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CONCEPTIONS OF ADULT LITERACY

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# A DECADE OF “LITERACY” IN CJSAE: CONCEPTIONS OF ADULT LITERACY

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## Abstract

*We examine the ways that academic writers have taken up the concept of literacy in the pages of the Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education (CJSAE) since 2011. We discuss key policy events from the last decade to provide a broad context for how adult literacy has been conceptualized and researched in CJSAE. We then review publications that discuss adult basic literacy in CJSAE as well as articles that we describe as adjacent to adult literacy: their interests or sites of study overlap, but are not explicitly linked, with adult basic literacy. Finally, we interrogate the tension between these two groups of publications and consider the implications of an absence of adult basic literacy in CJSAE for adult learners and practitioners.*

## Résumé

*Nous examinons les manières dont les universitaires ont mobilisé le concept de littératie dans les pages de la Revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes (RCÉÉA) depuis 2011. Nous abordons des événements clés liés aux politiques de la dernière décennie afin de fournir un contexte général de la conceptualisation et des recherches portant sur la littératie des adultes dans la RCÉÉA. Ensuite nous révisons les publications dans la RCÉÉA qui traitent de la littératie de base des adultes, ainsi que les articles que nous décrivons comme connexes à celle-ci; dans ces articles les intérêts ou sujets d'étude se chevauchent, mais ne sont pas explicitement associés à la littératie de base des adultes. Pour terminer, nous examinons les tensions entre ces deux groupes de publications et considérons les implications, pour les apprenants adultes et les praticiens, d'une absence de littératie de base des adultes dans la RCÉÉA.*

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Since the publication of the first issue of the *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education* (CJSAE) in 1987, only one special issue, in November 2001, has been dedicated to adult literacy. The issue focused on adult literacy in the context of adult basic education and featured articles about adult learners who sought opportunities to develop their reading, writing, and numeracy practices, their experiences in various literacy programs in Canada and elsewhere, and the experiences of practitioners who ran these programs. The sentiments from the special issue are best summed up by the editorial written by Allan Quigley (2001):

All of this [adult literacy programming and research in 2001] goes to attest to the fact that adult literacy *education* is rising: In its profile, in its advances, in its promise for a better future for those seeking to enhance their literacy skills. Numbers aside, these are exciting, optimistic times for literacy. (p. 3, emphasis in original)

The special issue reflected an optimistic portrait of a field committed to equity and critical practice. Yet despite the enthusiasm and positivity generated by such a complete and in-depth discussion on adult literacy in CJSAE, the 2001 special issue was not followed by a flourishing of the adult literacy field in the pages of the journal.

The 2001 special issue stands in stark contrast to the number of adult literacy-related publications we found in the pages of CJSAE over the last decade. We identified 15 publications published between 2011 and 2020 that discussed literacy in some shape or form. Importantly, not all 15 publications explicitly discussed adult literacy as described in the previous paragraph. Only five among these 15 articles directly investigated or theorized about adult literacy in a way that built on the discussions in the 2001 special issue. While the editors of CJSAE declared adult literacy as one of "the most pertinent issues of our time" for adult educators in 2007 ("Editorial," 2007, p. ii), the absence of publications on adult literacy since then is remarkable. Unfortunately, this dramatic decline of the presence of adult literacy in CJSAE is but one sign of the overall challenges facing the field of adult literacy in Canada.

As researchers and practitioners in adult literacy, we strongly believe that adult literacy education is a pertinent area of study for researchers in critical adult education. Altogether, we have been in the field for over 20 years conducting research on adult basic literacy as our doctoral work and working with adult literacy learners in community, school board, and post-secondary settings. We take a critical stance toward adult literacy education, which entails recognizing and investigating systemic challenges that adult learners face within and beyond basic reading, writing, and numeracy. Since CJSAE's special issue in 2001, there have been significant shifts in adult literacy policy in Canada, reflected in the sharp declines in research and operating funding for adult literacy. We argue that the waning presence of adult literacy in CJSAE reflects the overall fragmentation and precariousness within the field of adult literacy in Canada.

