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Adult High School Learners' Experiences with Literacy Education in Institutional Upgrading Classrooms

by

Pamela Young 

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education

in

Adult and Higher Education

Department of Educational Policy Studies

Edmonton, Alberta

Spring, 1999

University of Alberta

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *Adult High School Learners' Experiences with Literacy Education in Institutional Upgrading Classrooms* submitted by *Pamela Young* in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of *Master of Education* in *Adult and Higher Education.*

Dr. G. Malicky

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Date: March 25, 1999

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore adult high school learners' experiences with literacy education in institutional upgrading classrooms. A qualitative approach was used in the study. Six students who were enrolled in either a grade eleven or grade twelve English class volunteered to be interviewed about their experiences.

Three major categories of responses resulted from the interviews – instructional issues, affective issues, and power and control issues. In the instructional realm, these participants did not tend to understand or practice active learning techniques. Instead they relied on instructors to understand and accommodate their individual learning backgrounds, pace of learning, learning styles and interests. They also sought an approach to writing instruction that included sustained practice and sensitive, specific feedback. In the affective realm, their past work, home and school experiences impacted their expectations and experiences of their adult learning situations. They appreciated opportunities for meaningful peer interaction both within and outside the classroom. Also, they relied on their instructors for satisfying classroom experiences. In the realm of power and control, most of these participants felt their instructor dominated classroom decisions. This dominance was an expectation for some but produced tensions for others. Most participants wanted more opportunities to have their opinions heard and respected in the classroom.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

During the production of this thesis, I was grateful for the academic and personal support I received from a strong network of colleagues, friends and family. The candid comments of the students who participated in the research helped the thesis to evolve from possibility into reality. Their unwavering interest in the project and willingness to help me understand their experiences reinforced my beliefs in the value of the research. The wisdom, humor and insight of Dr. Grace Malicky guided me throughout the thesis. Professor Art Deane and Dr. Carol Leroy were enthusiastically supportive of my ideas and provided valuable feedback. Dr. Mary Norton gave me many opportunities to reflect on participatory literacy and observe it in action. Shirley Casavant, true friend and computer whiz, patiently provided much needed assistance with the word processing of this document. Lorne Dmitruk, my partner and friend, believed in this project from the start and continued to love, encourage and keep the home fires burning as it unfolded. Deborah Begoray, cherished big sister and academic role model, planted the idea of pursuing masters research within me and helped to encourage its growth. Finally, I am eternally grateful to my mom and dad, Grace and Les Young, whose love, support of my education and attentiveness to my stories gave me the foundation for listening and responding to my students' voices.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

When instructors of adult high school English meet their classes for the first time, they are often aware of "the diverse faces of literacy learners" (Malicky & Norton, 1998, p.119). Both genders are represented as well as a wide variety of ages, literacy skills, formal schooling levels, racial and ethnic backgrounds and disabilities (Charnley & Jones, 1979; Hindle, 1990; Mezirow, Darkenwald & Knox, 1975; Sawyer & Rodriguez , 1992-93). For some students, family backgrounds (Charnley & Jones, 1979; Darkenwald & Silvestri, 1992; Hindle, 1990) and previous school experiences (Charnley & Jones, 1979; Fingeret & Danin, 1991; Hindle, 1990; Quigley 1992a; Sawyer & Rodriguez, 1992-93; Smith-Burke, Parker & Deegan, 1987; Thomas, 1994; Ziegahn, 1990) may have provided obstacles to pursuing an education. A significant number of the students have experienced poverty due to chronic underemployment or unemployment (Beder, 1991; Darkenwald & Silvestri, 1992; Gaber-Katz & Watson, 1991; Malicky & Norman, 1996; Minister of Industry, 1996).

Depending on the type of literacy program, the diverse needs of learners are addressed in various ways. "At one end of a continuum are programs that are oriented to individual achievement and social mobility, to helping adults fit into the status quo" (Fingeret & Danin, 1991, p. 3). These programs adopt a fundamental or functional approach to literacy, increasing literacy skills for their own sake or as a means to finding employment. "Other programs are more community-oriented, working with adults in their communities to develop individual skills as well as to work toward broader social change that requires collective action" (Fingeret & Danin, 1991, p. 3). Community-based

programs implement a participatory approach to literacy, involving students in decision-making to address their own needs and the needs of their communities.

The literacy and teaching philosophy of individual instructors also affects the approach taken to literacy education. In the past, literacy instructors often used a top-down, instructor-driven approach (Beder, 1996; Fingeret, 1991; Kazemek, 1984,1988; Keefe & Meyer, 1991; Padak & Padak, 1988); the instructor made decisions about curriculum, instruction and evaluation for the students. Recently, however, proponents of participatory adult literacy have challenged this traditional approach. They point to a number of negative characteristics inherent in top-down literacy programs. First, these programs are rarely based in current research (Kazemek, 1984, 1988; Keefe & Meyer, 1991). They may be partially responsible for the high drop-out rates in literacy programs (Kavale & Lindsey, 1977; Meyer & Keefe, 1988) since they may duplicate methods intended for children (Bowren, 1987), may not respond to or respect differing cultural backgrounds (Fingeret, 1991) or provide insufficient opportunities for student empowerment in the classroom (Campbell, 1994; Fingeret, 1991).

The opposing nature of varying literacy philosophies and approaches has sparked much debate among literacy instructors, administrators and researchers. Noticeably absent, however, are the perceptions and voices of the learners themselves about their experiences with literacy education (Malicky & Norman, 1996; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991; Quigley, 1992b and c; Sawyer & Rodriguez, 1992-93; Tremblay & Taylor, 1998; Ziegahn, 1990). Ignoring student perceptions has a number of pitfalls for instructors and

program planners. First, a basic tenet of adult learning suggests that "the learner reacts to all experience as he [sic] perceives it, not as the teacher presents it. Consumption does not equal presentation" (Brundage & MacKeracher, 1980, p. 25). Without student perceptions, it may be difficult to organize a successful literacy program. Also, "mismatches between an instructor's and a student's model of literacy instruction can create serious problems in literacy programs" (O'Brien, 1989, p. 302). Finally, not listening to student voices about literacy education duplicates the marginalization and alienation many students may have encountered in other areas of their lives. Therefore, the question posed in this study is "What are adult high school learners' experiences with literacy education in institutional upgrading classrooms?"

Study Purpose and Rationale

The primary purpose of the study is to contribute to the understanding of adult learners' experiences of instructional approaches in high school upgrading classrooms within institutional settings. Presently, there is a lack of literature on adult literacy learners, and even less has been written on their literacy upgrading experiences. As will be more thoroughly explored in chapter 2, the research which has been conducted focuses more on lower level literacy, community-based education and student perceptions of factors other than teaching approaches.

The second major purpose of the study is to encourage instructors and administrators to listen to learners' voices. We cannot know what will work for learners in the classroom unless we ask them.

CHAPTER TWO

AN OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Historically, the field of adult literacy has been under-researched (Quigley, 1997). "While many people write about adult literacy and hold tenaciously to ideas as to how it might be achieved, there is an obvious need for empirical studies to support and/or challenge our beliefs" (Smith-Burke, Parker & Deegan, 1987, p. 9). Alamprese (1990) calls for "research that can guide the design of instructional programs and professional development activities" (p. 96). Draper and Taylor (1992) echo this view, stating that instructional methodologies and learning environments should be studied in relationship to the success and failure of various literacy programs.

Recently, researchers have noted that learners themselves seldom have been consulted in research about the very programs that are attempting to serve them (Malicky & Norman, 1996; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991; Quigley, 1992 b, c; Sawyer & Rodriguez, 1992-93; Tremblay & Taylor, 1998; Zieghan, 1990). They call for the removal of the "cloak of silence" (Tremblay & Taylor, 1998, p. 31) which has hushed learners' voices. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) suggest that, in the future, learners' experiences should be a "major source of our understanding of learning" (p. 404) and that research needs to be "collaboratively designed" (p. 404) in partnership with the learners themselves.

