, at least for those of us with white privilege.⁵

I have felt the pressure of trying to figure out who I am as a mother and I know that my subjectivity as mother is determined by discourses of mothering and notions of the ideal mother. To say I am a mother does something; that word constitutes me in a way that is beyond the boundaries of my subjectivity, is always already there. It means that the choices I have about who I am are delimited and that some things are possible or sayable and some things are not.

⁵ I recognize that our/my experience of homeschooling is embedded in our identities and privileges as white middle class settlers. While I feel strongly that the ‘choice’ to take our children out of the system is one we should all have, I am aware of the tension that those who are most damaged by the system may be the least able to ‘choose’ to leave it.
The importance of my identity as a mother in this thesis is in part its role in shaping how I understand family literacy work. The discourses of mothering that I will talk about and that are intertwined with deficit thinking are discourses that construct me in ways both similar to and differently from other mothers. As white and middle class, I can, in theory, approach the ideal mother of family literacy; as a mother with a disability I stand outside, invisibilized/made nonsensical by the dominant representations/interpellations of ‘ideal’ motherhood. I feel conflicted about the images and ideals - both wanting to resist but also wanting to be a good mother, as (mostly) all mothers do. And in being a mother I am some things and not others. I can only make sense as a mother in certain ways and in certain places.

I am a white settler

As I described above, other than the one year I spent in Toronto to do coursework for my PhD, I have lived on the Canadian Prairies and on land ceded by treaty for my entire life. My ancestors came to this part of the world in the mid to late 1800s mostly from Eastern Canada. At various points before that they were from Scotland, Ireland and France. They came to Manitoba and Saskatchewan to farm. They were homesteaders or they bought their land directly from first generation homesteaders. They, and consequently I, were the direct beneficiaries of the treaties.

The place I grew up, Winnipeg, Manitoba is on Treaty One land. Traditionally the land of the Cree and the Ojibway people (and then the Métis), it was settled by Europeans of French and British/Scottish descent/ancestry as well as by a large and growing Métis population who traded furs and farmed and began industries. As the city grew and boomed in the late 18th and early 20th centuries, it became populated with Eastern Europeans, including a large Jewish
community. Eventually people from other parts of the world came as well. Growing up, I was aware of and ‘appreciated’ the ethnic diversity of my city. The neighbourhood I lived in was predominately white and mostly Anglo Saxon but there were also a small but significant Jewish population, a number of families that identified as Italian, Polish and Ukrainian, and some more recent non-white immigrants, mostly from India.

Despite the significant role of Aboriginal, particularly Métis, people in the development of Winnipeg, my awareness of Aboriginal people in Winnipeg was minimal as a child. I was not aware of knowing any First Nations or Métis kids growing up, although later I realized that there were a few Aboriginal kids on my street and in my schools, including a family I babysat for periodically and two sisters on my block who I played and had been adopted by a British couple as part of the ‘60s scoop’ (although not in the 60s). As a kid, I did know they were adopted but I had not known they were Aboriginal. I had thought/assumed they were just ‘Canadian’ (that is just white). At the time, and until fairly recently, I had never heard of the 60s scoop, the name for a government policy that removed thousands of Aboriginal children from their homes and placed them with white families during the 1960s and 1970s. The things I remember hearing about ‘Indians’ when I was a kid were mostly derogatory, but they were always about people I didn’t know and/or didn’t see.

I also didn’t grow up with some consciously triumphal/grand/storied narrative about settlement. I didn’t hear much about how my ancestors had come over from the old country and worked hard to get us to where we are today. All my grandparents and great-grandparents (most of who I never knew and none of whom I remember) were born ‘here’. I knew that some of my ancestors were Scottish. My dad was interested in genealogy and where his family had come from, particularly his Scottish heritage (he was/I am also of Irish
and French descent). We visited dusty prairie graveyards on summer vacations looking for graves of mostly forgotten relatives so that he could piece together lost bits of the story. I felt we had practically always been in Canada and was only vaguely interested in what had come before. Stories that placed us in the position of the other always interested me more. I did not know for a long time that my dad’s family was significantly French or more than half Irish. I was always interested when pieces of this story would come out: how the KKK where he grew up would target the Catholics or how my grandmother had grown up speaking French and English and almost became a nun. These things were kind of exotic to me and distant. Not part of who I was. In my mind we hadn’t come and settled and succeeded; we just were here. I see now that this perspective served to separate me from ‘immigrants’ as well as to obscure the ways in which I was complicit in colonialism.

As I became engaged in feminist and activist communities in my teens and twenties, my political awareness grew. I was aware of homelessness among Aboriginal people in Winnipeg. Often downtown I was stopped on the street by Aboriginal panhandlers and I prided myself on being respectful and compassionate, sharing when I could, when I felt comfortable. In various volunteer and paid positions, I occasionally worked with Aboriginal people and communities; I thought about the injustice their people had experienced and imagined a previous time when Aboriginal people and Europeans had met peacefully at the Forks of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers to trade. I knew the history, the role of Louis Riel and the Metis in founding the province. And I knew that colonialism hadn’t worked out all that well for the Aboriginal people who lived alongside me. But until I did this research, I hadn’t really thought about ‘my’ history in the context of ‘their’ history, or rather about the
ways in which our histories were entangled. I hadn’t really thought about how I had come to be there.

Currently I live on Treaty Four land. I am a white settler here; I am a treaty person. I think about my history, or the history of my ancestors, and how my being here, where I am today, sitting in my 100 year old house, staring out at my street (named after some colonial hero, no doubt) depends on this history of colonialism and treaties. My ancestors benefited from the treaties by being given the right to homestead, to ‘settle’ this land. And they continued to benefit from that relationship often using the cheap labour of local Aboriginal and Metis people on the farm. As an adult, I have learned some of the ways in which Aboriginal people continued to support my family in developing middle class status. My parents both grew up on farms in different parts of the Canadian Prairies. My dad was the oldest of ten in a Catholic family in which his mom was a school teacher. While he was growing up his family relied on hired girls, Cree and Métis. My mom’s family also relied on Aboriginal labour - workers who helped out with harvest and lived, temporarily, in little shacks on the side of the highway. Shacks I passed every weekend of my early life, on the way to my grandmother’s house. I sit here in this middle class life today maybe in part because of the hard work of my predecessors, but definitely as a beneficiary of the injustices experienced by First Nations people.

**Audience for the thesis**

When I first began to plan this research, I wanted to produce something that would be of interest to practitioners working in the field of family literacy. I also hoped that it would offer something to researchers interested in social practices understandings of literacy, deficit thinking in education and feminist poststructural research in education. Although the research
ended up going in different directions from what I at first anticipated, I am hopeful that these groups will still find something in these pages that seems useful or thought-provoking. I have talked a little bit about what that might be in my conclusion chapter.

In addition to these audiences, I hope the thesis will offer something to educators and researchers in different fields who are interested in decolonizing practice, indigenization and settler studies in educational context. In the conclusion chapter, I have made some tentative connections to the ways that decolonization and indigenization are being talked about in k-12 and post-secondary education. There may also be something of interest here to researchers drawing on critical race studies or cultural studies in education.

**Layers of the thesis (Strands of the braid)**

In this section I give an overview of the layers of the story I tell as they appear through the chapters of this document. In *Chapter Two*, informed by feminist genealogical approaches (Pillow, 2003). I begin to explore the history of family literacy. My discussion focuses on how family literacy as a field began within in a complex policy and research context about 30 years ago. The beginnings of the field were informed by a community-based commitment to social change and a literacy practice that reflected people’s lives, but also by the neo-conservative 1980’s war against poverty and the poor, concern/hysteria about school outcomes and focus on the cycle of risk. The field was significantly shaped by the deficit thinking that shapes educational practice in the United States (Valencia, 2010) and Canada. In this chapter I consider how deficit thinking might be a matter of “orientation” (Ahmed, 2006, 2007b) and consider that strengths-based approaches, the usual counter to deficit thinking, might not actually re-orient us.
In Chapter Three, I draw specifically on Pillow’s “feminist genealogy” (Pillow, 2004) to explore how deficit thinking in the field of family literacy has constituted and regulated ‘the bodies in the room’ in family literacy programs. I discuss the gendered critique of the field that has focused on the way the ‘burden’ of family literacy is placed on women (Cuban & Hayes, 1996; Hutchison, 2000; Smythe, 2006; Smythe & Isserlis, 2002). I discuss how notions of ‘diversity’ and culture appear in family literacy programs and policy. Drawing again on Valencia (2010), my continued exploration of the notion of deficit thinking as a racialized and racializing discourse that was always already there, and into which family literacy as a field arrived, leads to me new insights on race and deficit thinking. I discuss the ways in which I have become increasingly interested in issues of race, whiteness and colonialism (Ahmed, 2007b).

As I explored the link between race, deficit thinking and family literacy, I was also developing an increasing awareness of colonialism as a factor in the field of family literacy. The ways in which the connection between family literacy work and settler colonialism became visible to me is the focus of Chapter Four. I have located the turning point of this chapter in my observations in the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting program. During this experience I began to think in new ways about my identity as a white settler and my relationships to this place that I live and work. As layers of historical context became increasingly visible to me, I came to understand that all family literacy programs in Saskatchewan took place on treaty land and the people in the programs were “all treaty people.” These realizations came partly through engaging with my theoretical framework and analysis but also through experience, in particular the experience of ‘losing my chair’ (Ahmed, 2007b) and of feeling de-centred.
Observing in the Aboriginal Parenting Program helped me see the presence of colonial frontier logics (Donald, 2009c). This is the focus of Chapter Five. I could see that I had continued to construct the problem of deficit as a problem of the way ‘we’ (those of us inside the fort) see ‘them’ (those outside the fort). Now I started to see deficit thinking as something that shapes how we see relationships and in focusing on relationships, I began to want to move towards ‘better’ relationships (Ahmed, 2002) or towards what Donald calls “ethical relationality” (Donald, 2009c).

Chapter Six explores the idea of respect and how a more robust understanding of respect might work to create programs that support these better, more ethical relationships. Building on my observations of family literacy programs, particularly the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting program, I suggest that practitioners, programs and policies informed by robust respect commit to better (reciprocal) relationships and then act on that commitment. Furthermore, robust respect is grounded in an ontology that views the other as inherently worthy of respect. Finally, robust respect recognizes the historical context of place and identity. For family literacy programs in Saskatchewan, and perhaps beyond, this requires us to acknowledge and explore the impact of historical and ongoing colonialism on the lives of participants and facilitators.

In Chapter Seven, I reflect on the layers of my story and how I have come to see family literacy programs and research in new ways. I consider some of the gaps and silences in this thesis and how these might direct me in my future research. I also consider the unfinished nature of this work and suggest that in order to consider an ‘anti-deficit’ family literacy

6 The relevance of this work beyond Saskatchewan is important, but it is beyond the scope of this thesis.
practice we (particularly white settlers in the field) might need to resist the desire to ‘move forward’ and instead must continue to dwell in unsettled space.
Chapter 2: Framing the problem: Family literacy and deficit thinking

Introduction

My discussion in this chapter reflects my early thinking about the ‘problem’ of deficit thinking and family literacy. Starting with my experience as a practitioner, interpreted through my developing understanding of post-structural genealogy and Indigenous Métissage, I discuss how the field of family literacy has been constituted through multiple discourses and how these discourses have contributed to my own experiences of tension and disconnect in the field. As I will discuss in the chapter, these explorations into the genealogy of the concept of family literacy have helped me begin to see how deficit thinking and strengths-based practice, while described as opposites, were in many ways interdependent. They have been shaped by the same set of ideals and were a result of the same processes of normalization and regulation that had constructed family literacy as a thing that could be researched and as a practice in which a program could ‘intervene’ with the goals to change or improve upon existing family ways of learning.

In this chapter, I begin a genealogical analysis of the field of family literacy as it has come to be constituted in Saskatchewan, Canada. Through a close reading of documents drawn from the field in Saskatchewan, Canada and the United States, I trace the roots and ongoing presence of deficit thinking in family literacy work. In doing so, I pay particular attention to the tenacious and amorphous nature of deficit thinking (Valencia, 2010) and to the ways in which language and practices continue to work to reinscribe deficit thinking.
In my discussion, I pay particular attention to how the origins of the field can be located in two seemingly contradictory perspectives: one, which I will describe later as the social practices view, was informed by a view that saw literacy as a diverse set of social practices embedded in particular cultural contexts and by critical and social change approaches to education. The other, which I have called the intervention view, was shaped by school-based notions of literacy intertwined with concerns about ‘the literacy crisis’ that linked individuals’ low literacy levels to unemployment and poverty. Of interest in my discussion is how these seemingly contradictory perspectives have been intertwined in the development of the field and how they have both worked to maintain deficit thinking in family literacy (Gadsden, 2002).

Methodologically, this chapter draws on poststructuralist approaches to genealogy (Pillow, 2003, 2004; Tamboukou, 1999, 2003a, 2003b) as well as literary and Indigenous Métissage (Donald, 2012b; Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009). From a genealogical perspective, this chapter explores the history of family literacy as a field focusing on “the processes, procedures and apparatuses by which truth and knowledge are produced, in what Foucault calls the discursive regime of the modern era” (Tamboukou, 1999, p. 202). I explore these processes in the context of family literacy work and pay particular attention to how those processes/truths have been constituted in and through discourses of deficit/deficit thinking terms that I will discuss in detail later in this chapter. In Chapter Three, I expand on the genealogy begun here and drawing on Pillow’s approach to feminist genealogy (Pillow, 2003, 2004) I consider how family literacy programs and policy have worked to construct and regulate the gendered and racialized bodies of participants and practitioners.
Genealogical methods have informed my analysis and particularly the discussion in this chapter; however, as discussed in Chapter One, I do not claim that this work is a genealogy. While drawing on these specific genealogical traditions, I recognize the limits of my discussion. Genealogy as research method is often sweeping, covering long periods of time, and is meticulous (Foucault, 2003). My use of genealogy is neither. I have limited my discussion in scope, choosing a few representative documents from research, policy and practice that I feel show the ways in which deficit thinking has been intertwined in the development of the field of family literacy. I have also chosen to discuss a few key documents that, informed by my experience in the field and the more ethnographic aspects of my research, I believe are representative of family literacy discourse in Saskatchewan.

From the perspective of métissage, this chapter is but one strand in a braid (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009). Alternatively, drawing on Donald’s metaphor of pentimento, this chapter represents my first attempt at scraping away the layers to reveal new perspectives. “Pentimento implies a desire to scrape away layers that have obscured or altered our perceptions of an artifact or memory as a way to intimately examine the character of those layers” (Donald, 2004).

**Narrative and Discourse**

Foucault described genealogy as “a history of the present” (Rabinow & Rose, 2003). In this chapter, I begin by exploring the history of how deficit thinking continues to be tenaciously present in family literacy work today.

Later in the thesis, I begin to look at more layers of family literacy discourse from different angles and in different lights. In particular, I explore layers of place and identity and I begin
to see the ways in which I have also been constituted. To begin this discussion, I have chosen a narrative from my own experience as a practitioner. I experienced the narrative as a moment of tension in which certain common sense understandings about family literacy became clear to me. It was the first time I could remember seeing deficit thinking in action, although I did not understand at first that that was what was happening. In my initial reflections on this experience, I was unaware that, like the strengths-based approaches to family literacy that I drew from, I was also implicated in and reinscribing the dominant discourses of deficit thinking. Through the research process, I have come to understand that this is the case. According to Foucault (1972), we are always within discourse; power circulates through and in these relations in ways that shape us as subjects.

This story became a starting point for me in which I began to see discourses that I did not understand, but which surely impacted the ways in which I was constituted as a practitioner but also as a mother. This is the point at which I remember beginning to wonder about “the processes, procedures and apparatuses by which truth and knowledge are produced” in family literacy. As told here, this story is a memory, and in this chapter I begin an “intimate examination” of the layers that memory, as I have begin to understand them.

I have tried to present this story as I remember experiencing it at the time, although obviously layers of subsequent experience and the vagaries of memory have shaped the version of the story I have produced here. In the sections immediately following the story, I will offer some of the layers of context that I was only vaguely aware of as a new practitioner. The remaining sections of the chapter will present more layers of my understanding as I scrape away some more layers of the pentimento. To introduce the story, I
give a little background on the state of field of family literacy in Saskatchewan at the beginning of the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century.

**Family literacy in Saskatchewan and Canada: Some context**

In the early 2000s, family literacy was an established but still new approach to adult literacy programming and knowledge of the field was developing in Saskatchewan. Funding for family literacy programs was expanding and the provincial government was demonstrating its commitment to the field with new program and training initiatives. The 1990s had seen considerable growth in family literacy as a programming approach and a policy focus in adult literacy across Canada (Kennedy, 2008; Shohet, 2012; Thomas & Skage, 1998). In 1994, the (now defunct) Movement for Canadian Literacy,\textsuperscript{7} a national coalition of provincial literacy organizations, held its first national family literacy conference. Throughout the 1990’s the federal government provided funding for family literacy projects and program development through the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS)(Shohet, 2012). In 1997-98 family literacy was recognized by the NLS as a funding priority for the year (Thomas & Skage, 1998) and in Saskatchewan, provincial funding specifically for family literacy programs was first made available in 1998 through the Family Literacy Initiative (Klassen & Veeman, 1999). During this period, Saskatchewan’s Ministry of Education also made money available for family literacy programs in schools.

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\textsuperscript{7} The Movement for Canadian Literacy was formed in 1976 and served as a national advocacy, networking, and support organization for adult literacy work at the national level. In 2010 MCL changed its name to Canadian Literacy and Learning Network (AlphaPlus, 2010). At about this time the organization moved away from family literacy work in response to funding and policy decisions in the Federal government. In September 2014, CLLN announced that it would be closing its doors by March of 2015 due to a loss of funding (Canadian Literacy and Learning Network, 2014).
While interest in and support for family literacy work appeared strong, there were many challenges that faced the growing field in Canada (Kennedy 2008; Shohet 2012). While the United States had put policy and funding support behind an intensive full-time family literacy national model called Even Start (Gadsden, 2002), in Canada, organizations pieced together funding to deliver low intensity (few program hours per week), short term family literacy programs (Thomas, 2001). The field had a diverse and dispersed character. Although in many parts of Canada family literacy programs had an established connection to adult literacy work, this relationship was uneven across the country (Kennedy, 2008). There was little consistency across provinces, several different models were being used, and the context for programs included adult literacy programs, family resource centres, community health centres, libraries and early childhood education programs. Schools were also involved in family literacy to varying degrees and in various ways. This made it difficult to identify a cohesive field of family literacy or a cohesive set of principles of practice.

Just as programs were happening in several different contexts, practitioners also came from a wide variety of backgrounds and the knowledge and experiences that they brought with them were diverse. Some leaders in the field expressed concerns that new practitioners were not receiving adequate training to meet the demands of the complex interdisciplinary work of family literacy (Klassen & Veeman, 1999). Initiatives such as the Foundational Training in Family Literacy (Centre for Family Literacy, 2002) that some of my colleagues and I had attended the year before developing the program described below were in part a response to these concerns. The Saskatchewan Literacy Network’s Introduction to Family Literacy workshop which started a few years later, and which I observed in as part of my data collection, was another response to these concerns.
I, along with the organization I worked for, came to be involved in family literacy work partly because of these trends in policy and the funding opportunities that came with them. We were excited to be able to offer a new program to a group of learners we felt was underserved - immigrant mothers. We were also always looking for any new sources of funding that could help expand and stabilize our organization. In addition, in the early 2000s as family literacy grew, funding for adult literacy programs (in Canada and Saskatchewan) was becoming more narrowly focused on essential skills and increasingly employment outcomes were being used as evidence of accountability (Smythe, 2015). Overall, funding was more scarce and more difficult to retain, particularly for programs that took a more holistic approach and were not focused on ‘measurable’ changes in employment for participants. Eventually this trend would mean that in many places in Canada (perhaps less so in Saskatchewan) adult literacy funders moved away from funding family literacy projects, though this was not yet the case in 2001.

The community-based adult literacy programs that I worked with, particularly the one in which I started doing family literacy work, had always worked with learners who, for various reasons, were generally less focused on getting a job, at least in the short term. As an adult literacy program we worked with both English language learners and English speaking literacy learners. Some learners in our programs had disabilities that limited their opportunities and sometimes their interest in full time employment. Many of the learners we worked with were newcomers who were already employed in low paying jobs, sometimes despite having professional qualifications and work histories in their home countries. Lack of English literacy was often a significant barrier to better employment but it was not the only barrier, and their need to work to support themselves and their families contributed to slower
(academic) progress in English skills. Their goals sometimes included accessing further education to improve their long-term employment prospects (not a measurable outcome according to some funders). Other learners were more interested in integrating socially into Canadian society. And some learners, both newcomers and Canadian-born, were stay at home parents, almost always mothers, who weren’t looking to immediately enter the workforce but wanted to improve their English language literacy and also wanted to make connections in the community. For these learners, family literacy programs seemed like a good option and funding was available so we began to work more in this area. As we were aware, this did not help us address the needs of learners who also were not eligible for employment focused programs and for whom family literacy programs did not make sense including many disabled learners, underemployed English language learners and learners with very low literacy skills that were (usually among other things) a barrier to employment.

A story from my practice

In about 2001, I was involved in developing a family literacy program for immigrant families who were learning English as an additional language (EAL). I was working in a community-based literacy program offering one-to-one volunteer tutoring supplemented with a few part time classes for learners. We had recently lost funding for a computer assisted literacy and language for Employment class and were looking for new ways to meet the learning needs of the learners who had attended the class. We knew that many of the participants in these classes were immigrant women who were stay at home moms, some of whom also worked part time. This program worked for them because it was part-time (only a few hours a week), learner-centred, in that it was adapted to the language levels and learning needs of the participants, and it was offered at times when other family members were available to be at
home with the children or when older children were in school. The women came to learn English and make social connections. Their backgrounds and current situations were diverse but in conversations with staff members and during activities in class several of the women had shared that they were not looking for immediate employment, although many of them were hoping to seek further education or (re)enter the workforce when their children were older. We thought a family literacy program that included English classes for the mothers and an early childhood component for their children might better meet their needs.

The women came from diverse language and cultural backgrounds and had different levels of comfort with English. Some had attended a few years of school in their first language and some had University degrees and had worked as professionals before coming to Canada. All of them faced the challenges of raising children in a new country far away from family. We wanted to support the women with the diverse literacy and English language demands they encountered in their daily lives as mothers and we wanted to do so in an environment that felt empowering and welcoming. Drawing on the participatory model of Auerbach (1992), we envisioned a program that was community-based, learner-centred and strengths-focused in which participants co-created the curriculum.

We needed a little bit of money, about $5000 a year, to cover program expenses that were outside of our core budget specifically for food, transportation and staff to provide childcare. There was a new family literacy grant being offered by the provincial government and it seemed to be a good fit. We started putting together our proposal. We partnered with another community-based organization that agreed to develop and facilitate programming for the parent and child together time that we imagined. I planned to facilitate a participatory
English language class for the parents that would be developed with the participants around family related themes they were interested in.

I sent a draft proposal to organizations asking for letters of support to include with the funding application and most responded positively. One of these requests went to the executive director of a provincial literacy organization. The organization worked closely with the provincial government as well as with ‘the field’ and often served as a go-between in policy and program development. They were influential in provincial funding decisions and were seen as a leader in family literacy work in the province. We felt we needed their support.

The ED seemed cautiously supportive. She said she would pass the proposal on to their family literacy coordinator so that the coordinator could (this was my understanding) write the letter. A few days later we received an e-mail from the ED saying that the family literacy coordinator did not feel comfortable with our proposal and as a result the organization would not be offering their support.

I felt as if I had the wind knocked out of my sails.

I contacted the ED for more information and then spoke to the family literacy coordinator. After a series of back and forth e-mails and conversations, I felt that I understood her position but I was still puzzled by the stance she was taking. She expressed concern that we were not explicitly including in our program a component that would teach parents to support the development of their children’s pre-literacy skills. Her example? Teaching parents to read to their children.
I consulted with my coworkers. I met with staff at the other organization. We made some adjustments and tried to explain to the family literacy coordinator that, while not ruling out the kind of activities she was asking us to include, we didn’t want to promise that we would include any particular literacy activity. We wanted to work with the parents and together develop a program that would address their literacy needs as family members and individuals.

In the end, we did not get her support. She suggested that, while the program might be valuable and needed, it was not, in her eyes, family literacy.

The funding program manager at the province expressed similar concerns but granted us the money: $5000 for a year of programming. The first year went well, we learned a lot. Since then, the program has been running for over decade and, in terms of participation and learner satisfaction, is a success.

**Connecting the story to deficit thinking**

Before the experience described in the story, I had been conscious of the link between deficit thinking and family literacy work and, as an adult literacy worker, I had wondered if family literacy programs prioritized the needs of children over the needs of the adults in the program (Cuban & Hayes, 1996). But, like other adult literacy practitioners, I also saw great potential in the family literacy model (Sanders & Shively, 2007) and I thought that a participatory Freirean model, such as the one described by Elsa Auerbach (1992, 1995), could ‘work’ in the context of our program.

My co-workers, partners and I were excited by the potential of the program. It was different from what we had done in the past and different from other family literacy programs that
were happening in the province, many of which followed the *Come Read with Me* model, a model developed by the Saskatchewan Literacy Network which focuses on using children’s books to support children’s (literacy) development. As we were writing the proposal we were conscious of trying to describe the program in a way that would communicate its newness but also show that it was not based on radically different ideas than the family literacy work that the funder was likely to be familiar with. The proposal we had created was based firmly in an established family literacy approach informed by a literacy as social practices and popular education approach (Auerbach, 1992) and drew on many ideas we had learned about in a *Foundations to Family Literacy* workshop that the Saskatchewan Literacy Network had recently offered in conjunction with the Manitoba provincial literacy office. It also was rooted in the particular needs/experiences/desires of learners that were already registered in our programs. The program we were developing was also a much closer approximation of the four component or ‘Kenan’ model which was often referenced as the ideal; that is it included an adult education component, an early childhood component and a parent and child together component (this model will be discussed later in the chapter).

We anticipated that the government funder might not be initially supportive of the program; we did not think that colleagues in the field would question the value of the approach. The lack of support of the family literacy coordinator I described above, who was a community-based practitioner herself, was a total surprise. Looking back and through my subsequent experiences in the field as well as through the theoretical lens of my current research (and data), I can now more clearly see how the tensions and disconnect I experienced were connected to *competing* understandings of family literacy work which were embedded in competing discourses that shaped the field. My interest shifted to the tension created in
programs in which “the use of literacy as a means of control lies uneasily alongside the power of literacy and knowledge to cross domains and transform practices” (Pitt 2000).

Underlying these tensions were some questions that guided my early explorations of family literacy and deficit thinking such as: What is (family) literacy? What counts as family literacy work/programs? And who gets to define family literacy (programs)? As I continued with my research journey other questions became more prominent, questions that connected to deficit thinking and the ways in which strengths-based and deficit thinking approaches are part of the same binary. I began to think about how a particular view of family literacy as a set of practices (as opposed to a type of program) was informing assumptions about who participants are and what they need, and how it is that participants are constructed as “at-risk” parents/mothers who need to be taught how to support their children’s literacy development in narrow ways. As the story of my research journey emerged I began to see this story from my practice in new ways; I began to think about how it was embedded in a particular place, about who the bodies were that were being constituted and regulated through this story and I began to recognize my own positionality in the story - seeing ways in which I was complicit in constituting family literacy through colonial frontier logics and fort pedagogy. These layers will be discussed in later chapters.

Defining family literacy

My first attempts to understand the tensions evident in this example from my experience as a practitioner focused on the ways in which family literacy and family literacy programs were defined. Although my colleagues and I felt that we had planned an innovative program that clearly could be called “family literacy” (and therefore be eligible for funding designated for
family literacy programs) some of the ‘experts’ in the province did not agree and I was interested in better understanding the assumptions that informed these different views.

As a field, family literacy is not clearly defined and this lack of clear definition is often a subject of discussion in the literature (Brizius & Foster, 1993). According to Thomas and Skage (1998),

> trying to represent the scope of family literacy is a daunting task. It may be compared to trying to capture a wide landscape with a single camera shot. As the lens focuses on one part of the scene, another part of the landscape disappears from view, and the integrity of the picture is lost. (p. 5)

Reflective of this complexity, the (research) literature defines the field of family literacy in many different ways. For example, sometimes family literacy programs are defined as adult literacy programs that focus on how literacy is used and developed in families (Kennedy, 2008). Other times they are described as early childhood literacy programs that emphasize parent involvement (Nutbrown, Hannon & Morgan, 2005). And whereas family literacy work is portrayed as “a social movement based on social equity and empowerment of families” (Thomas & Skage, 1998, p. 18) in one policy conversation, it is described as an intervention intended to “inoculate” children against future school failure and poverty in another (Anderson, Lenters & McTavish, 2008). Family literacy policy is sometimes based on a social practices or critical view of literacy emphasizing the ways family and community members of all ages use literacy in their daily lives (Auerbach, 1995). At other times it is based on research suggesting that the first years of life represent a critical window for fostering brain development necessary for future academic success (Anderson, Lenters & McTavish, 2008). In addition, family literacy is also often linked to employment and the notion that increased literacy will lead to increased economic success for individuals and nations (Wasik & Van Horn, 2012). And while in Canada, school-based conversations about
parent involvement have generally been separated from discussions of family literacy programs, the two fields overlap in other places in many ways (Compton-Lilly & Greene, 2011).

These tensions around what family literacy is and what counts as family literacy work have appeared in many policy and practice documents that I reviewed. These documents often defined family literacy (as a practice and program approach) in vague and sometimes contradictory ways, as I will discuss in more detail below. This lack of clarity around definitions and parameters in the field may partly reflect an awareness of the ways in which families and literacies are diverse and complex. Such a perspective is evident when Thomas and Skage quote Taylor: “‘No single narrow definition of family literacy can do justice to the richness and complexity of families and the multiple literacies, including often unrecognized local literacies, that are part of their everyday lives’” (Taylor cited in Thomas & Skage, 1998, p. 7). However, I also believe that these contradictions are rooted in competing discourses that have informed the development of family literacy work.

One example of the ways in which these competing discourses work to (re)present family literacy in contradictory was is the tendency to use the term family literacy interchangeably and without clarification to describe both the literacy practices of families as well as policies and programs that promote particular ways of practicing literacy in families. As Anderson, Rogers, Kendrick & Pirbhai-Illich (2002) state, “for some, (family literacy) means intervention programs usually aimed at low-literate or marginalized families while for others, it encapsulates the myriad ways that literacy is practiced and promoted within the context of the family” (n.p.). As Hannon points out, this common conflation (which I have tried to avoid in this thesis) works to obscure sociocultural research into the way literacy happens in
families and also to erase family literacy practices that exist outside of the realm of targeted family literacy interventions (Hannon, 2000). With the erasure of these other meanings of family literacy, (family) literacy becomes something that can be understood and defined by experts, taught to non-mainstream parents and funded by governments and private funders.

This conflation appears in research documents as well as in documents from the field. For example, the following statement is from the *Family Literacy Toolkit* available on the Saskatchewan Literacy Network’s website: “Family literacy is founded on a strengths-based holistic model” (Saskatchewan Literacy Network, n.d., p. 2). What exactly the authors mean by family literacy in this statement is unclear. Family literacy is defined earlier in the document in reference to the processes by which an adult family member passes on knowledge and experience to a child. Although it is possible to say that these processes are strength-based, it does not seem to make a lot of sense to say that these processes are founded on a “strengths-based holistic model.” Instead, what appears to be happening is that the term family literacy is being used to refer to family literacy programs or more broadly to the field of family literacy. That the document does this, despite earlier having defined family literacy in terms of the practices of families suggests the ways in which this intervention-based definition of family literacy has become “common sense” (Kumashiro, 2015). It also suggests the extent to which deficit thinking (and, as I will discuss in chapter four, colonial frontier logics) shapes family literacy discourse at all levels. What has become most interesting to me is the ways in which these contradictions, which appear both within and outside of the field, are indicative of the politically complex terrain which family literacy occupies, including its deep roots in deficit thinking.
Deficit thinking in Education

Deficit thinking is a logic that predates the field of family literacy and is intertwined with the history of schooling itself (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Gorski, 2012; Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2005; Valencia, 2010). Valencia (2010) examined the construction/origins of deficit thinking in American education describing how deficit thinking has appeared and what it has done. According to Valencia (2010) deficit thinking locates the reason for school failure among minority groups in their own inadequacies:

The deficit thinking model is, at its core, an endogenous theory—positing that the student who fails does so because of his/her internal deficits or deficiencies. Such deficits manifest, adherents allege, in limited intellectual abilities, linguistic shortcomings, lack of motivation to learn, and immoral behaviour. (p. 6-7)

Valencia’s discussion of deficit thinking focuses on its various appearances/forms since the 1960’s; however, he acknowledges that evidence of deficit thinking can be seen historically in the United States long before the 1960s in arguments barring African slaves from access to education and in school segregationist laws and practices regarding both African Americans and Mexican Americans. His examples also bring to mind discourse around residential schools in Canada (Regan, 2010; Smith, Ng-A-Fook, Berry, & Spence, 2012).