While the number of publications discussing adult literacy as basic reading, writing, and numeracy declined in CJSAE, we saw a notable presence of publications that attached the word *literacy* to specialized knowledge or skills (for example, health literacy and financial literacy) or focused on programs for specific subsets of learners who often overlap with adult basic literacy learners (such as newcomers, English-language learners, and non-traditional learners in community-based programs). We see these articles as occupying a space adjacent

to conceptualizations of adult literacy as basic education. By *adjacent*, we mean that this second group of CJSAE publications shared similar interest in the concept of literacy and its presence in the lives of adult learners, but they did not explicitly address the context of basic literacy. The number of this second group of publications suggests a growing interest in these discussions. Literacy researchers and practitioners have long discussed forms of literacy such as health and financial literacy, and in our experience these specialized terms appear to be growing in popularity in the field. However, the publications that we reviewed (and hence research and discussions) that focused on these conceptualizations of literacy did not discuss the basic reading, numeracy, and social activities that usually encompass the adult literacy field.

In this paper, we explore the presence of adult literacy research in CJSAE from 2011 to 2020, particularly through the distinctions of adult basic literacy and specialized areas of literacy. First, we place the literacy publications in CJSAE in the broader policy context of adult basic literacy in Canada to understand how the pages of CJSAE reflect the shifts in adult literacy. Next, we look at the handful of articles in CJSAE from 2011 to 2020 that continued to examine adult literacy as adult basic education in order to see what they may tell us in terms of the future of research in adult literacy. Finally, we also examine the articles that presented adjacent conceptions of literacy and discuss how they worked to change the directions of how we investigate and address literacy for adults.

### Policy Context

The declining presence of adult literacy in CJSAE in the last decade occurred amidst major shifts in the adult literacy landscape, where the infrastructure for practice and research for literacy projects has been considerably reduced in favour of skills acquisition. Adult literacy across Canada became further dismantled in 2014 with the federal government's withdrawal of core funding to national literacy organizations. Prior to this, Canada's adult literacy field was already struggling in precarious funding and policy commitments.

At the start of the decade in 2010, adult literacy was riding a wave of growing provincial and interprovincial policy development. Provincial and territorial governments were emerging with new or updated strategies and frameworks for adult literacy (see Council of Atlantic Ministers of Education and Training, 2009; Government of Alberta, 2009; Government of Manitoba, 2009; Government of New Brunswick, 2009; Government of Nova Scotia, 2010; Nunavut Department of Education, n.d.). This policy work in adult literacy continued through the 2010s (see British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education, Skills and Training, 2018; Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, n.d.; Government of Saskatchewan, 2019; Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2015). While provincial and territorial governments have jurisdiction over the organizational structure and delivery of adult literacy programs, much of the policy work is shaped by federal mandates and policy priorities in Canada. And although the federal government sought to improve literacy levels from 2011 to 2020, this was not a new commitment: earlier, contentious federal directives established common priorities and objectives for adult literacy. For example, literacy received considerable attention following the federal government's creation of a National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) in the late 1980s, which was tasked to build and support collaboration among public sectors, private stakeholders, and volunteer organizations to increase literacy (Elfert & Walker, 2020). Under the authority of

the federal Department of Secretary of State, the NLS was intended to work "independent of department specific mandates" (Canadian Union of Public Employees [CUPE], 2019, p. 11). One of the research responsibilities of the NLS was to increase collaboration with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which was producing work that linked a country's literacy level with the economy (Atkinson, 2019, as cited in Elfert & Walker, 2020). Subsequently, literacy surveys in Canada emerged from Southam News and Statistics Canada about the plight of low literacy (Bailey et al., 2012). By the mid-1990s, the NLS was moved to the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development (HRSDC), where separate work to develop essential skills and skill profiles had been taking place with the Essential Skills Research Project (ESRP); the overlap between the NLS's workplace literacy stream and the ESRP resulted in further collaboration and development of testing mechanisms for essential skills in the NLS-based workplace literacy initiatives (CUPE, 2019). At the same time, the NLS and HRSDC had contrasting approaches to distributing grants and managing partnerships with funded programs (Hayes, 2009). Additionally, adult literacy researchers and practitioners began expressing concerns that an essential skills framework was being applied to contexts beyond its intended use, including those of academic-based and community-based literacy learning: "This shift marked the beginning of tensions and divisions with many literacy practitioners and researchers who perceived literacy and ES [essential skills] as based on opposing worldviews or ideologies" (CUPE, 2019, p. 16).