The goal of this study is to understand the perceptions of adult high school literacy learners regarding classroom approaches in institutions. Six areas of literacy research help to provide a context for the study: (a) learner characteristics; (b) learner

motivations; (c) learner expectations; (d) curriculum and instruction in the ABE classroom; (e) teacher-learner relationships and (f) learner outcomes.

Learner Characteristics

"The more we know about the adults in our literacy programs, the more our programs can reflect their needs and the subjective realities of their lives" (Malicky & Norman, 1996, p. 6). With this in mind, researchers are turning their attention to understanding the characteristics of the women and men who enroll in programs, who participate reluctantly or who do not participate at all.

The first generalization researchers have discovered about all three groups is that learners "defy generalization" (Hindle, 1990). A wide variety of ages, literacy abilities, formal schooling levels, racial and ethnic backgrounds, disabilities, life experiences, interests and personal circumstances characterize literacy learners (Charnley & Jones, 1979; Hindle, 1990; Mezirow, Darkenwald & Knox, 1975; Sawyer & Rodriguez, 1992-93). Although student diversity is essential for literacy educators to recognize so that they can plan for a wide range of needs, some of the commonalties among students are also important to note. First, many learners come from backgrounds characterized by poverty (Beder, 1991; Darkenwald & Silvestri, 1992; Hindle, 1990; Malicky & Norman, 1996; Smith-Burke, Parker & Deegan, 1987). As a result, they are often members of the non-dominant social group (Malicky, Katz, Norton & Norman, 1997). Also, their family members often had little schooling (Darkenwald & Silvestri, 1992) and tended to leave the responsibility for formal education to the schools (Charnley & Jones, 1979). Many

learners also report difficulties within the family (Hindle, 1990). Darkenwald and Silvestri (1992) surmise that the "press of economic survival and family breakdown militated against educational success" (p. 22) for many learners.

It is interesting to note, however, that the learners in the Malicky and Norman study (1996) do not blame their low literacy on their family backgrounds, suggesting that, in their perceptions, other factors provided larger barriers. Participants in a large number of studies discuss negative experiences in public schools (Charnley & Jones, 1979; Fingeret & Danin, 1991; Hindle, 1990; Quigley, 1992b, c; Sawyer & Rodriguez, 1992-93; Smith-Burke, Parker & Deegan, 1987;Thomas, 1994; Ziegahn, 1990). Learners often recall being aware of their literacy difficulties at an early age and remember thinking of themselves as failures and inferior to their peers (Charnley & Jones, 1979). The special education classes, which were designed to help them with their difficulties, are often perceived as doing more harm than good (Charnley & Jones, 1979; Smith-Burke, Parker & Deegan, 1987; Ziegahn, 1990). The curriculum is remembered as boring and irrelevant (Quigley, 1992b, c) and teachers are recalled with "anger and bitterness" (Ziegahn, 1990, p. 23), due to their lack of sensitivity and indifference towards their students' literacy struggles. It often seems to the learners that teachers simply passed them along, regardless of their inability to cope with the curriculum (Ziegahn, 1990). Since teachers and students often came from different socioeconomic communities that used divergent discourse systems, students feel they couldn't express their difficulties to their teachers and that their teachers lacked "the sociolinguistic versatility necessary to be sensitive to

multicultural needs" (Smith-Burke, Parker & Deegan, 1987, p. 58). Many adult literacy students are "learners whom, to some extent, the 'system' seems to have 'beaten'. They were unable to make it work for them, or perhaps to cope at all" (Hindle, 1990, p.117). And so they dropped out, recalling that few people, if anyone, at the school or at home reacted to their decision (Quigley, 1992b, c). Now, as adults, they often blame themselves for their past inability to succeed in public schools (Smith-Burke, Parker & Deegan, 1987; Malicky & Norman, 1996).

The backgrounds of literacy learners are frequently characterized by poverty, family circumstances that were not conducive to pursuing an education and negative public school experiences. Some researchers, however, have pointed out that not enough is known about the differences between learners who persist in literacy programs, those who attend briefly but terminate their attendance and potential learners who choose not to participate (Sawyer & Rodriguez (1992-93), Quigley (1992b, c), Ziegahn (1990). Participants in literacy programs do not seem to represent the least literate and the most alienated members of society (Mezirow, Darkenwald & Knox, 1975). Charnley and Jones (1979) characterize them as the "aristocrats of the educationally underprivileged, handicapped by the lack of a particular skill but unbowed" (p. 62). Darkenwald and Silvestri (1992) discovered that the participants in their study were, in many respects atypical of the "'urban underclass'" (p. 42-3). They concluded that these learners "would not be in a program, much less persist and make progress, were they not the kind of people we discovered them to be" (p. 43-4).

Who, then, are the learners who do not persist in literacy programs or who have chosen not to participate at all? Quigley (1992c) has researched in detail those who enter literacy programs but leave after a short time and has discovered definite differences between these reluctant learners (RLs) and program persisters (Ps). In public school, RLs were often loners with few close friends. Also, they did not interact significantly with teachers, preferring to take their problems to school counselors. They were far less self-sufficient than Ps, needing and seeking support outside themselves to a higher degree. When these RLs enter ABE programs, they often do so with the attitude of having been 'wounded' by their public school experiences. In spite of this, in the early days of their ABE experience, they have very high expectations of the program and often feel very comfortable within the program atmosphere. Within a few weeks, however, RLs become very disillusioned. They perceive a lack of challenge and relevance in the course content and are disappointed with the amount of attention they receive from teachers. Once again, they duplicate their public school pattern of maintaining few if any friendships within the program and not requesting help from anyone but the counselor. After approximately three weeks, they drift away from the program, feeling that ABE is an even more alienating place than public school but, surprisingly, still maintaining the belief that getting an education is important.

Different procedures may be required to attract and retain the high percentage of the underliterate population who are eligible for ABE programs but choose not to participate at all. Sawyer and Rodriguez (1992-93), Quigley (1992b) and Ziegahn (1990)

have studied these populations to understand what would encourage them to become program participants. All three researchers discovered that the non-participant populations do not resist the idea of learning, knowledge or education. What they do object to are the "implicit and explicit values, the lifestyles and the cultural norms pervasive in school"(Quigley, 1992b, p. 2-2). Quigley (1992b) classifies non-participants into three categories, based on the type of resistance they offer to literacy programs. Personal/emotive resisters are those for whom ABE "triggers painful, personal memories" (p.2-17) of past schooling experiences. Cultural/ideological resisters see ABE as a place that does not address differences between cultures, "keeps people in their place" and does not provide the economic and social advancements it promises. Older resisters feel that, because of their age, they would not fit in to ABE programs. Although they are often nostalgic about public school, they see literacy programs as best suited for the younger generation. Sawyer and Rodriguez's (1992-93) and Ziegahn's (1990) research echoes many of these characteristics of non-participants and adds others. Non-participants tend to prefer a 'watch then do' learning style. Sawyer and Rodriguez wondered if this was a cultural preference since they exclusively studied Canadian Aboriginals. However, Ziegahn (1990), who included both American Natives and non-Natives in her research, discovered the same preference, suggesting that the "watch then do" learning style may be more based in past learning experiences than in culture. Also, non-participants want learning to be connected with practical use, prefer to learn on their own terms and want to pass on their knowledge to others (Ziegahn, 1990).

Learner Motivations

Learners' motivations for increasing their literacy skills are as diverse as the learners themselves. Researchers have stressed the complexity and interwoven nature of reasons for participating (Black & Sim, 1990). Goals include enhancing employment opportunities, being able to help children with schoolwork and providing them with a role model, pursuing a specific reading or writing goal, achieving a foundation for further study, wanting to fit in with the literate population and improving self-confidence (Abell. 1992; Black & Sim, 1990; Lowden, Powney, Gardner & Mark, 1995; Sawyer & Rodriguez, 1993; Smith-Burke, Parker & Deegan, 1987; Towards the ABE Promised Land, 1992). "The variety in students' motives for participation...highlights the challenge to providers to be flexible enough to meet the diverse range of needs" (Lowden et al.. 1995, p. 28).