Valencia (2010) identifies six characteristics of deficit thinking. First, deficit thinking is characterized by “victim blaming.” This builds on a tendency toward parsimony in which the simplest explanation, in this case that individuals cause/are responsible for their own failure, is seen to be the most likely to be true. Second, deficit thinking is a form of “oppression” that works to reinscribe the marginalized position of disadvantaged groups. Third, deficit thinking draws on “pseudoscience to support an alleged scientific paradigm of White superiority, apropos to people of color” (p. 13). Fourth, deficit thinking has a protean or chameleonic
nature so that its appearances are shaped by, fit into and build on the dominant ideas of the era. Fifth, Valencia sees deficit thinking as being shaped by a belief in the “educability” of the other; that is deficit thinking in education is characterized by a belief in ‘our’ ability to understand a problem and prescribe a solution to those who have ‘failed’ to achieve. Finally, Valencia notes that deficit thinking as orthodoxy is continuously challenged; there is always a heterodoxy questioning deficit thinking. Each of these characteristics is present in deficit thinking in the field of family literacy and I will try to highlight these characteristics in the discussion in the remainder of this chapter.

In addition to the six characteristics, Valencia’s discussion also describes three types of modern deficit thinking in American education discourse. Each type of deficit thinking exhibits the six characteristics. The first type of deficit thinking is “neohereditarianism,” which is a revival of eugenics thinking and promotes racist understandings of biology and genetics. Valencia’s argument is worth noting, that such racist pseudoscience has been present in American policy discourse throughout the thirty-year period in which the field of family literacy has existed. The ways in which race and racialization have shaped family literacy discourse will be discussed in Chapter Three.

The other two types of deficit thinking described by Valencia are the ‘culture of poverty’ type and the ‘at-risk’ type. These two types will be more apparent in my discussion of family literacy policy and practice in this chapter. The ‘culture of poverty’ type of deficit thinking begins with the argument that “a culture of poverty” can be identified and that it is this ‘culture’ that prevents people who are living in poverty from succeeding academically (and ultimately economically). This view “assert(s) that the poor are the makers of their own material disadvantagement and deprivation” (Valencia, 2010, p. 69). Valencia associates this
argument with Ruby Payne, a contemporary American educator who has been a popular speaker among educators in both the United States and Canada, who talks about the “mindsets of poverty.” However, Valencia notes that the roots of this notion predate Payne. He credits the idea of a “culture of poverty” to Oscar Lewis who discussed and popularized the notion in the 1960’s. Several researchers who were linked to President Johnson’s “war on poverty” took up the notion and emphasized that any attempt to help individuals out of poverty would only be successful alongside efforts to change the behaviours of the poor.

For example, Gladwin (1967) in his discussion of the war on poverty claimed,

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\text{if poverty is both the cause of and result of a way of life in which self defeating behaviours are learned by each rising generation then any attack on poverty should try to modify these behaviours. Put more positively this cultural conception of poverty means that if this cycle is to be broken poor people must among other things be taught new and more effective ways of functioning. (cited in Valencia, 2010, p. 72-73)}
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This idea continued to be present in policy discussion into the 1980s when the focus was on an underclass of “generational poor.” The perspective is very much linked to the notion of a ‘cycle of poverty and low literacy,’ a concept which was foundational to the development of family literacy policy in the United States in the 1980s (Auerbach, 1989) and continues to inform the field today (e.g. Cooter, 2006).

The third type of deficit thinking that Valencia discusses is based in the increasingly common “at-risk” concept. Valencia traces this idea all the way back to the Puritans who saw the souls of children as being at-risk of damnation. His further discussion focuses on the ways in which the concept has been used in educational discourse to identify children who are seen to be ‘at-risk’ of school failure. Drawing on the work of Swadener and noting that the ‘at-risk’ concept exists in several contexts and disciplines, Valencia chooses to focus on the way “at-risk” appears in three fields: medical and public health, child psychology and early
education, and child welfare and social policy. In these fields he describes at-risk discourses as framed by the concepts of prevention and intervention (particularly in the medical and early education fields) a connection also made by Elsa Auerbach in her 1989 article critiquing the field of family literacy (discussed in more detail below). In public policy in the United States, a link between education and the economy, present in the Nation at Risk report in the 1980’s (which I will also discuss later in the chapter), has shaped at-risk discourse. Valencia notes that use of the term “at-risk” reached a peak in the ERIC education database in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, again at the very time that family literacy was becoming established as an educational ‘intervention’. Another interesting claim discussed by Valencia is that the term “at-risk” was originally intended to focus on systems that put children at risk. "Rather schools are organized and run in such oppressive ways...that many students are placed at-risk of school failure" (Valencia, 2010, p. 125). But the dominant policy discourse refocused the concept on the behaviour of individuals and the ways in which they did not live up to ideal standards. This tension is worth keeping in mind as we discuss the ways in which family literacy developed as a field.

First appearances: family literacy through the lens of social practices

Although I will discuss the ways in which the field of family literacy was constituted in and by the discourses of deficit thinking discussed by Valencia, I recognize that the first appearances of the family literacy as a concept were located in a somewhat different set of assumptions. Family literacy as an identifiable approach to literacy programming began to appear in the United States in the 1980s. The concept soon spread to other English speaking countries so that by the mid 1990s it was an established approach to literacy education in
several countries, including Canada and the UK (Hannon 2000; Shohet 2012). It is these two countries, particularly the US, that have had the most influence on programs in Canada. A 1983 study by Denny Taylor is generally credited with coining the term family literacy (Shively & Thomas, 2009). Although, as some point out, programs and research that would likely now be designated as family literacy pre-exist Taylor’s study (Thomas & Skage, 1998), the publication of her book, *Family Literacy: Young Children Learning to Read and Write*, is often identified as the beginning of professional and academic interest in the family as a site of literacy development (Anderson, Anderson, Friedrich, & Kim, 2010). For the purposes of this study, and in keeping with the consensus in the literature, I use Taylor’s book to mark the beginning of family literacy as a field.

Taylor’s book was based on her PhD research work, an ethnographic study of the literacy practices of white middle class families in suburban New York where Taylor was living during her time as a PhD student at Columbia. Taylor’s initial interest in literacy was rooted in her experiences as a classroom teacher and her focus was on how children attending school learn to read. To learn about this she chose to study families in which at least “one child was considered by the parents to be successfully learning to read and write” (Taylor, 1983, p. 1). Taylor became interested in an ethnographic approach to literacy research after initially studying early reading through a psycho-linguistic approach. In her book she noted that in the mid 1970s the psycho-linguistic approach represented a new way of looking at reading as it focused on the process of reading as something separate from schooling and the curriculum. However, Taylor felt this approach to research did not reflect her own observations as a teacher in the East End of London where she saw children’s literacy development supported by their social context and their families’ interactions. While working
as a teacher she realized that the parents of her students knew more about how their children learned than she did and through this experience she became interested in how children learned to read and write within the context of the family.

As Gadsden (2002) points out, Taylor’s research was positioned within the context of early reading scholarship and was part of a conversation that was “opening up the way for a serious discussion of families as an important context for understanding literacy development and of family literacy as a potentially viable field” (n.p.). Contemporary to Shirley Brice Heath’s landmark study of literacy in a community in the Southern United States, *Ways with Words* (Heath, 1982, 2010), Taylor’s work can also be seen as part of an emerging sociocultural approach to literacy research known as New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000; Gee, 2012; Hamilton & Barton, 1998). According to Street (2003), NLS “represents a new tradition in considering the nature of literacy, focusing not so much on acquisition of skills, as in dominant approaches, but rather on what it means to think of literacy as a social practice” (p. 7). From the perspective of NLS “practices include the values, attitudes, feelings and relationships associated with using written texts” (Hamilton, 2006, p. 130).

Viewing literacy as a set of social practices, NLS scholars have attempted to resist dominant instrumentalist (skill-based) discourses of literacy, what Street calls the “autonomous view” of literacy (Hamilton, 2006; Street, 2003). As an alternative to this view, Street proposed an ideological view of literacy, which recognized the many different assumptions underpinning our understandings of literacy and its entanglement in relations of power. This view recognized that “in practice” literacy varies across contexts and cultures. Literacy from this perspective could not be isolated as a set of skills; rather, it was viewed as being situated in a
particular social context (Barton et al., 2000). Furthermore, in this view, literacy development was neither linear, nor hierarchical (Purcell-Gates, 2007). With increasing emphasis on multiple literacies as opposed to the singular literacy (Hamilton, 2006), New Literacy Studies challenged traditional views of literacy and recognized that understandings of literacy are embedded in relationships of power (Street, 2003). One (of many) implications of the NLS view of literacy is that school or academic literacy is seen as merely one of many different literacies (Purcell-Gates, 2007), albeit a powerful one and consequential to people’s lives.

Since the early 1980s, research into the literacy practices of families and communities has become established as a field and work continues to be done in this vein e.g. (Balanoff & Chambers, 2005; Barton et al., 2000; Hamilton & Barton, 1998; Mui & Anderson, 2008; Rogers, 2003; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1998). In addition, some family literacy programs have explicitly drawn on this research as well as on traditions of popular education and critical pedagogy (e.g. Auerbach, 1989, 1992; Hutchison, 2000; Quintero, 2009; Taylor, 1997). Indeed, this body of research and practice has been influential in my own work and informed my colleagues and I in developing the family literacy program described earlier. However, although Taylor’s book is often referenced in family literacy literature and some early family literacy programs were informed by sociocultural understandings of literacy, the degree to which texts from research, policy and practice have engaged with (or been informed by) the complexity of Taylor’s research and by NLS research in general varies a great deal. As I will discuss, I see this inconsistency as rooted in the diverse and contradictory discourses that inform family literacy work including the backgrounds of practitioners and policy makers working in the field.
For example, I see Handel’s (Handel, 1999a) use of Taylor’s work as fairly typical. In her discussion, Handel references Taylor’s 1983 study as well as her 1988 study with Catherine Dorsey-Gaines. In doing so, Handel takes up Taylor’s work (along with other similar studies) as prescriptive, “intended…to help guide programs and practices” (p. 7). However, as an ethnography, Taylor’s study was descriptive rather than prescriptive and emphasized context and relationship, something that is lost in Handel’s discussion of the work. Handel compares the practices of the “urban,” that is poor non-white,\(^8\) families living in inner city communities in the United States with whom she works to the practices of the middle class families Taylor studied. Although the comparisons are often made in favourable ways, in doing so Handel does not acknowledge the diverse ways in which literacy practices are embedded into the daily lives of families (Taylor, 1983). I have come to see that examples like this, which reference Taylor’s work in the absence of discussion of the complexity of the content or of issues of power, may work to reinforce the representation of white middle class practices presented in Taylor’s original book as ideal practices.

Taylor’s work was significant for the field of family literacy because in naming family literacy she identified both a topic that could be researched and a set of practices into which programs and policy could intervene. However, the dominant policy and program approach that developed in the United States through the 1980s and 1990s was informed by a different set of assumptions than those Taylor drew upon in her own work. Instead of drawing on research which showed the “complex understandings of families and the multiple literacies that are a part of their everyday lives” (Taylor, 1997, p. 1) and seeing families as a rich site of

\(^8\) See Pica-Smith and Veloria (2012) for a discussion of the practice of using the term ‘urban’ in this way.
literacy learning for children (and adults), this dominant perspective, promoted by the National Centre for Family Literacy (NCFL) in the United States and eventually legislated through Even Start policy, drew on the kinds of deficit thinking discourses described by Valencia (Valencia, 2010; Valencia & Black, 2002). These discourses framed literacy as “school-based” (Auerbach, 1989) and framed family literacy programs as ‘interventions’ directed at ‘at-risk’ families (Auerbach, 1995; Taylor, 1997).

In order to further explore the ways in which truth and knowledge about family literacy have been produced (Tamboukou, 2003b), I now turn my attention to another discourse that was present at the time of the emergence of the field and that has shaped the field in ways that have intertwined it with deficit thinking. In doing so, I am conscious of the ways in which these two discourses/origins of the field are intertwined and, like layers of a painting, can only be seen one through the other.

### The cycle of risk: family literacy programs as intervention

At the same time that Taylor’s book was published, the *A Nation at Risk* (1993) report also appeared in the United States (Prins & Van Horn, 2012). As discussed above, the report would come to be very influential in shaping educational discourse in the United States. From one perspective, this report “raised awareness about the persistence of children's poor literacy performance, particularly in impoverished, isolated, and vulnerable communities” (Gadsden, 2002) but the implications of the arguments made in the document would go beyond this simple statement to influence educational (and some would say economic) policy in the United States, Canada and globally (Smythe, 2006).
The perspective presented in the report also framed the dominant approach to family literacy work in the United States as well as other countries including Canada. From the perspective of the development of the field of family literacy, the *Nation at Risk* report framed parents as first and most important teachers in ways that would have an impact on government policy (Smythe, 2006). In the 1990’s this idea was further promoted by “‘new brain research’” that suggested that the first three (or five years or six) years of life were the most important for future success (Wall, 2004, p. 41). In Canada, the Early Years study (McCain & Mustard, 1999) was particularly influential. This policy discourse suggested that some children were “at-risk” and that their families needed intervention to prevent the continuation of the cycle of poverty and failure. The ways in which this perspective profoundly shaped family literacy as it developed a field can be seen clearly in documents produced by the National Centre for Family Literacy (NCFL) in the United States (Cuban & Hayes, 1996; Smythe, 2006).

The NCFL was a leading voice of family literacy advocacy in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s and through prolific publication and promotion it also strongly influenced family literacy discourse in Canada during that period (Smythe, 2006). In my own experience working in the field in the early part of the 21st Century, family literacy practitioners in Saskatchewan often referenced the organization’s materials and ideas. The influence of the “at-risk” perspective on the NCFL approach to family literacy in the United States can clearly be seen in *Generation to Generation: Realizing the Promises of Family Literacy* (Brizius & Foster, 1993). The book written by Brizius and Foster and “sponsored” by the NCFL aimed to take stock of the family literacy “movement” in the early 1990s and provide a vision for the future of the field.
Notably, Brizius and Foster’s book presented the notion of the “cycle of poverty” and the need to break this cycle as a key rationale for family literacy programs. With clear echoes of the “culture of poverty” discourse discussed by Valencia (2010), the book framed the creation of family literacy programs as a direct response to generational poverty and under education. The discussion in the book framed/constituted families living in poverty as being in need of “intervention” from outside. For example, the authors state:

> Poverty, ignorance, and despair can be carried down from generation to generation, or we can intervene and refuse to allow this vicious cycle to continue. In a search for ways to intervene with dignity and success, we have developed family literacy. Family literacy is an approach that can help break the cycle of poverty and dependency among families that need a second chance. Family literacy can be a tool available to every community to help break the intergenerational cycle of poverty, under education, and dependency. (Brizius & Foster, 1993)

In a chapter discussing the “history of family literacy” (which opens with a quote by Barbara Bush), Brizius and Foster acknowledged, “the history of families learning together is the history of literacy itself” (p. 25). From there, the book goes on to state that the history of family literacy as policy is less than a decade old at the time and the remainder of the history discussion focuses on family literacy as an intervention that will help break the cycle of risk. NCFL’s prescription for this cycle comes in the form of the “comprehensive model” of family literacy (Brizius & Foster, 1993).

The comprehensive model of family literacy refers to programs that include some variation of the following four components: adult literacy, early childhood literacy, parent and child together time and parenting education. Variations of this model were promoted by the NCFL (Gadsden, 2002) and through the Federal Evenstart program which, beginning in 1988, provided funding for programs that met a given set of criteria for family literacy programs in the United States (Brizius & Foster, 1993). As Gadsden points out, Evenstart, which in part
grew out of the NCFL discourse about family literacy, became “the most successful in institutionalizing the concept of family literacy in discussions of education and policy” (Gadsden, 2002, n.p.) and it is the NCFL/Evenstart model that has dominated research and policy discussions about family literacy in the United States. Although programs based on other approaches (such as the participatory approach described by Auerbach, 1992) were being developed and delivered throughout the 1980s and 1990s, research and policy discussions in the United States, shaped by the federal government and the powerful voice of the NCFL, focused on the four component model obscuring other possibilities and possible benefits of other approaches. In fact, Brizius and Foster and others working from within the NCFL discourse, suggested that models that do not include the four components of the ‘comprehensive model’ are not, in fact, family literacy programs. Brizius and Foster referred to such other approaches as ‘intergenerational programs’ and for the most part excluded them in their discussion of family literacy work. Hannon (2000) criticizes this perspective, particularly Sharon Darlings’ (the founder and director of the NCFL) use of the term “total programs” to describe four component programs, pointing out that the term suggests that other programs are somehow incomplete (a similar argument could be made about the use of the term ‘comprehensive programs’). In contrast, Hannon refers to the four component model as the “restricted model” because they “are restricted to families who participate in all components and because the programmes constitute a restricted subset of family literacy programmes in general” (p. 123).

The focus on the ‘comprehensive’ model has worked to shape the field of family literacy in a number of ways. First, in part by suggesting that an ideal family literacy program was long term and ‘intensive’ (several hours a week), it constructed participating families as ‘at-risk’
and suggested that they ‘needed’ this intense level of intervention. Second, it framed parents who were identified as targets for family literacy programs as in need of parenting education in addition to personal literacy development and family literacy support. Third, these programs normalized the surveillance of parents through parent and child together time, a component of four component programs in which facilitators observed parents as they interacted with their children in prescribed family literacy activities. Fourth, it reinscribed the connection of family literacy work to discourses of developmentalism, a metanarrative that constructs particular ‘truths’ about human development (MacNaughton, 2005; Nichols, 2004; Spatig, 2005; Walkerdine, 1993). It also linked family literacy to discourses of school readiness and parent involvement (Gadsden, 2002; Smythe, 2006).

**Deficit thinking and strengths-based practice**

Ultimately the NCFL discourse described above, which was itself deeply embedded in discourses of deficit thinking, worked to reinscribe deficit thinking within the field of family literacy. The presence/influence of deficit thinking in the field of family literacy has been noted since the 1980s when family literacy programs first appeared. In 1989, Auerbach published a seminal article that discussed the ways in which family literacy programs were informed by “school-based” approaches to literacy that blamed poor and language minority families for their children’s failure in school as well as for the economic crisis in the United States. Auerbach (1989) suggested that the dominant approach to family literacy programs worked to “blame the victim” and form “a new version of the deficit hypothesis” (p. 169).

In this article, Auerbach observed that proponents of this argument sometimes cited ethnographic literacy studies such as those by Heath (1983) focusing on the ways in which a mismatch between the home literacy practices of marginalized groups and the dominant
school literacy practices contributes to school failure. According to Auerbach the dominant model had interpreted such studies to mean that there is a lack of adequate literacy support in the homes of poor and language minority students and that these families are to be taught to emulate dominant literacy practices. Auerbach called this approach, exemplified in the EvenStart and NCFL approaches to family literacy discussed above, a “transmission of school practices” model. The kinds of tasks such programs focused on included teaching parents to communicate with schools and teachers, teaching parents games to play with their children, teaching parenting approaches and techniques and ‘training’ parents techniques for read(ing) to their children. Other literacy practices that families might engage in were obscured or, at the very least, made insignificant in this perspective.

Auerbach’s article marked the beginning of what has proven to be an ongoing conversation among both researchers and practitioners about deficit thinking in the field of family literacy. In the 1990’s the conversation about deficit became increasingly mainstream in the field and researchers and practitioners (policy makers/advocates) began to reject deficit language and to deploy the language of strengths. This conversation continued into the 2000s and still appears in documents from research and practice (Caspe, 2003; Handel, 1999b). Despite the ongoing critiques of deficit thinking in the field, many researchers, including myself, feel that deficit thinking continues to shape the dominant discourse of family literacy. According to Anderson et al (2010), “family literacy programs continue to be controversial for despite continued rhetoric about family strengths and socio-contextual responsiveness, deficit discourse—and we believe deficit thinking-undergirds many of them” (p. 47).

By the mid 1990’s a substantial anti-deficit rhetoric (what Valencia calls a heterodoxy) had emerged. In a 1995 article Auerbach noted, “virtually all of the proponents of family literacy
(including the National Centre for Family Literacy) claim to oppose deficit perspectives and to embrace family strengths” (Auerbach, 1995, p. 643). However, Auerbach and others suggested that this new ‘strengths-based’ model did not effectively move the field of family literacy away from the protean deficit thinking that had shaped it early on (Anderson et al., 2010; Hendrix, 1999). Auerbach (1995) noted, “quite simply, the rhetoric of deficit has been replaced with a rhetoric of “strengths”” (p. 644) informed by an “intervention-prevention model” rooted in “at-risk” discourse that continued to inform the dominant approach to family literacy programming. In fact, some felt that the rhetorical commitment to ‘strengths-based’ approaches worked to mask the ongoing presence of deficit thinking in family literacy work as well to further obscure the diversity of approaches to family literacy programming.

For example, Auerbach (1995) argued that

the antideficit rhetoric has become so pervasive that it masks fundamental underlying differences in values, goals, ideological orientations, and pedagogical approaches. Despite apparent agreement on the need to combat deficit frameworks, the postdeficit generation of family literacy approaches is by no means monolithic. In fact, I will argue that, disclaimers notwithstanding, a significant tendency within the current generation of family literacy approaches may, in fact, represent a neodeficit ideology and that the discourse of strengths may, wittingly or unwittingly, serve the function of legitimating that ideology. (p. 644)

Auerbach and other critics of family literacy during this period, while recognizing the ways in which deficit thinking had shaped the field, also expressed a belief that the family literacy approach held the potential to be empowering for families and for women in particular (Cuban & Hayes, 1996). For example, the document, Many Families, Many Literacies: An International Declaration of Principles, edited by Denny Taylor (1997) drew together practitioners and researchers from many contexts to envision an approach to family literacy programs and policy that would support
people working together, grandparents and parents, sons and daughters, sisters and brothers, aunts and uncles, friends and neighbours, celebrating their own literacies while at the same time using many forms of literacy available to them to find their own solutions to the problems they face within their families and communities. (p. 5)

Although the critique of deficit thinking family literacy has been robust and alternative approaches have been modeled, family literacy policy and practice has not escaped the tenacious and “protean” nature of deficit thinking (Valencia, 2010). In Saskatchewan, and elsewhere, ideas that seemed rooted in the “transmission of school practices” (Auerbach, 1989) and the “intervention-prevention” approaches that shaped the dominant discourse of family literacy in the United States appeared intertwined with community-based, learner-centred and critical approaches to programming. What was most interesting to me as I began to explore deficit thinking in family literacy work was not that deficit thinking existed in the field but rather that it continued to be strongly present even in contexts where it was explicitly rejected; that despite the calling out of deficit thinking by leaders in the field it continued to shape the field in significant ways; in fact, it seemed to me that deficit thinking was the most significant discourse in the field.

The ‘deficit model’ in Saskatchewan

In Saskatchewan by the early 2000s, the dominant approach to family literacy was a strengths-based approach and the “deficit model” was identified as something that family literacy programs wanted to avoid. Generally speaking, this perspective continues to be dominant. For example, a series of fact sheets produced by the Saskatchewan Literacy Network and available on their website discusses deficit and strengths stating: “Within the field of family literacy there are two models: the deficits model and the strengths-based model” (Saskatchewan Literacy Network, n.d., p. 3). The document goes on to cautiously
criticize the deficit model for its tendency “to oversimplify the complex problems and situations of the community with no or little thought towards history, culture, gender and influences within the home life” (p. 3) and the strengths-based model is presented as a preferable alternative.

Although the authors go on to make many important observations about the nature and characteristics of deficit thinking in family literacy, the suggestion that there is something called the “deficit model” seems problematic. ‘Model’ suggests to me that deficit is something that is contained or finite. But although many people do claim to work with a strengths-based-based model or from a strengths perspective, I have never heard anyone claim that they are working from (within) a deficit model. Unlike a commitment to strengths, a belief in “deficit” does not consciously inform the work of family literacy practitioners or policy makers.

In suggesting that a deficit model and a strengths model are the same sort of thing in this way, the SLN document works to frame the deficit model as something that you can simply choose not to do, a perspective you can choose not to take. In this framework, by choosing a strengths-based model, you have avoided the problems of a deficit model and then you don’t have to think about the values and assumptions that inform family literacy programs and policy anymore. The implication seems to be that deficit is something that some people do and some people don’t (that is good programs/practitioners don’t and bad programs/practitioners do) rather than a perspective/discourse that has shaped and is embedded in the field and that exists alongside and in relationship to strengths-based approaches.
The ways in which deficit thinking and strengths-based approaches often exist together in family literacy discourse is evident within the very SLN document that makes this distinction between the deficits and strengths models. In discussing the distinction between these two models, the authors of the document highlight language/ideas that are embedded in/suggest a deficit perspective such as “‘at-risk’”, “‘experts’” and “‘fix.’” Further on in the document “the literacy cycle” is discussed. The phrase “literacy cycle” (as opposed to the ‘illiteracy’ or ‘low literacy’ cycle discussed by Brizius and Foster) suggests a commitment to the strengths model; however, the discussion that follows is focused on deficit. It highlights the ways in which low levels of parental literacy and high levels of poverty negatively affect children’s school readiness and chances of succeeding in school. By comparing parents with low literacy skills and parents with higher literacy skills it points out the “barriers and disadvantages” that children living in houses with poorly educated parents are likely to face. While not using the words “at-risk,” the document clearly suggests that children of parents who have lower literacy skills are “at-risk” and although it does not use the words “fix” or directly suggest that literacy fixes problems of poverty, it does state clearly that parents with more education are more likely to be healthy, employed and self-sufficient and that their children will benefit from these advantages. While I do not want to suggest that there is no ‘truth’ to this argument, I want to note that this discussion draws on the notion of an intergenerational cycle of risk rooted in deficit thinking as described by Valencia (1997, 2010) and others (Gorski, 2012; Pica-Smith & Veloria, 2012; Reyes & Torres, 2007; Shields et al., 2005; Wall, 2004). In doing so, it focuses on the characteristics of individual parents and families and takes attention away from structural factors that lead to these relationships of inequality. Later in the thesis, I will discuss the ways in which such narratives can work as myths that reinscribe deficit thinking and colonial frontier logics.
Another example of the tensions between deficit and strengths in family literacy practice in Saskatchewan can be seen in documents produced as part of the *What Really Matters in Family Literacy* research project (Wason-Ellam, 2012; Wason-Ellam & Crandall, 2009). This project, which began in 2008, brought together community-based literacy organizations, the provincial government and university researchers. The report was often referenced by my interview participants and seems to have had an impact on the direction of family literacy work in Saskatchewan today.

The research project grounds itself in community-based understanding of literacy and draws from a strengths-based understanding of family literacy work. In an early report from the project Wason-Ellam and Crandall (2009) write: “Literacy can be best described as a set of social and cultural practices, not simply a set of discrete skills learned through formal schooling or detached from other social patterns” (p 4).

However, despite this broad view of literacy, the document also echoes deficit thinking in drawing on the idea of risk and the cycle of poverty. For example:

> Children living in poorer neighborhoods, and children with limited proficiency in English are particularly at risk of arriving at school with weaknesses in these areas and, hence, of falling behind from the outset in school-prescribed literacy practices. It is imperative that throughout Saskatchewan, family literacy programs be available to support parents in finding ways to bridge the gap in verbal skills and shared practices in reading and writing. (Wason-Ellam & Crandall, 2009, p. 5)

Wason-Ellam and Crandall’s assertion that children from “poorer neighbourhoods” and those with “limited proficiency in English” are “at-risk” of “falling behind” involves many “common sense” assumptions (Kumashiro, 2015) that may not be immediately obvious. But as readers, we must rely on them to make the same ‘sense’ of this statement as they do. For example, to make sense of notions like “limited proficiency” or “falling behind” we need to
accept the premise that there is some universal standard against which notions of ‘limited’ or ‘behind’ can be determined. But the very idea of a ‘universal standard’ is itself a social construct, and one that is increasingly open to challenge from differing perspectives, e.g. cultural or geographic. Indeed, in the statement above Wason-Ellam and Crandall do acknowledge that certain literacy practices are “school-prescribed.” But in acknowledging this, the authors do not seem to recognize the possible limitations or partiality of these literacies. Thus for them, without a hint of reflexivity, children simply “arrive[...] at school with weaknesses.” The assignment of ‘weakness’ is not seen as a moment of cultural negotiation between differing 'standards' or expectations of a community and those of the school. Similarly, the notion of children falling ‘behind’ is firmly embedded in developmentalism which suggests that ‘normal’ development follows a particular predetermined path (Spatig, 2005; Walkerdine, 1993) and anything that deviates from that is a failure or deficit. Using such language obscures the discursively constructed assumption of linear progress on which it lies. This is increasingly contested terrain in education. More generally, and perhaps most significantly from the perspective of deficit thinking in family literacy, this way of talking about children who are constructed as ‘at risk’ focuses on the ways in which children and families need to change, rather on the ways that educational structures might change to better meet the needs of all families.

Wason-Ellam and Crandall balance the “urgency to intervene” (p. 5) apparent in this statement with a caution against “over-generalizing” about the literacy practices of the families she describes. They acknowledge that family literacy programs exist in part as a response to the inadequacies of school systems. They also acknowledge “the deficit-driven family model embedded in some literacy programs worldwide” and draw on Taylor (1997) as
well as interviews with community-based practitioners in Saskatchewan in stating that economically marginalized families bring strengths with them to family literacy programs. The ways in which they draw on ideas of intervention and prevention as well as strengths-based practiced is an example of how deficit thinking and strengths-based approaches are woven together in family literacy discourse.

Looking at these documents through the lens of deficit thinking as described by Valencia and with an awareness of the diverse and sometimes competing discourses that have shaped the development of family literacy, helps me begin to understand the tensions I witnessed and experienced working in the field. Noticing the ways in which deficit thinking persists in these documents in the form of assumptions and omissions helped me begin to see how deficit thinking is embedded in discourses that inform the field. Writing about constructions of disability, Titchkosky (2009) states, “the text obliterates all signs of interpretation as if interpretation is not part of the experience of disability, as if disabled people are not surrounded by conflicting interpretations of their identity” (p. 48). Similarly, I began to see that the ways in which the ideas of “family literacy” and “strength” (and family literacy and deficit) are linked together repeatedly makes the connection appear natural or ‘effortless.’ But I also began to recognize that it is only through a great deal of effort that this comes to be (Ahmed, 2006). Drawing on Ahmed’s discussion of orientation (Ahmed, 2006) I began to think about deficit and strengths in new ways: not as opposite views of family literacy, but as different positions from which to view the “problem” of family literacy (Heitkamp, 2015) and the cycle of risk.
Deficit thinking and strengths-based orientations

A deficit-based orientation directs our consciousness towards certain objects. These objects include families who are in need and at-risk, parents who are poor and illiterate and children who lack school readiness. It also includes others families who are successful, other parents who are middle class and well-educated and other children who enter school and learn to read easily. We look at these two sets of families and we notice that there is a difference. These objects (people, families) lead us in a direction that suggests that one set of families is doing something right and the other is doing something wrong. The next step seems to be to teach the at-risk families to do what the middle-class families do – to create a program that will show them how to do literacy and parenting in the same way as the middle class (normal and ideal) families in order to somehow lift the families out of poverty and support the children to succeed in school (e.g. National Centre for Family Literacy, n.d.).