Meanwhile, the federal government expanded its collaboration with international agencies like the OECD to develop a growing body of data on literacy. Not only were the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and the Adult Life and Literacy (ALL) Survey developed, in part, out of Statistics Canada's collaboration with international agencies, but federal policy also brought on new concepts and indicators about literacy that further shifted the federal government's priorities for adult literacy toward essential skills. As Smythe (2015) explained:

The [ALL] study authors also hoped to lay the groundwork for an ongoing monitoring of adult skill levels in OECD countries, and to measure the effectiveness of adult literacy policy in terms of gains in the skills of the population in the time between the IALS (1994) and the ALL survey (2003). The underpinning human capital logic was that survey results could be used by OECD member states to invest in adult education in order to maintain the "supply" side of skills and so their global economic competitiveness. (p. 8)

Literacy assessments like the IALS and the ALL survey ultimately gave credence to claims like 48% of Canada's population had low literacy levels, and the conceptions of "high" and "low" literacy were undergirded by testing mechanisms premised on "predictable ability" (Darville, 2014, p. 36). The experiences and quality of life for literacy learners became framed by international testing that offered narrow ideas of literacy as skills, literacy's purpose in society, and the "literate" adult learner.

This testing framework also gave rise to a sense of crisis on accountability. Jackson (2005) highlighted the contradictory focus from Ontario's auditors in the early 2000s, who claimed that adult literacy agencies presented "misleading" and "unreliable" statistics about literacy outcomes when reliability was defined institutionally and exclusively from the everyday

experiences of actual literacy learners and practitioners (p. 771). On a national level, the NLS was also scrutinized for lacking proper documentation on cash flows and formal agreements from literacy grants, although documentation was available and disregarded by the HRSDC's auditors (Hayes, 2009). When the 2003 ALL survey results showed no changes in Canada's literacy scores, the NLS became the target of blame:

The NLS which had no mandate for literacy provision, was nonetheless held responsible for the lack of progress on Canada's literacy scores. Provinces and territories began to pursue more of their own initiatives with their own budgets, but variation in adult literacy investments across the country that had always existed now increased. (CUPE, 2019, p. 18)

The nature of funding for adult literacy shifted as the NLS was replaced by the federal Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) in 2007. Although federal funding for adult literacy research and programming disappeared, core funding agreements were created for national literacy organizations. One of the national projects was to develop accountability processes and indicators; however, adult literacy agencies and funders could not agree on a common definition for accountability (see Page, 2009). Finally, the processes for funding adult literacy programs and research became much more competitive, bureaucratic, and skewed toward a version of literacy as (essential) skills (CUPE, 2019; Elfert & Walker, 2020; Hayes, 2009).

By the early 2010s, national literacy organizations were facing an uphill battle trying to build provincial and national collaboration for advocacy and research while working with limited core funding and an arbitrary focus on workplace literacy and essential skills (in contrast to family-based and community-based literacy). After OLES ended core funding for national literacy organizations, it issued a call for proposals to start a pan-Canadian network for literacy and essential skills. In 2014, after much delay, only one national literacy organization was selected, resulting in a major shake-up of the majority of the adult literacy infrastructure. Jason Kenney, the then minister for employment and social development, stated:

Our government is committed to ensuring that federal funding for literacy is no longer spent on administration and *countless research papers* [emphasis added], but instead is invested in projects that result in Canadians receiving the literacy skills they need to obtain jobs... Canadian taxpayers will no longer fund administration of organizations but will instead fund useful literacy projects. (Kenney, as cited in Centre for Literacy, 2014, par. 3)