Learner Expectations

Three key areas characterize the expectations of literacy learners as they begin attending programs. First, although some have realistic expectations of the amount of time they will spend upgrading their skills, others expect large gains quickly (Hindle, 1989; Towards the ABE Promised Land, 1992). Second, learners may expect that ABE programs will replicate their experiences of the fruitless struggle, humiliation and boredom of public school and are relieved when this does not occur (ABE Promised Land, 1992). For others, however, who feel that education can only be gained in an atmosphere of strict teacher control, the more relaxed, learner-centered environment of

many ABE programs is a disappointment (Black & Sim, 1990). Finally, many participants enter a program with a definite idea of how reading and writing should be taught (Black & Sim, 1990; O'Brien, 1989; Padak, 1992; Smith-Burke, Parker & Deegan, 1987). They recall the skills-based emphasis of their public schools and hold firmly to the belief that reading and writing can only be learned through lessons that emphasize phonics, pronunciation, spelling, grammar, punctuation, word usage and handwriting (Padak, 1992). It appears that dropping out may be associated with the discrepancy between student expectations and the actual experience of the classroom (Darkenwald & Gavin, 1987). The challenge for teachers is to discover student expectations and "work with the inherent tensions" (Fingeret & Danin, 1991, p.11) when discrepancies are recognized.

Curriculum and Instruction in the ABE Classroom

The curriculum taught in literacy programs is, once again, characterized by variety. Mezirow, Darkenwald and Knox (1975) found that curriculum was often based on skills learners need to succeed on the GED and standardized reading tests. More recently, Canadian researchers have found some programs which teach the standard provincial curriculum and others that include instructor-designed courses (Malicky & Norman, 1996; Tremblay & Taylor, 1998). Learners in the programs studied by Darkenwald and Silvestri (1992) and Fingeret and Danin (1991) identified their own learning goals and chose the reading materials and writing topics which would best help them realize those goals. The large diversity of course content found in literacy programs reflects the program's, the instructors' and sometimes the learners' view about the

purpose of literacy. Malicky and Norman (1995) describe three purposes of literacy: fundamental, functional and emancipatory. In their study, they discovered that learners had a fundamental perspective towards literacy but entered programs for functional reasons; that is, learners believed that reading and writing need to be learned for their own sake but had job-related reasons for participating in literacy programs. Their teachers, on the other hand, viewed literacy from a functional perspective but offered fundamental-style programs in their classrooms. "Emancipatory views were reflected to a very limited extent in either views of literacy or actual classroom experiences" (p.63). Malicky and Norman postulate that the results of this study reflect the literacy views of policy makers, funders and society in general which in turn place constraints on literacy teachers and the institutions in which they work.

Literacy purposes control not only the curriculum found in literacy programs but also the types of activities and interactions that occur within classrooms. Mezirow, Darkenwald and Knox (1975) discovered activities which reminded them of "elementary schools of the 1920s" (p. 18). Students participated in drills, recitations and the completion of exercises in workbooks. They also found that, although a group of students shared classroom space, they were more often "aggregates of individuals rather than true groups" (p. 49). Twenty years later, Malicky and Norman (1995) found similar activities and interactions in a variety of programs and classrooms at various literacy levels. Group work is more often a feature of programs which favor a learner-centered or emancipatory approach (Campbell, 1996; Fingeret & Danin, 1991; Towards the ABE Promised Land,

1992). When learners were asked whether they preferred individual or group instruction, most thought that some of both served their needs most effectively (Abell, 1992; ABE Promised Land, 1992; Fingeret & Danin, 1991; Hindle, 1990). They obviously appreciated one-on-one interaction with their instructor, but found many benefits of group work as well. Increased language comprehension (Hindle, 1990), reduced anxiety about learning (ABE Promised Land, 1992), extended community contacts (Malicky & Norman, 1996) and appreciation of each other's differences (Campbell, 1996; Towards the ABE Promised Land, 1992) were all valued outcomes of group work. Finally, working in groups means that "through talking, reading and writing, people come to understand that their issues are not unique, that they can get support from each other in addressing these issues, and possibly that they can start to seek solutions and take action" (Malicky, Katz, Norton & Norman, 1997, p. 102).

Teacher-Learner Relationships

One of the findings which is repeated throughout most of the literature on student perceptions of programs is the crucial importance of an effective teacher-learner relationship (Abell, 1992; Black & Sim, 1990; Darkenwald & Silvestri, 1992; Fingeret & Danin, 1991; Hindle, 1990; Lowden, Powney, Gardner, Mark, 1995; Malicky & Norman, 1995, 1996; Smith-Burke, Parker & Deegan, 1987; Thomas, 1994; Towards the ABE Promised Land, 1992). It appears that this relationship is far more significant to learners than materials or methods (Hindle, 1989; Malicky & Norman, 1995). Learners look for a combination of personal characteristics in their instructors including competence in

teaching; helpfulness; understanding; respect for learner abilities, differences and adult status; interest in students; patience; listening skills; honesty; directness and trustworthiness. Learners also rely on instructors to create an environment that is conducive to learning. Some students, particularly those with an ESL background, want an environment characterized by strictness and discipline (Black & Sim, 1990) since they are used to such an atmosphere in the schools of their home countries. To many students, however, a positive learning environment is one which does not resemble the oppression found in their public schools (Ziegahn, 1990). They desire a classroom which is psychologically comfortable, nonthreatening and allows learners to take risks and make mistakes, one which values happiness, having fun and the appropriate use of humor (Tremblay & Taylor, 1998). Many students also look for an atmosphere in which they will be allowed more input into classroom decisions (Smith-Burke, Parker & Deegan, 1987; Ziegahn, 1990).

Some literacy teachers may be reassured by the extent of their impact on adult students' learning experiences. However, the centrality of this impact raises the issue that "a warm, trusting, but not totally equal relationship can and often does result in a dependence that has negative consequences" (Darkenwald & Silvestri, 1992, p. 19-20). Malicky and Norman (1995) stress that "one of the basic principles of adult education is to lead adult learners in the direction of becoming independent and self-directed" (p. 82). This is a goal that cannot be achieved when the teacher maintains the balance of power in a literacy relationship, defining what counts as knowledge, making choices for students

and dominating evaluation. Some literacy programs are addressing this issue by implementing participatory literacy practices. These programs challenge established power relationships between students and staff (Campbell, 1996), encouraging students to share in decision making instead of becoming the passive objects of literacy instruction. Learners who participate in these programs are encouraged to move from "silence into speech" (Campbell, 1996) by taking an active role in setting their own goals, choosing their own materials to progress towards these goals, participating in speaking opportunities within and outside of the program and having a say in program operations by occupying positions on the board (Campbell, 1996; Fingeret & Danin, 1991; Malicky, Katz, Norton & Norman, 1997). Even when a program's focus is fundamental or functional, teachers can still accomplish participatory goals in their classrooms by demonstrating a willingness to share power with their students (Malicky & Norman, 1995).

Learner Outcomes

When learners are asked what has changed for them as a result of their participation in literacy programs, they note a large variety of outcomes. Study participants most often mention academic, employment, social and personal outcomes. It should be kept in mind, however, that the boundaries between these categories often blur since they are very interrelated (Black & Sim, 1990).

Academic outcomes involve changes in reading, writing and general knowledge and the ability to use, both within and outside the program, what is learned. Learners in

programs studied by Abell (1992) and Hindle (1990) felt that they had improved their reading and writing substantially. The same gains were noted by Darkenwald and Valentine (1985), Darkenwald and Silvestri (1992) and Fingeret and Danin (1991), with the added benefit that learners were employing their skills outside the program as well. Learners in Black and Sim's (1990) study and Lowden, Powney, Gardner and Mark's (1995) research felt they were better prepared to go on to other courses as a result of improved reading and writing skills. Learners interviewed by Malicky and Norman (1996) felt that they knew more and were generally "smarter."