A strengths-based orientation directs us to look at the same families, but in a different way. Instead of seeing at-risk families and successful families (good families and bad families), they/we see diverse families: families of different cultures, backgrounds, histories, learning styles – different strengths. They/we also see that, educationally and economically, some of these families are succeeding and some of them are failing (have failed). This orientation also takes them/us in a direction that says that something needs to be done. But the doing is somewhat different. Programs are developed to ‘highlight’ the strengths of the families (Saskatchewan Literacy Network, n.d.), particularly the families that are seen to be failing, so that the parents can be encouraged to do their best and their children can be given the best chance of success. Families are recognized for positive behaviours (although these are defined in relation to the ‘ideal’ practices of middle class white literacy and parenting
practices). But the “problem” is still seen as starting with the families and the solution is still seen to be a program of intervention that focuses on improving their practices.

Although an orientation to strengths may be a place to start in challenging deficit thinking, an effective critique of deficit models needs to be more conscious than what has existed in the field so far. An anti-deficit approach needs to choose to commit to something other than deficit, yes, but the solution needs to be greater than simply emphasizing the positive that resides in families. Literacy practices and the social contexts in which they occur are more complex than what can be contained in a simple binary of strengths vs. deficits. Further, resisting, or de-centering deficit, involves a choice that cannot be made just once. The choice to move towards a truly alternative model must be made in every moment, to try and do ‘better’ in every encounter, in every relationship (see Ahmed, 2002).

In this chapter, I have drawn on genealogical methods to scratch the surface of the ways in which deficit assumptions have been embedded in the field of family literacy and the ways they continue to appear in and shape programs and policy in family literacy. The layer discussed here only addresses one small part of the picture. In this discussion, I have begun to consider how family literacy programs have been located within discourses from several fields that have focused on regulating parents and families, rather empowering them. In the following chapter, I draw more specifically on Pillow’s approach to feminist ethnography which focuses on how “bodies matter” (2003, p. 149).
Chapter 3: The Bodies in the Room

Introduction

Building from the discussion of the history of the field of family literacy described in the previous chapter, this chapter looks at how an embodied analysis of family literacy programs reveals ways in which deficit thinking constructs, represents and regulates the bodies in the room (Pillow, 2003). Drawing on Pillow’s approach to genealogical analysis, the chapter explores the ways in which discussions of gender, culture and race are present and absent in family literacy discourse. I suggest that there is a lack of attention to intersectionality - i.e. the ways multiple aspects of identity, including race and gender, are experienced within relationships of power (Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005) - and in particular, a lack of attention to race. These silences obscure the role of power, the historical context of family literacy work (the history that brings us together in the room) and the positionality of both practitioners and policy makers. In practice, these absences allow the field to address questions of gender and culture through approaches that can easily be folded into the dominant discourse in ways that continue to reinscribe deficit thinking. I conclude the chapter with a tentative discussion of how an analysis of whiteness (Ahmed, 2007b) and a consciousness of settler colonialism (Donald, 2009c) might help us see the workings of deficit discourse and the bodies in the room in new ways.

Feminist genealogy and bodies

As discussed in the previous chapter, some researchers have considered the ways in which deficit thinking appears in family literacy programs and policy, particularly in relation to gender and culture or language. Some of this discussion has been taken up at the level of
practice (in some places, in particular ways); however, such discussion seems rarely to engage with issues of identity/power and often deficit thinking (sometimes through the language of strengths-based practice) continues implicitly to shape the discussion. Furthermore, although gender and differences in culture/language are referenced fairly commonly in family literacy discourse, other aspects of power and subjectivity do not seem to have been given much attention in family literacy research, policy or practice.9

Drawing on a feminist genealogical approach has helped me understand how family literacy work became and has continued to be embedded in deficit thinking. Exploring what Mahon described as “the historical conditions of existence” and “technologies of power embodied in social practices” (cited in Pillow, 2003, p. 150) of family literacy reveals some of the ways that idea(l)s of family literacy and family literacy work have been constituted in the field and in public discourse. This demonstrates that policies about family literacy and the way we think and talk about family literacy have come from somewhere, and that these origins continue to matter.

While the last chapter drew more generally on genealogical methods and feminist thinking, in this chapter I am informed more specifically by Pillow’s approach to feminist genealogy (2003, 2004). This chapter will further the analysis begun in the previous chapter by beginning to look more closely at the bodies in the room. By this I mean the bodies that inhabit family literacy program spaces, the bodies around which family literacy program and policy spaces are oriented (Ahmed, 2007b) and the ways in which these bodies are

9 In this chapter I focus on the ways in which gender, culture and race appear in family literacy work. I will not discuss in any depth other aspects of identity including sexuality, ability, or class. In excluding these (for the most part) from my discussion, I recognize that I am perpetuating another set of silences and exclusions that are part of deficit thinking and family literacy discourse.
constituted in and regulated by family literacy discourse. In focusing on bodies, I am particularly influenced by Pillow’s approach to policy research, which she calls feminist genealogy (Pillow, 2003, 2004).

Unlike traditional approaches to (policy) research, feminist genealogy as conceptualized by Pillow starts with the premise that “‘bodies matter’” (2003, p. 149). Pillow’s focus on embodiment draws on “race-feminisms” which she discusses as feminisms that are “changed by analyses of race, racialization and racism and contact with race theory” (p. 156) and also on Foucault’s genealogical approach. According to Pillow, “Foucault’s discussion of genealogy is focused upon the body and, thus, feminist genealogy cannot be separated from an understanding of the importance of the body in social organization, theorizing, power and practice” (p. 147). Building on these theoretical foundations, Pillow “focuses specific attention upon the discursively structured raced, gendered and sexed body” (2003, p. 146).

Feminist genealogy originates in Pillow’s work on educational policy and teen mothers. In her research, Pillow found that discussions of bodies was somehow ‘taboo.’ As a school administrator said to her, “‘bodies are dangerous’” (2003). However, according to Pillow, the lack of attention to (or acknowledgement of) the body in policy contributed to the creation of programs that did not ‘fit’ (sometimes literally) the pregnant and mothering teen (Pillow 2003, 2004). As an example, Pillow (2004) describes a pregnant teen trying awkwardly to fit her body into a traditional school desk. Although the class she was participating in was specifically for pregnant and mothering teens, no consideration had been given to the physical needs of pregnant and mothering bodies. The pregnant teen’s body simply did not fit in the chair. And yet, despite the silences about bodies in the policies and programs she studied,
at the same time and likely precisely because ‘bodies are dangerous’ policies are all about bodies — controlling, regulating, shaping and (re)producing bodies. Bodies, nevertheless, remain uncontrollable in many ways, receptive to and disruptive of power. What would it mean then to pay attention to the body, literally and figuratively, in policy analysis? (2003, p. 146)

It is my suggestion that lack of attention to the bodies in family literacy programs contributes to the creation of programs that are more regulating of those bodies than empowering. By ignoring bodies, we are able to ignore the particular literacies that are embedded in the lives of families and inscribed on the bodies of participants. We are also able to ignore the historical context that led to those bodies to be present in family literacy programs and the power structures that shape the ways in which the bodies in the room are constructed in relation to one another. Or, as Ahmed (2002) writes:

To put this into more affirmative terms, I would suggest that it is by attending to the particularity of this other that we can show that which fails to be grasped in the here and the now, in the very somebody whom I am faced with (p. 560)

**Who are the bodies in the room?**

My experience in adult and family literacy work in Saskatchewan has told me something about who the bodies in family literacy programs are likely to be. As a white female practitioner, I am conscious now (I wasn’t always) that the bodies in the room at practitioner meetings and trainings were usually bodies that could be read as being like mine in particular ways; that is they were usually white and almost always female. On the other hand, as a facilitator of programs I can look back and see that often I was the only, or one of the only, white bodies in the room. In adult literacy and family literacy programs the participants were mostly brown and black bodies: new Canadian and Aboriginal bodies. In family literacy
programs, the adult bodies were always female. This experience was reflected in my fieldwork. Participants were mostly non-white newcomers or Aboriginal people. Practitioners were most often white. And of the 30 or so parents I observed and interviewed, two were male. None of the fifteen practitioners I interviewed or observed in their roles as facilitators were male. There was one male practitioner who was a participant in the first introductory training I attended.

**The bodies in the room - fitting in**

As part of my fieldwork I observed in the READ program at an organization that worked with families who had been categorized through government assessment processes as “vulnerable” or “at-risk.” At a break during one of the sessions, a mom approached me to ask me about my experience doing a PhD. She was a (recent) immigrant from China and the mother of a young toddler. She lived with her husband and mother in law. During our conversation (and later during an interview) she explained that she had a master’s degree in environmental engineering and had worked professionally before immigrating and having her child. Thus far, she had been unable to find work in Canada and was thinking about doing a PhD in hopes that it would improve her prospects. She was wondering how graduate school worked for me as a mom, doing a PhD from a distance. We chatted a bit then and a few more times during my observations; I was unable to answer many of her questions as my situation was quite different from hers but I think she appreciated talking with another mom with a somewhat similar experience.

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10 Discussions of gender in family literacy literature do not appear to extend beyond binary understandings of gender identity and gender roles; and for the most part, with a few exceptions, representations of families in family literacy texts continue to conform to a heteronormative understanding of the family.
As we talked I wondered how it was she had come to be in the family literacy program and what she was getting out of it. For the most part, the families in the program had been referred to the organization as a result of having income levels below the poverty line; although beyond that, someone had to identify the family as likely to benefit from programming at this particular organization. For example, there are organizations with similar programming and funding that specifically work with newcomers to which she might have been referred. And although Xia\textsuperscript{11} expressed that she enjoyed the program, it struck me that her situation and challenges were very different from those of many of the women in the program. She was one of only two newcomers in this particular program. The rest of the participants were fluent English speakers born in Canada, mostly Aboriginal or white Canadians. Many of the other women were several years younger than her; some had not graduated from high school. Most lived in social housing and some lived in second stage housing. Some were looking to find work or attend upgrading programs. I am not sure how this highly educated woman ended up in the program; there is of course more to her story than I learned in our brief exchanges. And there is more to the stories of the other women in that room, most of which I learned only a very little during my observations. But Xia didn’t seem quite to fit in the READ program where I met her. And although she enjoyed going to the program and expressed that she was happy to have support in her role as a mom, the program didn’t quite seem to me to fit her needs. Somehow, through the intersection of policy and practice, this mother had been classified as ‘at-risk,’ and referred to the Centre for a program focused on “enhance[ing] parenting knowledge, provid[ing] support and build[ing] on family strengths” (Government of Saskatchewan, n.d.-a). But there was little

\textsuperscript{11} All names of all participants and organizations in the thesis are pseudonyms.
space in the program for the strengths and knowledge about parenting of her home culture; nor was there space for her to build on her strengths or address her needs as a displaced educated professional.

In constructing her as an ‘at-risk’ mother, or the mother of an ‘at-risk’ child it seemed to me that the dominant discourse had also constructed her needs in particular ways which had led to her being in that room with other mothers who, although they brought very different histories and experiences with them, had been constructed in similar ways within the context of family literacy discourse. While it was true that Xia felt the need for support in her role as a mother, in the context of the READ program it seemed she was being defined by those needs. The other needs that she identified, such as the need to return to her role as a professional, were not at that time being addressed either within the program or elsewhere; it seemed that support for those needs was not as easily available.

**Paying attention to bodies in programs and in policy: Gender**

Alongside and often intertwined with discussions of deficit thinking in family literacy, gender has been a site of discussion and critique in family literacy literature over the past two decades. This is not surprising because paying attention to bodies in programs and in policy analysis in family literacy leads me to notice that most, if not all, of the bodies in the room are female bodies. As several authors in different countries over a period of years have noted, family literacy participants are most often mothers or other female caregivers (Handel, 1997).

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12 Discussions of gender in family literacy literature do not appear to extend beyond binary understandings of gender identity and gender roles; and for the most part, with a few exceptions, representations of families in family literacy texts continue to conform to a heteronormative understanding of the family.
Recognizing the gendered nature of the field, feminist critiques have suggested that to the extent that they are framed by deficit thinking, family literacy programs work to blame mothers. Shaped by regulatory discourses of mothering (Smythe & Isserlis, 2002) and informed by the narrative of “You are your child’s first teacher” (Crooks, 2013), family literacy programs are deeply embedded in discourses that construct literacy as “women’s work but not women’s right” (Rockhill, 1987). Expanding on Rockhill’s observation, Luttrell (1996) suggested that embedded in family literacy discourse is a message that women “are (and should be) primarily responsible for children’s cognitive growth and development” and “that ‘good’ mothers internalize these expectations, judging themselves on how well they are able to perform this educational task” (p. 347). Luttrell points out that this also makes invisible women’s own literacy and other personal goals such as the goals Xia described to me during a break in the READ program.

Cuban and Hayes (1996) and other authors have pointed to an interesting paradox in family literacy discourse; despite, or perhaps because of, the dominance of women in family literacy programs, gender is often invisible in discussions of family literacy programs (except perhaps when men are in the room\textsuperscript{13}). In academic literature and documents from the field, gender neural term like parent and caregiver are often used (Handel, 1999b; Prins & Toso, 2008). Caspe calls this the “silent gendered discourse” (Caspe, 2003) and notes that when

\textsuperscript{13} This was demonstrated when a dad entering the traditional parenting programs on the first day noted that he was the only guy there - an experience men may not have very often.
gender does appear, “women tend to be one-dimensional individuals” (p. 5). In other words, women are seen only as mothers, not as women with their own lives and educational goals outside of motherhood.

There is a taken for granted character to the ways in which women are viewed/constituted/interpolated in family literacy discourse/programs and policy. Without saying so, family literacy programs often draw on/are constituted by notions of what it means to be a ‘good,’ that is an ideal/white, middle class mother (Prins & Toso, 2008; Reyes & Torres, 2007; Smythe, 2006; Smythe & Isserlis, 2002) who prioritizes her children’s success and happiness over her own (Nichols, Nixon, & Rowsell, 2009). From this perspective literacy can be seen as part of the invisible work that women do to support schooling (Griffith & Smith, 2005). These notions shape program and policy (curriculum) in ways that may exclude fathers but also judge mothers and create narrow ideals of what is acceptable and what is marginalized/abject. Citing Davies and Saltmarsh (2006), Richey (2011) notes that subjectivities are formed partly in the intersection of discourses of literacy and gender. “That is, literacy learning—from early childhood—has reproduced and exercised the gender order in our society such that we are simultaneously produced as gendered and literate” (Richey, 2011, p. 42).

Some women are more likely to have access to family literacy programs than other kinds of language and literacy programs partly because such programs fit better in their lives - they are constructed as part of their responsibility as mothers. This seemed to be the case for Xia and for several other mothers in the programs I observed. And, as family literacy programs are more likely to provide supports such as childcare and transportation, it makes it possible for women who might otherwise find these to be significant barriers to participate in
programs. According to Cuban and Hayes, paying attention to gender in family literacy work helps us “to understand how women have been disenfranchised from the full range of educational opportunities in the first place, and to consider how family literacy programming can either reinforce or challenge gender-related barriers to literacy” (Cuban & Hayes, 1996). They suggest that the focus of family literacy is on children’s educational progress and that women are often constructed as “conduits of literacy” for their children who are valued as “‘first teachers’” as long as they “convey dominant cultural knowledge and values to their children, knowledge that supports rather than challenges the status quo” (p. 7). In response to this criticism, Cuban and Hayes suggest that “family literacy providers need to hear these women’s voices and attend to women’s educational needs as well as those of their children” (p. 5).

Smythe & Isserlis’ (2002) discussion of discourses of mothering in family literacy is also significant here. They note that the ways in which mothers have been constituted in family literacy work has been influenced by three intertwined discourses of mothering. The “Standard North American Family” based on Dorothy Smith’s work, the “mothering as pedagogy” discourse and “the discourse of maternal responsibility.” Together these discourses work to produce a notion of the ideal mother, to constitute particular women, those who are marginalized in our society, as “at-risk” and in need of intervention, and to obscure the needs of interests of women outside their roles as mothers.

One of the ongoing critiques of family literacy programs, and one mentioned by several practitioners to whom I spoke during my research, is that the adult education or literacy component of family literacy programs is often overlooked and underdeveloped (Gadsden, 2002). And if it is true that women make up the majority of family literacy participants, then
it is women’s (not just adults”) literacy development that is being ignored/neglected in these programs. Considering this within the context of the “hardest to reach” (Cuban & Hayes, 1996, p. 5) participants that family literacy programs often target could be important in identifying the ways in which deficit thinking is at work in family literacy.

**Discussions of gender in the field**

Working in the family literacy field, and with an interest in gender, I have noticed that, at the level of practice, gender has received some mention in recent years. Professional documents such as The Saskatchewan Literacy Network’s *Family Literacy Program Standards* and The *Foundations in Family Literacy* training modules acknowledge gender as a factor to be considered in family literacy programs.

The Saskatchewan Literacy Network’s *Family Literacy Program Standards* (Saskatchewan Literacy Network, 2012) encourages practitioners to “actively recruit different cultures, genders, races, and special needs into your programs” (p. 24). The document also suggests that a good practice is to “respond to the literacy needs, interests and goals of your participants. Carefully choose content and activities which are age and gender appropriate, and which are culturally sensitive. Understand and apply current theories about family literacy” (p. 23). Best practices documents, like the *Standards* document, give us tick boxes of things that we are supposed to consider, usually without any context that might help us understand where these things fit. In this case, it is not clear to me what the authors of the document intended by including gender as a category of identity to be considered alongside culture, ability, learning style, personality styles and literacy levels. Such a list suggests that these factors might be addressed through a change in pedagogy or materials. This shows one way that issues of gender get folded into the dominant discourse, when they are isolated from
other aspects of identity and analysis and from systemic inequity. Critiques of gender and
culture in family literacy are interpreted through a liberal lens (Ladson-Billings, 1998), which
focuses on addressing inequality through attention to access and accommodations rather than
to the underlying epistemologies and ontologies that inform the field.

Another example of gender being discussed in the field can be seen in the training modules
for the *Foundations in Family Literacy* training program. This program was developed by the
Centre for Family Literacy in Edmonton and has been offered as a certificate program by
Vancouver Community College and Conestoga College in Ontario. The course was
developed from the *Foundational Training in Family Literacy* training (which was based on
Alberta’s *Training Manual in Family Literacy*) (Shively & Thomas, 2009). As I discussed in
Chapter One of this thesis, I participated in the *Foundational Training* in 2002 and what I
learned in that training contributed to the development of the family literacy program I
discussed in Chapter Two. Since then, several practitioners in Saskatchewan, included a few
of my research participants, have been funded by the provincial government to participate in
the certificate program out of Vancouver Community College.

Gender is discussed in the first chapter of the program’s first training module (Shively &
Thomas, 2009). In a section titled “Perspectives on Gender” (p. 20) the authors discuss
women’s and men’s “role(s) in family literacy.” After acknowledging that women continue
to be the primary participants in family literacy programs, the document states,

> This is the cause of much discussion among practitioners and researchers,
ranging from the needs for extra supports for women to the need for social
changes that more evenly distribute the responsibility for child rearing among
men, women and/or society as a whole. However, gender roles are strongly
entrenched and it is neither the responsibility nor the desire of family literacy
programs or practitioners to dictate cultural mores. (p. 21)
The authors then go on to discuss the positive impacts/outcomes of literacy programs for “women, families and society as a whole” (p. 21). The examples they use are drawn from Afghanistan and Senegal and do not (directly) address the context of family literacy work in Canada. The section on men’s role in family literacy programs discusses encouraging men to participate noting that for cultural reasons it is “sometimes crucial to have fathers involved” (p. 22). Overall, this discussion of gender seems to suggest that gender equality is a problem in other countries and cultures that might be addressed through family literacy programs. At the same time, the discussion works to obscure the gendered nature of family literacy practice (as discussed above) in Canada.

Later in this chapter, Smythe & Isserlis (2002) are cited in relation to the suggestion that gender neutral terms like parent and caregiver may obscure the underlying assumption that family literacy is the responsibility of mothers (p. 39). Gender is addressed again briefly in a chapter on health (Dionne-Coster, Sauvé, & Shively, 2009) that links the educational levels of women, as the primary caretaker of the family’s health, to the well-being of their families. This discussion cites a 1990 UNESCO report by Sticht and McDonald as evidence that “it is absolutely critical to focus more educational resources on women” (Dionne-Coster et al., 2009, p. 36). Gender is again addressed in the chapter on working with immigrant and refugees families (Clark & Hoffart, 2009); in this case the discussion emphasizes the importance of involving immigrant and refugee fathers in family literacy to support the acculturation of the whole family and in recognition of the fact that in some cultures fathers are primarily responsible for their children’s education. Taken in total, these references do little to challenge dominant discourses around family literacy and gender or to address the criticisms of feminist researchers described above. Ultimately they fail to challenge common
sense understandings of gender and literacy as they remain embedded in the dominant discourses of mothering discussed by Smythe and Isserlis (2002) and do not consider the complexities of power and identity.

In my observations and experience, gender is sometimes considered in program development, particularly around the lack of male participation in family literacy programs. A few practitioners I spoke to during my research expressed this concern and it is also something I heard about while working in the field. This discussion is sometimes linked to concerns about boys’ literacy development and school achievement (Rowsell & Kendrick, 2013; Smythe 2006; Brown, Chesney-Lind & Stein, 2006) and to the belief that more male literacy role models are needed in order for boys’ literacy achievements to improve. It is also rooted in essentialized understandings of boys’ (and girls’) literacy (e.g. Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004). In Saskatchewan, this perspective has contributed to the development of some family literacy program models for men, such as the “Duct Tape to Diapers” program.

This discourse works to construct men and women (and boys and girls) in particular ways and to regulate male and female bodies. Within the context of the gendered nature of deficit thinking, the conversation works to blame fathers and families for boys’ struggles in schools rather than to address structural issues in schooling. But at the same time, it takes women’s role as literacy teachers and school support workers for granted (Griffith & Smith, 2005). While discussions about how to attract men to family literacy programs have led to the creation of program models for men such as the “Man in the Moon” (Vancouver Foundation, 2009), little attention has been paid to how to better meet the needs/desires of women who are already attending programs. The ways that women’s participation in family literacy activities and programs is taken for granted is also reinforced when female practitioners...
focus on how to attract men to programs and verbally praise fathers for their attendance to programs, as I witnessed several times in my fieldwork.

Another way in which we see the presence of women in family literacy work being taken for granted is the idea that attracting men to family literacy work as participants and practitioners is needed or desired for the field as a whole. For example, when discussing the future of family literacy in Saskatchewan, Joan, a family literacy coordinator I interviewed, suggested that until more men are involved in the field, both as participants and policymakers, the field would not be given the status she feels it deserves. As a field that is “dominated by women” she suggested that family literacy is “perceived as sort of a soft area” (Interview 3). This “soft approach” is one she feels does not attract men to the field and “the more that we can engage fathers or male caregivers to be involved in this whole area, that’s what’s going to change it.” This echoes one of Luttrell’s (1996) suggestion that focusing on the “caring dimension” or “soft side’ of literacy” (p. 350) has constructed literacy work as low status: volunteer work not worth paying for, something that can be said of many female dominated professions.

Although family literacy programs are mostly attended by women, my experience and observations suggests that few of these programs are designed (consciously) with women in mind. One exception is the model of pre-natal family literacy programs such as the SLN’s Prenatal Caring Circle program and the literacy module developed in Alberta for expectant and new moms (Alberta Government, 2014). Like the programs discussed by Cuban and Hayes, these pre-natal programs seem to construct women as conduits of literacy for their children rather than focusing on women’s own literacy needs. The programs also are strongly shaped by the regulatory discourses around motherhood described by Smythe and Isserlis
Another exception is the Families Learning program for newcomer mothers that I observed. This program ran for several years open to any newcomer parents of caregivers. No men ever attended. Eventually, it was decided to make the program open to mothers only. This was partly because of the large number of Muslim women who attend, some of whom expressed that they would not be comfortable with male participants. Some of the ways in which this program worked to both regulate and support the women will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Beyond these examples, it seems relatively uncommon to consciously consider gender in the planning of most programs, which in the end are often de facto women’s spaces. In my experience and observations, the fact that many programs are women’s spaces may be one of the contributing factors to women’s experience of empowerment in family literacy programs (Crooks, 2009). As Joan, the practitioner whom I quoted suggested “there’s also strength in (women coming together) because women care about their children.” Hutchison (2000) found that this strength can be fostered using a feminist and critical pedagogy approach to family literacy. Similarly Cuban and Hayes (1996) suggest,

> Perhaps more than any other type of programming, family literacy has the opportunity to challenge the cycle of gender and educational subordination for low-income women and to facilitate positive and progressive changes, meeting rather than defeating women's dreams for their futures. (p. 14)

However, I have seen little evidence of such understandings of family literacy work in my research and practice. Instead, the notion that it is “neither the responsibility nor the desire of family literacy programs or practitioners to dictate cultural mores” (Shively & Thomas, 2009) in relation to gender seems to be reinforced in different ways. By not engaging in gender in the context of relations of power and by not examining the gender relationships that we are embedded in family literacy programs, simplistic understandings of gender
binaries are reinscribed and traditional gender mores are reinforced (if not dictated).

Appearances are addressed rather than structural issues.

Anderson et al. state “gender issues in family literacy persist and are unlikely to be soon resolved” (Anderson et al., 2010). This will likely be the case as long as discussions of gender in the context of family literacy practice and policy continue to ignore the intersectionality of identity and obscure the role of power in shaping the experiences and relationships of gendered bodies. Separating gender from other aspects of embodied identity may be one of the reasons that gendered critiques have not made a significant impact on practice and have instead continued to support the ways in which deficit thinking shapes family literacy.

Culture and language in family literacy discourse

Discussion of diversity in family literacy programs is common in family literacy discourse and yet, at the same time, what exactly is meant by diverse cultures or what exactly is the impact of this diversity on family literacy programs and policies is at times, hard to identify. In Canada and elsewhere, family literacy programs work with participants from diverse backgrounds and cultures and the large numbers of newcomer and Aboriginal learners in family literacy programs is one of the contexts that has shaped family literacy practice in Saskatchewan and Canada in unique ways (Wason-Ellam, 2012). In Canada, it is a reality of family literacy work (like adult literacy work)\(^\text{14}\) that newcomers who are English language

\(^{14}\) The extent to which this is accepted by government funders seems to vary from province to province and over time. Although at times programs have been told that work with EAL learners would not be supported by literacy funding in Saskatchewan the most recent call for proposals included immigrant and refugees as a priority group.
learners often make up significant numbers of the participants in programs. In addition, in Saskatchewan at least, many family literacy programs work with Aboriginal families. This was true of the programs that I observed and it is also reflected in funding priorities for the major government funders of family literacy in Saskatchewan, which construct some families as being more “vulnerable” than others (Government of Saskatchewan, n.d.-a). For example, the provincial government’s Saskatchewan Community Literacy Fund prioritizes programs for First Nation, Metis, Inuit and immigrant participants as well as young parents, working age youth, people with disabilities and lone parents (Government of Saskatchewan, n.d.-b). Similarly, of the four organizations in Regina that deliver Kids First programming (an early childhood support program that includes family literacy work as part of its mandate), three work with primarily Aboriginal families and individuals and one is a newcomer settlement agency (Government of Saskatchewan, n.d.-a).

Critiques of deficit thinking in family literacy have often focused on the ways in which deficit thinking constructs “non-mainstream” families as deficient and have pointed out the way in which programs tend to promote a particularly middle class and Eurocentric understanding of literacy (Hendrix, 1999; Prins & Toso, 2008; Reyes & Torres, 2007; Toso, 2010). As Whitehouse and Colvin (2001) note, “marginalized families that are considered diverse with regard to language, culture, ethnicity, and class are particularly vulnerable to representations grounded in a deficit discourse” (p. 212). Grounded in the “(often) unstated belief that transforming culturally diverse families to mirror mainstream families will produce educational and economic success for their children” (p. 212), family literacy programs have been framed around middle class ideals of literacy and family which others have argued contain a presumption of whiteness, as I will explore below.
Many early critics of family literacy programs, such as Elsa Auerbach, came from a context of working with language minority families in the United States. Auerbach (1989) pointed out that family literacy programs tended to promote the kinds of literacies practiced in middle class Anglo families as these were the kinds of literacies valued in schools and seen as necessary for school success. Auerbach suggested that the “transmission of school practices model” made negative and unsupported assumptions about poor and language minority families. Drawing on her own experience and ethnographic research, she discussed ways in which assumptions about these families were untrue and described ways in which language minority families and families living poverty had their own rich literacy practices.

Ethnographic research with families from many different cultural and linguistic backgrounds has continued to expand researchers understandings of what literacy looks like/how literacy is practiced in families (Anderson et al., 2010); however, it is unclear the extent to which this research has informed programs and policy which often continue to promote narrow views of ‘what counts’ as family literacy (Anderson et al., 2010; Balanoff & Chambers, 2005).

At the level of community-based practice at least, there is evidence that these critiques have influenced conversations about family literacy work. The strengths-based approaches that community based organizations have often embraced are, to some extent, premised on the understanding that ‘diverse’ families have literacy practices that programs can celebrate and build on. However, as Auerbach pointed out, the ways in which ‘strengths’ and culture has been constructed and what that means for programs and practice in these so-called “strengths-based models” varies significantly:

Where the intervention model advocates cultural sensitivity as a respectful stance, the multiple-literacies model sees an understanding of cultural practices as the centerpiece of curriculum development. Where the intervention model advocates individual empowerment through self-esteem
and personal responsibility, the multiple-literacies perspective promotes empowerment through affirmation of cultural identity and community building. (Auerbach, 1995, p. 651)

It seems to me that policy and programs are often impacted by both the intervention and multiple literacies models, and less often by the “social change” model advocated by Auerbach. I would also suggest that none of these models and their discussions of culture, completely escape the “protean” nature of deficit thinking (Valencia, 2010) as I will further discuss below.

**Culture and diversity in SLN’s Family Literacy Standards**

Alongside other aspects of identity such as gender, culture is mentioned several times in the Family Literacy Standards document from the Saskatchewan Literacy Network (2012). Under the heading of philosophy, practitioners are encouraged to “validate the diversity of families” (p. 13). Diversity is not defined in the document but examples of diversity in the document refer to gender, family background, language and values, culture, regional background, learning styles, disabilities, personalities, school experiences and familiarity with print and literacy levels (p. 13). What it means to “validate” is also not explained; however, to me the term validate suggests that the power to decide ‘what counts’ remains with the practitioners. Examples such as “have a balance of perspectives and avoid stereotypes” (in relation to gender) and “seek to understand and acknowledge the values and customs of each families” suggest that it is possible to meet the criteria at a fairly superficial level. The example listed for culture, “do you encourage program participants to use or learn their family’s first language?” also suggests a superficial understanding of diversity. Further, it conflates language with culture, obscuring issues such as migration and race. In addition the word “encourage” seems to support a particular relationship in which knowledge or
approval flows from the practitioner/program to the parent. The intention of such questions might be to encourage reflection (or reflexivity) on the ways in which the assumptions of practitioners as people in positions of power might impact participants; however, without an open discussion of power in programs, these principles seem more likely to work to reinforce the power of practitioners, support dominant regulatory understandings of family literacy and reinscribe protean deficit thinking.

As discussed above, the Family Literacy Standards document is little more than a checklist and perhaps it is not surprising that there is not more depth in the suggestions regarding identity and diversity. And there is little to tell us how “diversity works when it is “put into action”” (Ahmed, 2007a) in this context. The only training I know of that might address these standards is the Introduction to Family Literacy workshop; however, there is little in the manual for that workshop that would suggest a deeper understanding of these issues and in the two introduction workshops I observed as part of my research, there was little discussion of culture or diversity.

Cultural competence

In contrast, Foundations in Family Literacy (FiFL) includes a fairly in-depth conversation about culture and diversity that is both woven into the program modules and given specific attention in several chapters including chapters about “social and cultural complexity” (Wilson, 2009), “immigrant and refugees communities” (Clark & Hoffart, 2009), “family literacy in Aboriginal communities” (Laderoute, Ningwakwe, & Steeves, 2009). Furthermore, the notion of culture is embedded in the way the program describes/defines family literacy: “Literacy in families is a thread woven through a multi-layered, complex network of family activities and relationships embedded within the context of the cultures
and communities in which families live, work and play” (Shively & Thomas, 2009, p. 7).

Photographs and examples in the document also reflect the diversity of the ‘bodies in the room’ in family literacy programs by depicting/portraying/representing families and individuals of different skin colours and from different cultural and language backgrounds.