Since 2014, OLES has offered limited project funding for building or sustaining the delivery, capacity, and research related to adult literacy in Canada. For example, OLES spent only 50% of its allocated funding in 2017 (Elfert & Walker, 2020). More broadly, the shifts in delivery and capacity have had devastating effects on research about and in relation to adult literacy. While many practitioners in adult literacy today remain passionate about rebuilding communication and knowledge across locales, some literacy experts are leaving the field while others grow more isolated (CUPE, 2018). Most concerning is that the shift from adult literacy to essential skills has become entrenched and resulted in research that aligns with federal and provincial priorities in adult literacy. There is

a lack of objective independent research on ES [essential skills]...some of the earliest and most knowledgeable researchers during the years of development were providers and/or government employees who eventually became program managers at colleges or consultants selling ES services and products. (CUPE, 2019, p. 21)

Such emphasis on skills development might leave many to assume that adult literacy is no longer a field burgeoning with activism against social and political inequalities and without research investigating lived experiences. It is within this policy context that we considered our review of CJSAE's past decade of publications on literacy.

### Methodology

In our quest to understand the state of the adult literacy field in Canada, we examined how adult literacy has been conceptualized in CJSAE since 2011. We used a multistep approach to select a sample of publications that featured literacy as their focus of investigation or discussion. In other words, we were not interested in reviewing articles that merely used the term *literacy* or referred to literacy tangentially.

The first step in creating this sample was a broad search using only the word *literacy* as the search term in the CJSAE website and the ProQuest database for CJSAE. We cross-referenced the search results from the two to ensure that we would not miss any publications. The search yielded 38 articles published in CJSAE from 2011 to 2020 that included the word *literacy*. Within this list of 38 results, we created a spreadsheet including titles, authors, keywords, and abstracts. This second step narrowed the sample by eliminating publications that were clearly unrelated to literacy based on their titles and keywords. We also eliminated book reviews and editorials, resulting in the removal of 12 publications from the initial 38. This left us with 26 publications.

In the third step, each of the three authors of this article reviewed the abstracts and full texts of these 26 results to ascertain whether each article investigated or discussed literacy as a main focus. The criteria used in this step included the frequency of the term *literacy* and the use of literacy as a concept to address adult learners, practitioners, or a specific context. We made individual notes and discussed the relevance of the publications in helping us understand the state of the adult literacy field in the pages of CJSAE. We reached a consensus on eliminating another 11 from the sample because literacy was not the main focus of discussion of these publications, leaving us with 15 articles. This final sample of 15 for the review in this paper is presented in Table 1. Of the 98 articles published in CJSAE from 2011 to 2020, only 15% were literacy-related.

In the final step, at least two of us reviewed each of the 15 articles in the sample. As mentioned already, our primary interest in this paper was to understand how literacy has been conceptualized in the pages of CJSAE in the last decade. Considering the changes in the field over the last 10 years in terms of funding and policy, we looked for any connection between the writings on adult literacy in CJSAE and these changes. We also sought to identify any common areas of interest and discussion among these publications and their conceptions and arguments about literacy. During our review process, we each made notes, focused on these questions, and had multiple meetings to discuss our findings from the review. Through this process, we identified two groups of articles: one group that addressed adult literacy as adult basic education, and another group that discussed literacy in a

**Table 1:** Final Sample of 15 Publications From CJSAE After Step 3

Year	Publications
2011	1. Hyland-Russell and Groen — Marginalized Non-Traditional Adult Learners: Beyond Economics
	2. Taylor et al. — Shaping Literacy: Evolution Trends in Canada's Literacy Research Since the Mid-1980s
2012	3. Ricento and Cervatiuc — Curriculum Meta-Orientations in the LINC Program
	4. English et al. — Financial Literacy and Academics: A Critical Discourse Analysis
	5. Guo — Beyond Deficit Paradigms: Exploring Informal Learning of Immigrant Parents
2013	6. Sumner — Food Literacy and Adult Education: Learning to Read the World by Eating
	7. MacPhail and English — Adult Literacy in Nova Scotia: A Critical Examination of Policies and Their Effects
2014	8. Burkholder and Filion — Educating Adults for Citizenship: Critiquing Adequate Language Practices and Canada's Citizenship Test
	9. Fernando et al. — Helping Them Help Themselves: Supported Adult Education for Persons Living With Mental Illness
	10. Roy — Telling Stories of Resistance and Change: Organizers of Film Festivals Contribute to Media Literacy
2015	11. Lange et al. — Wounded Learners Failed by Schooling: Symbolic Violence and Re-Engaging Low-Income Adults
2016	12. El-Guebaly and Butterwick — Exploring Young Adults' Perspectives on Sexualized Media: Lessons for Developing Sexual Health and Wellness Literacy
	13. Robson et al. — The Best-Laid Plans: Educational Pathways of Adult Learners in Toronto
2017	14. Smythe and Breshears — Complicating Access: Digital Inequality and Adult Learning in a Public-Access Computing Space
2018	15. Luk and Perry — Volunteer Tutors: Agents of Change or Reproduction? An Examination of Consciousness, Ideology, and Praxis