Employment gains were also a part of some students' experience. Darkenwald and Valentine (1985) call these increases "modest but by no means insignificant" (p. 23). A small number of students had gained employment and a few were working at better jobs. Just under half of those working had experienced a raise and just over half thought they had better job security. A more substantial number felt their job performance had improved and that they would find a job due to their participation. Black and Sim (1990) also noted these two findings. However, Malicky and Norman (1994) discovered that, "following participation in programs, most adults returned to the same type of job as they held prior to participation" and "none...actually obtained a full-time job in the area selected following participation in the program" (p. 125-6). In light of these findings, a number of researchers caution against emphasizing a strong link between literacy program participation and employment outcomes (Black & Sim, 1990; Darkenwald & Valentine, 1985; Malicky & Norman, 1994).

Changes in social interactions are another benefit for learners. Independence (Fingeret & Danin, 1990; Malicky & Norman, 1996) and assertiveness (Malicky & Norman, 1996; Towards the ABE Promised Land, 1992) are both noted. Increased confidence in and willingness to work with others and share stories is another benefit (ABE Promised Land, 1992). Fingeret and Danin (1990) found that while relationships are often established in programs, "those relationships do not transfer...; students do not develop friendships with each other on the outside and feel limited to their pre-existing social networks when not in class" (p. 20).

Another social outcome for some students involves a positive impact on their children. Darkenwald and Valentine (1985) found that learners who had school-aged children are much more likely to talk to their children about school and help them with school work. Also, their children develop better attitudes towards school and get better grades. Increased parental involvement with children's schools was also noted in this study and by Darkenwald and Silvestri (1992).

For most learners, the greatest psychological or affective outcomes involve gains in self-confidence and self-esteem (Abell, 1992; Black & Sim, 1990; Darkenwald & Valentine, 1985; Fingeret & Danin, 1990; Hindle, 1990; Lowden, Powney, Gardner & Mark, 1995; Malicky & Norman, 1996; Towards the ABE Promised Land, 1992). Learners express this newfound self-confidence and self-esteem in a variety of ways. They take pride in their accomplishments, feel comfortable in a greater range of situations and are willing to try new challenges. They enjoy reading and writing for the first time.

understand and believe in themselves as learners, want learning to continue, and feel less inferior to those with literacy skills. Fingeret and Danin (1990) caution that in order for learners' feelings of self-confidence to continue, they must see progress in their new skills. This may explain why Malicky and Norman (1996) found that some learners had lowered self-esteem after participating since they had experienced frustration or discouragement within the program.

Perhaps the greatest single indicator of increased self-confidence for participants is their sense of gaining a voice. Students in the Malicky and Norman (1996) study said they were becoming more outspoken, which was "particularly interesting since the primary focus of the literacy programs [studied]...was on written rather than spoken language" (p. 14). Campbell (1996) notes that students in the participatory programs she researched were encouraged to state their opinions and did so as they experienced a shift in power relationships between themselves and their instructors. Hindle (1990) sums up learners' sense of gaining voice. "Many of these learners have been silenced in the past. In learning to read and write they 'find voice.' In finding voice they feel a 'great lift to freedom'" (p. 135).

Advocates of participatory practices hope that this 'great lift to freedom' will also translate into increased empowerment for learners on an individual and a community basis. At the level of personal empowerment, Malicky, Katz, Norton and Norman (1997) noted definite gains. They found that students enjoyed increased control over what they did and learned in the program as well as enhanced ability to take charge of situations.

Black and Sim (1990) found students taking a "more active and constructive role in running their lives, that they have more control, or are seeking more control over their lives and they are moving forward, not stagnating" (p. 34). Students in the ABE Promised Land (1992) study indicated that they felt much more competent in solving the problems in their lives.

Empowerment at a community level has shown fewer positive outcomes for students. Malicky et al. (1997) found that the students who sat on the board of one program did not have a sense of increased or actual power within the program. Fingeret and Danin (1990) had a similar finding. Likewise, in the ABE Promised Land (1992) study, very few students felt powerful enough to make changes in their neighborhood. However, as Campbell (1996) notes "participatory literacy practices...are a process that gradually evolves over time" (p. 140). Programs that are attempting to empower students on a personal and community level have few models to turn to for assistance at the present time (Fingeret & Danin, 1990). However, in the future, "the much more complex goal" (ABE Promised Land, 1992, p. 7) of feeling empowered in the community may come closer to being realized as programs continue to hone their policies and practices to fulfill participatory outcomes.

Summary

Learner characteristics, expectations, motivations for attending literacy programs and perceived outcomes show the high level of diversity found among students in any literacy program. Program philosophies and classroom approaches have been equally

diverse. As program planners and instructors search for methods that will address learners' needs, they often ignore the experiences and opinions of the learners themselves. The current study is designed to provide stakeholders in literacy programs with an opportunity to hear the voices of a group of literacy learners in an institutional setting. The following chapter describes the methodology of the study as well as the methods used to gather the learners' opinions. It also portrays the institutional context and the participants themselves.

CHAPTER THREE

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

Research Design

Since the question for this study involved discovering the experiences of learners in adult high school literacy classrooms, using a qualitative approach was the best way to explore the "depth, detail and individual meaning" (Patton, 1990, p. 17) of their experiences. The qualitative approach allows researchers personal access to participants, in order to capture and describe participants' perspectives (Patton, 1990).

Specifically, the work in this study was informed by the techniques of ethnographers and phenomenologists. A basic tenet of ethnographic studies is that "every human group that is together for a period of time will evolve a culture" (Patton, 1990, p. 68). Therefore, even though the adult students interviewed were not in the same classes or at the same literacy level, they shared the culture of the upgrading program in their institution. My goal as researcher was "to share in the meanings that the cultural participants [took] for granted and then to depict the new understanding for the reader and for outsiders" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 39). Phenomenological techniques, which "focus on how we put together the phenomena we experience in such a way as to make sense of the world" (Patton, 1990, p. 69), have also supported this research since it attempts to gain an understanding of adult students' experiences in literacy upgrading classrooms.

Pilot Study

Before beginning the interviews to collect the data, I conducted a pilot study, meeting with a focus group consisting of five former students from an English 10 class I taught in 1996. At the time of the pilot study, they were enrolled in either English 30 or 33. I chose these students because they possessed the same characteristics I would later require of my individual interview participants. Also, we had built up and maintained a strong rapport that I thought would expedite the discussion process and provide me with rich "practice" data. These students had been very supportive and interested in my topic but were ineligible for the main study because of our established student/teacher relationship. Therefore, they were very enthusiastic about the chance to have their opinions heard in the initial stages of the research process. We met in a room at the university on a Sunday afternoon and talked for almost three hours.

The focus group was extremely useful because it provided me with many opportunities to practise techniques I would employ in my individual interviews. I offered the same orientation to research participation that I would eventually use with my actual research participants, including discussing ethical considerations. I was able to implement various interview techniques and to hear responses to the general interview questions I had developed (Patton, 1990). This provided me with ideas about "what to pursue in individual interviews" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 100). I was also sensitized to issues that could arise in the individual interview process. After the focus group interview, I listened to the students' audiotaped responses and informally reviewed them for recurring

themes. I compiled these and offered them to the students for member checking. These processes also allowed me to practise techniques I would eventually use while analyzing the data from the individual interviews.

One of the greatest benefits of the focus group was that the students gave many indications that a study of adult experiences of high school literacy education is long overdue. They were very interested in discussing the questions at length and exhibited a great deal of emotion in addressing issues that arose as a result.

The Institutional Context

At the time of the interviews, the participants were all attending upgrading classes in a large urban college. This institution provides academic upgrading, as well as a number of other programs to literacy learners. In the upgrading department, approximately 1200 students are registered. Sixty-six per cent of students in the total upgrading population are women, 20% percent are Aboriginal and 4% percent are English as a second language speakers. The average age of the students is 30.7 years. Eighty-six per cent of these students are provincially funded for their education. In order to qualify for full-time provincial funding, students first must identify a career goal. For each 20 week term in which they are registered, they must be enrolled in three classes that are helping them to progress towards this goal. Their English classes, which follow the provincial high school curriculum, are held once per day for 70 minutes and are taught by certified teachers.