In response to the diverse backgrounds of participants in family literacy programs, the first module of the Foundations texts promotes the development of “cultural competence” as “an essential aspect of growth for family literacy practitioners” (Shively & Thomas, 2009, p. 18).

As an approach to working in culturally diverse settings, cultural competence is “‘a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes and policies’” (Cross, Bazron, Dennis & Isaacs cited in Shively & Thomas, p. 18), that inform practitioners and programs in working with ‘diverse’ communities. Cultural competence is developed along a continuum from “cultural destructiveness” to “cultural proficiency.” Those who reach the highest level “are specialists in developing culturally sensitive practices” (Shively & Thomas, p. 19).

In Chapter One of the module, Shively & Thomas (2009) introduce the idea of cultural competence and place it within a context that acknowledges “a broad range of diversities and the power imbalances they give rise to our society” (p. 20) as well as the “historical, political cultural and social contexts in which our practice is embedded” (2009). In Chapter Two, Wilson expands on the notion of cultural competence and discusses it alongside “Paulo Freire’s dialogic education”, “multicultural education” and “holistic and traditional Aboriginal pedagogies” as theories that can inform “practice in diverse communities” (Wilson, 2009). In this chapter, cultural competence is described as “the orientation and skills necessary to first recognize social justice issues, and second to work and live successfully with others” (p. 25). As part of the discussion of cultural competence, the text encourages
practitioners to be conscious of their own social and cultural identities and suggests they examine assumptions about those who may have been negatively impacted by “a long history of unequal treatment” (p. 21). Although the authors frame cultural competence in this way, I sometimes struggled to see how the principles of cultural competence themselves might work to promote social justice or address structural inequality in family literacy programs and policy.

**Cultural Competence: Why doesn’t this feel educational?**

While I can see that the idea of cultural competence might be useful in developing programs and policy to work with culturally diverse groups, there is something about the way it is discussed in *Foundations in Family Literacy* that suggested to me a tension between the cultural competence approach and the commitment to learner-centred, social justice practice that is expressed alongside it. Language used in discussing the principles of cultural competence struck me as particularly incongruous with work for social justice and with learner-centred approaches to family literacy. For example, Wilson (2009) states that cultural competence requires “having the capacity to…manage the dynamics of difference” (p. 28) and that “practice is driven in service delivery systems by client-preferred choices, not by culturally-blind or culturally free interventions” (p. 28). These statements sounded to me like they came from management discourses (Ahmed, 2007a) rather than educational discourses and left me wondering where exactly this notion of cultural competence had originated.

Following the references in the document I found that the version of cultural competence being referenced in *Foundations* is drawn from the field of health care and mental health care. The references given connect to work being done at the Center for Child and Human Development at Georgetown University (Georgetown University Center for Child and
Human Development, n.d.) and specifically the National Centre for Cultural Competence

The homepage of the National Center for Cultural Competence states:

> The mission of the NCCC is to increase the capacity of health care and mental health care programs to design, implement, and evaluate culturally and linguistically competent service delivery systems to address growing diversity, persistent disparities, and to promote health and mental health equity (Georgetown University, n.d.).

The fact that the concept of cultural competence is taken from the field of health care suggests that it might be informed by/embedded in the kind of medical model of deficit described by Valencia (2010) (discussed in Chapter 2 and below). And without acknowledging where this notion of “cultural competence” comes from, the Foundations document decontextualizes the ideas, presenting them as ahistorical and therefore neutral and common sense. It seems likely that the concept of cultural competence has also been shaped by the competency-based education discourse, with its reductionist approach to defining learning goals in decontextualized, fragmented, and behavioural terms (Jackson, 1993).

Speaking of her experience working on a university diversity document Ahmed writes, “[this experience] also encouraged me to reflect on the significance of vocabulary not by seeing words as repositories of meaning, but as enabling different kinds of action within institutions” (Ahmed, 2007a). Paying close attention to the language used in the cultural competency model suggests what the model might do when translated into practice. To see “growing diversity” as something that needs to be “addressed” or the “dynamics of difference” as something to be “managed” does not seem to support a strengths-based, learner-centred approach to family literacy work. Such language suggests that difference (i.e. difference from some ‘mainstream,’ normalized ideal) is a problem (or in other words, a
deviation from the norm, thus a deficit). Diversity becomes framed as a challenge for the organization to address in carrying out its mandate, which remains unchanged.

The language of cultural competence works to centre the organization, the program or the practitioner. Cultural competence is framed as something that practitioners or organizations can achieve and can have. It reminds me of this statement from Ahmed (2007a): “This model of cultural diversity reifies difference as something that exists ‘in’ the bodies or culture of others, such that difference becomes a national property: if difference is something ‘they are’, then it is something we ‘can have’” (p. 235). The creation of a continuum, or hierarchy, of cultural competence suggests that once you reach the top then you are a “specialist” or an expert. It obscures the ways in which culture is complex and dynamic, a process more than an object:

Although culture is often written and spoken about as though it is a static and identifiable thing possessed and practiced by Others, culture is really a dynamic social process of making sense of past influences in light of current circumstances and future priorities. Cultural teachings emphasize values, ethics, and specific roles and responsibilities that provide meaning to people's lives. In this way, culture can be seen as the practical and creative expression of epistemological and ontological understandings. (Donald, 2009c, p. 408)

Cultural competence and other ways that culture and diversity are discussed in family literacy leave out (for the most part) discussions of power, structural inequity and historical constructions of identity. And although the Foundations documents make reference to practitioners being aware of their own cultural identities, for the most part the notion of cultural competence leaves out the need for the practitioner to examine her own positionality, and thus the origins of her own power. In discussions about cultural competence, culture is not linked to power but rather to examining assumptions about cultural practices of others that might influence literacy or learning. While culture is discussed, it is presented as a
decontextualized, but reified, object; the embodied experience of culture, the experiences of participants and their unique and complex relationships to culture and power are invisibilized.

**Deficit thinking as racialized and racializing**

As discussed by Pillow (2003, 2004, 2015), discourse in social policy tends to invisibilize bodies even while it works to regulate them. Drawing on this idea, I believe that in focusing on cultural competence and gender stereotypes, family literacy discourse works to constitute parents and families in ways that invisibilize the complexity of identity and power as well as to invisibilize the ways in family literacy programs and policy might be experienced as regulating by those who are its objects. In particular, it seems to me in looking at the way that identity is discussed in family literacy discourse that attention to gender or culture in family literacy policy often works to obscure relationships of race and racism and the ways in which family literacy programs are oriented around white bodies (Ahmed, 2007b).

In my research I found that discussions of race are largely absent from discussions of culture and gender in family literacy policy, practice and discourse. While a focus on culture may emphasize the celebration of diversity, ways to accommodate families of different cultural backgrounds and the cultural competence of the facilitator, attention to race does something different (Ladson-Billings, 1998). It has the potential to direct our attention to discussions of positionality, whiteness and power.

The SLN’s Family Literacy Standards uses the term race only once in a standard that asks practitioners to consider if their programs “actively recruit different cultures, genders, races, and special needs” (Saskatchewan Literacy Network, 2012, p. 25). As discussed above in
relation to gender, there is little in the document to suggest exactly what this means or why it is important. Significantly, the same section about recruitment is also the only time that Aboriginal learners or newcomers are mentioned in the Standards document. The SLN’s *Family Literacy Fact Sheets* (discussed in Chapter Two of his thesis) do not use the term race at all; although, there is mention of language diversity as well as the “cultures, values, beliefs and needs of participants” (n.d., p. 3). The only representation of race in the document is seen in the pictures of racially diverse happy families. Other than skin tone, there is nothing about the families that might suggest cultural or ethnic backgrounds. In the document’s discussion of groups that are the objects of the ‘at-risk’ label, the authors do not reference specific racial or cultural groups that are given this label, instead referring to communities with high poverty and crime rates, low literacy and employment levels, without any acknowledgement that these conditions are racially organized.

In contrast, Valencia (1997, 2010) frames deficit thinking in education as connected to race as a historical construction and social reality in the United States. He discusses ways in which deficit thinking is rooted in histories of slavery and colonialism and relations between White Americans and African Americans, Mexican Americans and Native Americans (Valencia, 1997). Identifying deficit thinking as rooted in early “racist discourses” of the 1600s to 1800s (p. 6), he outlines the ways that modern versions of deficit thinking have continued to construct students of colour in racist ways. Valencia (2010) notes that one of the characteristics of deficit thinking is its role as a form (tool) of oppression of people of colour currently and historically through (for example) segregationist laws. He also points out that deficit thinking about people of colour is intertwined with the notion of white superiority (1997). Drawing on examples of pre-service education, Valencia notes the importance of

As in the SLN example, discussions of deficit thinking in family literacy literature seem to be rarely linked directly with notions of race and racism. Instead, they are connected to discussions of poverty, culture, language and sometimes gender (Auerbach, 1995). As I have discussed in Chapter Two, deficit thinking is generally rejected (at least rhetorically) in practice based literature, but how exactly deficit thinking appears, who it is directed towards (other than families and participants in general) tends not to be directly identified. In this absence, ways in which middle class white understandings of literacy are normalized is obscured.

One example of a practice-based document that linked deficit thinking to a specific group was in a document from the What Matters in Family Literacy research project (Wason-Ellam, 2012). In a section about Aboriginal family literacy under the heading “Trends and Developments in Family Literacy” Wason-Ellam writes, “marginalized families that are considered diverse with regard to language, culture, ethnicity and class are particularly vulnerable to representations grounded in a deficit assessment” (p. 38). While directly linking deficit thinking to Aboriginal people in Saskatchewan, this quote and her discussion overall focuses on differences in language and culture between Aboriginal families and mainstream populations; there are no mentions of colonialism or historical inequities such as residential schools. Issues of power and privilege are also absent.
If we are to begin to engage in a family literacy practice that might challenge deficit thinking’s hold on the field, then I would suggest that we need to engage in a discussion about structural issues of power and privilege. This means those of us who currently hold both power and privilege in the field, often in taken for granted ways, need to be willing to be uncomfortable. We need to go beyond gender to intersectionality and we need to go beyond culture to historical constructions of race. It is hard to recognize the racist/racialized nature of deficit thinking in family literacy partly because discussion of race is so absent in family literacy discourse. Discourse in family literacy is largely ‘colour blind’, in that race is subsumed under categories of culture and language; this works to avoid discussions of racism. In my experience, white practitioners rarely discuss or even mention race, likely in an attempt to not ‘look racist,’ (Leonardo & Porter, 2010).

In reading the *Foundations in Family Literacy* documents, I sometimes had the sense that some of the authors were flirting with issues of power and structural inequity; they would come right up to the fence and then back away, as if there was some unseen, or unspoken barrier. For example, in acknowledging unequal treatment of some groups historically and by discussing critical approaches (e.g. Freirean pedagogy, Aboriginal approaches and multicultural education) there is a move towards a social justice approach to education within the manual (Wilson, 2009). However, in suggesting that inequality could be addressed through a process of practitioners becoming “culturally competent,” despite the ways in which the discourse of cultural competence seems to avoid discussions of power and reinscribe deficit thinking, the manual moves away from a deep engagement with issues of structural inequity, including racism. It seems to me that in this move towards cultural competence and away from discussion of the ways in which race and racism shape family
literacy programs and policy, the manual maintains a discourse that obscures the embodied impact of structural inequality. This hesitancy may be rooted in the ways in which the boundaries of the field of family literacy have been constituted. It may be rooted in the silences in other discourses (e.g. early childhood education, developmentalism, public and community health, mothering and schooling) that I have discussed as informing family literacy work. It may have to do with being stuck in a deficit thinking binary discussed in Chapter Two in which strengths and deficits are the only lenses through which we see participants in family literacy programs. I think it is certainly indicative of our reluctance, particularly as white practitioners, to address the ways in which power and historical inequity shape the relationships of the bodies present in family literacy programs, and of the field’s embeddedness in a discourse that is oriented towards keeping white bodies comfortable.

It seems to me that white educators, myself included, are reluctant to open ourselves up to uncomfortable and dangerous conversations about race and historical inequalities. In 1998 Gloria Ladson-Billings wrote about the perceived dangers of engaging in discussion about race in education: “I fear we (educational researchers) may never assume the liminal position because of its dangers, its discomfort, and because we insist on thinking of ourselves as permanent residents in a nice field like education” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 22). As I closely read the *Foundations* texts, I began to see a desire to move past the uncomfortable notions of our complicity as educators in structural inequality to, as one author in the manual states, “the task of identifying and correcting damaging assumptions and addressing how decisions impacting the lives of families and individuals are made” (Wilson, 2009, p. 21). Cultural competence and best practices documents like the SLN’s *Family Literacy Standards* may offer us a route to comfort and certainty, a checklist of things we can do to move on.
Ahmed suggests that the question often asked by whites, “what can I do?” is a reflection of this desire to move on. While most often well intentioned, in practice the question works to separate the speaker from the structures of racism and colonialism:

When I give papers on whiteness I am always asked about resistance, as a sign of how things can be otherwise. Some of these questions take the form of ‘what can white people do?’ The sheer solipsism of this response must be challenged. We can recall Adrienne Rich’s description of white solipsism: ‘to speak, imagine and think as if whiteness described the world’ (1979: 299). To respond to accounts of institutional whiteness with the question ‘what can white people do?’ is not only to return to the place of the white subject, but it is also to locate agency in this place. It is also to re-position the white subject somewhere other than implicated in the critique (Ahmed, 2007, whiteness, p. 164-165).

In beginning to explore the presence of race and racialization in family literacy work, I have been informed by Ahmed’s discussion of whiteness (Ahmed 2007b). Starting with poststructural understandings of phenomenology and drawing on her previously discussions of orientation (2006), Ahmed describes whiteness as an orientation that puts certain things within reach. By objects, we would include not just physical objects, but also styles, capacities, aspirations, techniques, habits. Race becomes, in this model, a question of what is within reach, what is available to perceive and to do ‘things’ with. (p. 154)

Building on this, I am interested in the ways in which the practices (or “styles, capacities, aspirations, techniques, habits”) of family literacy are constructed as objects which may be seen as more or less “reachable” by participants in family literacy programs, particularly those that are ‘targeted’ or constructed as ‘at-risk’ in family literacy discourse. In discussing race and whiteness it is important to remember, as Ahmed says, that although whiteness is about bodies, it is not located in the body.

Then what phenomenology describes is not so much white bodies, but the ways in which bodies come to feel at home in spaces by being orientated in this way and that, where such bodies are not ‘points’ of stress or what we can call stress points. (2007b, p. 160)
Further, “what is important to note here is that it is not just bodies that are orientated. Spaces also take shape by being orientated around some bodies, more than others” (Ahmed, 2007b, p. 157).

As a beginning part-time instructor in the teacher education program at the University of Regina, I am often aware of the reluctance of white students (and sometimes non-white students) to discuss race and racism in education (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014; Schick & St Denis, 2003; Tupper, 2013; Tupper & Cappello, 2008).

Not only do whites fear that they will be exposed as racist; they also fear being found out as racial beings. People of color already know that whites comprise a racial group, therefore white raciality would not represent a shocking discovery for them. However, whites’ discovery of their own raciality is precisely what is at stake. (Leonardo & Porter, 2010, p. 156)

As several authors point out, white people expect comfort and often feel angry and vulnerable when that (right to) comfort is questioned (Leonardo & Porter, 2010; DiAngelo, 2011; Schick, 2012); indeed, whiteness is in some ways defined by comfort and by the experience of extending (sinking) comfortably (unnoticed) into spaces (Ahmed, 2007). As I will discuss in the coming chapters, recognizing our own whiteness in a colonial settler society means recognizing the ways in which we are implicated in historical and ongoing oppression of the colonized. This is an experience that many of us are likely to find uncomfortable.

Non-white bodies/white spaces

This chapter began with my discussions of Pillow’s approach to genealogy, which asks us to look the ways in which bodies are regulated by policy, programming and pedagogies, but also at the ways in which the experiences of those bodies exceeds what policy and programs acknowledge. I have used this lens as a starting point to explore who the bodies are in family
literacy programs, the degree to which these bodies do or do not ‘fit’ (the ideal) in family literacy program spaces, and to read dominant family literacy texts through the lens of identity and the embodiment. As I have explored these ideas, I have come to see the ways in which paying attention to bodies might lead us to a discussion of race in family literacy work. Although uncomfortable, at least for those of us who are white, this discussion might bring into view new understandings of the ways in which deficit thinking is perpetuated in the field of family literacy.

Seen through this lens, the story of Xia, the Chinese professional woman who participated in a family literacy program that did not seem to quite fit her needs, might be partly understood as an example of how she is positioned as "at risk" in part through processes of racialization, along with processes that have constituted her as a gendered and immigrant subject. As a mother, and (presumably) a poor mother who was also a non-white newcomer to Canada, her subjectivity as a mother was seen as central and other aspects of her identity were set aside. It was the construction of her as a mother, in particular a mother presumed to lack the knowledge or ability to support the early development of her young child, that led to her being in the room at the Children’s Centre. As Foucault notes, “‘need is also a political instrument, meticulously prepared, calculated and used’” (cited in Pillow, 2004, p. 19). In defining the needs of a particular group who have been constructed as having something in common (in this case poor/at-risk/vulnerable families), family literacy discourse, and other overlapping discourses such as education and public health, work to constitute and ultimately regulate the bodies (Pillow, 2004) in family literacy programs.
I have argued in this chapter that family literacy programs are spaces oriented around white bodies. This orientation may be practically invisible to those of us who “inhabit” whiteness and who therefore are comfortable in such spaces (Ahmed, 2007b). For as Donald has noted, successful participation in formal schooling has required conformity to Eurocentric cultural values and assumptions. Ironically, the commonsense logic and universalistic pervasiveness of Eurocentrism in schools renders such cultural values invisible to all except those who were raised in a different cultural context (Donald, 2009c, p. 409).

If we recognize schools as white spaces (Schick, 2012), then in order to address deficit thinking in family literacy work, we must be conscious of the ways in which orientation towards schooling constructs whiteness as an ‘ideal’ and centres Eurocentric literacy practices.

To the extent that racial supremacy is taught to white students, it is pedagogical. Insofar as it is pedagogical, there is the possibility of critically reflecting on its flows in order to disrupt them. The hidden curriculum of whiteness saturates everyday school life and one of the first steps to articulating its features is coming to terms with its specific modes of discourse. (Leonardo, 2004, p. 14)

We must also find ways to make such processes visible to practitioners and policy makers and to engage in other processes that may work to de-centre whiteness in ways that can open family literacy work up to other possibilities. As a way to pursue/develop/consider such possibilities, the next chapter turns to the ways in which deficit thinking is shaped by colonial logics. In particular I explore my own experience as a white settler researcher observing in a program that was oriented around non-white, Aboriginal bodies.
Chapter 4: Losing my Chair

Introduction

I was not always oriented towards doing family literacy research in relation to my location on Indigenous/colonized land. I was not always conscious of colonialism or its relationship to deficit thinking in my writing. I did not, from the very beginning of my work in family literacy or my work on this research project, think of myself as a white colonial settler working and living in Indigenous and colonized spaces. Yet, through the course of my reading and fieldwork I began to understand that historically and an ongoing basis, the workings of settler colonialism were central to the work I did set out to do: to explore the tenacity of deficit thinking in the field of family literacy. I realized that when I entered into this work (when I entered into this world), I entered a space that was always already colonized and in which I was always already a settler, embedded in colonial relations. When family literacy was conceived of as a new approach to literacy education, it was conceived of within a colonial discourse, through colonial frontier logics (Donald, 2009c, 2011) at least in Canada, at least in Saskatchewan.

In this chapter, I begin an exploration of the ways in which colonial frontier logics have shaped family literacy work in Saskatchewan and my own identity as a researcher and practitioner. My starting point for this discussion is my own experience observing in the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting (TAP) program. During my observations in this program, I experienced a shift in my perspective which I describe as an experience of ‘losing my chair’ (Ahmed, 2007b). This shift helped me see the workings of colonial frontier logics and the layers of place and space that shape family literacy programs in Saskatchewan, on treaty land. Drawing on Donald, I discuss how I came to see colonial frontier logics in relation to
deficit thinking and I conclude the chapter with some explorations of how colonial myths might be seen to be at work in family literacy discourse in Saskatchewan.

In previous chapters, I have discussed the invisibilized but always present relationships of power in relation to gender, class, culture and race in family literacy programs. Before beginning my research, I had thought about these relationships and my understanding of them shaped my initial understandings of deficit thinking. This perspective served as a starting point for my discussions in Chapters Two and Three.

As discussed in Chapter One, my fieldwork and writing for this thesis took place in Saskatchewan on Treaty Four and Treaty Six land. Although I want to produce a thesis that is relevant outside of a Saskatchewan context, I have come to feel that in order to begin to understand issues of deficit thinking and colonialism in family literacy work, I need to look closely the specific context in which I live and work. The racialization of family literacy programs, which I have discussed in the previous Chapter, was of interest early in my thinking about the thesis, alongside my beginning deconstructions of the ways in which words such as ‘at-risk,’ ‘needs’ and ‘urban’ worked in family literacy discourse. But although I had thought about the ways in which race was made invisible in family literacy discourse and about the embodied realities of learners in family literacy programs, until observing in the TAP program, I had not thought about colonization, about Indigenous/white settler spaces or about my own identity as a settler woman on treaty land.

In retrospect, I see this lapse as reflecting my white settler privilege and the ways in which this privilege is maintained by the dominant discourses of adult and family literacy work (among many other dominant discourses). I was able to talk about culture, class and race
without thinking about how race had appeared in this place, without thinking how it had appeared in/on my body and the bodies of those around me. I could talk about newcomer and Aboriginal families but never mention colonialism although now I see that it shapes me, makes me who I am, in this place, in this body at this time. Racism and colonialism were ideas that, as described by Chambers, I tried to address from “an elevated moral plane or a politically neutral space” (Chambers, 2006, p. 27). My fieldwork in the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting program was a turning point after which I could not continue to view these relationships from a distance.

**Traditional Aboriginal Parenting - The First Encounter**

As discussed in Chapter One, The TAP program was an outreach program of the Children’s Centre and was offered in partnership with a community based organization in an urban centre in Saskatchewan. Aboriginal practitioners developed the program curriculum based on traditions of the Plains people. Two Aboriginal women (a Cree woman and a Métis woman) facilitated the program I observed with the support of a female Cree Elder. The program focused on helping Aboriginal parents become empowered though learning about traditional Aboriginal approaches to parenting. Drawing on traditions of the Plains people, the TAP program was grounded in a holistic approach to life and learning represented by the four quadrants of the medicine wheel: mind, emotions, body, and spirit. The program emphasized the importance of balancing all four aspects in one’s life as a parent in many ways; as the manual stated, the (Aboriginal) communities’ values would be brought back “by raising a child spiritually, emotionally, mentally and physically.”

The program took place at a drop-in centre located in the basement of a school in an ‘inner city’ neighbourhood. The neighbourhood is one that some city residents (white residents,
and, as I will discuss in Chapter Five, some newcomers) are afraid to enter. It has a reputation for prostitution, drug houses and the highest violent crime rates in the city. The neighbourhood has the largest Aboriginal population in the city and, for the most part, Aboriginal people are seen as both the perpetrators (in an immediate sense) and the victims of these crimes.

On my first day observing in the program, I parked my car in a snowy parking lot a short distance from the building. Although it was the middle of the day and although I was conscious of the degree to which the dominant narrative about the neighbourhood is not always reflective of the neighbourhood itself, I was careful to make sure I locked my car and glanced quickly around for safety before I walked to the building.

The drop-in centre was located in a school in an older brick building. On the outside, it was imposing, but some would say beautiful. That day as I entered from the bright sunlight into the dark hallway, it looked a little grungy and worn out. The drop-in centre was in the basement and as I walked downstairs, I noticed that the dark stone stairs dipped a bit in the middle where they had been worn away by many generations of feet. The basement hallway appeared dingy and dim. The space occupied by the drop-in centre was on my left and as I went through the doorway I was surprised by the bright, cheerful appearance. Two large classrooms had been renovated to create the space, which was filled with pale wood and primary colours. The lighting was bright and warm. The chairs and carpets looked comfortable and cozy. The space was filled with toys and books. To me, it appeared warm and welcoming: a lovely space.
That day a staff member of the drop-in centre directed me to a classroom down the hall, where the parenting program was taking place. The room was a sewing classroom shared by the school and the centre. It was large but had not been renovated as the child and family space has been. It appeared a bit grey and worn like the rest of the building but there were several colourful projects decorating the walls. Some reminded me of the projects from my grade seven sewing class; in fact a set of patterns for stuffed animals that we used in my grade seven sewing class were displayed. There were also examples of traditional Aboriginal projects. I learned later that the drop-in centre and the school offer classes that teach participants to make moss bags, a traditional Aboriginal baby carrier, and star blankets, a traditional Aboriginal quilt pattern. Tables were set up in a large circle/square and with chairs set around them. To one side, a table was laid with a substantial selection of snacks and drinks. As I continued my observations, these reflections about the place and the space of the program began to take on a different significance for me.

As I entered, the facilitators greeted me warmly and invited me to help myself to a coffee or snacks before I sat down. During this first session, and during all my time observing the program (I observed all six of the two-hour sessions), I sat alongside the parents at the tables and participated in the activities, sharing about myself where appropriate, while trying to take notes, listen and observe. As others were taking notes and listening as well, it was easy for me to blend in; although, as I will discuss, the ways in which I was positioned differently from the other participants quickly became evident.

Soon after I arrived, the participants began to enter. They were Aboriginal women and one man of different ages from teens to perhaps mid forties. During the sessions, in group discussions and sometimes in one-on-one conversations, I learned small bits about the lives
of the participants. Their stories and reasons for being in the program were varied. At least a few of the participants were there because of court-mandated requirements. Some participants had been in jail. Some had struggled with addictions. Some had lost children to Social Services and were trying to get them back or were trying to do ‘better’ with their younger children so it wouldn’t happen again. One woman (in her late 20s) had several children whom she was raising with her partner/their father. They had recently been homeless but were in a more stable situation while she attended the program. Another woman was pregnant with her second child. She had been convinced to give up custody of her first child when she was teenager and regretted it. One of the older moms - maybe 40 - brought her young teenaged daughter with her. The daughter had experienced violence at school and was afraid to go back. Because the school board would not give her permission to enroll in another school outside her catchment area, she was not attending school at all.

Of course these were only some of the stories the participants shared in the group. In addition, I learned about the father who was active in the community helping other dads reclaim traditional practices. The woman who had recently been homeless talked about her experience as a gardener and her knowledge of local fruits and preservation techniques. She was making a moss bag for the baby she was expecting and brought it in to have the Elder bless it. Several of the women also shared how they had begun learning traditional spiritual practices as part of their own healing and healing for their families.

I learned some of these stories that very first day and some were revealed later. But most of their stories, I never learned. Learning these stories from their lives was one of the ways in which my experiences in the TAP program contributed to my reconceptualization of how I understood deficit thinking in family literacy work and in my research. Eventually, as I will explore below, I recognized that the presence of these bodies in the TAP program and the
stories they brought with them could only be understood within the context of colonization.

The stories that they shared also suggested ways

culture, power, inscribes both on and in the body. Bodies are sites and centres of struggles between different power formations. Bodies bear the marks of these struggles and are also marked differently - processes and constructs of gender, race and class impact which bodies are marked and how they are marked (Pillow, 2003, p. 148).

In this setting I began to recognize that it was colonialism that led to the participants’ experiences of having a child taken away, of being homeless, or of being incarcerated.

Further, colonialism constructed the participants as in need of intervention and regulation.

Their presence in that room was at least partly a result of that construction.

Beginning to understand the participants’ experiences in the context of colonialism was a first step in more clearly understanding settler colonialism as relational. The next step was recognizing my own identity as settler. In moments in the program I began to recognize the complex layers of place and history shaping both the participants and me. Such moments lead me to think more about my own relationship to the people in the room and to the place/space of the program.

**Introducing myself as a white settler**

I became aware of my identity as a white settler and moved towards understanding my relationship with settler coloniality (and with the people in the room) in a new way in several moments during the TAP program. Prior to observing in the program, I had begun to think about my identity as “a treaty person” (Tupper, 2012). This idea was first introduced to me in a PhD seminar with Dr. Jennifer Tupper at the University of Regina, and then it was
something that I found myself\textsuperscript{15} teaching to teacher candidates at the University of Regina.

As my understanding of the significance of settler colonial relationships in the context of education work in Saskatchewan developed, I began to introduce myself as a white settler and to acknowledge the traditional land on which I worked in the University classroom and in conference presentations. However, I was not yet sure what the impact of my developing awareness would be for my approach to literacy work or my research.

On the first day of the TAP program, after an opening prayer and smudging, participants were invited to introduce themselves. I listened as each participant in turn said their name, their Nation and where they were from (E.g. I am Sandra, I am Cree, I am from the Pasqua First Nation). When my turn came to introduce myself, acknowledging my identity as a settler seemed to be the introduction that made the most sense and so I said, “I am Stacey. I am a white settler.” My identity as a white settler, born and raised on Treaty One land, now living on Treaty Four land, the traditional land of the Cree, Saulteaux, Nakota, Dakota and Lakota people, was the only way I could describe who I was in that context. Although I may have chosen to introduce myself in this way anyway (as I said I had begun doing so in other contexts), this was the first time during my fieldwork or in a family literacy program that this introduction seemed not only appropriate but also necessary. Where I was from and how I came to be there mattered because it described, in concrete ways, my relation to the people in the room, not the only relation, but an important one that often goes unspoken.

\textsuperscript{15} ‘The term ‘found myself’ sounds like it happened just by accident, but a major premise in this thesis is that things do not happen ‘just’ by accident; there is work that goes into making things happen. In saying I “found myself” I do not want to imply that there were no larger discourses at work in constituting me in such a way that I might choose to be teaching about treaty education to a group of (mostly) white Saskatchewan teacher candidates; nor do I want to suggest that I had no choice or agency in this event. But I want to suggest that I did not exactly plan this. It came as a bit of a surprise to me.
Although I didn’t see it at the time, I later came to recognize that these introductions were about identifying our relationships. The identifying of relationships is an important aspect to Aboriginal culture (Graveline, 1998). In the READ program, I noticed that the Aboriginal facilitators made a point of finding out how they were connected to the other Aboriginal participants. One of my interview participants, a Cree woman, mentioned the importance of parents helping children understand to whom they are related.

Identifying myself as a white settler and then explaining that I was there to listen – to respectfully learn from the participants’ and facilitators’ journeys – was supported by the context of the program itself: in the way an Indigenous space was created that acknowledged the colonized context and in the way that respect was promoted and enacted through the program philosophy. For example, in the second session of the program one of the facilitators was speaking of the ways in which attempts were made to abolish and destroy Aboriginal practices such as the rain dance. The facilitator spoke of her own memories of seeing the rain dance being performed in her First Nation and knowing that this was dangerous thing for the dancers to do. In her discussion, she said something vaguely negative about white settler Canadians for these acts and then she apologized to me, as the only white person.

This moment might have been awkward, but I felt instead that it was actually an enactment of respectful relationships in which everyone in the room was able to acknowledge the ways in which I, as a white settler, was complicit in and benefited from this history. I did not feel blamed, but instead I felt grateful for having been invited to and accepted in that space. The opportunity to learn about these events and structures respectfully and humbly alongside the Aboriginal parents in the program helped me to understand my own position as a white.
settler on Aboriginal and colonized land and to begin to see how this shaped my own understanding of family literacy work.

Echoing the views of other Indigenous scholars, Battiste (2000b) argues that this restoration and revitalization of Indigenous languages and cultures, while certainly deeply meaningful to Aboriginal students and communities, offers opportunities for Canadians to better understand the significance of living on this land (Donald, 2009c, p. 410).

**Being De-centred**

The Traditional Aboriginal Parenting Program was different from the other programs I observed. While it seemed to me that the other programs had been oriented around whiteness and white bodies, in this program it appeared to me that the program developers and facilitators had made a conscious effort to orient the space around and to create a space comfortable for Aboriginal bodies. This was evident in the content of the curriculum, in the valuing of ceremony, for example by beginning each session with smudging and prayer, in the identity of the facilitators, and the participation of the Elder. As I have said, for me, this was a space in which I was very aware of my difference (I think in which my difference was visible) particularly of my identity as a white settler.