way that overlapped or was adjacent to that discussion. As a whole, these articles represent how adult literacy was discussed within CJSAE in the last decade.

### Adult Literacy as Adult Basic Education

We identified five articles from the 2011–2020 period that discussed adult literacy as basic education for adult learners. The authors of these papers saw the field of adult literacy as

primarily concerned with adult learners taking opportunities to participate in learning for reading, writing, mathematics, computers, and social activities. These authors were interested in learners from all walks of life and addressed some common experiences associated with literacy learners. These papers provided a national perspective to some degree, with one paper looking at literacy across Canada and the others representing specific provinces.

### *Summary of Adult Basic Literacy Articles*

The Taylor et al. (2011) article presented a comprehensive assessment of the state of the adult literacy field from the mid-1980s to 2011. The authors traced "the evolution and shaping of adult literacy in Canada through time" (p. 46) by connecting the historical development of adult literacy with the ongoing research published by 2011. They reviewed research literature on adult literacy in CJSAE as well as publications such as *Literacies* (part of the Ontario-based Festival of Literacies initiative from 2003 to 2009). Altogether, the paper offered a view of the adult literacy field based on 1,200 entries, describing three emergent voices from these publications: literacy sponsors (funders for adult literacy programs), practitioners, and researchers. However, the authors noted that the three voices were increasingly becoming separate "solitudes" (p. 59); most alarmingly, the voices of adult learners were rarely heard in research, while practitioners' voices were also at risk of disappearing from the literature.

Three of the five articles in this group featured adult learners as their focus. MacPhail and English (2013) wrote about the shift in adult literacy policy from a focus on community development to skills development and economic gains, leading up to Nova Scotia's release of its 2013 Adult Learning Act. The authors contended that even though Nova Scotia had a long tradition of using adult education for "citizenship, at least with regard to our white British citizens" (p. 2), the then new act presented a framework that was distinctly focused on economics. The paper discussed how the act would hinder access to learning opportunities because it was employment-oriented and did not take into account the resources needed to assist learners with different programs. Moving to Ontario, Fernando et al. (2014) reported findings from interviews with 42 students as well as volunteers and staff at an adult literacy program based in a hospital specializing in mental health in Southern Ontario. Drawing on students' negative schooling experiences when they first exhibited symptoms of mental illness, the authors talked about the related barriers in returning to formal schooling or accessing further education. Participating in the adult literacy program at the hospital helped the students fulfil their desire to learn and improve their literacy. The authors argued for more flexible settings to deliver adult basic education for learners who require additional health and community support services. In British Columbia, Smythe and Breshears (2017) wrote about adult learners' experiences in accessing digital resources in the Vancouver area. They pointed out that the inequalities of digital access were further compounded by federal and provincial policies for adult literacy because such policies assumed literacy learners already had access to digital resources. Through the story of one learner, the authors highlighted the challenges relating to digital inequalities facing adult literacy learners, which went far beyond the technical aspects of literacy.

The last article in this first group was focused on practitioners: Luk and Perry (2018) delved into the stories of volunteer tutors to understand the challenges in initiating and

sustaining meaningful broad social changes through adult literacy programs. The authors recounted composite stories of three volunteer tutors who worked with learners in an adult literacy program in Ontario. While the tutors in the paper showed signs of gaining personal understanding of the circumstances for the adult learners that they were working with, the tutors were unable to bridge the disconnect between policy and learners beyond the one-on-one tutoring relationships.