Selecting the Participants

After gaining permission to conduct the study, I asked all the instructors who were currently teaching either grade 11 or 12 English in this institution if I could visit their classrooms to discuss my research and invite students to participate. All these instructors gave me the opportunity to talk to their classes. First, I acquainted the students with some of the fundamentals of graduate level research and then related the specific purpose of the study. I stressed that I would be asking them to discuss their experiences as upgrading students for the purpose of finding out about teaching approaches, not to evaluate their institution or their teachers. Also, I discussed the following characteristics that would make students eligible to participate:

1. Funded for full-time upgrading by grants (Student Finance Board, band grants, Employment Insurance). This would identify socially and economically marginalized students who comprise the largest proportion of learners in this institution.

2. "Centrally involved with the phenomenon and have many life experiences of it to talk about" (Becker, 1986, p. 105). For this study, having many life experiences to talk about meant that the students would be enrolled in at least their third upgrading class at the time of the interview. Malicky and Norman (1995) postulated that students did not discuss instructional approaches because they did not have enough background to be familiar with available choices. By requiring participants to have completed at least two upgrading courses, there was an increased likelihood they had been exposed to various approaches.

3. Articulate, reflective, analytical and "willing to struggle with verbally describing their everyday experiences" (Becker, 1986, p. 105). Very rich data could be garnered from participants with these characteristics.

I also discussed with the students what would be expected of them during the study, the time commitment involved and the various ethical issues inherent in research. I let them know that although I would not be offering remuneration, this study would provide an opportunity for their voices to be heard and for them to become possible agents of change. Without their words, it would be impossible for me to gain the perspective of upgrading adults in literacy classrooms. I asked the students to identify their interest in participating by placing their name and telephone number in an envelope and depositing it in a box in the upgrading office.

There was a great deal of interest in the study as I was making my presentation. Students expressed pleasure that they were being asked for their input and a number were disappointed that they did not qualify for the study because they did not meet all of the criteria. Some students asked for copies of my findings. Within two weeks, I had received the names of seven students who wanted to participate in the study. One student did not respond to my phone calls and I eventually interviewed the remaining six.

The Participants

Becker (1986) recommends that the research goal should help to determine the number of participants who are interviewed. Since I planned to conduct an in-depth

exploration of learners' experiences in adult literacy upgrading classes, choosing six students to participate seemed appropriate to help accomplish the research goal. Although the small sample size cannot be seen as representative, the institution's diverse student population was partially reflected in these participants. All were provincially funded for their upgrading. Five of the six participants were women, one participant was Aboriginal and one was an immigrant for whom English is a second language. The average age of the participants was 35.5 years. The participants are profiled in detail below:

1. Angelica is a 44-year-old, married mother of children who are 21, 19 and 15 years old. She was born and raised in Africa; of the five languages she speaks, English is the second which she says she "learned but rarely used" in her home country. She characterizes her parents as loving and putting "an education first." The educational system in her country was very strict and disciplinarian; she remembers being caned. She completed grade 12 with above average marks but could not continue to college because tuition fees were too high for the family to afford. Therefore, for 4 1/2 years, she took secretarial and dressmaking courses in the evenings and on Saturdays and worked during the day in an automobile manufacturing plant, contributing her salary to her nine-member extended family. She married in 1975 and turned her attention to caring for her home and children and operating a home-based business. In 1991, she emigrated from Africa to Canada and worked for five years in a daycare. She entered upgrading in February 1996 at the 7 to 9 level and was completing English 33 at the time of the interviews.

2. Susan is a 37-year-old single mother of a 12-year-old daughter. She is Caucasian and English-speaking. Since the school did not judge her ready to begin grade 1, she began public school a year later than her peers. She attended grades 1 to 6 at the same school in a large urban center, repeating one grade, before transferring to a trades and services program in grade 7 at a vocational secondary school. Her marks were satisfactory in this program although she recalls experiencing peer difficulties while she was enrolled. She completed the grade 10 and final year of this program when she was 17. After graduating, she worked at a series of what she calls "dead-end, part-time, minimum wages jobs" in such places as car washes and fast food restaurants. During that time she also took a mixology course, which she says "got me nowhere." She returned to school in September 1996 at the 7 to 9 level in order to "get a job in the kind of work that I enjoyed doing" and was completing English 23 at the time of the interview.

3. Kelly is the divorced, 29-year-old mother of two boys, ages 5 and 6, both of whom have been diagnosed with attention deficit disorder. She attended grades 1 to 5 at an elementary school in a large urban center. She felt that her teachers perceived her as unmotivated and a slow learner. However, her marks were average until the death of her father when she was in grade five. Shortly afterwards, she began to experience academic and behavioral problems. "Because I was a troublemaker", she was transferred to another elementary school for grade 6, which she repeated. She spent one year at a regular public junior high and then entered a trades and services program at a high school in the same urban center. The years she spent in this program were characterized by conflict with the

school staff. During the second year of this program, when she was 17, she quit school. "From that day on, I said I'm never going back to school. I'm never going to be put through that again." She worked at various jobs in such places as a video store, bingo hall and fast food restaurant. In 1992, she took a personal development course at a large urban college and then entered upgrading at the 7 to 9 level in September 1994. Due to personal problems, she withdrew before completing the semester. She repeated the personal development course and re-entered upgrading in September 1996 at the English 13 level. Her main goals in returning were not job-related, but rather to prove to herself, her sons and the teachers "that always said I was going to be nothing" that she could be a successful student. She was completing English 33 at the time of the interview.

4. Jackson is 27 years old, single, Caucasian and English-speaking. He attended elementary school in a small town, repeating grade 4. In grade 7, he began the integrated occupations program at a school in the same town. He completed the grade 12 year of this program when he was 18. His marks were average because "I wasn't really interested in school; I wanted to get out and work." Until he was 23, he worked as a dishwasher, a bar tender, a pawn shop employee, a mechanic, a loans consultant and a valve technician. He also held various supervisory positions, was a partner in and the president of a company and completed a number of on-the-job certificates. Although he was earning a comfortable salary in his last job, he decided to return to school because " I wasn't happy yet. I haven't got what I wanted in life." He entered upgrading in September 1996 at the 7 to 9 level and was in English 23 at the time of the interview.

5. Patricia is 39 years old, married and the mother of children who are 21, 18 and 16 years old. She is Metis and English-speaking. Her public school education occurred in many small towns, "so many, I can't remember the exact number." The longest she spent in one school was "1 year, 3 days"; during one school year, she attended 13 schools. Despite the disruption in her public school education, her marks were always average and she was never involved in any type of special education. She left school after finishing grade 8 at the age of 15. The same year, she moved in with the man who would later become her husband. For the next several years, she cared for her home and family and took business courses in a large urban center and introductory college courses in an outreach program offered in her town. In September 1992, because she was interested in pursuing a career as a religious minister, she obtained a federal grant and entered upgrading at the English 13 level in a small town regional campus. She completed English 23 and English 33 by January 1994. Because these English courses would not allow her entrance into her chosen employment field, she began English 10 in a large urban center in February 1997. She was completing English 30 at the time of the interview.

6. Diana is 33 and the divorced mother of two special needs children, aged 10 and 8. She is Caucasian and English-speaking. Due to her father's work and her parents' marriage pattern of living together and then separating, she attended school in a variety of Western Canadian centres: in 9 ½ years, she attended 12 schools, returning to some twice. After repeating grade 5, she was transferred to an integrated occupations program, which

was organized so students worked for 6 months and attended classes for 6 months. She quit school at 17, halfway through the grade 10 year of this program. She married in 1994 but chose to leave the relationship after six months because her husband was abusive. In April 1995, she attended a personal development program at a college in a large urban center and then enrolled in upgrading in September 1995. She was placed initially at the English 10 level, but after a month, transferred to a 7 to 9 level class. She was enrolled in English 23 at the time of the interview.

The Interviews

Interviewing was the best technique to ensure that students' voices were heard and to get inside their meanings. Before interviewing, I developed questions to use in a general interview guide approach (Patton, 1990). I reflected on the types of experiences students may have in literacy classrooms and then developed questions which could be categorized as experiential/behavioral, feeling, sensory and opinions/values (Patton, 1990). I organized my questions according to an order suggested by Patton (1990), beginning with the students' present experiences, followed by questions about the past and then asking future-oriented questions. These questions were worded in such a way that the participants could re-experience classroom approaches during the interview, thus giving me rich and detailed descriptions (Patton, 1990). I also tried some of the creative interviewing techniques suggested by Patton (1990), such as having students respond to program materials and photographs.