Introducing myself as a white settler at the beginning of the program was a moment in which my understanding began to shift and my usually invisible, yet privileged, identity as a white settler started to ‘mean’ something different. I had been prepared to see differently and to understand the significance of such moments by my engagement with feminist and post-structural theory and, more recently by beginning to think about the notion of being a treaty person. But (in retrospect) it was the (somewhat disorienting) experience of ‘losing my chair’ (Ahmed, 2007a) that really opened up new perspectives to me. The idea of losing my chair is drawn from Ahmed’s 2007 article, the “Phenomenology of Whiteness”. In the article, Ahmed
discusses the way in which Husserl, an early 20th Century German philosopher, lost his chair of philosophy, his “place in the world,” when he was ‘read’ as Jewish and his “whiteness came into dispute” (2007b, p. 160). As a white literacy practitioner and researcher, I was used to being comfortable and being placed at the centre in literacy program spaces. As I have argued in Chapter Three, such spaces tend to be “orientated around whiteness” (2007b, p. 160) even, I would argue, when the majority of the bodies in the spaces are not white bodies.

In reflecting on my experience of the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting program, I was interested in what made the relationship of settler colonialism visible to me in a way that I had not experienced before. At first I thought it was the experience of being the only white woman in a room of brown bodies - that somehow the presence of those non-white/Indigenous bodies made my own whiteness visible to me as well as the ways in which family literacy programs often operate as white spaces. However, after further reflection, I recognized that as an EAL and literacy instructor, this was not the first time I had been in a room in which white bodies were in the minority. And in fact, this was not the first time I had been the only white person in the room. However, in those settings, I had been the teacher. Similarly, in my other research settings I was generally treated as an expert by the facilitators I was observing. I knew all of the facilitators in the programs I observed prior to my research. I had worked with them, facilitated workshops they had attended, sat with them on boards and committees and interviewed them for other research projects. Often the facilitators would ask me for my input during the sessions and at some point during the programs they all asked me how I thought things were going. In the other two family literacy programs where I had
observed, I was often treated and the facilitators described me to the participants as another teacher.

But in this program things were different. Although I knew the facilitators of the program previously (one professionally through literacy and the other, a novice literacy worker, more through personal and community networks), it was clear from the beginning that I was not invited into that space as an expert. The invitation extended to me was to observe and also to participate as a parent and learner. In this program, the visibility of my identity as a white settler constructed me as someone who was not an expert in traditional Aboriginal parenting. I was there to listen and learn. In this program, an Aboriginal space was created in which I was constructed as different and as something other than expert, I was de-centered. I had lost my chair.

**Losing my Chair**

In her article, “The Phenomenology of Whiteness,” Ahmed (2007b) notes:

> If we said that phenomenology is about whiteness, in the sense that it has been written from this “point of view,” as a point that is “forgotten”, then what phenomenology describes is not so much white bodies, but the ways in which bodies come to feel at home in spaces by being orientated in this way and that, where such bodies are not “points” of stress or what we can call stress points. To make this point very simply: whiteness becomes a social and bodily orientation given that some bodies will be more at home in a world that is orientated around whiteness. If we began instead with disorientation, with the body that loses its chair, then the descriptions we offer will be quite different. (p. 160)

Ahmed goes on to discuss how black (non-white) bodies (in particular the body of Frantz Fanon) experience losing their chairs “as a loss that precedes a relationship of having (being chaired)”, an experience of “losing one’s place in the world” and of “inhabit(ing) the negative” (p. 160). This experience of being out of place and being seen as an object is how
Ahmed suggests non-white bodies experience racism/white spaces. To Ahmed, whiteness is partly an experience of being comfortable. Institutional spaces are oriented around whiteness and therefore white bodies (or bodies that are ‘read’ as white) extend unconsciously into such spaces and experience a ‘sinking’ as their body ‘trails behind’ or is unnoticed. On the other hand:

When you don’t sink, when you fidget and move around, then what is in the background becomes in front of you, as a world that is gathered in a specific way. Discomfort, in other words, allows things to move by bringing what is in the background, what gets over-looked as furniture, back to life. In a way, the experience of not being white in a white world not only gives us a different viewing point, but it disorientates how things are arranged. This does not always feel negative. Every experience I have had of pleasure and excitement about a world opening up has begun with such ordinary feelings of discomfort, of not quite fitting in a chair, of becoming unseated, of being left holding onto the ground. So yes, *if we start with the body that loses its chair, the world we describe will be quite different.* (2007b, p. 163, emphasis added)

My experience in the TAP program, as one who is white and one who is ‘read’ as white, was different than the experiences described by Ahmed. In Ahmed’s examples it is the loss of whiteness (in some cases a loss that is experienced without ever having had the experience of ‘possessing’ whiteness) that shifts one’s perspective on the world. In my case, I did not experience a loss of whiteness, but rather the meaning of whiteness shifted so that whiteness was no longer at the centre. It was a (small) loss of comfort in which I did not ‘sink into’ the space in the way that I am used to;¹⁶ my whiteness did not ‘trail behind’ (Ahmed, 2007b) but was visible.

¹⁶ As a woman with a disability my experience of ‘sinking in’ is not always complete. My body does not always trail completely behind me, although usually my whiteness does… My experience of disability sometimes makes me aware of what it is to (quite literally) not feel comfortable in a space that I am expected to fit into.
Ahmed asks if the arrival of non-white bodies and the disorientation they generate is ‘enough’ to disorient whiteness. As she points out, “organizations can recover from disorientation, and they can use disorientation to recover” (p. 163) which I take to mean that whiteness (like deficit thinking) is protean, hegemonic and tenacious. Referring to the discomfort she senses within a group of white people as she speaks to them about whiteness, she writes, "it is hard to know sometimes whether feelings are in the room or are a matter of our orientation; the impressions we have of the room by virtue of the angle at which we are placed. I feel uncomfortable, let’s say that" (p. 163). I don’t know if the arrival of non-white bodies can disorient whiteness, but what I do know is that in particular moments in the Traditional Parenting Program, moments in which my whiteness could not recede and could not grant me the comfort I was accustomed to having, I felt disoriented and in those moments it seemed to me that my perspective shifted.

There were times when the visibility of my whiteness was somewhat uncomfortable for me. Sometimes I felt uncomfortable about my ignorance around certain practices. For example, I had/have only limited experience of smudging and was not sure if/how I was expected to participate. I found the facilitators and participants very supportive in moments like these. There were also moments when the participants and facilitators seemed to feel uncomfortable for me. For example, one of the facilitators apologized to me two or three times when she was critical about white settlers (I described one of the moments above). Always there was this sense that I was different in the space. These feelings of difference and discomfort were not just about the appearance of white bodies and non-white bodies; they were about the history in the room, the things that were behind or beneath the surface (Ahmed, 2007a). They were also about what knowledge counted and from what point we were oriented.
In my experience in the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting program, there was a sense of discomfort but there was also a sense of, as Ahmed says, “opening up” (p. 163). In this space, I experienced family literacy differently and was able to see things that before had been obscured such as the layers of place and space I will discuss in the next section. Looking back, I began to understand the tenacity of deficit thinking in new ways and to imagine ways in which it might be possible to shake it loose, if only for a moment, here and there.

Layers of place and space

My sense of the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting program was one of an Aboriginal space in which Aboriginal bodies were centred and in that space colonialism became visible to me as a white settler body. My relationships to other bodies in the room were made concrete, as was our relationships to the space we were in. The way the space had been constructed by settler colonialism and the ways in which that space constructed the bodies within it were also visible.

Looking around the classroom where the program took place and that I described earlier in this chapter, I began to think about the layers of history that are normally obscured. Drawing from Donald’s notion of Indigenous Métissage and particularly his description of the “pentimento” I began to see ways in these stories about the space had been ‘painted over’ (Donald 2009c).

The idea of pentimento operates on the acknowledgement that each layer mixes with the others and renders irreversible influences on our perceptions of it. Doing Indigenous Métissage, then, involves peeling back these layers to reveal what has been concealed and interpreting the significance of what has been uncovered. (p. 141)

As I worked to peel back the layers of place and space I was experiencing in the TAP program, I began to see spaces nested in spaces, all of them connected but distinct. I saw the
TAP program as an Aboriginal space but saw that the space was being created within a school space, which was a white settler space/a space formed by colonial history. I was also aware that the school space we were in was occupied mostly by non-white bodies and that efforts had been made to shape that space in a way that was more welcoming of Indigenous bodies. I became conscious of the neighbourhood in which the school was located as one that was read as Aboriginal by residents of a city that might be seen as a mostly white space, certainly as a space created through settler colonialism (although there were layers to that as well). And then I became conscious of the fact that the city was located in a landscape like the one I viewed out the window of the University of Regina (described in the Prologue): an Indigenous space that was colonized to become a Canadian space, shaped by histories of settler colonialism as well as the histories of what came before.

**Seeing colonial frontier logics**

The experience of ‘losing my chair’ in the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting program opened up new orientations towards seeing the ways in which deficit thinking was embedded in and shaped family literacy work. If I wanted to see family literacy programs and policies that supported ‘better relationships’ (Ahmed, 2002) then I needed to think about the ways in which the place we were in, this colonized, Indigenous space shaped our relationships and our subjectivities. In reflecting and looking back over how I had thought about the problem of deficit thinking and family literacy up until that experience, I felt that I had continued to think about how ‘we’ (practitioners, policy makers, white English speakers) constructed ‘them’ (participants or target families, the often non-white bodies in the room) through the lens of deficit thinking and in doing so had reinforced a binary described by Donald as “colonial frontier logics” (Donald, 2009).
Colonial frontier logics and family literacy

Donald (Donald 2009a, 2009b, 2012a, 2012b) uses the phrase “colonial frontier logics” to describe ways of thinking that reinforce the divide between settlers and Aboriginal people. According to Donald, “colonial frontier logics are those epistemological assumptions and presuppositions, derived from the colonial project of dividing the world according to racial and cultural categorizations, which serve to naturalize assumed divides and thus contribute to their social and institutional perpetuation” (2012a).

Donald’s description of colonial frontier logics begins with the image of the fort. He describes how the fort has become, in the Canadian imagination (and embodied in historical sites and museums), a place in which European settlers and Indigenous people are separated by the walls of the fort with the Europeans on the inside of the wall and Aboriginal people camped outside. Donald also notes that the dominant “myth of the fort” tells the story from the perspective of the white settler and that the fort is depicted as part of the process of civilizing Canada; within this myth European settlers are associated with civilization, progress and modernity while Aboriginal people are seen as uncivilized people who resist this progress. “Using the socio-spatial significance of the fort as a strategy for describing the dynamics of being inside or outside Canadian society is a provocative way to demonstrate the ongoing presence of the colonial past in contemporary Canada” (2009c). These divisions in these relationships continue to be present in embodied ways. While describing the role that colonial front logics was playing in the first draft of my thesis to a colleague, the colleague pointed out that protestors from the Colonialism No More group had that morning been asked to move their tents further away from Indian and Northern Affairs Canada offices in Regina,
at which point a fence was erected separating the bureaucrats from the protestors (CBC News 2016).

Donald (and others) have noted that our institutions in Canada, including (and maybe especially) our educational institutions, have been built on the logics of the fort. According to Smith, Ng-A-Fook, Berry and Spence (Smith et al., 2012), “educational forts, like residential schools, represented (at least for the colonial governments) the pinnacle of ‘civilization’ and ‘progress’ set up to bring a benevolent curriculum of civilization to the ‘uncivilized outsiders’” (p. 54). And in many ways, educational institutions, informed by the “pedagogy of the fort” (Donald, 2009b) continue to act as “educational forts” today. Located inside these educational forts, policy makers and researchers view the higher levels of school failure experienced by Aboriginal students through the lens of colonial frontier logics and act on the belief that Aboriginal families do not know how to support their children in ‘our’ schools due to a disconnect of culture as well as historical factors which contributed to the breakdown of Aboriginal families such as trauma suffered through residential schooling. Although it has become more common to acknowledge the historical factors that have contributed to the challenges experienced by Aboriginal communities and families, it seems there is still rarely an acknowledgement of the efficacy of the traditional practices in Aboriginal communities and the fact that, although much damage has been done, many of these practices do exist today.

When family literacy programs and policy in Saskatchewan (and elsewhere in Canada) are informed by a school-based understanding of literacy and a school-centred understanding of learning and the family, they are also shaped by colonial frontier logics. As I have discussed in Chapters Two and Three, family literacy programs informed by these logics suggest that
literacy and schooling should be understood through particular Eurocentric ways of knowing (Graveline 1998; Reyes & Torres, 2007) and that in order for families to succeed/to support their children in succeeding they must adopt and adapt Eurocentric ways of doing literacy and parenting.

**Deficit thinking and colonial frontier logics**

Drawing on Valencia’s earlier work, Shield, Bishop and Mazawi (2005) write,

> deficit thinking is a product of long-term power imbalances that need to be examined by educators in terms of their own cultural assumptions and a consideration of how they themselves might be participants in the systematic marginalization of students in their schools and classrooms. (Shields et al., 2005, p. 6)

In Saskatchewan these “long-term power” imbalances are rooted in our colonial history. The ways in which deficit thinking is rooted in colonial frontier logics in Saskatchewan is particularly evident when we see the ways in which family literacy programs are targeted towards Aboriginal people, but also towards newcomers. It is also evident in how white settler practitioners are positioned in family literacy work. Through the process of ‘losing my chair’ describe above, I began to see how I was embedded in these systems that I was criticizing.

Shields, Bishop & Malawi (2005) connect deficit thinking to a process of pathologizing “the lived experiences of others” (p. x) as well as to processes of colonization: “pathologizing the lived experiences of people often has deep roots in colonial and imperial history.

Representing the Indigenous—the culturally, ethnically, and socially different—as a pathologized Other is endemic to the colonial discourse” (p. 2). In becoming aware of the ways in which colonial frontier logics divides people into discrete groups and privileges one group over the other (insiders and outsiders), I have begun to see how colonial thinking is
endemic to the field of family literacy and to educational thinking generally. It is present in much of the language that I have identified earlier in this thesis as problematic in family literacy policy and practice. Often this language identifies the group seen to be on the outside of the fort, marking members of that group as “the pathologized Other” (2005), but it does not explicitly discuss the group that ‘they’ are being defined against. So we talk about “at-risk” families but do not discuss who the ‘secure’ families are; we target “inner city” or “urban” communities but we do not discuss suburban communities; and we talk about “including” Aboriginal and newcomer families but not what it is that we are including them in, which presumably is ‘Canadian’, or white settler culture.

In the process of dividing Aboriginal people from Canadians, colonial frontier logics and fort pedagogy lead us to believe that there is this way of doing (in this case) family literacy and there is that way of doing family literacy but that there is no way for these two sets of practices to meet or even successfully co-exist. Further it suggests that this way of doing things is the ‘right’ way of or the progressive/modern way. This colonial perspective suggests that if Aboriginal people/parents/families (and others outside the fort) wish to enter and succeed in the ‘Canadian’ schooling system, then they should learn ‘Canadian’ ways of doing family literacy and they should leave those other ways behind. To be clear, no family literacy practitioner or policy maker that I spoke to suggested that this was true and no policy document that I looked at made this claim outright. But in various ways, looking back at my data and at the ways that I had tried to understand deficit thinking in family literacy work earlier in my research, I saw colonial frontier logics being implicitly reproduced in family literacy policy and practice (discourse).
As I have tried to show in Chapter Two, school-based discourses of literacy have been influential in shaping family literacy policy and practice in Saskatchewan and Canada. Looking again at documents and practices that directly shape family literacy work in this place, I could also see examples of this practice of dividing insiders and outsiders and ways in which deficit thinking is maintained despite stated attempts to counter it. For example, in looking at the notion of “cultural competence” that I discussed in Chapter Three through the lens of colonial frontier logics, I noted that the focus of cultural competence was on how institutions ‘respond’ to diversity and difference. Underlying this, there seems to be an assumption that the institution itself, does not need to change; in fact, the purpose of culture competence might be seen as maintaining the institution, or maintaining the fort, in such a way that it does not have to change even as ‘outsiders’ enter its walls. It seemed cultural competence was always about looking at those outside and thinking about how to “manage” them rather than looking at our own culture and the ways in which we might change as well as looking at how we might learn from others.

Another example from the Saskatchewan and Canadian context is the practice of adapting ‘mainstream’ family literacy curricula for particular groups, particularly Aboriginal and newcomer families. For example, the family literacy program *Literacy and Parenting Skills* (LAPS) has been adapted as *Aboriginal Literacy and Parenting Skills* (ALAPS) and *ESL Literacy and Parenting Skills* (ESLLAPS). Although perhaps intended to recognize differences in experiences as well as cultural understandings (e.g. Further Education Society, n.d.) such programs also reinforce the notion that the dominant model of (family) literacy is both fundamental and neutral. From the perspective of colonial frontier logics this practice may also work to divide Aboriginal (or newcomer) literacies from “mainstream” settler
literacies in a way that may work to marginalize Aboriginal literacies and suggest that the two groups cannot understand one another.

I began to wonder about this process during an interview with a practitioner. When I asked her about how working in a predominantly Aboriginal community impacted programming at her organization, the practitioner discussed offering cultural programming, the importance of oral language and working with Elders. As none of the programs she mentioned were family literacy programs, I asked specifically about the *Come Read with Me*, a program developed by the SLN that I knew her organization offered, or any other family literacy programs the organization offered. The practitioner explained that “it would be really appropriate” to offer more Aboriginal focused family literacy programs but that since no one in the organization had taken any training for any Aboriginal family literacy programs such as ALAPS, at this point they did not offer any.

Knowing the *Come Read With Me* program, I was surprised at her response. It is a particularly flexible program (although generally based on a school-centred model of family literacy) and it seemed to me that it would be relatively easy to adapt the program for Aboriginal families with the support of Elders or Aboriginal staff members in the organization. This is not to say this would be the best approach. As I saw in the TAP program, programs created for and delivered by Aboriginal practitioners can be particularly powerful for Aboriginal participants. But it was curious to me that the organization where this interviewee worked had not considered this approach. Or, having practitioners who were trained in family literacy work, they might have chosen to develop their own program model, such as the *Families Learning* program for newcomer mothers that I had observed.
I can think of several practical reasons that this practitioner (or organization) may not have considered adapting *Come Read with me* or creating a new model appropriate for the Aboriginal families they worked with. However, reflecting on this later, after thinking more about colonial frontier logics, it seemed to me that the notion that (mainstream) family literacy practices and Aboriginal family literacy practices were (irreconcilably) different from each other might have influenced her thinking. This possibility seemed confirmed to me when I looked again at the interview transcript:

> I think it would be nice to have more of an Aboriginal focus but we’ve also talked about here… yes, we have a lot of First Nations clients but we also have a lot of… the demographic of the neighbourhood is changing. We’re…getting a lot more immigrant clients as well so we’ve talked over the last year about trying to be flexible in programming too. (Interview 4)

By flexible in programming, the practitioner seemed to mean offering programming that was no so “First Nations focused” and perhaps more directed to the needs and cultures of the newcomers in the neighbourhood. Again, while this makes sense on some practical level, it also suggests to me that she is thinking of the organization as neutral or mainstream, that is Canadian, an organization that responds to diversity in the neighbourhood. After my experience in the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting program, I wondered if a more complicated understanding of the place in which the organization was located as a colonized/settled/Aboriginal space might shift that orientation in some way.

The connections between deficit thinking and colonial frontier logics in this always already colonized space appear in many ways. In the remainder of this chapter, I will explore how colonial myths work to maintain deficit thinking and colonial frontier logics in family literacy work in Saskatchewan.
Family literacy myths/narratives and colonial frontier logics:

As discussed above, deficit thinking works to locate the cause of failure within the individual rather than in the systems that make it difficult for individuals/groups of individuals to succeed (or in the ways that systems define/construct success). Through the lens of colonial frontier logics, this belief is reproduced so that (school) failure on the part of Indigenous people is seen as a problem of adapting to modern civilization. In relation to/partnership with deficit thinking, colonial frontier logics suggest that (some) Aboriginal people who fail to succeed in school do so because of their own resistance to (or ignorance of) the civilizing forces of literacy and schooling. Family literacy programs informed by colonial frontier logics focus on convincing (Aboriginal) parents (those who are located outside the fort) to change their attitudes as well as their practices to better fit with the practices and attitudes of the school.

Donald suggests that “one important task of decolonizing involves the persistent questioning and denaturalization of colonial myths” (Donald, 2012a, p. 97). The myth of the fort is one such very powerful myth. However, there are many narratives present in family literacy discourse that might be seen to be working as colonial myths. The first teacher narrative exemplified in the common family literacy slogan “You are your child’s first teacher” is one such myth (Smythe, 2006). This story creates the myth of an ideal parent/mother and works to measure all mothers and parents against that ideal (Crooks, 2013).

Another narrative/myth that appears in family literacy discourse and that might be seen as part of a larger colonial myth in family literacy appears as a concern often expressed by family literacy practitioners and teachers, particularly those working in predominantly
Aboriginal communities. The concern is that some parents (or perhaps grandparents) do not see the importance of supporting their children in school because they do not value education, they do not know how to support their children properly or they are afraid of/uncomfortable with interacting with the school due to their own negative experiences with schooling. Often practitioners suggest that because the parents or caregivers do not have positive memories of school themselves and because they were often not successful in school, they do not know how to and/or do not feel comfortable supporting their children in their schooling. The follow up to this is often to suggest that if parents can learn the skills they need to support their children in school, they will then feel empowered to do what they need to do to insure their children’s success. Ultimately this works to suggest that there is nothing wrong with the school (at least not anymore); we (white settlers) just need to teach parents (Aboriginal parents or others outside the fort) how to do their jobs better.

This myth is one that I have been aware of for several years. At a workshop I facilitated in 2011 with practitioners from rural, urban and Northern Saskatchewan settings, this was one of the top challenges identified by practitioners particularly from more remote locations. At that time, I noted the ways in which the myth seemed rooted in deficit thinking but beginning to understand colonial frontier logs, and to understand this narrative as a colonial myth has helped me think about it in new ways. Looking back at my interviews, I can see moments in which interview participants engaged with this narrative in different ways in response to different questions.

17 See (Valencia & Black, 2002) for a discussion of how deficit thinking about Mexican American families works in a similar way.
For example, during our second interview in her office, I asked one of my interview participants, a white female practitioner with several years experience in the field, what about the differences she saw in working with diverse groups including newcomers, Aboriginal and white settler parents. As part of a fairly lengthy response, she discussed several things that she felt all marginalized, low literacy parents (including white parents) needed support with, including “the idea that parent support is required in schools and the idea that even if you have had negative school experiences you can go to the school and support you children” (Interview 9). She then told a story about a white man who had had negative schooling experiences and could not bring himself to enter a school when his daughter was young. Over time though, he was able to overcome his fear. This story was told both to illustrate that it was not just Aboriginal parents who have this experience and that adults can be motivated by wanting to be good parents to overcome their negative feelings about schooling. The same practitioner shared that she felt that she was seeing ways in which First Nations communities were starting to see the value of family literacy programs for teaching parents to support the school success of their youth. She spoke positively of initiatives she had seen taking place in a particular reserve community and the changes that were happening as a result. While her story spoke of the strengths of the community, it also suggested that First Nations communities were beginning to recognize that they needed to change their parenting practices rather than change school practices or address social and economic inequalities on reserves. This kind of change does not challenge colonial relations.

When I asked another white female practitioner about the relationships of the families she worked with to the locals schools in an “inner city” predominantly Aboriginal neighbourhood, she responded “depends… yeah, I’ve seen, I mean… I have heard lots of
positives from some families and lots of negatives from others.” She then spoke of a mother who struggled with her own literacy: “she’s very reluctant to be involved in her kids’ school and learning because of her low literacy level. So you do… I do frequently hear stories like that.” Although she did not speak in any way that criticized the mother, the practitioner also went on to say that she had heard “really positive things about people really enjoying their school experience.” This narrative again suggested that it was the mother, rather than the schools that needed to change (Interview 4).

An Aboriginal practitioner who was a facilitator in both the READ and TAP program responded to a question about her background in part by discussing her experience working with a First Nations (on reserve) school to build relationships with families:

A lot of the older people had a very hard time going into the schools. Truancy was a big deal but yet when you would go in and speak to the families they would say well…(he) didn’t want to go to school today… having to appreciate their opinion but also letting them appreciate the importance of education and how important it is that we…educate our children and gone are the days when we…have to be scared about going in to a school and I ran across that a lot where parents…they were so traumatized, a lot grandparents also did the caregiving to the kids and they already thought….okay, I am not going to go into the school or push them to go to school…because I had bad experiences in school. (Interview 17)

This practitioner’s presentation of the narrative was slightly more complex than the stories the two white women told me. The Aboriginal practitioner emphasized the notion that schools are (now) safe places: “gone are the days when we…have to be scared” but she also acknowledged that they had not always been so. She emphasized her strong belief in the importance of education for First Nations youth, but her comments showed her mixed feelings about the situation. She contextualized the lack of support she had seen from First Nations parents and grandparents within the history of residential schools and she expressed that she understood the feelings of those parents and grandparents. Her narrative recognized,
tentatively at least, as Smith et al. (2012) have said, that “the relationship between First Peoples and educational systems, according to Donald (2009), has been historically built upon ‘colonial frontier logics that have served to enforce epistemological and social conformity’ (p. 4) to the dominant colonizing culture of Canada” (Smith et al., 2012).

But at the same time, she strongly believed in the value of education (that is schooling) for First Nations people. As a colleague of hers, another Aboriginal woman, explained:

> when you're working with family support, or with family outreach, we really believe in education. We really believe that we need to educate ourselves to keep going with our lives so we're big pushers of it. We will try and get families into schooling. (Interview 16)

**Recognizing and Challenging myths**

As Donald discusses, myths are not necessarily false; rather they are cultural interpretations of historical ‘truths’ that become reified, idealized and normalized (2009b). It is likely true, as these practitioners’ experiences suggested, that many Aboriginal people (and others who have been marginalized within schooling) have an uncomfortable relationship with schooling and some Aboriginal parents may be reluctant to ‘push’ (discourses of) schooling on their children. However, when reified and presented unambiguously, the myth that Aboriginal parents do not support their children in school works to perpetuate colonial frontier logics by reinforcing the notion that the practices of European settlers that structure the institution are not in need of change and that our job as educators is to help outsiders, Aboriginal and others, enter the fort.

In challenging these myths, I believe we need to recognize the ambiguities and contradictions that shape these myths. Chelsea Vowel, an Indigenous educator and mother, writes about her
own feelings of conflict as she works and encourages her children to succeed in an education system that she sees as “inherently colonial” (Vowel, 2013). She writes:

The reality of our situation is that unless we succeed in Canadian schools, we will never be able to revive Indigenous education. We will never have the capacity to bring back into being a fundamentally different way of learning about the world. We have already been losing pieces, and eventually there will be nothing more to lose (n.p.).

And so she is committed to seeing her children and other Aboriginal people “excel” in Canadian schools so that someday there will be an “Indigenous system of education” that does not rely on the fort.

For white settler practitioners like myself, I think we must also recognize the contradictions in doing family literacy work. For the most part, it seems to me the complexity of our (colonial) history is absent from family literacy work. As part of my fieldwork I observed in two one-day Introduction to Family Literacy workshops. This training has been developed by the Saskatchewan Literacy Network and is delivered by throughout the province. This training, which is required for all new family literacy before they can access further provincial training, has a section that discusses the ‘history of literacy.’ The main focus of the discussion seemed to be that literacy demands have increased due largely to material/economic realities and that, as a result, families need increased support with literacy learning. This approach to discussing the history of literacy perpetuated a number of colonial myths. Reflecting the autonomous model of literacy described by Street (2003), literacy was represented as a neutral tool that gives adults access to full economic participation. In presenting processes of industrialization in a neutral way, the linking of these processes to ‘progress’ remained unchallenged and in fact was reinforced. (Literacy) practices that once worked well for (some) individuals, families and communities were invisibilized and
devalued. Particularly relevant to my discussion here, the ways in which literacy has been used as a tool of power or colonization, including the history of residential schools and the devaluing of Indigenous literacies, did not appear in the workshop manual and was not part of the discussions in either workshop that I visited.

Recognizing the historical context of our myths is an important piece of developing a decolonizing approach to family literacy. Consciously acknowledging the history of residential schools might be a start to this process. But I think we must see this not just as ‘history’, something that happened in the past; we must be willing to recognize that schools, and family literacy programs, perpetuate colonialism on an ongoing basis. “Apologies have been made and monetary settlements administered. However, the authority of the colonist narrative still supersedes First Nations stories as the hallmark of our Canadian national identity” (Smith et al., 2012).

Another important piece of decolonizing family literacy is to begin to imagine how things might be different; to challenge notions that Canadian institutions like schools can not be changed; to begin to consider different ways of being successful in and out of school settings; and in the case of family literacy to see the ways in which family literacy programs could be meeting places for different cultures. This notion of how we might think differently about family literacy work will be addressed in more depth in Chapters Six and Seven.

As I have described in this chapter, the experience of losing my chair was a beginning step for me that helped me begin to see the history shaping the places and spaces of family literacy program. Significantly this also helped me begin to see the ways in which I was constituted in relationship to our colonial history. Looking through the lens of colonial
frontier logics and beginning to think about colonial myths has helped me better understand these relationships, as well as the ways in which deficit thinking continues to shape family literacy. In the next chapter, I will further explore Donald’s notion of the myth of the fort, particularly the notion of “fort pedagogy,” and the ways in which I saw it at work in the READ program that I observed at the Children’ Centre.
Chapter 5: Colonial Frontier Logics and the Pedagogy of the fort

This chapter explores colonial frontier logics and the pedagogy of the fort and the ways these taken for granted lenses inform family literacy practice in Saskatchewan. Looking back at my fieldwork, particularly my observations of the READ program, I discuss the ways in which school-based understandings of literacy appear within family literacy work and work to locate the field within the walls of the fort. I explore the tensions this creates in organizations in which staff work to be informed by learner centred approaches/pedagogies. I also discuss the tensions between school-based/school-oriented family literacy curricula and Aboriginal ways of knowing and ways of understanding literacy. In addition, I look at ways that the pedagogy of the fort and colonial frontier logics may also shape family literacy work with newcomers. I then deepen my argument about how place and history, including those of colonial frontier logics, might support a decolonizing approach to family literacy; an approach that works to de-center deficit thinking in family literacy. Finally, I discuss better relationships (Ahmed, 2002) and ethical relationality (Donald 2009c, 2012b) as an introduction to the notion of ‘robust respect’ - the topic of the next chapter.

Curriculum and pedagogy: fort pedagogy and READ

For Donald, colonial frontier logics is associated with the myth of the fort or what he calls the pedagogy of the fort. This myth portrays forts as outposts of civilization in ‘unsettled’ parts of Canada. At historic forts that have been turned into museums/historic sites, there is (almost) always an ‘Indian’ camp set up outside the gates of the fort. This representation perpetuates the myth that Aboriginal people and Europeans were divided at forts by race and culture. Europeans are depicted as representing the future and Aboriginal people as
representing the threatened past. This narrative takes on the role of myth and obscures alternative stories including the stories that Aboriginal people tell of these forts and the idea that forts were meeting places where relationships were formed and cultures were exchanged.

Through my research, including my observations in the READ program, I have come to see ways in which family literacy is shaped by and sometimes rooted in fort pedagogy. In discussing the influences of fort pedagogy in READ, I am particularly interested in the ways in which I feel the influence of fort pedagogy contributed to moments of tension I saw in the program. I observed the READ program being delivered at the Children’s Centre, an early childhood education and family support centre located in an urban setting in Saskatchewan. My observations of the READ program took place over six weeks. In addition to observing the program, I was invited to attend planning meetings. I interviewed three staff members at the Children’s Centre, including the program coordinator who acted as one of the facilitators. In addition three of the program participants agreed to participate in short interviews.