### *General Observations*

By 2011, CJSAE had published 29 articles about adult basic literacy among the total of 147 articles presented in a 23-year span (Taylor et al., 2011). However, we found only five articles about adult basic literacy published in CJSAE in the subsequent 10-year period. The proportion of articles with a focus on adult basic literacy went from around 20% to 5%. This precipitous drop and the complete absence of publications on adult literacy since 2017 may reflect a dearth of research or even general discussion of adult literacy among the contributors of CJSAE.

Taylor et al. (2011) commented on the distinct and seemingly separate voices of adult literacy researchers, practitioners, and funders before 2011. In the last decade of adult literacy publications in CJSAE, three of the five articles in our sample presented the voices of adult learners. Two of these articles reported on the learning experiences of individuals in an adult literacy program (Fernando et al., 2014; Smythe & Breshears, 2017). Additionally, MacPhail and English (2013) used composite learners to discuss the possible challenges in accessing literacy programming. However, the voices of practitioners were less prominent in all the articles. Luk and Perry (2018) presented stories of volunteer tutors, while Smythe and Breshears (2017) and Fernando et al. (2014) briefly addressed practitioners' experience as background to the learners' experiences. Thus, literacy practitioners were virtually absent from the articles in this group.

Interestingly, none of the publications in our sample presented the perspectives of program funders. It is unclear whether the lack of funders' perspectives indicates a lack of publications by funders or if their publications were shared elsewhere. As Taylor et al. (2011) noted, researchers and funders rarely actually engaged with the literature produced by each other. It may also relate back to the disinterest in research on the part of governments, as illustrated in the comment by Jason Kenney in 2014. In three of the four papers from the last decade (Luk & Perry, 2018; MacPhail & English, 2013; Smythe & Breshears, 2017), government policies were front and centre as these authors pointed out the disconnect between government policies and the needs of adult literacy learners. In fact, the three papers presented critiques of an employment-based or human capital-based focus in adult literacy policies in Ontario, Nova Scotia, and British Columbia, arguing that this approach exacerbated historical and present-day inequalities. The authors of these three papers discussed a broader view of adult literacy as social practice: an understanding of literacy that extends beyond reading and writing in school or the workplace and that accounts for the ways that literacy is embedded in the social context of learners' lives.

All the authors of the five publications only appear once within the small subsample, raising concerns about the inconsistent and fragmented presence by new and emerging scholars. The fragmentation of the research field on adult literacy also follows the retirement of some of the more prolific writers—including Richard Darville, James

Draper (1930–2004), Allan Quigley, and Maurice Taylor—who previously maintained a spotlight on adult literacy in CJSAE. In fact, among the 13 authors of the five papers in this subsample, only four are tenured faculty members—English, Fernando, King, and Smythe—while the rest are part-time instructors, retired, or current/former students.

### Adjacent Conceptualizations of Adult Literacy

While we identified relatively few articles that addressed literacy in the context of adult basic literacy, we identified 10 articles that engaged with the concept of literacy for adults in a less direct way. We describe these articles as adjacent to research about adult basic literacy: they conceptualized literacy in relation to specialized knowledge and expertise, or they referred to adult learners that also encompassed those within the adult basic literacy context. Ten adjacent articles fall within these two categories. The first set consists of four articles that discussed specialized forms of adult literacy. The second category includes six articles that focused on marginalized learners and community-based programs: three of these articles focused on newcomer English-language learners, and three discussed community-based programs and marginalized learners outside the specific context of adult literacy programs.

#### *Specialized Forms of Literacy*

The first set of four articles discussed specialized forms of literacy, including food literacy (Sumner, 2013), financial literacy (English et al., 2012), health literacy (El-Guebaly & Butterwick, 2016), and (critical) media literacy (El-Guebaly & Butterwick, 2016; Roy, 2014). Each article referred to literacy in the title, suggesting that literacy was a central idea to the research and theory being discussed. Additionally, each article discussed specialized literacy knowledge in relation to working with adults and youth. However, none of the articles discussed working with learners whose goal was to develop their basic literacy knowledge; that is, there was no discussion of literacy as reading, writing, speaking, listening, or numeracy.