Each student was interviewed once, with the interviews lasting from just over one hour to 2 ½ hours. Four of the students were interviewed in their homes and two in the cafeteria of a college other than the one they were attending. I began by building rapport with the participants, discussing such topics as their families, their upgrading decisions and our shared adult student status. I also reviewed the various ethical features of the research. I then discussed how the interview would be conducted, that it would be recorded but that the participants had the option of turning off the tape machine at any time. I also explained the general order of the questions and encouraged the students to be as complete and honest in their answers as possible.

I was impressed by a number of features about the interviews. First, the participants had accorded enormous importance to the time I spent with them. There were very few disruptions: answering machines picked up telephone calls and if the student's children were at home, they had obviously been asked to entertain themselves while I visited. One student's son, who had been diagnosed special needs, stood politely at the kitchen door, waiting for our attention before asking his mother a question. Also, the students talked with great emotion about their experiences and with great conviction about the changes they thought should be made. As with the pilot group, the students very much wanted their voices to be heard. I had originally planned to talk to each student twice to keep them from experiencing interview fatigue, but once they began to talk, they wanted to keep talking. I also realized that I would not be following the general interview guide in any straightforward manner. Although I always started the interview with the

same question, this question often led the student to discuss other areas that I planned to ask about later. I began to pause the tape to see which questions they had already answered in the course of discussion and then proceeded with the next new question.

Data Analysis

I began data analysis while transcribing the interviews. I noticed that students repeated certain words, phrases and topics and kept track of these as possible theme categories. I was also interested in the students' metaphors and in the patterns of interaction that seemed to characterize student-teacher relationships. Two of my participants discussed experiences and expressed opinions that were clearly different than the other four and I postulated why they would be so divergent. As I became immersed in the emotion of my participants' words, I debriefed often by talking with my advisor and other professional colleagues. I also did freewriting, particularly after I worked with the angry frustration of one participant's experiences.

After completing the transcriptions, I began specific theme generation, guided by the work of Colaizzi (1978). His method is highly systematic and yet can be "viewed flexibly and freely by each researcher, so that...he [sic] can modify them in whatever ways seem appropriate" (p. 59). I first reduced his procedure from seven steps to five steps since two stages of his data analysis referred to generating the essence of a phenomenon, which was not a purpose of the study. I then added one more step concerning the validation of findings, suggested by Guba (1978). The six-step procedure used in this study is summarized below:

1. Read over each participant's descriptions to gain an overall sense of them.

2. Highlight "significant statements" (p. 59) that pertain to the research question. The significant statements ranged from a few words to an entire anecdote.

3. Formulate first order themes by articulating the meaning of the significant statements, being careful to "never sever all connection with the original protocols [but rather] discover and illuminate those meanings hidden in the...original protocols" (p. 59). I reorganized my participants' words by creating two columns on a page, one for the significant statements and one for my interpretation of the statement.

4. Repeat steps 1, 2 and 3 for each participant's data and then cluster the discovered themes "in an attempt...to allow for the emergence of themes that are common to all of the subjects..." (p. 59). In the margin beside my interpretation of the significant statements, I coded the statement with a category and subcategory and developed an outline of these codes and subcodes on a separate sheet of paper. I then copied the significant statements and interpretations onto colored paper, a different color for each participant so that I could keep track of their words. I then used what Bogdan and Biklen (1992) call the "cut-up-and put-in-folders approach", cutting apart each significant statement and its interpretation and inserting it into an envelope which was labeled with a code and subcode from the outline. I also validated these themes by referring back to the original transcripts to be sure that nothing from the data had been omitted in theme generation and to see if the themes proposed ideas not found in the data. I also resisted "the temptations of ignoring data or themes which [didn't] fit, or of prematurely

generating a theory which would . . .eliminate the discordance of [the] findings" (p. 61). I viewed these negative cases (Patton, 1990) as statements for further reflection and exploration, adding to the richness of the findings.

5. Validate the themes with participants to discover whether they reflect their experiences or omit any aspect of them. All six of the participants in this study were available for member-checking. They felt that their words had been reported, grouped and interpreted accurately.

6. Validate the themes with another "competent judge" (Guba, 1978, p. 56) who "ought to be able... to verify that (a) the categories make sense in view of the data which are available, and (b) the data have been appropriately arranged in the category system" (p. 57). My advisor acted as the "competent judge", providing feedback on the categories and the arrangement of the data within them.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

There is one major limitation of the study. My middle class status, my education and my literacy philosophy acted as filters through which I viewed and interpreted the participants' words. In qualitative studies, the researcher's objectivity is often a cause for concern (Patton, 1990). However, it can be addressed by an awareness of how biases may affect fieldwork, documentation of methods so that others can track possible biases and openness in describing the perspective's limitations. A delimitation of the study is that the participants in this sample are program persisters. As Quigley (1992c) points out, persisters and reluctant learners are very different populations. Therefore, these results

may not be applicable to students who drop out of literacy programs. Another delimitation is the small sample size of the study, which means that findings are not generalizable to other learners in other programs at other times. Instead of generalizations, this research focuses on reasonable extrapolations, that is, "modest speculations on the likely applicability of findings to other situations under similar, but not identical, conditions" (Patton, p. 489).

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

When the six participant interviews were analyzed for recurring themes, three broad categories emerged: instructional issues, affective issues, and power and control issues. Woven among the common experiences of these participants are strong and sometimes opposing individual responses. These comments reflect both the commonalties and the diversities found among adult students in high school literacy classrooms.

Wherever possible, the participants' words form the subheadings in this chapter. This technique has been used to capture the students' experiences as authentically as possible.

Instructional Issues

Within the category of instructional issues, six subcategories emerged: student background knowledge for dealing with instructional tasks, pacing of instruction, learning style preferences, meaningfulness of assigned tasks, passive learning issues and issues involving written assignments.

Student Background for Dealing with Instructional Tasks

A lot of this stuff is new to me or I just don't remember.

Four of the participants mentioned that the material they were learning in their upgrading classes was new to them, or if it had been presented in their previous public school classes, they could not remember having learned it. For example, Diana's

recollection of high school was "it's all a blur to me." Participants mentioned a number of reasons for this sense of "blurriness." Four participants' high school programs were vocational rather than academic so may not have included the material being taught in their adult upgrading English classes. Also, their attitudes as adolescents may not have been conducive to learning and remembering. Diana recalls, "I couldn't have given a shit back when I was 16 or 17 about getting an education. That was the furthest thing from my mind." Jackson concurred with this lack of interest. "I didn't really want to be in school. I wanted to get out and have fun. I wanted to get into the job force." Diana also mentioned that being "too stoned" during junior and senior high likely affected her memory of what was taught. Susan discussed another reason why students may not remember high school concepts. "A lot of these adults have been out of school for a long time...They'd probably pretty much have to start from scratch."

I had covered all of it.

Not all of the participants felt that they had to "start from scratch" in their upgrading classes. Kelly and Angelica both mentioned that they had felt bored and frustrated when teachers covered too many concepts in class that they had already learned. Although Susan had not felt this personally, she was aware of the variety of student background knowledge in her classes. "Some students seem to be more advanced in the classroom than other students. Some students will be frustrated or say 'Oh, I know this stuff' yet there's other students that say 'Well, I don't know this. Can you start from a lower level?'"

Material oriented towards...experiences.

Three participants had experienced instructors who attempted to relate the material they were teaching to the students' background knowledge. One of Angelica's instructors explained to the class how to relate literature to their experiences. Patricia had appreciated instructors who found out about students' backgrounds and discussed the material in relationship to these. One of her instructors had related material to her "farm background" and had taught her how to structure a piece of writing by connecting it to her artistic knowledge. Another instructor had related literature to Patricia's experience with "being a mother."

'Leave your past.'

Only Kelly mentioned having an instructor who did not seem to want students to use their background knowledge to understand the new material being taught. To Kelly, this instructor's perspective seemed to be that students should be forward thinking, rather than dwelling on past experiences.