As discussed in Chapter One, the Children’s Centre is a community-based pre-school for children ages three to five who are deemed to be living in at-risk circumstances. The Centre also works with families with children from birth to age six who do not attend the pre-school, but are considered to be “vulnerable,” a term used by one of the organizations major funders. The idea of “respect” for children and families is a central/guiding concept at the Centre and was enacted in many ways in the practices of staff at the Centre. In my observations at the Children’s Centre, I was impressed by the priority the staff placed on relationships and connection. Staff members were very welcoming to the program participants and also to me. I also noted the quality of their relationships with one another, which appeared to me to be collaborative and supportive.
The READ program is one of several support programs, including other family literacy programs, offered to parents at the Children’s Centre. It was offered by the Children’s Centre to parents registered with the Centre as a six-week session and facilitated by three women, two Aboriginal and one white. In planning and delivering the program, the three co-facilitators relied heavily on the READ facilitator’s manual, although they also brought in their own ideas as experienced practitioners and mothers and drew on their knowledge of the community they work with. Each session of READ focused on a theme related to the ways in which parents can support the literacy development of their children. These themes are described as “steps” in the process of developing literacy. For example, some of the steps discussed were book reading, talk/oral literacy and environmental print. The sessions also often included an activity that focused on support and self-care for parents. There was time set aside during each session for sharing experiences and building relationships. Although respectful relationships were evident in the READ program at the Children’s Centre, I did feel at times that there was a tension between these relationships and the way that the READ curriculum was delivered.

The READ curriculum is an off-the-shelf literacy curriculum similar to many used in family literacy programs in Saskatchewan, and likely elsewhere in Canada (Kennedy, 2008). Before delivering the program practitioners usually receive a two or three day training course. Most family literacy practitioners - or rather most practitioners who deliver family literacy programs - do not have family literacy as their core work and a well-founded assumption of such programs is that practitioners have little time for course preparation in their jobs. This reality was reflected in my observations at the Children’s Centre. Two of the three co-facilitators of the program worked primarily as home visitors and the third also had a
significant case load of home visits. This work was sometimes crisis oriented and often took priority over other, less immediate, parts of their job descriptions. In addition, the women worked somewhat irregular hours due to the evening programming they did with families. This was evident when planning meetings were being organized for the program. The meetings were often postponed or shifted to accommodate the facilitators’ irregular schedules and usually only two of the three got together. In addition, the women had varied backgrounds and although all had some training in early child development, not all had any training in early literacy and adult literacy beyond what they had learned from the READ curriculum.

It is with these circumstances in mind that many family literacy programs are designed to be ‘pulled off the shelf’ and delivered with minimal preparation. Practitioners often value this convenience in their day-to-day lives. For example, Charlene, the program coordinator and one of the co-facilitators, commented on how she appreciated that everything was all laid out for her in the manual. However, this approach can work to frame family literacy practitioners as technicians rather than knowledgeable, creative professionals. The READ curriculum is, in my experience of such ‘teacher-proof’ programs, particularly prescriptive. It is based on an academic understanding of literacy and focuses on helping parents support children’s early literacy development with the goal of success in school. Although the curriculum states an intention to support the empowerment of parents, in practice there are many ways in which it reinscribes deficit thinking about literacy and families. The ways in which the curriculum works to construct the facilitator (and the authors of the curriculum) as experts in literacy and to devalue, in some ways, the experiences of the participants will be particularly explored in the discussion that follows.
Tensions in delivering the READ program at the Children’s Centre

The ways that the READ curriculum frames the facilitators as technicians, while at the same time positioning them as experts in relation to participating families, did not always mesh well with the overall philosophy of the Children’s Centre. As I have mentioned above, and will discuss in some detail in Chapter Six, the Children’s Centre promotes and values respectful relationships as core to their approach to working with families. I observed these respectful relationships enacted many times during my observations. It seemed to me that the creation of such relationships at the Centre depended on valuing the other person and their experience. However, the underlying perspective of the READ curriculum did not always support that approach.

The tension between the READ curriculum and the perspective of the Children’s Centre and facilitators of the programs was visible to me at several points during my observations. One example of this tension, which I will discuss in detail, occurred during a session on “environmental print.” As discussed, the READ curriculum divides early literacy development up into five ‘steps.’ Each step represents/explores a “context” in which children learn about literacy. The first step is “books and books sharing” which, according to the manual, was chosen as the starting point because it is a practice that parents recognize as being connected to literacy. In addition, the READ program encourages storybook reading in families and in the first session facilitators are directed to model strategies for parents to

18 What I am calling the READ curriculum is actually a pseudonym used to help increase anonymity for the people and organizations I studied. Consequently the curriculum manual is not included in my reference list. I have included page numbers in cases where I have quoted from the manual.
“discover” and use as the program continues. This rationale for beginning with books and book sharing suggests some interesting assumptions that might be seen as rooted in deficit thinking. For example, the idea that parents value books is in some way framed as a deficit in that it shows their limited understanding of literacy. On the other hand, by starting with this step, the program reinforces the, perhaps not universal (Anderson, Anderson, Lynch, & Shapiro, 2003), idea that parental storybook reading is foundational to children’s literacy development. In addition there is a suggestion that there are right ways to do book sharing (and therefore wrong ways) that parents will ‘discover’ by being told how to do them.

In the version of the program offered by the Children’s Centre, each step is the focus of one session. “Environmental print” is the fourth step in the program and was the focus of our fourth meeting. This step has the most academic/technical sounding name and its meaning is perhaps the least obvious to parents (and sometimes to facilitators). “Environmental print” is a term that parents are not likely to use unless the expert gives them that language. Interestingly, this is the only “step” that is named in this way. Week two is called talk/oral language and so has that element, but talk comes first. The titles of the other weeks - books and book sharing, play, and scribbling/drawing/writing - are much more transparent. The use of the term “environmental print” - one that the parents will likely not be familiar with - is evidence, in a general sense, of a “colonizing mentality” (Reyes & Torres, 2007) in which the expert knowledge conveyed in the program is seen to supersede the knowledge of parents. It is interesting that on the one hand, it would have been easy to use another term for this step that was more obvious to parents and ‘non-experts’ (for example, Words Around You); on the other hand, such an action would have required a shift in perspective on the part of the
creators of the program. The “insertion” here of colonizing language is a moment in which something is revealed about the underlying understanding of the program.

The tension between this expert/colonizing perspective and the more community-based empowerment perspective of the Centre was particularly evident during the environmental print session when one of the facilitators, Charlene, led the participants through an assessment activity that was included in the manual. The READ manual provides assessments/questionnaires for each “step” in the program. According to the manual, the questionnaires are intended to help parents examine their assumptions about literacy. The questionnaires are intended to be “administered” at the beginning and the end of each step to see if the participants’ beliefs have changed to become more “in line” with the perspective of the READ program. This was the only time during my observation of READ at the Children’s Centre that the questionnaires were used.

The questionnaire used by Charlene listed a series of ‘beliefs’ about the topic of environmental print. Charlene read each statement aloud and asked parents, as a group, if they agreed or disagreed. Examples from the environmental print step include: “Do you believe that children can learn a lot of print from a walk around the neighbourhood?” “Do you believe that children first recognize a store from its location, shape, sizes, and only later notice that any logos or signs for that name of the store?” and “Do you believe that drawing children’s attention to print in the environment will help the child understand that print is useful for naming things?” (READ manual, p. 248-249). Most worked to imply there was only one right way of understanding the role of environmental print in literacy acquisition.
During most of my observation in the READ program, participants were animated and engaged; however, during this activity there was very little observable engagement. Few participants spoke during the activity and there was some uncomfortable shifting in seats. My sense was that the very academic way of talking about literacy and the school-like approach of the activity (it felt like participants were being quizzed) worked to silence the participants. In this moment, as well as a few other moments in which the facilitators used more didactic activities drawn from the manual, the dominant deficit-based discourse became palpable and the more learner-centred, strengths-based beliefs that informed the Centre and READ facilitators was obscured. Only a small portion of each session was characterized by this narrow approach to delivery of the curriculum. In this example, Charlene moved from the questionnaire to a more active exploration of print in the neighbourhood and the comfortable and respectful atmosphere, present during most of my observations in the program, was quickly restored. The neighbourhood walk changed the atmosphere; things shifted back into being about relationships and context.

**Pedagogy and curriculum**

In exploring the tension that I witnessed during this moment (and a few others), I draw on Donald’s definitions of pedagogy and curriculum:

> For the purposes of this inquiry, curriculum is conceptualized as the stories teachers tell students about living in the world that explain their places in it. Pedagogy is considered the quality and character of the relationships fostered and supported through the process of telling these stories (Donald, 2009c, p. 19).

When I examine the READ manual with Donald's definitions in mind, I see it offering a particular story about literacy, school success and parents’ role in their children’s learning. Some of the major themes of this story are that ‘experts’ know important things about their
child’s literacy development that parents do not know, that there is a particular set of knowledge that parents need to know/possess in order to support their children’s (school) literacy development appropriately and that this knowledge can be taught to parents by facilitators in an twelve week (or less)19 program. In my understanding of the READ curriculum, literacy is seen as decontextualized; it is about ‘reading the word’ rather than ‘reading the world’ (Freire & Macedo, 2005; Rocha-Schmid, 2010). The READ facilitators manual presents a prescriptive curriculum and includes a great deal of content to be communicated to participants as well as intensive instructions about how to present the material. The focus of the manual seems to be on insuring the transmission of this knowledge. The emphasis on conveying this knowledge suggests to me that the program conceives of literacy learning in the program as a technical process, and that only through coming to acquire ‘expert’ knowledge of that technical process can parents adequately support their children’s school success.

I found relatively little discussion about pedagogy in the READ manual and little evidence of attention to the relationships fostered by the curriculum. As with the content of the curriculum, the manual is prescriptive in terms of procedures and instructions to facilitators. Facilitators are encouraged to “recognize that the participants should have as much decision making power as possible,” to “help parents understand the rationale for each of the steps” and also to offer positive feedback and praise parents “for any literacy activities in which they are currently engaged” (p. 26). There is some attention to pedagogy suggested by the use of activities that are meant to engage the participants. However, generally they are closed

19 The READ program is offered by the Children’s Centre in a six week format. In my experience it would be fairly unusual for a community-based organization to offer a twelve week program. A six or eight week format is much more typical.
activities that direct participants’ involvement along narrow lines, rather than participatory activities that might involve participants in a co-construction of the program. For example, each step is introduced with a “parent input time” in which parents are invited to share their knowledge and experience. For example, at the beginning of the books and book sharing session, parents are asked, “What comes to mind when you hear the word ‘Books’?” (p. 38) A list of questions is included in the manual that facilitators are encouraged to use to “probe” into the ways that books are read and shared in the participants’ homes. This approach is strengths-based in a narrow sense; i.e. the approach invites participants to share ways in which they participate in the kinds of activities considered ideal in the program. For the most part the “quality and character of the relationship” (Donald, 2009c) implied in the READ facilitator’s manual is hierarchical and expert-led. The learner in the relationship is seen as having relatively little knowledge to contribute. The expert is seen as having possession of any knowledge that counts. And empowerment is seen as a process of transferring that knowledge to the learner.

In contrast to the approach to pedagogy conveyed in the READ manual, the Children’s Centre has developed a conscious approach to pedagogy (although they may not name it in that way) which I saw expressed in documents produced by the organization, interviews with staff members and the practices of the facilitators in the programs. It was evident to me that the organization had spent a lot of time thinking about, talking about and describing on paper the kind of relationships they are trying to build between staff and participants, among staff, between children and teachers, with the community and within the community. I came away from my observations with a very strong message that these relationships are rooted in respect, build on the culture of the community and the participants and acknowledge the
economic and political structures that marginalize and construct the families they work with as ‘at-risk’.\textsuperscript{20} In some ways this pedagogy seemed to me like the air that they breathed. I was left with the impression that it was conscious but not forced or performed.

For the most part the facilitators used the READ curriculum as a kind of touchstone, a guideline to keep them grounded in the topic of parents’ roles in supporting their children’s early literacy development. The activities they used were not always ones from the manual but were sometimes ones they had learned about through other workshops they had attended, their experience as teachers with children, and/or things they did with their own children. The weekly plans the facilitators developed together, drawing on the manual, were sometimes a little sparse; however, a fairly rich program took shape from these sometimes vague outlines, in part because of the emphasis on relationships, and perhaps because the story about child development and community that the organization was rooted in was one that was somewhat different from what the READ curriculum presented.

In observing the READ program offered by the Children’s Centre, there were many moments in which the pedagogy, that is the quality and character or the relationships, were predominantly shaped by the philosophies/epistemologies/ontologies of the Children’s Centre and the facilitators. However, in some moments I felt that the facilitators’ desires to faithfully represent the curriculum led to presenting it in a way that was uncritical and left little space for the participants’ own experiences with literacy. In those moments, such as when Charlene used the environmental print questionnaire, it seemed that the awareness of the historical context in which the program existed and in which literacy happened was

\textsuperscript{20} This central role of respect and the Children’s centre will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Six.
obscured/invisibilized. The facilitators valued (respected) the curriculum and wanted to be true to it, but in these moments the commitment to a relational pedagogy seemed to recede and the pedagogy of the fort seemed to take precedence.

I would suggest that the READ curriculum as it appears in the facilitator’s manual is, at times at least, embedded in fort pedagogy. "Fort pedagogy works according to an insistence that outsiders must be either incorporated—brought inside to become like the insiders—or excluded in order for progress and development to take place in the necessary ways" (Donald, 2012a, p. 101). By promoting a notion that there is one particular way to become literate, and one particular way to support that process in children, the READ program reinforces “cultural divides” (Donald, 2009c, p. 438) in which the only way for those outside the fort, that is those on the ‘other’ side of the divide, to ‘succeed’ is “to be assimilated to conform to universalized Euro-western standards” (p. 460). When applied to working with Aboriginal participants (about half of the participants in this READ program were Aboriginal), such an approach, intentionally or not, “teaches that Aboriginal peoples and their knowledge systems must be either assimilated or eliminated" (Donald, 2012a, p. 101).

**Views of literacy and learning**

Like much rhetoric and writing about family literacy, the READ curriculum tends to simplify understandings of early childhood literacy development. According to Donald, this tendency is evidence of fort pedagogy: “When education is used to advance knowledge as a form of power and exclusion, then these forms of ambiguity are suppressed and evaded” (Donald, 2009c, p. 448). One unambiguous claim that appears often in family literacy literature is the notion that children whose parents support their literacy development appropriately (as well as their emotional, physical and intellectual development) will experience success in school.
For example, the READ manual states “the more that preschool children engage in literacy activities and experiences, the more easily they will make the transition from home to school” (p. 10). Although this statement does not guarantee that a supportive family literacy environment will lead to school success for children, the overall message is clear: children whose parents do the ‘right’ things will (likely) do well in school. Of course, people with close up experience of the school system know this is not necessarily the case.

It seems to me that the idea that if parents do the ‘right’ thing, their children will succeed in school suggests (among other things) that the process of learning to read or becoming literate is somehow knowable, predictable and describable in relatively simple terms. The common practice of creating checklists of activities that parents ‘should’ do with their children (Whitehurst, 2004) is one example of this reductionist tendency, as is the environmental print questionnaire used by Charlene and described above. However, the process of learning to read cannot be contained within lists of steps or checklists that we often draw on in family literacy discussions. Literacy learning exceeds the limits of what our discourse allows us to discuss. In promoting a view that early literacy can be understood in a check list, a questionnaire or a twelve (or six) session course, we gloss over the complexities of a Euro-western understanding of what it is to learn to read. Indigenous and other non-Eurocentric understandings of literacy and learning are rendered (completely) absent.

The dominant understanding of literacy presented in the READ program simplifies the experience of literacy and presents reading as “a technical, fragmented skill of decoding” (LaTremouille, 2016, p. 99). It is also related to Street’s “autonomous” view of literacy that I discussed in Chapter Two. In doing so, the program reinscribes another myth that works through colonial frontier logics and fort pedagogy to marginalize other ways of knowing.
Referring to this view of literacy, Chambers and Balanoff (2005) note that “by attributing literacy to individuals, the model ignores the role of literacy as a community resource ‘realised in social relationships’” (p. 18). This narrow view, the one most often promoted in literacy policy in Canada, excludes many people’s literacies including Aboriginal perspectives of literacy. Aboriginal approaches to literacy, which I will discuss in more detail below, have tended to emphasize literacy “as a way of life based on a holistic world view” (Antone, 2003) and as engaging the spirit, heart mind and body (Ningwakwe, 2003).

Drawing on the four directions teachings of Elder Bob Cardinal of the Enoch Nation, Latremouille (2016), a white teacher and mother, reflects on her struggles to understand the experience of her young daughter, a so-called “‘reluctant reader’” and her own sense of anxiety and urgency as her daughter does not learn to read on the school’s timeline. As she explores the four directions teachings she re-imagines reading as a gift, as an individual process of "wording the world" and as ceremony. Her abstract states: “I interpret the process of learning to read as a relational and careful act of ceremony, which literally overflows the dominant interpretation of reading as a technical, fragmented skill of decoding” (LaTremouille, 2016, p. 99). In doing so, Latremouille suggests an alternative story (curriculum) about family literacy to the one presented in the READ curriculum.

**Medicine Wheels: what does a circle do?**

In speaking of Indigenous communities in Canada, Chelsea Vowel (2013) writes, “they want Indigenous education, not ‘education for Indigenous peoples,’ which is merely Canadian education with cut-and-pasted medicine wheels or four direction teachings” (n.p.). Although not common to all Indigenous cultures in Canada, the medicine wheel and four directions teachings are relevant to First Nations groups in Saskatchewan. Indeed, in attempts to
‘include’ Indigenous students’ perspectives in education, the medicine wheel is sometimes used to organize curriculum content in Saskatchewan. For example, in the recently updated Saskatchewan Literacy Benchmarks document, *The Circle of Learning* (Network, 2014), which is intended to guide adult literacy (and in some cases family literacy) programs in Saskatchewan, the benchmarks are organized/arranged in a circle. This representation is intended to reflect Aboriginal perspectives and create a document or tool that is inclusive of all learners in the province:

The Circle of Learning drew inspiration from the wisdom and traditional teachings of the Medicine Wheel, as shared by First Nations and Métis Elders and advisers. The circle continues to be a powerful symbol of the cyclical, ongoing nature of continuous learning (p. 4).

Medicine wheels are also often seen in Aboriginal versions of family literacy curricula. For example, when I asked Charlene about the Aboriginal version of the READ program she explained to me that it includes the same basic content as the ‘non-Aboriginal’ curriculum document, but starts with oral language and represents the steps in a circle.

My own experiences and observations regarding medicine wheels and four directions teachings used in mainstream teaching environments have led me to question how much substance there is to the notion that (re)presenting information in the form of a circle suggests a difference in the underlying philosophy, discourse or pedagogy that shapes the content being presented or discussed. It seems to me that simply presenting information in a circle format does not change hierarchical ways of thinking into holistic ones.

For example, one of the schools my daughter and son attended in Regina used a program called the “Circle of Courage” (See Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990 and footnote below). A large visual representation of the Circle of Courage was posted on a bulletin board.
in the main hallway of the school. It appeared to be a medicine wheel with one of the words “belonging, mastery, independence and generosity” in each of the four quadrants. Each month the school had an assembly and a few children were chosen by their teachers to be recognized for displaying one of the four qualities and to have their names added to the Circle of Courage bulletin board. From outside, it seemed to me that this ‘holistic’ circle was being used in a hierarchical and individualistic system to reward some children and exclude others; and perhaps even more significantly, to manipulate or manage behaviours.

Perhaps naively, as a parent I assumed that the Circle of Courage was an initiative that had been developed locally in an effort to include and embrace Aboriginal teachings that are part of the place that we live. In searching, I discovered that the Circle of Courage, at least the version being used by the Regina Public School Board, was adopted from an American non-profit consulting organization specializing in “positive psychology” (Starr Commonwealth, n.d.). Although the organization cites several Aboriginal sources in its description of the Circle of Courage, I am not sure that the program was developed by or in partnership with any Aboriginal communities.21 The Regina Public School Board promotes the program as part of their bullying prevention and intervention strategy (Regina Public Schools, n.d.). Although the program uses the image of a medicine wheel, the description on the Regina Public Schools website of the way the Circle of Courage is intended to be used does not suggest anything profoundly different or outside the dominant discourses of schooling:

21 Although I have since learned that the Circle Of Courage was developed by Dr. Martin Brokenleg, a Lakota elder and psychologist (http://www.snuneymuxw.ca/news/circle-courage-dr-brokenleg) in collaboration with Larry Brendtro and Steve Van Bockernwith, I did not find this information on the Regina School Board website or the website of Starr Commonwealth.
The methods are grounded in research evidence on resilience, brain science, and positive psychology. This training offers practical methods providing positive behaviour support and creating climates of respect in schools by focusing on strengths and solutions. Brief “teaching moments” instil positive behaviours and values. RAP sets high expectations of youth to take responsibility and show respect for themselves and others. Young people are enlisted as responsible agents in positive change. (Regina Public Schools, n.d.)

The use of the word respect here is worth noting. As I will discuss in Chapter Six, I see potential in a commitment to a deep and thoughtful respect that might challenge deficit thinking in family literacy. However, this example shows that it is easy to use the word respect without changing our fundamental views of the other. Through observing these and other examples, I have come to be aware of the tensions inherent in the ways in which ‘medicine wheels’ and other Aboriginal imagery are appropriated by schools and other educational institutions toward pedagogies and goals that may contradict with the meanings and ways in which these images are used in Aboriginal cultures.

During my observations of the TAP program, the Elder supporting the program also alluded to these tensions. During one of her presentations to the participants, she was critical of public schools and at one point noted that the presence of medicine wheels on the walls did not make schools welcoming places for Aboriginal children or places that embraced holistic approaches to learning. But at the same time, she also emphasized the importance of the circle. The Elder suggested that European institutions (like schools) are pyramids; this hierarchical way of thinking was also reflected in the metaphor of steps in the READ program. In contrast, the Elder in TAP described Aboriginal societies are circles. Reflecting this, the image of the circle appeared repeatedly in the TAP program. Life was described as a circle. Knowledge was seen as a circle. Learning happened in a circle.
The medicine wheel as presented in TAP, and as understood among the Plains people (Graveline, 1998), was sacred and it shaped (but also was shaped by) understandings of knowledge and relationships in the program. Life was seen to be experienced as a journey around that medicine wheel. One ends where they began, having travelled through the seasons of their life on a predictable but unique (sacred) path. An Elder is not superior to a child, not higher up the pyramid, but able to be a guide because they have travelled along that part of the circle before. Lessons (learnings) and gifts characterize each season of life. There is not one better than the other; all are sacred.

This holistic approach to education/learning that is part of many Aboriginal cultures (Battiste, 2013; Graveline, 1998; Ningwakwe, 2003) may not be easily compatible with Eurocentric approaches to education (Graveline 1998). While I want to be careful in this discussion not to essentialize Aboriginal people (or white settlers) and not to create a sort of static dichotomy (binary opposition) between Indigenous and settlers ways of knowing/thinking/being, at the same time I want to try to illuminate where there might be gaps and tensions. And often it seems that attempts to incorporate an Aboriginal view, to incorporate the circle, end up being undermined by a kind of “cognitive imperialism” in which “a Eurocentric foundation is advanced to the exclusion of other knowledges and languages” (Battiste, 2013, p. 26). Even attempts to talk about this more holistic approach can lead to Aboriginal perspectives being reshaped to fit in a Eurocentric perspective. “The asymmetry arises because Indigenous peoples must use the normative language of the dominant culture to ultimately defend world views that are embedded in completely different normative frameworks” (Turner, 2006 cited in Donald, 2009c, p. 295).
When the circle continues to be seen through the lenses of fort pedagogy and colonial frontier logics then it can work mostly as a way to engage Aboriginal people in order to bring them into the ways of the fort, rather than to expand or challenge ways of thinking that shape the fort. Eurocentric perspectives are “cut-and-paste(d),” as Vowel (2013) says, into a circle format, divided into four quadrants and called holistic. The language and the relationships remain the same - or at least they do to those of use who continue to look at it through a Eurocentric lens. It may be that to an Aboriginal person or a person looking at it through a holistic lens, the circle does matter and it says something quite different.

In my observations in the TAP program where I was privileged to learn from an Aboriginal Elder as she shared her teachings with a group of Aboriginal parents, I began to see that for those embedded in an Aboriginal perspective, for whom the circle has cultural meaning, the circle is integral to the content. It is not just a way to graphically organize the information; it is part of the meaning. Part of the literacy to able to understand that is to be able to interpret what the circle means because the circle shapes the story (curriculum) and shapes our relationship to the story (pedagogy); those who are outside that worldview can easily miss that part of the story. We may just see the words and interpret them in the linear way we are used to. If we are accustomed to linear thinking, like the steps of the READ curriculum, then we are likely to not see what the circle does/means. Learning to pay attention to the circle might support an expanded and expanding view of literacy and learning.

**Newcomers and fort pedagogy**

My discussion so far has focused on colonial frontier logics and fort pedagogy in relationship to Aboriginal people, white settlers and family literacy; but I think there is also a connection to be made regarding non-Aboriginal, particularly newcomer families. It seems to me that
newcomer families in family literacy programs are also constructed through the lens of
colonial frontier logics. For example, a similar narrative or myth appears about the ways that
Aboriginal families and newcomers do (not) support their children in schooling. In the case
of newcomers, differing cultural understandings of education and the lack of experience with
the Canadian school system are cited as reasons that newcomer parents do not engage
‘appropriately’ in their children’s education. As with Aboriginal families, dominant family
literacy discourses suggests that the way to address this deficit is to train parents to support
their children in the ways that Canadian schools expect. It seems to me that, in addition to
deficit thinking, colonial frontier logics are at work here. This view suggests that there is a
particular Canadian way of supporting children in developing literacy and becoming
educated and that teaching newcomers to Canada the ‘ways of the fort,’ is the only way for
them to be part of Canada/to become Canadian. Citing Lear, Smith et al. state, “often when
‘outsiders’ attempt to enter such institutions (forts), they are asked or even forced to give up
their way of life and in turn reconstruct their subjectivity as a curriculum of radical hope”
(2012, p. 54). In seeing family literacy programs as supporting newcomer families to enter
the fort by teaching them to behave in ways that are more Canadian we continue to draw a
line between insiders and outsiders, reinscribing colonial logics.

Newcomer and Aboriginal learners: “there are other children here”

As an adult literacy worker in Saskatchewan, I had been conscious of a tension that arises
when immigrants and refugees (usually but not always non-white, English language learners)
are participants in programs alongside Aboriginal learners, a common situation at least in
part due to the lack of English language learning opportunities for newcomers. The two sets
of learners may have very different needs/interests and very different backgrounds and relationships to schooling. For example, an immigrant learner with a University degree and a professional work history in her home country may attend the same program as a refugee learner who has had limited access to formal education and an Aboriginal learner with a grade nine education. In adult literacy programs there is often (but not always) some separation of these groups according to their perceived language or literacy needs but in family literacy programs both ‘target groups’ are constructed in similar ways and will often be participants in the same program (e.g. READ).

Looking at work with immigrants and refugees through the lens of colonial frontier logics has changed my perspective about this tension. For example the Community Literacy Program, the organization that offers the program, a participatory family literacy program for immigrant mothers (see Chapter One for more details), is primarily an adult literacy organization that works with English speaking (Aboriginal and settler) literacy learners as well as newcomer, English as an additional language (EAL), learners. The organization’s core program is a one-to-one volunteer tutoring program and over the years, the organization has chosen not to make efforts to recruit new learners, although they do make efforts to recruit tutors. As it was explained to me by the program director during an interview, the reason for this is that there are never enough volunteers and there is always a long list of learners waiting for tutors and other programs. This passive approach has contributed to a situation in which the percentage of learners who are newcomers has steadily increased over the years so that currently more than 90% of the learners currently registered for their programs are English as an additional language learners.
There are also, I would suggest, certain practices within the Community Literacy Program that may work to create an environment that is more welcoming to newcomer English language learners than to literacy learners born in Canada (white and non-white settlers and Aboriginal people). For example, policies about program registration, some clearly embedded in the hierarchical nature of Canadian institutions and the pedagogy of the fort (e.g. You must have identification with your address on it; you must participate in an intake interview; missing two sessions may lead to you being removed from the program) can work to exclude or rather to not actively include some literacy learners. These practices and policies may also work to construct some learners as more deserving than others. The long waiting lists also may make it more difficult for adult literacy learners who are more likely to be transient and may have had a harder time making the decision to walk in the door in the first place, as they may be more likely to be coming with negative experiences of education and institutions to begin with. And because the program has never wanted to recruit new learners, they may not have put thought into the ways these barriers may work to exclude some learners more than others.

In the case of this particular program, the ever-increasing numbers of English language learners is perhaps extreme, but I don’t think the general dynamic is unusual in literacy programs. Having worked with newcomers in Saskatchewan, I am aware that settlement services for newcomers have been historically under-provided. Newcomers often work long hours at several jobs and sometimes are unable to attend the full time language programs that are available. Mothers of young children frequently report difficulties accessing childcare
while they study; during small group interviews\textsuperscript{22} with moms attending Families Learning, several mentioned this as a reason they had stopped attending LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada) classes. The flexible part-time and evening hours of community-based adult literacy programs like the Community Literacy Program are more suited to many immigrants’ and refugees’ lives. In addition, the needs of newcomers are sometimes considerable and pressing, particularly as these organizations often work with newcomers who face the most barriers: refugees, learners with little education in their first language, older learners, learners living in poverty, learners with disabilities and mothers or primary caregivers. Because their needs are very real and immediate and because, in some ways, these learners are easier for programs to work with than literacy learners, more attention and resources may be put in that direction.

Perhaps the white Canadian ‘imaginary’ (Leonardo & Porter, 2010) and our desire to see Canada as a welcoming country to immigrants also plays a part here; we want to help the newcomers enter the fort. There is a sense of obligation or of wanting to meet a certain view of what it is to be Canadian that organizations, practitioners and policy makers may be influenced by. And certainly most (white settler) Canadians would likely rather position themselves as part of a Canada seen as welcoming and multicultural rather than a Canada that is still, always already, a settler colonial society (St. Denis, 2011). The Canadian immigration narrative is one of settlers creating this land and of being a welcoming, multicultural society (Tupper, 2014). This imaginary depends on ignoring or turning our

\textsuperscript{22} See Chapter One for more details about these interviews.
backs on our history of colonization and orienting (Ahmed, 2007) ourselves to the image of Canada as an empty land waiting to welcome people from around the world, some of them displaced by the same processes that colonized Aboriginal people here in the first place.

The ways in which the needs of Aboriginal and newcomer communities are constructed as different and in some ways at odds can be problematic. One way this appears is when practitioners or others question the focus on Aboriginal philosophies or content, suggesting that this approach may alienate or exclude others, particularly immigrants, who are seen as/constructed as an equally at-risk or needy group. St. Denis (2011) discusses this by describing how teachers sometimes question the focus on Aboriginal content in curriculum (in Saskatchewan) by arguing that “there are other children here.”

The tension in continuing to welcome new immigrants, or new settlers, to a settler colonial society also sometimes appears as a competition for scarce resources. Funding that may have been working to serve Aboriginal people, although not exclusively or explicitly targeted in that way, now is used to support programs that help newcomers settle more successfully. This creates a sense in which these two groups (which are really many more diverse groups within groups) are placed in competition; and I think, in some ways, it may feel easier for programs to serve newcomers, as suggested by the situation described above, especially if they are seen as ‘deserving’ newcomers, those that fit our image of what a good newcomer should be. What exactly constitute a ‘good newcomer’ shifts over time and across contexts (Guo, 2009); however, in the case of the Community Literacy Program, a good newcomer

23 An example of this is former Prime Minister Harper claiming that Canada has no history of colonialism while in office (Wherry, 2009)
might be defined in the same way as the program policies define a good learner: one who is reliable, punctual, cooperative. That is one who adapts to and adopts the practices of the fort.