Instead, these articles used the term *literacy* to bring attention to issues related to, but not synonymous with, literacy as basic education. English et al. (2012) directly addressed this expansion of the term *literacy*, noting that “specialized terms” associated with literacy (for example, health literacy and financial literacy) reflect the value that society places on literacy and particularly on “knowledge and information sharing” (p. 18). English et al. also suggested that particularly in financial literacy, the concept of literacy has been “absconded or borrowed” in ways that frame literacy as “a thing to be consumed” (p. 26). Further, they recognized that “the lifting of literacy from its context of community (functional literacy) and importing it in the financial hierarchical sector (financial literacy) is not without its issues” (p. 27), especially with loss of grassroots-level perspectives from adult literacy learners and practitioners. This discussion offered an interesting critique of neo-liberal discourses, which have also heavily shaped adult literacy policy, in the context of financial literacy; yet while acknowledging concerns about the disconnect between financial literacy and community-based literacy work, the authors did not engage with the adult literacy field beyond this acknowledgement. All four of the articles in this first set of adjacent publications made some connections to adult literacy research and theory to frame their approach, most notably to critical literacy scholar Paulo Freire. For example, El-Guebaly and Butterwick (2016) referenced Freire’s ideas as foundational to an empowerment

approach to health literacy, and Roy (2014) framed the documentary film festivals that she discussed as “embodiments of Freire’s (2004) pedagogy of indignation” (p. 11). However, none of the four articles drew on the 50 years of critical literacy research and practice after and beyond Freire.

Although these articles expanded the use of the term *literacy* beyond classic definitions (English et al., 2012), in other ways they also narrowed it. As a whole, the articles produced a view of literacy as intervention and focused on literacy in the context of individual change and knowledge acquisition. Some of the authors, notably English et al. (2012) and Sumner (2013), acknowledged the limitations of these “individualistic and apolitical” approaches (Sumner, 2013, p. 84). This apolitical perspective is reflected in the fact that these articles did not centre marginalized learners in their discussions. Instead, the learner addressed in the programs seemed to be a more generic, and at times clearly middle-class, participant. Traditional adult literacy learners—those who identify as poor, working-class, racialized, and/or with learning difficulties—were excluded from the research discussions and publications about social justice and equity relating to critical literacy work.

#### *Marginalized Learners and Community-Based Programs*

The first set of adjacent articles embraced the term but did not focus on traditional literacy learners or engage deeply with research or practice in critical adult literacy. The second set of adjacent articles in our sample did not centre the concept of literacy in the same way. In contrast to the first set, these articles described work with or experiences of marginalized learners in community-based programs. One theme that appeared throughout this second set of literacy-adjacent articles was the vulnerability or marginalization of learners participating in adult English-language and community-based programs, a focus that was ostensibly absent in the set of adjacent articles discussing specialized forms of literacy.

While at first glance the second set of articles may not seem to belong in a discussion about adult literacy, as adult literacy researchers and practitioners, we see clear connections to adult literacy work even if the authors did not always articulate these connections themselves. Three articles in this second set discussed the learning experiences of and programs for newcomer English-language learners: Burkholder and Fillion (2014) critiqued the federal government’s policy on citizenship tests and the minimum language requirement in English or French for individuals and connected this policy with a deficit view of literacy; Guo (2012) discussed immigrant parents’ informal learning about parental involvement in Canadian schools; and Ricento and Cervatiuc (2012) examined the hidden curriculum of the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada program. In these articles, some connections were made to adult literacy research. For example, Guo and Ricento and Cervatiuc referred to Freire in their discussion. Specifically, Ricento and Cervatiuc suggested that programs informed by Freirean-based participatory or transformational approaches to literacy and language education were “most practical and useful for adult immigrant language learners” (p. 29). Ultimately, both articles promoted a critical applied linguistics approach for teacher training. The discussion in these articles about adult English-language instruction and acquisition illustrated that a more developed, critical, and encompassing view of language and literacy might offer a more robust framework for analysis. The potential of such an analysis was demonstrated by Burkholder and Fillion, who

drew upon research in the area of new literacy studies to engage with the language learners as embedded in social contexts.