'You should know this stuff.'

Three of the participants felt that some teachers expected them to understand new tasks with very little classroom support. Kelly reasoned, "If we knew everything that we should know in [the instructor's] eyes, we wouldn't have been back in school." Susan described one of her teacher's methods for giving explanations. "With a little bit, 15, 20 minutes that [the instructor] talked about it, 'OK, go ahead and answer the questions.' That doesn't always help." Kelly echoed Susan's experience. "Some of the assignments, I

felt that basically we're given the assignment and then they say, 'Well, look at this chapter in the book.' It's like OK, now what? So you read the chapter and that and I still have a hard time comprehending it. I can't just read something out of a book. I'm not very good at reading instructions out of a book." Diana stressed that providing support for students was needed at all levels of English upgrading. "Just because you're at a higher level doesn't mean that you're any smarter you know."

She'll spend more time explaining things.

Participants had also experienced instructional styles in which teachers spent a great deal of time explaining new concepts. Kelly mentioned that her instructor had discussed the historical context of a play so students could understand the play better. For a major written assignment, the instructor had provided not only a step-by-step explanation but had also referred students to various print resources for extra explanation. Both Kelly and Susan appreciated having teachers write examples on the board. Several participants also mentioned that having teachers spend more time on material helped them to succeed in exams. Diana praised one instructor's methods. "Before we even wrote the exam, [the instructor] would say, 'OK, this is what you need to study, this is what we've done', just giving us very intense knowledge." Angelica felt that her classroom instructor had prepared her well for her diploma exam. "It was basically what we had done in class so it was more related to that work."

Pacing of Instruction

You have to learn a lot in a little bit of time.

Five participants indicated that they were required to learn the concepts in their courses very quickly. Four of these five felt that the pace was too rushed and affected their learning in various ways. Jackson commented that "there's lots of times where some people need help and there's not time for it." Diana concurred, saying "You need review, you need repetition and you don't get it." Diana, Kelly and Patricia mentioned that the quick pace affected their ability to understand, absorb and remember concepts. Diana commented "when you're cramming seven or eight modules into four months, that's a lot to comprehend." Patricia thought, "with more classroom discussion, we would have helped to internalize more these concepts." Patricia also felt that with more time she would have achieved "better accuracy" in her English 30 work. Diana raised another issue related to learning concepts quickly. "It doesn't sink into your brain what you're learning 'cause it's so fast-paced.... There's no way, not when you have outside issues, dealing with them. The material's just going so fast."

Three of the participants recognized that their teachers felt the pressures of time as well. Kelly sensed "[the instructor's] attitude is 'we really don't have a lot of time so we gotta continue with the class.'" Patricia acknowledged that her teacher "ran out of time." Jackson paraphrased his instructor's words regarding the pacing of the class. " 'We gotta get this down in a certain amount of time. This is the course outline. If we get it done in time, we have fun. If we don't, we kick our butts.'"

I don't mind it being condensed.

Of all the participants, Jackson was the only one who did not raise major objections about the pacing of the course material. "I think it's good because it keeps the students at their feet and it keeps the teachers at their feet too, saying 'We gotta get this done, we gotta get these students into their career and on with their lives.'"

Expect a lot of questions.

Three participants mentioned that, even if teachers are feeling pressured by curriculum demands, they should not forget that they need to provide time for students to ask questions. Susan reported that "some teachers will spend all day during their class answering questions. Another teacher says 'Look, we don't have time for all these questions.'" Diana valued a teacher who, "if we had a question... would take time and listen and answer it." Jackson thought that at the end of the presentation of new concepts, "the teacher should say 'Does everybody understand this?'" Susan cautioned, "if you've got your day planned out to do certain things, don't expect to get it all finished 'cause there's gonna be a lot of questions." Angelica was the only participant who did not feel that providing time for questions was essential. "Sometimes when the teachers had to repeat the stuff, I was kind of getting bored." She also felt that often her classmates did not understand concepts because of their poor attendance. "I'm always there and why do I have to listen to ten people asking it on ten different days and wasting valuable time?"

I don't want to ask the instructor.

Not all the participants had been self-confident enough to ask their instructors for assistance when they did not understand a concept. Susan described her reluctance to admit her lack of comprehension. "Sometimes I don't feel right going to the instructors. I don't know why. I mean cause that's what I went back to school for...I says 'I'm an adult. I should know this stuff.' But yet.... if I've got a question in my head, I don't know is this appropriate to ask." Kelly had also felt uncomfortable about asking questions. "If I don't understand what somebody's saying, I feel that even though I don't understand it, probably the rest of my class does so I don't want to say I don't know what [the instructor] is saying. I don't want to bring that up because then I feel real stupid." As her upgrading progressed, however, she had begun to realize that "you gotta ask for help, otherwise you're not gonna learn."

Everybody learns at a different speed.

Five of the participants felt that in the rush to complete the requirements of the course, instructors sometimes forgot individual learning speeds. Jackson commented that "some students have a hard time grasping the stuff." At many times throughout the interview, Susan mentioned how much difficulty she had understanding concepts in her English class. Part of the reason for this, she felt, was "because of the fancy words they used."

Susan and Jackson provided ways that instructors could accommodate students' individual learning speeds. Susan believed "you might have to spend more time with

individual students while other students are working ahead on their own." Jackson agreed. If a student understands a concept, "let them go ahead and do it. They may be faster than other people." For students who do not comprehend, "[instructors] should...say 'OK. What don't you understand?' Go up to the student and say 'This is how it goes.' Just go into more detail." For Jackson and Kelly, it was also important for instructors to remember that taking more time to understand one concept should not earmark the student as being weak in all skills. "Everybody at something or other is better," said Kelly.

Learning Style Preferences

We have our own way of thinking, our own way of doing.

All the participants were aware of their individual learning preferences. Kelly, who had been diagnosed with attention deficit disorder as an adult, said, "I actually need to hear it taught to me and I need it shown to me." She also appreciated taking notes because "I've got a very short term memory so I forget very easily." Although Angelica had never been officially diagnosed ADD, she too characterized herself as "a person who gets distracted by scraping chairs or somebody slamming the door. So I can learn better when everybody's focused." Diana also mentioned that it was difficult for her to concentrate due to diagnosed ADD, especially when she was reading, noting, "I have an attention span of a zip." She found that she "learned more on tape, doing it taped than I do reading [although] it helps me to do both." Susan agreed with the importance of aural input, saying, "I have to really listen in class in order to catch everything." Although

Jackson acknowledged "sometimes I can do it just by seeing and hearing", he expressed a preference for "the practical...I need the on-hands experience." This likely accounted for his enjoyment of tasks where he could "think on the computer." Patricia also appreciated being able to bring her word processor to class and receiving extra time to write her exams. "It always helped my self-confidence more with spell check and the thesaurus so it was very encouraging."

Not all instructors had accommodated and respected individual learning styles. Kelly experienced difficulty with an instructor who did not write anything down while talking "so I wasn't catching everything...I couldn't keep it all in my head." After Kelly's ADD diagnosis, she began to take a tape recorder to class to assist her in notetaking. However, one instructor would not give her permission to tape record lectures, saying "I was using my ADD as an excuse." Diana had experienced a similar situation. She felt her ADD and drug and alcohol problem interacted to produce a number of learning challenges for her; one of her instructors had also reacted by saying "we use having that [ADD] as an excuse." This instructor had scheduled exams on three consecutive days, which Diana had found "stressful." This seemed to indicate to her that the instructor did not "care" about the consequences for students of closely scheduled exams. The same instructor also "expect[ed] more" of students who had extra time to write their exams. "Students in our class if they're writing in class only have to give... a rough copy of an essay.... We have to give... the good copy, the rough copy, all of it, because we have extra time." Diana had also conflicted with this instructor when she had not written down

answers for a class discussion of a story. "My work might not be on paper, but I can answer in my head faster than anybody that has it written on paper and [the instructor] tells me that I'm lazy and I'm just not doing my homework."

Meaningfulness of Assigned Work

Why are we doing this?