As I discussed briefly in Chapter Four, the perceived tension between serving Aboriginal families and serving newcomer families was discussed by one of my interview participants who worked in an inner city organization that had in the past worked mostly with Aboriginal people. The practitioner expressed a concern that her organization was seen to be an Aboriginal organization and was therefore not seen as welcoming to the newcomer residents in the neighbourhood even though it was a government funded community based organization that served a particular neighbourhood, not a particular client group. For generations this neighbourhood has been predominantly the home of Aboriginal people and the organization made conscious decisions to be more welcoming to Aboriginal residents and to draw from Aboriginal philosophies to some extent in their programming. Recently the neighbourhood has seen an increase in immigrant and refugee residents and the organization is wondering what changes it should make to be welcoming towards and meet the needs of these new residents. Through colonial frontier logics, the focus becomes on how to support these two groups which are seen as different from the mainstream and different from each other (although perhaps monolithic within each group) to enter the organization in order to receive the support/intervention that they are seen to need. The idea that an organization informed by an Aboriginal perspective, might be an in a position to meet the needs of all residents of the neighbourhood, who after all, are living on Indigenous/colonized land does not seem to be a consideration.
Newcomer learners within a discourse of settler coloniality

Although at times in discourses or practices of family literacy the needs/interests of immigrants and refugees and Aboriginal people in Canada might be positioned in opposition to one another, I would suggest that immigrants and refugees in Canada are constituted by the same, or a very similar, settler colonial discourse (colonial frontier logics) that constitutes Aboriginal people as "other" (in family literacy programs). This discourse imagines/desires a Canada that welcomes and embraces diverse immigrants (while still retaining its identity as a Eurocentric country) and it obscures the huge diversity within immigrant and refugee populations. It also obscures the ways in which colonization globally has shaped immigration to Canada.

However, there are other ways we might look at this and other related concerns. First, it is important to remember that immigrants and refugees in Canada are not always welcomed with open arms; and in fact the myth that Canada is an open, multicultural, welcoming and accepting society can be harmful for immigrants and refugees if it prevents the discussion of problems that immigrants face including racism, discrimination and isolation. The ways in which we conceptualize/constitute/interpellate/ immigrants (and the ways in which Canada is constituted as a country of immigrants) can shape/be enacted in policy and programs (Gibb, 2008).

Colonial frontier logics divides groups into insiders and outsiders and the dominant narratives about newcomers leaves out the complexities and diversity among newcomers and refugees. For various reasons some newcomers find it easier to succeed (survive and thrive) in Canadian society, and the assumed goal of "integration" remains complex and
controversial. Newcomers are racialized in different ways. Their reasons for and experiences of migration are different. They also arrive with different levels of education, comfort with English, life and work experiences. They speak various different languages and identify with many different cultures and religions. They have varying experiences of ability and sexuality. Perhaps particularly significant in discussions of family literacy, migration is gendered and the experience of women immigrants and refugees, who may more often than men find themselves in family literacy programs, is routinely very different than that of male immigrants (Gibb & Hamdon, 2010). There may also be shifts in gender roles and in power relationships between genders that happen in and through the immigration process/experience. As discussed below, mothers in the Families Learning program that I observed at the Community Literacy Program displayed this diversity. The twelve regular participants were from at least eight different countries, spoke at least six different first languages and had varying levels of English and education in their first language.

In addition, I would suggest that the Canadian colonial discourse (colonial frontier logics) that works to continue to perpetuate colonialism on First Nations people also works to construct an image of the good newcomer, to assimilate newcomers and ultimately to colonize (or recolonize) newcomers to Canada. Through all this, what it means to be Canadian is still largely defined through a Eurocentric framework.

**Becoming “at-risk”**

Migration can also be a process through which newcomer families and women in particular come to be positioned as in deficit (Guo, 2013). In migrating to Canada, women who come from diverse backgrounds become part of one category (newcomer or English as an additional language learner) and to the extent they bring linguistic and cultural traditions that
differ from the Eurocentric Canadian norm, the categories of ‘newcomer’ or EAL learner are often further conflated within the category of “at-risk” although their past experiences and their needs remain highly diverse.

Mothers attending the Families Learning program shared the experience of bringing up children in Canada in a culture that was not their home culture; however beyond that, the differences among them were great. Some women were university educated and had had careers in their home countries including a midwife and doctor. Some had not completed high school. Some women were ‘economic’ immigrants and some were refugees. Some were multilingual, some had studied English in their home countries before coming to Canada. Others spoke only their first language and knew no English upon arriving Canada. Some families had relatives in Regina, sometimes living with them, and some were active members of local communities of people from their home countries. Others were more isolated. Some had one child. Some had several children. These difference lead to greatly differing needs, many of which did not fit in the structure of a single family literacy program.

As part of my observation in the Families Learning program, I did interviews with small groups of four or five participants. These interviews were done in a room adjacent to the program room, during program time. During these interviews, several of the mothers told me how difficult it was to raise children here in Canada compared to where they had grown up. As one Sudanese learner described, “back home it’s easy to have kids. The family are there … the neighbours are there… here it is so difficult to see neighbours” (Interview 19). The other participants in the group, who were from several different countries, nodded in agreement. In many of the countries they came from, child rearing was seen to be more of a collective responsibility shared among female family and sometimes community members.
Now in Canada they were raising their children in nuclear families, often with most of the childcare falling on the mother. They expressed that they felt isolated and sometimes struggled.

Through fort pedagogy and colonial frontier logics, the loss of this community and the lack of support for mothers/parents in Canada can be constructed as an individual deficit. When discussing the ways in which the diverse learners in the Families Learning program benefit from the program, the Community Literacy Program’s director, who had facilitated the Families Learning program for several years, described a mother who cried when she first learned about pre-reading skills that preschool children develop through family literacy programs about because she had not engaged her older children in the kinds of activities being discussed. According to the practitioner, the mother

...didn’t even talk to them because it’s no fun to talk to a baby, they don’t respond to you and so she discovered that her older kids were struggling in school and then she came to Families Learning and started immediately talking to her baby and her little toddler and doing these literacy things with them and by the time they got...into school it was so much better. And she had no concept of that because you raise a child in a village...(Interview 9)

Here “raising a child in a village” is constructed as a deficit in that the mother didn’t learn how to be solely responsible for her children’s literacy development. This perspective blames the mother and instead of criticizing the ways in which mothers are often isolated in Canada. Further, this view entirely discounts the benefits of other forms of learning and of literacy that took place in the village (e.g. sharing cultural knowledge, building relationships and using life skills). From her position within in the fort, the practitioner sees these other ways of doing literacy and parenting as incompatible with Canadian ways.
Family literacy and newcomers

Family literacy programs, working specifically with or including immigrant and refugee families can work to promote the image of the ideal Canadian and to construct newcomers as ideal immigrants who work hard to contribute to Canadian society. In Families Learning, participants had asked to learn about the Canadian citizenship test and the facilitator spent part of each session I observed in discussing material from the Canadian citizenship book with the mothers. During these discussions there were many opportunities, in theory, to explore and challenge this construction of what it is to be Canadian. For the most part, however, the information provided was the standard Eurocentric story of Canada, represented, at the very least, as what one had to know to become a ‘Canadian’ and more often it was presented as a ‘truth’ in a largely uncritical manner. As I will discuss in the next chapter, I have come to see that perhaps drawing on an ethic/approach/perspective of robust respect and acknowledging how we came to be together in that room might allow a different approach.

The citizenship content discussed in Families Learning also worked to position the participants in deficit. They were not Canadian and they didn’t know these things that in theory Canadian should/do know. For the most part the discussion also erased/invisibilized the colonial and Indigenous history of Canada. There were moments when it was discussed (and there may have been more discussion when I was not there) but the way in which it was addressed during my observations did not make visible the ongoing colonial relationships and the understanding of all of us as ‘newcomers’ or as settlers on Indigenous/treaty lands. Staff at the program did recognize that there was a need to discuss Aboriginal people with newcomers. In my work with newcomers in Saskatchewan I often saw that they had absorbed
very negative attitudes about Aboriginal people. One staff member at the organization that offered Families Learning discussed this:

A lot of the learners are terrified of Aboriginal people because they live in the …area and they see…they come downtown…They’re afraid to come in the evening because of the environment around this (office)…So do you blame them for having misconceptions about Aboriginal people when they see the worst of it? (Interview 9)

The recognition that there is work to be done is an important first step and the practitioner did describe some interesting efforts they were making to help newcomers learn about Aboriginal culture. There is also, I think, an opportunity to help newcomers make connections between Canada’s history as a settler colonial society and immigration today. However, it is important that in addressing beliefs that newcomers have about Aboriginal people that we do not only treat their comments as “misconceptions.” Instead we need to recognize that the views of newcomers, like those of most other Canadians, are shaped by the dominant discourse about Aboriginal people in Canadian society, including its silences about the impact of colonialism. All of these issues can be difficult for practitioners to recognize when most of us, as white settlers, have not even come to grips for ourselves with the historical context of the place that we live:

At the heart of the lovely story of the Canadian nation and nationality, then, is a deep denial of the physical, epistemic, and ontological violence committed against Indigenous peoples and their ways. This denial makes it difficult for most Canadians today to understand the complexities of the relationships today. Heavily influenced by the settler story of freedom, progress, equality, equity, and opportunity, as well as the prominent international reputation Canada enjoys for these same reasons, most Canadians are unable to comprehend the difficult and ambiguous character of Aboriginal-Canadian relations today (Donald, thesis, p. 152).

Colonial frontier logics and fort pedagogy marginalize other ways of knowing and construct Aboriginal people as well as newcomers in particular ways, reinforce the divided between Aboriginal people and settlers (including newcomer settlers) but also, I would argue between
white settler Canadians and newcomers. Perhaps in beginning to recognize the workings of colonial frontier logics and in committing to work towards better relationships within family literacy programs, we might begin to de-centre deficit thinking and decolonize the field of family literacy. The ways in which such relationships might be fostered by grounding programs in an ethic of robust respect is the focus of the next chapter.
Chapter 6: Robust respect

Introduction

In this chapter, I will explore the idea of respect in more depth, and examine its central connection to the concept of orientation (Ahmed, 2006, 2007b). Building on the assumption that deficit thinking in family literacy programs and policy is partly a matter of orientation, I will explore how grounding family literacy work in an ethic of robust respect might help orient family literacy programs and policy in new ways. In particular, I will discuss how a commitment to robust respect might inform the creation of programs that can act as meeting places in which parents and practitioners can share experiences and learn from one another. This discussion will describe some of my observations of respect in the READ program and Families Learning. But much of the emphasis in this chapter will draw on my experiences observing in the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting program.

As discussed in Chapter Four, my experiences as a participant and observer in the TAP program were a turning point for me in how I understood deficit thinking in family literacy work and also how I saw my own relationship to my research, the place where I live and work and the people that I am in relationship with. Through the experience of ‘losing my chair’ I was able to begin to understand the role of colonial logics in shaping family literacy work and in shaping my own perspectives/identity. As I became aware of my own position as a white settler in relation to the Aboriginal participants and facilitators in the program, I was, I think, able to learn to see things in new ways. In this process, it struck me that the presence of deficit thinking that I had seen to greater or lesser degrees in my other research sites seemed much less present in the TAP program. I began to feel that the TAP program was somehow oriented differently than the other programs I had observed. In trying to understand
what was different about the orientation of the TAP program, I was aware that something about the program felt different. This chapter is my attempt to describe how that different feeling was created.

Central to my experiences and learnings in the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting program was my growing understandings of the Aboriginal ontology that informed the program, and how it helped foster an ethic of what I have called robust respect. I want to be clear that I am not any kind of expert in Aboriginal ontologies and I am not trying to present the perspective of the TAP program in a straightforward way. Although I am eager to learn more, my knowledge of Aboriginal teachings about parenting, literacy and learning remain incredibly partial and my discussion here is even more so. What I hope to do in this chapter is to try to describe how I saw/felt the program working in ways that seemed different from the dominant deficit thinking discourse of family literacy and how it was that I experienced the program in a way that seemed to help me orient my perspective in new ways.

Orientation

According to Ahmed, orientations “are about starting points” (2007b, p. 150). They “are about how we begin, how we proceed from ‘here’” (p. 151). Orientation is about what we face as well as what we turn our backs to, about what is in reach and what gets in the way.

My discussion thus far has suggested that family literacy programs have been, for the most part, oriented towards the fort - towards schools and their implicit whiteness - and embedded in fort pedagogy. The dominant approach to family literacy programs takes as its starting point the idea that there is a particular set of practices that parents can adopt in order to support their children in school and, for the most part, the discourse of family literacy does
not question the practices of schools themselves (Donald 2009c; Leonardo, 2004; Shields et al., 2005; Valencia, 2010; Whitehouse & Colvin, 2001). Family literacy programs and policies have generally proceeded from a school-based, autonomous view of literacy; notions of kindergarten readiness and parent involvement appear regularly in texts and conversation in the field. At the same time, in language and in practice, family literacy programs turn their backs on communities and the traditional practices of those outside the fort. This is true of family literacy programs operating from an intervention-prevention approach and family literacy programs working from a strengths-based perspective (Auerbach, 1995). In this sense, family literacy programs have constructed themselves as an entry point to schooling for children and families. The role of family literacy work has been to bring families into ‘the fort’ by promoting the literacy practices of those who are already in the fort - practices that better match the ‘whiteness’ of schools and practices that work to reproduce colonial relations.

In thinking about how we might move towards a ‘better’ or more ethical (Ahmed, 2002) approach to family literacy work, I have begun to explore how we might orient programs differently. One possibility is that instead of orienting them towards the school (in its role as the fort) we might orient family program towards relationships (within programs and the community). Through my research, I have come to believe that programs informed by an ethic of ‘robust respect’ might better support an orientation to relationship. Family literacy programs informed by such an ethic may work more as ‘meeting places’ in which there is an exchange of ideas and experience, and in such settings ‘better’ relationships might be developed. I am interested to continue to explore how a commitment to robust respect might help us move toward ‘better’ relationships (Ahmed, 2002) in programs and how it might
counter, or perhaps somehow avoid, the dominant narrative of deficit that often shapes family literacy work.

In trying to understand what was distinct the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting program, I found this notion of orientation very helpful. I feel I witnessed an approach to working with families that was oriented differently than the dominant discourse of family literacy. In this program, the facilitators and curriculum were oriented in a way that did not emphasize schools and mainstream parenting approaches that support schooling. As I will discuss, it seemed to me that the pedagogy and curriculum were built around understandings of respectful relationships. Within this context, deficit thinking did not completely disappear, but it seemed to be de-centered. Describing this approach to respect is difficult. Throughout most of my research it was not something I was looking for and at times seemed like something I sensed or felt more than observed. Like the “transgressive data” described by St. Pierre (St. Pierre, 1997) my experience of becoming aware of this was not linear or easily identified. I felt, from the beginning of my observation in the program was that there was something different in the relationships and when I considered the difference the word that came to mind was respect.

When reflecting on what made me think that the environment was different, more respectful, I first thought about what I had not observed in the program. During the TAP program, I did not notice the same moments of tension/contradiction such as those I discussed in Chapter Five, as being present in the READ program. I never felt that the facilitators’ interactions with the participants showed anything other than respect for participants. Further it seemed to me that, unlike in the READ program, the relationships with participants (or pedagogy) took precedence over the content/curriculum (story) that the facilitators were there to share. In
further thinking about these relationships, I felt that I had consistently seen the facilitators and the Elder interact with the participants in ways that were caring and supportive. The facilitators laughed and made jokes, as did the parents. They listened to and shared stories. As a group, the participants seemed to respond to this. They shared about their lives and asked questions. Over the six weeks of the program, I felt I saw the participants become more engaged and present. Observing, and more importantly experiencing this, I began to feel that there may be ways to see family literacy, to do family literacy, from a different orientation, one that is perhaps just slightly askew of the dominant perspective.

In trying to describe for myself what I saw, or what I felt, in that program, I began to use the term “robust respect.” In using this term, I was trying to describe a kind of respect that continued to be strongly present in the face of the dominant deficit discourses of family literacy work. This was a thoughtful respect, a respect that valued the other as worthy of that respect, and a respect that acknowledged the historical and political circumstances that lead participants and practitioners to be in the room together at a given moment. The purpose of this chapter is to try and flesh out how I saw robust respect being enacted, what made it different from the ways that I had seen the notion of respect being used before, and how I think an ethic of robust respect might support the development of ‘better’ relationships (Ahmed, 2002) in family literacy programs. In the next section I will explore the ways in which I observed/encountered respect in my research in places other than my observation in the TAP program.
Respectful Relations/Thoughtfulness

It is easy to talk about respect. The notion that practitioners should respect families appears as a common sense idea in rhetoric in the field (Compton-Lilly, 2009) and the notion of respect for our learners is, in some ways, foundational to our practice as adult educators (Darville, 2011). It is also a starting place for strengths-based practice. For example, in an article discussing the history of the Toronto District School Board’s Parenting and Family Literacy Centres, one of the first family literacy programs in the country, Mary Gordon, the founder of the program writes,

We always saw the family as the answer to problems rather than their cause, and the overriding value of the centres was one of respect for all families, who were seen as possessing significant strengths and the ability to find answers and solutions to their difficulties (Gordon, 2000, p. 45).

On the other hand, it also seems to me that the appearance of the word respect does not do much to challenge deficit thinking in any concrete way. It is easy for such a common sense concept to be swept up in deficit thinking and colonial frontier logics without having a significant impact. Respect can sometimes act in a superficial or an almost colonizing way, used to recruit families to programs without affecting how practitioners and families interact at a deeper level. In the article quoted above (Gordon, 2000), talk of respecting families, appears alongside constructions of families as in need of intervention and parenting education. These notions are embedded in fort pedagogy and perhaps undermine the notion of respecting all parents.

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24 For another example of the common sense use of ‘respect’ in education discourse see the discussion of the Circle of Courage in Chapter Five.
Despite the ways in which I see the term ‘respect’ being used in contexts shaped by deficit thinking, I have come to believe that an ethic of robust respect can do something else. The robust understanding of respect that I will expand on takes our common sense notion of respect and fleshes it out to be something more solid, something that is an action, a doing, as well as a word or an attitude. This respect starts not just with a commitment to having respect ‘for’ families as stated in the quote above. The respect I felt/saw enacted in the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting program, and felt/saw glimpses of elsewhere, began instead with a commitment to fostering respectful relationships with families.

I want to be careful not to suggest that treating participants with respect is a completely new idea and that is not generally present in family literacy practice. Respect is an idea that I feel I have heard in the words and seen in the actions of many practitioners with whom I have worked over the years, as well as those whom I interviewed and observed during my research, as I will discuss below. I think that the commitment to respect is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the learner-centred approach that many practitioners advocate. In committing to a learner centred (or participatory) approach, programs and practitioners move (to different degrees) towards respecting that participants know their own needs and understand their own learning and their own families. Many of documents I reviewed also indicated the value of respect in learner-centred family literacy work. For example, The *Foundations in Family Literacy* course textbook positioned respect in direct opposition to deficit thinking.

We all have a need to be respected and to respect others. Many individuals and families face great obstacles as they build a sense of self-worth. They face the daily challenges of poverty, ill-health, violence, racism, and failure. People must have the opportunity within a safe respectful environment to build a strong sense of themselves and their own identities. Families and practitioners need opportunities to identify their inherent strengths and values through
service to others, and to be enriched by the respect they offer and the respect they receive.

When we respect ourselves and others, we behave in ways that make others feel valued for who they are, in the circumstances they find themselves. When we genuinely treat people with respect, they gain confidence in themselves and in the worth of their life experience. Respect engenders dignity and is the opposite of ‘deficit thinking’ (Wilson, 2009, pp. 29-30)

Appearances of the notion of respect such as this suggest to me that, in some cases, a commitment to respect is in fact trying to do something different; it is in some way an attempt to shift the dominant regulatory deficit thinking orientation of family literacy.

During my research, practitioners in all three of the programs I observed demonstrated respectful relationships with participants in different ways. As a participatory learner-centred program, Families Learning was based on the philosophy that the families were best able to identify their own needs and interests. The facilitator listened carefully to participants and used what she learned to inform the activities she planned and the resources she brought in. She created opportunities for participants to connect and share about their lives; she also shared personal experiences from her own life. The facilitator seemed to enjoy not only talking with the participants, but also really learning about their lives. I saw this during informal moments in the program in which she took time to engage with the participants, listening more than talking, as the participants shared aspects of their lives outside of what the program explicitly made space for.

Similarly, I would describe the relationships that I witnessed between staff and participants at the Children’s Centre (and I think this held true for relationships among staff members as well) as characterized by respect, caring and warmth. In the READ program, Charlene and the other two facilitators made an effort to personally connect with participants. This was demonstrated by taking the time to talk with participants about where they were from, how
they had learned about the organization, what school their children went to and how they were doing. The facilitators often knew the participants’ children and would, for example, talk about something they had seen a child do in the preschool program. The two Aboriginal facilitators (two of the three facilitators were Cree women; the third was a white woman) often asked Aboriginal participants what reserve they came from and would try to identify connections through family relations. The practitioners also all talked about themselves and their own children and their successes and failures as parents.

At the Children’s Centre the notion of respect consciously informed their approach to programming in the READ program and beyond. Policy documents that guided the work of the organization positioned respect as a guiding value. Many every day documents produced by and used in the Centre including program descriptions and parent newsletters, highlighted respect, and more specifically respectful relationships, as being central to the practice of the Centre. In my observations at the Centre, I often noted the respectful way in which staff members interacted with families. Charlene, a Cree woman, who was a program coordinator and facilitator at the Children’s Centre for both READS and TAP, seemed to model respect in many ways, for example, by listening carefully to participants and by inviting them into conversation. In my observations, I often witnessed Charlene’s friendly manner with the parents. She was always smiling in a way that felt genuine. She greeted participants and seemed interested to hear about their lives. She would remember things that they had told her and follow up on any concerns. I also took note of the fact that she treated her co-workers and me, in my role as researcher, in the same friendly open way. In my interviews and informal conversations with Charlene, she repeatedly emphasized the importance of respect in informing the work of the Centre and her own work with families. From Charlene’s
perspective, respect at the Centre started with the way that children were treated in the program. This was something that originally attracted her to work at the Children’s Centre.

You know, like I said, the first time I came here… the thing that hit me most was how they treated the kids… Our young students are treated with pride and respect, you know. And you’ve seen that in the children eh, and you know that’s the first thing Stacey. And in my mind I said, even before I seen the teachers interacting with kids, when I just did my walk through here, this is a place I want my child… my grandchild to come. (Interview 18)

Other practitioners I interviewed talked about respect in different ways, sometimes using different language to express something that seemed similar to what I am calling robust respect. Sheila, a literacy coordinator and provincial trainer often discussed being “gentle” in her approach to family literacy and wanting to see other practitioners be gentle as well. Her concept of gentleness was connected to many ideas and including the importance of self reflection and being “aware that other people have perspectives” (Interview 1). She, and the other family literacy trainers I interviewed, also emphasized that practitioners should not position themselves as the expert; they should not talk down to participants but rather relate to them as co-learners and as individuals who brought their own strengths and life experiences. In such comments, I saw a connection to Donald’s (2009) discussion of “the reciprocal process of teaching and learning” (p. 437) and his description of teaching in terms of kindness, connection and relationship.

Charlene also described a commitment to reciprocal and non-judgmental relationships with the families she worked with in which she was available to support them while also setting her own boundaries. Like Sheila, Charlene described her efforts to put herself ‘on the same level’ as the families that she works with. Respect, for Charlene had to do with making participants feel valued or as she said, “welcome and wanted” (Interview 18). “It’s important within our positions and this is something that I just practice throughout my life is to treat
people with respect. I want to be treated with respect you know.” To Charlene, this was part of her philosophy of family support work (her primary role at the Centre) and also part of her approach to life: “I’ve found not only as a guidance counselor way, but as a mom, if we talk to the (school) staff in a respectful manner we’re going to get the same respect back” (Interview 18).

For practitioners I interviewed and observed, the commitment to respectful (and reciprocal) relationships with others did seem to be a starting point that had the potential to shift the orientation of family literacy work. However, there were many times in interviews, documents and observations in which I noted a tension between the commitment I saw and heard to respectful relationships and the prevalence of the dominant discourse of deficit thinking. This was the tension that I first felt as a practitioner as I noticed that a commitment to a strengths-based often was present alongside statements and actions that seemed embedded in deficit thinking. I observed this tension in the READ program in moments when the generally respectful attitude of staff came in conflict with the intervention-prevention discourse of the curriculum. In the Families Learning program I recognized this tension when practitioners would speak of the newcomer mothers’ experiences as strengths but then suggest that the mismatch between these experiences and the practice of mothering in Canada was a deficit.25 In these moments, the commitment to valuing respect did not seem to be enough to counter the tenacity of the deficit view; in fact, in these moments it seemed that the view of respect as “engender[ing] dignity” and being “the opposite of ‘deficit thinking’” (Wilson, 2009, p. 30) was being subverted. Instead, respect worked to help

25 See discussion in Chapter Five.
participants to feel comfortable and supported in a space that was reproducing colonial logics. In the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting program however, I saw respect embodied in a way that was more consistent and resilient and for the most part not marked by these same moments of contradiction.

I feel it is important to acknowledge that in all three of the programs that I observed during my research project, practitioners demonstrated respect for the families they worked with. Further, their interactions and words showed that this respect was rooted in a thoughtful commitment to reciprocal and respectful relationships demonstrated through practices such as listening, sharing their own experiences and making space within programs for connection. Practitioners that I interviewed, but did not observe, and documents I reviewed that inform family literacy work in Saskatchewan also indicated in various ways that respect for participants is a core value of community-based learner-centred practice. But it was in the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting program that I came to see a kind of respect in action that seemed more fleshed out and more robust and resilient in the face of deficit thinking. I will explore this experience in the next section.

**Ontology - seeing the other as worthy**

My observations of the TAP program, along with my reading of the program materials, suggested that there were a number of things that were unique about the TAP program, some of which, as I have discussed chapter four, supported me in beginning to rethink family literacy and deficit as well as my own relationship to deficit thinking as a white settler. In addition to observing a commitment to respect through listening to and connecting with participants, in the TAP program I saw respectful relationships being supported by two other qualities. First, the program was informed by a holistic worldview/ontology/epistemology...
that valued the other as inherently valuable and worthy of respect. Second, the curriculum, or story told within the program, and the pedagogy, or kind of relationships supported in the program (Donald, 2009c), acknowledged the social/political/historical context of the program. I will elaborate on each of these points below, beginning with a discussion of the ontology of the TAP program.

As described in Chapter Four, The TAP program was grounded in a holistic approach to life and learning which integrates the four quadrants of the medicine wheel: mind, emotions, body, and spirit. Consistent with Indigenous worldviews as described by Donald (2009c), the TAP program was based in an “understanding of human existence [that] is premised on the spiritual” (Donald, 2009c, p. 389). The centrality of spirituality was evident in many ways in the program.

Donald also notes that identifying with this ontology comes through participation in ceremonies, rituals, and observance of the various ethical obligations and responsibilities that we have to each other (Donald, 2009c, p. 390). I saw this demonstrated in many ways in the TAP programs including in the practice of beginning each session with a smudge and a prayer. According to the Elder in the program, the reason First Nations people “call everything sacred [is] because they are sacred” (Field notes, Feb. 15) and she emphasized the teachings of the spirit as the most important teachings for children. The spirit was also emphasized in the program as an aspect of life and learning that is missing in Euro-western approaches to parenting and education. By emphasizing this absence in the dominant way of thinking the source of expertise was shifted in the program. Deficits were identified in the dominant way of thinking and strengths were located in Aboriginal ways of knowing. In doing so, the program reversed or leveled the prevailing hierarchy.
The emphasis on the spirit was also intimately related to the way I saw respect being enacted in the program. Each individual was treated as sacred and the image of the medicine wheel was used to underscore the understanding of life as a sacred journey, a “walk of life” as the Elder called it. This perspective was expressed by Charlene, the coordinator/facilitator for both the TAP program and READ, who described her own work as sacred saying, “that’s what the creator put me on this Earth to be, is to be a helper” (Interview 18).

During the program, the facilitators and Elder expressed the belief that mothers/parents were chosen for these roles (as were grandmothers and great-grandmothers). It seemed to me that this view supported a particularly compassionate view of parents. Furthermore, the facilitators discussion of the life journey suggested that each person’s journey was unique; therefore, although we may learn from one another, and we are all teaching and have a responsibility to teach those coming up behind us, we are not in a position to judge another as we have not experienced their journey. Children, parents and Elders were all described as being somewhere along the road: none have reached the end and each still have learning to do. Describing life as a journey, particularly a journey that can be imagined as going in a circle (ending where it began) suggested an equality of value among people; one person was not seen as being more valuable than another.

As I observed this orientation towards spirituality and the innate value of each other as sacred human beings, I felt the problem of deficit thinking about parents and mothers faded into the background. Instead beliefs that parents are chosen for their roles and that we are all on a learning journey were centred. In fact, it seemed to me that notions of strengths and deficit became irrelevant and in their place was a deep respect for the other’s journey. The approach seemed to acknowledge that everyone has bumps in their road; however, these bumps were
not constructed as deficits but were seen as part of the learning journey of life. I felt there was a message communicated that others cannot ‘intervene’ to ‘prevent’ such bumps, although they can sometimes share their own gifts in order to support and protect individuals who are having these experiences.

The ontology apparent in TAP manual and in the way in which the program was facilitated by the two practitioners and the Elder reflected the way that other Aboriginal Elders and scholars have described learning and parenting. In the introduction to her 2013 collection, Marie Battiste references Saulteaux Elder, Danny Musqua: “Learning, he often says, is the purpose of our life journey” (2013, p. 18). I observed that this idea was integrated into the worldview of the TAP program; as the Elder explained in one session, referring to life as a journey around the medicine wheel, there are “teachings at every spoke” (Field notes Mar. 5). As I discussed earlier, prayer was part of every session and the facilitators explained that this was a key component of the learning process, important to absorbing and remembering the teachings that were presented. Similar to Aboriginal views of literacy, (Antone 2003; Balanoff & Chambers, 2005; Moayeri & Smith, 2010; Ningwakwe 2003), the curriculum of the TAP program suggested that all learning, including literacy learning, is sacred and also that it is embedded in the practices of everyday life: according to the program manual “everything was a teaching.” Rituals and ceremonies but also cradle boards, moss bags, traditional baby swings and teepees were all discussed in the program as being traditionally intertwined with the everyday learning of children and adults. And although these items are artifacts of everyday life, they also have spiritual significance demonstrating what Donald (2009) calls “the daily ontological task” of balancing “the ways in which the spiritual world and the material world are connected” (p. 388).
In the TAP manual traditional learning and parenting were described as being fostered within democratic relationships. The Elder in the program extended this by contrasting the medicine wheel or circle that shapes Aboriginal society with the hierarchical or pyramidal structure\textsuperscript{26} of Canadian institutions, including schools. This observation was partly used to show ways in which deficits are located in these systems, rather than in individuals. Supporting Aboriginal children to succeed in school was valued in the program; but at the same time it was acknowledged that schools are often harmful places for Aboriginal children and the manual, facilitators and Elder all emphasized that the parents’ (and communities’) job is as much to protect children from schools as it is to support them in school achievement. This recognition required the acknowledgement of settler colonialism. As the manual stated, “it is still the government’s agenda to assimilate us” (TAP program manual, p. 28)\textsuperscript{27}.

Coming to see how this ontology, rooted in an Aboriginal spirituality/epistemology, shifted the orientation away from deficit and towards relationships in the TAP program was a powerful experience for me. In recognizing this, I began to see a possibility for an ethical orientation that created a space in which the other was seen as sacred and therefore as inherently valued, and for a family literacy practice that was not embedded in deficit thinking and colonial frontier logics. Informed by Aboriginal spirituality, I have come to believe that this orientation in the TAP program is one that could also inform family literacy practice in other contexts. That is not to say that we (as white settlers or mainstream practitioners) might appropriate or adopt the ontologies of the TAP program; it is more that in seeing that this program operates from a different stance, we can recognize that it is possible to be oriented

\textsuperscript{26} I discuss this comparison in Chapter Five.

\textsuperscript{27} As TAP is a pseudonym, I have not included the manual in my list of references.
in a way that de-centres deficit thinking and that values the other in the context of relationships. As Donald (2009c) explains,

> Indigenous ontology offers a critical opportunity to live differently in the world today. Consciousness of traditional teachings can help us interrogate and contest Eurocentric philosophical traditions that shape the commonsense moral syntax that dominates current social, political, and economic discussions. (p. 390)

What I observed in the TAP program can be understood in various ways; understanding these practices as the actualization of robust respect is only one possibility, but it seems to me that it is a possibility that may “open up” (Ahmed, 2007b) new ways of thinking about family literacy work. This is particularly the case once we acknowledge that family literacy programs in this place, are embedded in a settler colonial context that has been shaped both by settler and Aboriginal ways of knowing. The importance of acknowledging this history is another important aspect of robust respect as I will discuss further below.