The other three articles in this second subgroup discussed the post-secondary plans of adult learners in school-board day programs (Robson et al., 2016), the ways in which marginalized adult learners have been "wounded" by their previous school experiences (Lange et al., 2015), and a community-based humanities program for marginalized learners (Hyland-Russell & Groen, 2011). In all three articles, the learners shared many characteristics with learners served by our first group of articles that addressed adult literacy programs relating to basic education (particularly Robson et al., 2017, and Smythe & Breshears, 2017). Further, both Robson et al. (2017) and Lange et al. (2015) explicitly mentioned adult literacy learners as one category of learners included in their research. Despite this, in all three articles, we note only a few, largely cursory references to literacy. Lange et al., who of the three articles made the most references to literacy, noted that the reduction of funding for adult literacy and other adult education programs in Alberta was a concerning trend making educational opportunities more difficult to access for marginalized adults.

Overall, we see many possible connections between the literacy-adjacent articles and adult literacy research, even though authors of these adjacent articles may not have identified them. Given the dearth of articles that engage with adult literacy research and practice, we see a worrying trend and fear that the lack of explicit links to adult basic literacy may reflect the fragmentation and increasing invisibility of the field.

### Conclusion

Within the context of Canadian adult literacy policy, learners and practitioners have been grappling with the complexity of literacy issues over the last 20 years as adult literacy work has become increasingly threatened. The most notable sites for shifting conceptions of adult literacy, both in practice and research, have been at community-based literacy programs that have traditionally benefited learners. Today, adult literacy learners and practitioners not only experience the reality of precarious funding and reduced access to adult literacy services, but are increasingly caught between views of adult literacy as reading, writing, and numeracy in relation to their social context, and adult literacy as specialized skills and knowledge. The first view is a scholarly and grassroots effort to investigate adult literacy as it relates to the actual experiences of marginalization and exclusion for adult literacy learners. The second view entails researchers and practitioners conceiving of literacy as skills for learners and programs to enact change while drawing upon discourses tied to economic and deficit-based models of individual empowerment. Simultaneously, this has reinforced notions that to be literate means to be in possession and not in deficit of specialized knowledge, like those that entail health, media, or financial literacy. The relationship between the first sample of publications, relating to adult literacy as basic education, and the second sample of publications, relating to specialized forms of literacy and cohorts of marginalized learners, illustrates both the way literacy, as a concept, has been simultaneously expanded and narrowed in policy and research over the last few decades.

Our review of literacy publications in CJSAE from the last decade presents a complex and worrisome picture of the field of adult literacy in Canada. On one hand, we see an interesting expansion of conceptualizations of literacy from general basic education to

specialized knowledge and skills and programs. However, much of the discussion of this specialized knowledge and skills seems to leverage the term *literacy* in a way that may lend weight to arguments about deficits in specific knowledge and skills for adult learners. The adjacent concepts of literacy also further distance researchers from adult literacy learners and their unique struggles with trying to access programming designed to support their learning. While we see opportunities in expanding the conceptualizations of literacy and the focus on specific learners in CJSAE over the last 10 years, we are concerned about the shift from seeing literacy education as a social, community practice toward literacy as skills for individualized, personal responsibility. Research on adult literacy is not immune to the shift that public policy has seen toward atomized, neo-liberal discourses. The nuanced fabrics of discussions woven by adult literacy researchers, practitioners, and learners is disintegrating, especially given the context of adult literacy policy in Canada.

Returning to CJSAE'S 2001 special issue on adult literacy, it seemed to mark a hopeful moment for a new direction for adult literacy research that, unfortunately, has not quite materialized into a positive long-term trend. Even though adult learners are still looking for and attending literacy programs across the country, and even though adult literacy practitioners continue to struggle with meeting the needs of learners and ensuring funding continuity, the visibility of adult literacy work is sadly diminishing. We argue that the issues in the field of adult literacy are more critical than ever as marginalization is now the reality of not only adult literacy learners, but also adult literacy practitioners and adult literacy researchers (Elias et al., 2020). We hope that the publications of CJSAE in the last decade are not a sign of the future of adult literacy research, and that CJSAE maintains the focus on one of "the most pertinent issues of our time" in adult education in Canada.

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