**The moment of encounter**

As noted, in the TAP program, the holistic worldview of traditional Aboriginal communities was contrasted with a discussion of Canadian schools as hierarchical institutions that value competition and that are (still) working towards the assimilation of Aboriginal people. The view presented of Aboriginal and Canadian societies was not simply a binary of good and bad/us vs. them; the facilitators and Elder were clear in their acknowledgement that Aboriginal people and Canadians now live together in this land. From their comments, I understood that a ‘pure’ Aboriginal perspective - or a pure Euro-western perspective - is no longer possible as we live in relationship to one another and the ways in which these two worldviews interact and connect were acknowledged and at times discussed. This is also a key assumption in Donald’s “Indigenous Métissage.” However, the contrast of the
underlying ontologies of Canadian/Euro-western and Aboriginal perspectives described by the Elder using the metaphors of the circle and the pyramid was significant to the program. From the comments and questions during the program, it seemed that this perspective helped some participants begin to see why it was difficult for Aboriginal people to ‘fit’ in the dominant Canadian schooling system, as well as other Canadian systems and structures. Also, in acknowledging the violent history of assimilation, or as Vowel (2013) calls it annihilation, that exists between Canadians and Aboriginal people, the curriculum and pedagogy of the TAP program created a climate of honesty as a foundation to the creation of respectful relationships in the program. While my focus in this thesis has been on what I learned from participating in the TAP program, I also want to acknowledge that the participants seemed to benefit greatly from their participation. Several of the participants mentioned that they wished there were more programs like TAP – or that other programs they attended were more like TAP. More than one participant expressed to me in conversations during the program that they hoped that my research would show how valued and needed TAP was.

In my observations/efforts to understand the ways in which an ethic of robust respect was supported in the TAP program, I came to recognize the importance of acknowledging (on an ongoing basis) “the multiplicity of the pasts that are never simply behind us” (Ahmed, 2002, p. 559) or the historical and socio-political circumstances which lead to the moment of encounter (Ahmed, 2002). These are the basis for a practice grounded in robust respect. As Ahmed states, “the immediacy of the face to face is affected by broader social processes that also operate elsewhere, and in other times, rather than simply in the present” (Ahmed, 2002, p. 562). For Ahmed, it is only through acknowledging this past that we might move forward
towards “achieving “better” relationships to others” (p. 570). In the context of programs in Saskatchewan, this requires us to acknowledge and explore the impact of historical and ongoing colonialism on the lives of participants and facilitators.

As discussed in Chapter Four, acknowledging the impact of historical and ongoing settler colonialism on Aboriginal people and families was a foundation of the curriculum/story being told in the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting program. A starting point of the program was recognizing that Indigenous people that lived on the land that is now known as Canada had functioning systems of child rearing and education prior to colonization. Colonialism interrupted these systems and settler colonialism purposefully interfered with them in devastating ways. In the second session of the TAP program, the impact of residential school was discussed as were laws that banned ceremonies and restricted the movements of Aboriginal peoples (such as the pass system). Links were also made to the foster care system today and to the ways in which schools are often damaging to Aboriginal youth.

What I saw and heard during these discussions suggested to me that they were important ones for many of the participants in the program. Although the participants all lived this history in various ways (as do I in my own way as a white settler), it seemed they had not always had the space to reflect on and name the historical processes of colonialism that impact their lives. During these discussions, several participants shared experiences from their lives that connected to the stories of colonialism that were being told. Others asked questions that demonstrated how they were beginning to understand in new ways how their parents and grandparents has been impacted by Canadian assimilationist policies and practices, including residential schools, and how that in turn had shaped their lives. It was evident in these conversations that some participants had already begun to explore this
history, and several shared stories about their healing journeys. In listening to the stories, it seemed to me that openly discussing this history helped some of the participants come to a place where they could begin to see that the ways in which their bodies and their lives (and the bodies and lives of their children, their parent and their grandparents) didn’t ‘fit’ \( ^{28} \) into the system was because of this history, not because of some flaw (deficit) that was in them as human beings.

As discussed in Chapter Four, another significant impact of discussing this history, that is including it as part of the curriculum or part of the story, was that I was positioned as a white settler in the room. It put my relationship with the Aboriginal bodies in the room on the table in front of us so that we could all acknowledge that I was a white settler who was part of that history of oppression and marginalization. In recognizing this, I was reminded that, even if we had not discussed this history, it was still present in the room and in the bodies of participants, facilitators and me, as researcher. As I have discussed, we do not generally talk about settler colonialism (or racism) in family literacy programs, policy and research. When we do talk about this history, we talk about it in a way that acknowledges the effect that past events have had on Aboriginal communities and individuals and perhaps we discuss how we might better support Aboriginal learners to heal and succeed. But what I have come to see is that we usually do not see it relationally and we do not talk about how who we are (as white settlers) is also shaped by this history. Nonetheless, whether we discuss it or not, our relationships are embedded in these histories and it is through these histories that we come to be together in a room for a family literacy program. For me, this recognition informed my

\[ ^{28} \text{See my discussion of Pillow (2004) in Chapter Three.} \]
need to be respectful in different ways because of who I was in that room. In order for me to be respectful in that space, I needed to bring with me an awareness of my own history that gives me a sense of humility. And through this experience I began to believe that by not discussing the history of settler colonialism in family literacy programs (which is in practice a denial or invisibilization of this history) we undermine our ability to be respectful across relationships of difference. In fact, I began to see that the act of denying this history – whether in active ways or more passively though omitting or minimizing it - was an act of disrespect.

Acknowledging this history can feel threatening to those of us who have become ‘comfortable’ (2007b) in the white spaces in which family literacy programs take place. For those of us who are white settlers, confronting that whiteness on an ongoing basis can feel unsettling (Wagner, 2005). However, I feel that acknowledge our identity as settlers is valuable in “encouraging a deeper consideration of our relationships with Aboriginal peoples” (Tupper 2014, p. 473). I have come to believe that fostering the kind of respectful relationships that can displace deficit thinking and orient family literacy work in different ways, can only be accomplished if we acknowledge this history on an ongoing basis.

Ethical relationality

All of the above brings us directly to Dwayne Donald’s notion of “ethical relationality”:

Ethical relationality is an ecological understanding of human relationality that does not deny difference, but rather seeks to more deeply understand how our different histories and experiences position us in relation to each other. This form of relationality is ethical because it does not overlook or invisibilize the particular historical, cultural, and social contexts from which a particular person understands and experiences living in the world. It puts these considerations at the forefront of engagements across frontiers of difference. (Donald, 2009b, p. 6)
Often in family literacy discourse, “the particular historical, cultural, and social contexts” of practitioners and participants are indeed made invisible. However, in the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting program the “different histories and experiences” of the practitioners, participants and of myself, the researcher, were not invisible. The acknowledgement of the program as both an Indigenous and colonized space brought our differences and relationality forward. Embedded in a deep respect for the other, this acknowledgment of histories and experiences supported participants in the room together in the TAP program and in their journey as parents.

The recognition of the space as Indigenous and colonized also supported me as a researcher. As discussed in Chapter Four, it informed my choice to introduce myself at the first session as a white settler. Identifying myself in this way and explaining that I was there to listen – to respectfully learn from the participants and facilitators journeys – seemed to help me develop ethical relationships with the participants and practitioners. I feel strongly, however, that this was an effective and ethical approach to observation in the program because it was supported by the context of the program itself: by the way an Indigenous space was created while acknowledging the colonized context and by the way respect was promoted and enacted through the program philosophy.

Family literacy programs as meeting places

My reflections on colonial frontier logics and deficit thinking, discussed in previous chapters, have led me to believe that for the most part, family literacy programs have been oriented towards the fort. On the other hand, my observations and experiences in the TAP program have suggested to me that it is possible to orient family literacy programs differently, to turn just a little bit and point ourselves in a different direction. I have come to believe that instead
of orienting family literacy programs and policy towards the fort we might instead, building on a foundation of robust respect, orient them towards ethical relationships. And instead of thinking about family literacy programs as interventions in which we teach families the ways of the fort, we might instead thinking of them as meeting places where the work of undoing colonial frontier logics might begin. Such meeting places can only function as “ethical spaces” (Ermine, 2007) if we acknowledge the complicated history that brings us together in the first place.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

One of my committee members asked me whether, after my close analysis and critique of family literacy programs, I still felt they were a valuable approach to working with families. This is something I have asked myself many times during this research. I don't entirely have an answer. At moments, I have felt that there is no way for family literacy to be anything other than regulating, anything other than colonizing.

On the other hand, at least two things (besides my own personal investment in family literacy) hold me back from rejecting family literacy programs altogether. The first is that the problems with family literacy explored in this thesis are a result of family literacy work being part of our society and embedded in our culture. Rejecting the field of family literacy work would not address the inequitable historical and ongoing structures that shape the places we live and the people we are. We live in a settler colonial context and, unless we find ways to engage with and address this reality, any new programs will be conceived within this context and are just as likely to be shaped by colonial frontier logics and just as likely to reinscribe deficit thinking. Before new kinds of programs can be established, we still have much work to do. This is an idea I will return to later in this chapter.

Second, and this is far more significant in my mind, my experiences as a practitioner, researcher and as a mother tell me that family literacy programs can be very positive, supportive and even empowering experiences for the adult participants, particularly for mothers. They fill a gap felt by many parents (again particularly mothers) in our society. The most successful family literacy programs, rooted in an ethic of respect, work to create a space in which mothers come together and feel safe, comfortable and energized. Mothering, and
parenting, is hard work, at least in our society where we have created a social and economic structure of the family that isolates mothers (and other caregivers). A place to come together in which one can be accepted and supported as a mother, but not completely defined by that experience, is rare; and sometimes family literacy programs can and do provide that for some women. I would like to see programs do that for more women, in more communities, across lines that sometimes divide us.

It is my observation as a practitioner and a researcher, as well my experience as a mother, that the creation of such spaces is both possible and desirable. Family literacy programs can and do act as meeting places for some mothers/parents/caregivers in some spaces. However, I have come to believe that for this to happen more consistently and in more contexts, those of us who are white middle class practitioners, those of us who are inside the fort, must be willing to learn from others even when, and perhaps especially when, the experience is uncomfortable.

**Reflections on the journey**

The direction that my thesis took was a surprise to me, although as I have discussed, it perhaps should not have been. When I stopped and paid attention to who I was and where I was doing this research, and when I listened respectfully with an orientation to how it is that we all came to be in this space together, it seemed obvious to me and necessary that I write about the ways in which we have all been shaped by colonial frontier logics and about the ways that family literacy has been embedded in fort pedagogy. It seems to me now that to talk about challenging deficit thinking means to talk about decolonizing family literacy practice.
Although my perspective on my research was originally strongly informed by feminism, my research methodology has been informed by a much more eclectic set of theories and practices. During the research process, I began very tentatively to explore the ways in which Métissage, particularly Indigenous Métissage, might help me understand research in new ways. Drawing on these methodologies helped me see the ways in which the layers/strands of ‘truth’ in family literacy are intimately intertwined; for example, the ways in which the spaces where we do family literacy work might be both Indigenous and colonized, or the ways in which participants might experience family literacy programs as both empowering and colonizing. Drawing on Indigenous Métissage, and particularly on Donald’s use of the notion of pentimento, also helped me see where I was located and how layers of history and identity shape the way in which we/I understand identity and place. As I move forward, I am interested in continuing to explore these methodologies from my position as a white settler on treaty land and to think about how this approach might help me re-orient myself towards relationships in research and practice. "It (Indigenous Métissage) is done not to overtly oppose colonial frontier logics, but rather to circumvent those logics through the assertion of ethical relationality" (Donald, 2012, p. 543).

In reflecting on my methodology, and the methodological challenges I experienced, it seems to me that this thesis has come to be as much or more about my experience of the data as it has been about using the data according to conventional qualitative methodologies. By this I mean that, for me, the most significant insights in my thesis were insights about my position and relationships to the place that I live and the people that I meet both as a researcher and practitioner and as settler. Particularly by engaging with Aboriginal worldviews in the TAP
program, I have come to see family literacy work and my own experience of research, practice and living in this place in new ways.

Echoing the views of other Indigenous scholars, Battiste (2000b) argues that this restoration and revitalization of Indigenous languages and cultures, while certainly deeply meaningful to Aboriginal students and communities, offers opportunities for Canadians to better understand the significance of living on this land (Donald, 2009, p. 410).

So what have I learned?

In Chapter Two, I shared a story about tensions that arose in developing a family literacy program for immigrant mothers. Underlying this story were some big questions that originally motivated my research: What is (family) literacy? What counts as family literacy work/programs? And who gets to define family literacy (programs)? As I moved forward in the fieldwork, my focus evolved from these general questions to more local and specific ones about how family literacy work appears in the context of Treaty Four land. I began to explore questions of identity and place, focusing on who I was, how I came to be here and what this means in relation to (in relationship with) others I encounter in family literacy programs. These explorations lead to me to recognize and explore the impact of colonial frontier logics and fort pedagogy in the field. They also lead me to begin to think about how programs might be informed by different understandings that might re-orient family literacy work. Those original questions did not become less important, but the ways in which I saw those questions changed and I began to feel that perhaps those questions were oriented in the wrong direction.

As I discussed in Chapter Two, family literacy programs and policy have historically been rooted in the deficit thinking that shapes much education practice (Valencia, 2010). Influenced by a belief in a “cycle of poverty and dependency” (Brizius & Foster, 1993), the
dominant approach to family literacy programs and policy actively positions poor families as being “at-risk” of intergenerational illiteracy and school failure. Informed by this discourse, an “intervention-prevention” approach (Auerbach, 1995) shapes many programs that aim to teach these “at-risk” families the mainstream literacy practices that are promoted by discourses of schooling.

I have acknowledged in my discussion that family literacy work also has roots in New Literacy Studies and ethnographic studies of literacy in communities and families, a perspective that sees literacy as located within the practices of communities and families (Gee, 1993; Heath, 1982; Street, 1984; Taylor, 1983). Program models that build from this body of research, often drawing from Freirean and participatory approaches, have been present throughout the history of the field. These programs may move us towards a family literacy practice that is more empowering than regulating. However, they don't seem to entirely resolve the problems I am addressing. Despite an acknowledgement by many practitioners, researchers and policy makers who work in various capacities in the field of the ways in which deficit thinking is problematic, I can't escape the conclusion that deficit thinking continues to be a tenacious and influential presence in family literacy discourse, deeply embedded in language and practice in the field.

In Chapter Three, I looked at how poststructural and feminist approaches to genealogy can help deconstruct deficit thinking in the field. Drawing on the work of Pillow, I began to see where such thinking appears and what it does (Pillow, 2003, 2004). These approaches can help us see how within family literacy (and in education generally), deficit thinking is gendered and racialized. Looking at the history of family literacy (discourse) through a feminist genealogical lens has helped me explore how it is that deficit thinking continues to
appear, shape and be reproduced within the field. It has also helped me explore how bodies (of participants, practitioners and policy makers) have been constituted in and by family literacy discourse. In these ways, I came to understand deficit thinking as tenacious and protean (Valencia, 1992, 2010), both discursive and discursively produced.

Thinking about who the bodies were in family literacy programs and how they were produced and regulated (Pillow, 2003, 2004) helped me understand how family literacy work is racialized and racializing. I recognized that practitioners (and perhaps more so policy makers) tend to be white and that participants, particularly those ‘targeted’ and constituted as ‘at-risk’ by family literacy policy, tend to be brown or black, specifically Aboriginal families and racialized newcomers (often but not always non-English speaking). Yet, I also noticed the absence of discussions of race in family literacy discourse. The rather limited conversation about identity in family literacy tends to focus on culture and cultural diversity and this works to erase or to obscure the racially organized historical relationships of power that are present.

Significant in my understanding of how deficit thinking appears in the field in Saskatchewan is my growing recognition that family literacy work here takes place in spaces that are simultaneously Indigenous and colonized. The political/historical context of these spaces is often invisibilized (Donald, 2009c), but it is present nonetheless. In chapter four, I discussed how the experience of ‘losing my chair’ (Ahmed, 2007b) and being de-centred during my participation in the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting program made these relationships visible to me. Through this experience I came to understand that our location in a settler colonial society constructs the subjectivities of all participants in family literacy programs,
including participants and researchers, and shapes the relationships of participants and practitioners.

In settler colonial societies, deficit thinking is intertwined with settler colonial logics. In Chapter Five, I explored how deficit thinking works to support settler colonial logics and how deficit thinking is also constituted in/by settler colonial discourse. Reflecting on this, I have come to believe that continuing to base family literacy work in deficit thinking informed/shaped by settler colonial logics will contribute to a family literacy practice that is more likely to work to disempower/regulate/colonize participant families and perpetuate status quo power relationships. I also have suggested that since literacy from this perspective is oriented to school literacy, then success from this perspective is likely to look like families who adopt dominant white Eurocentric literacy practices. Of course, adopting these practices does not guarantee their success in a system that is racist.

In Chapter Five, I also considered that ways in which newcomer families that participate in family literacy programs are influenced by deficit thinking and settler colonial logics. These discourses shape the ways in which settler colonial societies integrate/assimilate new immigrants and refugees. When family literacy programs are silent about colonial settler relationships, they work to support a false notion of Canada as a particular kind of society (multicultural, welcoming, peaceful). The presence of both newcomers and Aboriginal participants (as well as white settlers) in policy discourse as well as in particular programs may cause complex tensions, but it can also enrich family literacy practice.

In Chapter Six, I explore one way in which we might think about family literacy practice which would allow us to come from a new orientation that is “slanted” (Ahmed, 2006) or
askew from the dominant deficit thinking discourse. Drawing from my observations and interviews, particularly my observations of the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting program, I discuss an ethic of “robust respect” as a different way to inform family literacy practice. This understanding of respect begins with acknowledging the power issues embedded in the historical and political context of family literacy practice and recognizes the ‘sacred’ in the other. I have discussed my understanding of robust respect as I saw it being enacted in the Traditional Aboriginal Parenting program in part drawing on Donald’s description of “ethical relationality” (2009c) and Ahmed’s discussion of orientation and ethical encounters (2002, 2007a, 2007b). Further developing these connections, I am interested in how family literacy programs might be considered as meeting places informed by an ethic of “robust respect” in which relationships between and among participants and practitioners are fostered.

What Else? What More?

This research was necessarily limited by my own positionality, who I was and where I was located. These things shaped the research in many ways, some of which I have discussed but some have not fit within the confines of these pages. There were many layers of the pentimento or strands of the braid (Donald, 2009c) that did not end up on these pages. I learned much more during my research journey than I could possibly include in this document.

I am conscious that for the most part I have left out discussion of the inequitable material conditions of families lives, which I see as a more pressing problem and one that, if addressed, would have more of an impact on educational outcomes than family literacy programs could. For example, during my observations in programs, I heard many stories of the ways in which limited access to secure housing impacted participants lives. To the extent
that there was space within the programs for participants to share their experiences, I could see ways in which family literacy programs might be spaces of support for families experiencing such inequities. But I also must acknowledge that this is a problem that exceeds the scope of the field of family literacy as it is currently defined, and is rooted in structural economic inequality.

I was also conscious of the ways in which I was not able to explore a more complex understanding of white settler identity, history and experience both in my data collection (in particular in interviews) and in my analysis. Such explorations might help challenge colonial frontier logics, suggesting that neither what goes on outside, nor what goes in inside the fort walls is as simple as the either/or narrative suggested by colonial frontier logics. The process of complicating narratives, especially those that act as colonial myths, is an important strategy. This should always be done with a consciousness and understanding of the ways in which all settlers in Canada, including newcomers, are complicit in the ongoing colonization of Indigenous people.

Whether through anti-racism or multiculturalism, when colonialism in Canada is left unaddressed, racialized ethnic immigrants are too easily positioned as innocent (Lawrence and Dua 2005, 132). This position ignores the ways in which ‘people of color in settler formations are settlers on stolen lands ...and historically may have been complicit with on-going land theft and colonial domination of Aboriginal peoples’ (St. Denis, 2011, p. 311).

My research did not explore these complexities surrounding the relation of newcomers to ongoing colonialism. For that matter, it also did not attempt to explore the diversity and complexity of Aboriginal experiences. In these ways, I have taken only first steps.

During my research, both in my exploration of the literature and my fieldwork, I also was aware of the ways in which family literacy discourse constructs children and childhood
through deficit thinking, discourses of schooling and settler colonial logics. In working with programs, particularly the TAP program, but also at the Children’s Centre and in observing immigrant women with their children in the Families Learning Program, I saw different ways of being with children and different ways of understanding childhood. Through these experiences (and informed my own experiences with my children) I came to believe that the ways in which children are constituted within family literacy discourse and early childhood education discourse has significant impacts on the ways in which we imagine family literacy work can be done (MacNaughton, 2005; Walkerdine, 1993). These reflections also exceeded the scope of my research and the conversations within this document.

As discussed in Chapter One, I found it somewhat easy to identify moments in my observations or interviews that I could critique as ways in which deficit thinking continues to appear in and shape the field, and ways that practitioners who agreed to be part of my research perpetuate deficit thinking without noticing. But I did not want that critique to be the focus of my research. Instead, I was more interested in the question: What does it mean to be an ally of practitioners from a poststructural perspective? As my supervisor pointed out, we are “all up against it” in terms of the historical context and the discourse that shapes family literacy (and education at large) and that constructs privilege, oppression and inequality. Although the families we work with, and some families more than others, are most impacted in a material way by this history and this discourse, all of us who strive to make change are also shaped by and regulated by it. It is that discourse, located in and constituted by our historical context, that I want to critique.

Finally, I am also aware of silences in this document in relation to my own experience as a mother. I have struggled to fit the work of producing this thesis into nooks and crannies in
my life as a (homeschooling) mother. During the course of this work, the critiques of schooling that I have encountered and the ways in which schooling was working to regulate our lives (my life, my children’s and husband’s lives) has led my family to take the step to homeschool (actually unschool) our children. This experience has meant for me a rejection of much that schools tell us that children need in order to develop normally and in order to become fully literate. What I have learned in this process has led me to feel that much more skeptical of the myths that shape schools and schooling and of the ways these myths shape family literacy work. At the same time, my awareness of my subjectivity as a white settler leads me to think about the privilege involved in making these choices for my children and my family. The choice that I have made, to resist a system that I felt was harming my children, is not one that is so readily available to many of the participants in the programs I observed. Or if it is available, the consequences of that choice could be much different than the consequences for me and my family. This is something that I continue to struggle with.

All of these gaps might point to directions for future research. In addition, I suggest a few other possibilities for research in the next section.

Questions for Future Research

How might an ethic of robust respect inform research and practice in family literacy?

How might an understanding of colonial frontier logics allow us to imagine family literacy work in new ways?

How might robust respect inform a new way of seeing participants in family literacy programs – both adults and children?
What might settler Canadians (such as myself) learn from Aboriginal epistemologies/ontologies/pedagogies that might help us see family literacy – both as practices and as a program and policy approach – in new ways? What might be learned from newcomers to Canada about other models of literacy development in families?

How can robust respect, ethical relationality and/or an awareness of “the pasts that are never simply behind us” (Ahmed, 2002, p. 559) inform a family literacy practice that is oriented towards relationships and away from deficit discourses?

**Contributions of this Research**

The contribution that I hope for is that the research presented here will be of interest to both other researchers and practitioners in family literacy and other related fields. From the beginning of my PhD program, I wanted to do work that would be intelligible and useful in the field of family literacy. Family literacy is an interdisciplinary field that does not fit easily into other education disciplines at a policy, practice or academic level. Its closest ties are to adult literacy research and practice, community education, and early childhood literacy. But for the most part, family literacy research and practice take place outside, or perhaps on the edges of educational research as a whole. As such, the field has had its own preoccupations at the level of research and practice. In particular, over the last 30 years, researchers in the field of family literacy have repeatedly identified and attempted to address the problem of deficit thinking in family literacy policy and practice. From my perspective, the conversation has been largely stuck in a binary of strengths and deficit, which, as I have discussed, has not helped us move beyond deficit thinking. Recognizing this, a significant challenge in this thesis has been to think the problem of deficit in a new way.
While other areas of education, including for example, early childhood literacy, have begun to engage in discussions of race, whiteness and, more recently settler colonialism, these topics have remained largely absent from family literacy research and practice. I have come to believe that the main contribution of this thesis is that, in entering into a conversation about whiteness and racism and by recognizing the workings of colonial frontier logics, I might help to ‘open up’ (Ahmed, 2007b) new ways to think and talk about deficit thinking in the field of family literacy. This shift in perspective, or re-orientation, acknowledges our (ongoing) relationship to colonialism and potentially offers a space in which practitioners can begin to understand themselves in relation to historical and ongoing colonialism. I have come to the conclusion that, up to this point, this kind of reflexivity has been largely absent in the field.

My own experience during this research suggests to me that such reflexivity might move us forward in thinking in new ways about the problem we have been calling “deficit” within family literacy. In these pages, I have tried to share how my understanding of family literacy and deficit has shifted through my experiences of reflexivity in my research. I hope that the narrative that I have woven together here describing this experience might make sense to family literacy researchers and practitioners in ways that might help them imagine new ways of thinking about family literacy and deficit in their own work.

When I began this project, I was puzzled as to why the consistent (rhetorical) rejection of deficit thinking in the field did not seem to shift deficit from its central position; why was it that, despite committing ourselves to a strengths-based approach, we continued to reinscribe deficit thinking in our work as family literacy practitioners and researchers? At this point in my journey, it seems to me that part of the way that I originally understood deficit thinking
was as a problem of the narrow and blaming way that ‘we’ (practitioners, policy makers and researchers) constructed ‘them’ (participants and potential participants) as ‘at-risk’ and ‘in need’ of family literacy programs. When I began to see the ways in which settler colonialism is inextricably intertwined with deficit thinking in the field, I also began to see that the existence of such a divide, the very construction of an “us” and “them”, was a significant part of the problem. When I began to shift my perspective to look at the relationships within family literacy, I began to see how my own subjectivity was constituted within this binary. This was illustrated in the way my own perspective began to shift as I recognized my own position as a white settler and the way that place and history shape relationships. Once I saw "us" - myself and other settlers - differently in that relationship, then the familiar way of constructing "them" as a problem no longer seemed sustainable. As I reflected on my own position, my own relationship to family literacy, deficit thinking and colonial frontier logics, the way in which I saw the problem of deficit in family literacy discourse shifted and I saw how, in this process, its significance might fade.

Implications for Practice

This research has led me to believe that a strengths-based approach to family literacy programs is not enough and that instead we must base our practice in a stronger anti-deficit approach which "asserts that it is morally unacceptable and scientifically indefensible to hold students and their parents accountable for academic success, if schools are structured in such ways that thwart optimal learning" (Valencia, 2010, p. 117). From the perspective of family literacy programs and policy, this means that if we are to counter deficit thinking in family literacy we must stop orienting our practice towards the dominant discourse of schooling and must challenge taken for granted notions of school literacy and ‘ideal’ families. Further,
having thought deeply about how deficit thinking continues to shape family literacy practice in Saskatchewan, I have come to believe that an anti-deficit practice in family literacy in Canada must also be anti-colonial.

To the extent that family literacy programs are oriented towards schools and schooling, they are likely to continue to be embedded in deficit thinking and fort pedagogy. Turning away from schools, towards community and relationships, is a first step in orienting ourselves away from deficit and away from the fort. This may be more difficult as policy and funding changes in adult and family literacy over the last ten years have tended to move adult literacy more towards the fort of workplace and essential skills and family literacy more towards early childhood and k-12 education.

In so many ways, deficit thinking is embedded in racism and colonialism. This means that addressing colonialism and racism (whiteness, settler colonial logics) in family literacy is not likely to be a ‘safe’ enterprise (or an enterprise that feels safe) for white practitioners. Indeed, it may even been an enterprise that some might describe (or experience) as “violent” (Leonardo & Porter, 2010).

As discussed in Chapter Three, I have come to believe that the need or desire for whites (and those in power more generally) to feel safe - or to maintain their comfort (Ahmed, 2007b) - is a significant barrier to addressing deficit thinking in family literacy work. Maybe the inherent risk - this (perceived) lack of safety - is one of the reasons we have not adequately addressed deficit thinking in family literacy.

An important piece of decolonizing the field of family literacy is to begin to imagine how things might be different; to challenge notions that Canadian institutions like schools cannot
be changed; to see the ways in which family literacy programs could actually be as (as Donald argues that forts once were) meeting places for different cultural, language, racial groups. But it is also important to remember that we are not done with learning to recognize the presence of colonialism and whiteness in family literacy; in fact we have barely begun learning to do that analysis. The absence of visible discussions of race (and power) and the ways in which the field holds onto notions such as strengths-based practice and cultural competence suggest that this discussion (even just as a discussion) still has a long ways to go. Ideas of strength and empowerment are meant to address deficit thinking and cultural bias in the field, but in many ways they work to keep us stuck in problematic binaries and discourses. Furthermore, the question 'What do we do now?' is often rooted in a place of discomfort that follows from really seeing or reflecting on this history. Those accustomed to positions of power may want to move out of this discomfort to a place of where we are once again in charge. Asking this question often acts as a distancing move on the part of white people who want to say that yes, it is really horrible what those white people did; now, as a good white person, how can I fix it (Ahmed, 2007b)?

In Chapter Two I discussed how the somewhat amorphous nature of the ways in which we talk about family literacy in the field might work to obscure the regulatory discourses and colonial logics that shape the work. On the other hand, the openness of the field, the way in which it has not yet been entirely pinned down, might also be indicative of a space that is open to change, despite the current/growing climate of regulation/emphasis on accountability. In discussing Ermine's notion (2007) of “ethical space” as “a space of possibility” and as speaking a “language of possibility” (Ermine, Sinclair and Jeffrey, 2004), Donald suggests that such space “can only be created when it is affirmed that there are two
different entities, worldviews, and knowledge systems engaging. Once the existence of that other entity is affirmed, then ethical space emerges as a possibility” (2012, p. 105).

In his discussion of colonial frontier logics, Donald points out that the dominant myth of the fort, in which Aboriginal people and Canadians were divided by race and culture as those who belonged inside and outside the walls, is only one ‘truth.’ Other truths about forts might be told, including a truth about the ways in which forts served as meeting places where relationships were formed and culture was exchanged without one culture being seen as superior to the other.

Part of my challenge in this research has been to find an approach that would allow me to think the problem of deficit in a new way and to imagine how we might tell new stories about family literacy work. As discussed above, I believe that in recognizing colonial frontier logics, and particularly in beginning to see how those logics position me and how I position myself within and through them, I have been able to begin to see the problem of deficit thinking from a new angle and to imagine what it might mean to look at family literacy from a new orientation. In an approach to family literacy programs that sees programs as meeting places, oriented towards relationships and supported by an ethic of robust respect, new possibilities might appear.

When I begin to see family literacy practice as being about relationships - about being in relation - I begin to see how this approach is already there in promising moments in the field - in my interviews and my observations - not just in the words and actions of practitioners but also in the words and actions of participants. Perhaps my challenge then is to nurture those moments and help them to grow. In this I could take guidance once again from Donald, who
says: "Following the teachings of Kainai Elders, I believe that this educative intent must be
guided by an ethic of non-interference that requires us to resist the desire to prescribe
meaning and tell people what to think and do" (Donald, 2009c, p. 452).

**Future Challenges**

In other academic/educational fields the conversation about settler colonialism,
decolonization and reconciliation is further along than in adult and family literacy. For
example, in Saskatchewan, attention to treaty education and the notion that we are all treaty
people has engaged academics and k-12 teachers in conversations about how we might come
together in schools to understand the places and spaces that we occupy (Tupper 2014; Schick
2012; Tupper 2012; Tupper & Cappello, 2008). In post-secondary education, conversations
about “Indigenization” might offer insights to researchers and practitioners in family literacy
(Battiste, Bell, & Findlay, 2002; Pete, 2015). And, as a field that has a tradition of learner-
centred practice, adult and family literacy practitioners and researchers might also have
something to offer conversations about decolonization in other fields. I believe that it is only
through decolonizing our practices in the field of family literacy that family literacy
programs might become truly empowering spaces, not just for Aboriginal families, but for all
families who meet together in family literacy programs. As Battiste (2013) states,
‘decolonizing of education is not just about changing a system for Indigenous peoples, but
for everyone. We all will benefit by it” (p. 22).
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