Several of the participants questioned the suitability of the work they were doing in English class. Jackson and Susan both felt that learning essay writing was irrelevant to them because their careers would not require them to perform this task. Diana related an incident from a class in which the students were studying a play. Each day for thirty minutes, they wrote questions about the play from the board. "Halfway through the play, someone clued in and said, 'Oh. These questions are in the literature book.' When you bring it to that person's attention, [the instructor] says, 'Well, it's teaching you notetaking.' And you're going, 'No, that's called a waste of time.'"

I like to learn interesting stuff.

When time was spent productively in class, giving students knowledge and experiences that matched their needs and interests, the participants were generally enthusiastic about the assigned work. Jackson had enjoyed learning "how to analyze people" and "reading exciting novels." When Jackson's instructor introduced the class to the Internet, Jackson reports "I was out of school at 3 o'clock...came back at 6... and spent three hours a night on the Net." Patricia felt that most of her experiences as an adult

student had been stimulating rather than "grinding... I never had that experience. Maybe when I was a kid but not during my adult learning, no."

Two of the students felt that it was the teacher's responsibility to make the curriculum meaningful. Jackson commented "You gotta make the course, the subject, fun to learn, exciting and some of the teachers don't do that." Kelly agreed. "You have to make it interesting for me. Then I'm more willing to learn it."

Passive Learning

Some participants mentioned that their roles in classroom situations seemed relatively passive. Not being active for long periods of time was difficult for Jackson. "Sitting down for 70 minutes, that's quite a while." Other participants mentioned that they seemed to do a large amount of seatwork such as notetaking, writing out questions or listening to the teacher. For Angelica, classroom activities seemed "more like teacher standing up and doing stuff" to which she voiced few objections. Other participants reacted more negatively. Jackson felt "I'm just in class doing nothing" and Diana agreed. "I feel like I'm just taking up space."

Perhaps as a result of their perceived passive roles in English classrooms, the participants seemed to be relatively unfamiliar with the concept of learning actively to enhance their success in English classes. This was obvious when they were asked what advice they would give to a new student about how to be successful in English class. Susan didn't think she would be able to offer much advice to a new student because "that would be like me being an instructor." Later, she advised, "Listen in class and be there

everyday is about the only thing." Jackson thought that to be a success, a student should "do the stuff in [the instructor's] thinking, like think [the instructor's] way." Three of the students seemed to mix passive and active learning approaches. Patricia thought students should "participate" but then seemed to soften this advice by saying, "Just relax. Go for the ride is pretty much the only way." Angelica offered four pieces of advice. "Be there every day. Not to fool around. [No] eating and drinking in class because then you are not really focused because you are half on what you are doing and half on what the teacher is saying. Be on time." Kelly thought a student should "just make sure that you take down the notes that [the instructor's] giving [and] listen to the way, the things [the instructor] says. If you read between the lines of what [the instructor's] saying, you pick up a lot more."

Issues Involving Writing

I had really bad writing skills and wanted to improve.

All six participants described difficulties they were experiencing with writing for their English classes. The three problem areas they discussed most often were lack of self-confidence in writing, difficulties in expressing thoughts in writing and the challenge of structuring what they had to say. Susan did not believe in herself as a writer, saying, "I'm not a writer for essays and paragraphs. I can't catch on to it." When she did try to express her ideas, it seemed as though ideas were "all scrambling around in my head." Susan was unsure what the best method would be to help her "unscramble" her thoughts. She first expressed total frustration with trying to use a formal outline, saying, "I

absolutely hate those...I spend more time trying to figure out or remember how to do the outline than I do doing the essay." Later, however, she said, "even with those outlines, as much as I hate them, they do help in writing." Angelica attributed her written expression and organizational difficulties to a lack of experience with spoken and written English. She felt that "since English is not my language, sometimes I do have to think about what I'm writing when I'm doing the structure of writing." She also realized that "talk is different from writing...Sometimes when I write, I sometimes feel like I'm writing the way I'm talking and so that would show up in my writing." Diana was most frustrated by the lack of equality between her spoken and written abilities. "I can express what I want to say verbally but I can't do it on paper that makes any bit of a sense."

Writing Instruction: What Does Not Work

Some methods of writing instruction and evaluation were not perceived by participants to be of particular value. Four participants criticized peer editing. Angelica said "To be honest, I have never used a peer edit for myself. After I've talked it over with whoever is doing it...sometimes I find they are way off." Diana and Susan both expressed the difficulties they had with doing peer editing. "When you're told that you have to mark someone else's work, how can you mark it if you don't know how to?" wondered Diana. Susan also felt she lacked the necessary background to edit another student's writing. "I don't know nothing about fragments and run-ons and stuff like that." she commented. As a result, peer editing became an ordeal for Susan. "I was scared on checking the other student's work 'cause I was scared that they did something right and I

was going to correct it and do it the wrong way." However, Susan felt obligated to go through the motions of peer editing. "I'd make a few little red marks to show that I did correct something. I didn't want to correct too much...I don't want to screw up and making it worse."

Participants also criticized some instructor methods of editing and evaluating. Jackson was annoyed that some teachers did not engage in editing student writing at all before evaluating it. He described this process as "You hand it in. You get a mark. That's it." Kelly found that even though her teacher edited her writing, her errors were not indicated clearly enough for her to find and correct them. Students also had concerns about the way in which some instructors evaluated their writing. Two participants did not always know what their teachers meant with various notations on their writing. Kelly remarked that her instructor "would basically put an 'X' right through it. So then you're kind of going, like what?" Susan experienced similar frustration. "When I'd get essays back, saying a fragment and a run-on, what's fragments? What's run-ons?" Diana objected to holistic marking "because you don't know the basis for it." Also, she had felt hurt by marking which emphasized negatives; "all the way through our paper, trash, trash, trash, trash." One instructor had also told her that when she wrote, she experienced "verbal diarrhea." Her frustration with the entire writing process was evident when she commented, "We're told when we get an essay back, 'Well, maybe you should fix it up and try and get a better mark.' Well, if you're handed this paper that you don't even understand what a run-on is and you've written it the way you thought [the instructor]

would want it with the help of the [extra help] room and it's still not perfect, where do you go?"

Writing Instruction: What Works

All the participants had experienced teaching that had helped them to overcome some of their writing difficulties. Teachers who gave notes about structuring an essay were important to Patricia and Kelly because they felt they could work more independently while writing with written guidelines to follow . Patricia and Susan perceived that having enough time to practice writing was essential. To Patricia, the provision of class time was important since she did not "do a lot of writing at home." She also realized that " with more repetition, more practice, the better you got." Susan enjoyed an instructor who slowed the pace of writing instruction. "We just spent one class doing the thesis statement. That I found very, very helpful instead of saying 'Write the essay with a thesis statement and then the five body paragraphs.'"

Certain types of assignments gave students confidence in their written expression. Susan felt that being allowed to write from her personal experience was easier than producing literary writing. Journal writing gave Angelica the chance to express her thoughts without worrying about mechanics. As a result, her thoughts began "flowing."

Two students mentioned that they had enjoyed instructors who followed a conferencing procedure when helping them with their writing. Susan describes this technique as having an instructor who "sits down with you, shows you how to do it, gives you ideas on how to do theses and introductions and stuff like that." Susan felt "that

works better than having the instructor saying, 'OK, do this and do that' and then [the instructor] sits at [the] desk and does... paper work." Patricia had a similar experience with the conferencing procedure. "I felt [the instructor] took a great deal of time with me, personally on a one to one thing, trying to develop my writing skills better...[The instructor] corrected my material, gave me ideas...punctuation and different word phrases."

Even if instructors did not sit down individually with students, their input before the writing was evaluated was important to these participants. One of Jackson's instructors edited writing before marking it, letting him know exactly what areas of his writing he could improve. For Patricia, this input needed to be sensitive so that she could overcome her lack of confidence in spelling. "[The instructor] never judged my spelling which was delight. [The instructor pointed errors out] with a little 'spell', 'sp' which is OK. I can take that. Don't make a big circle around it. Don't show everybody, you know, discreetly. That can be very offensive."

Participants also appreciated feedback from teachers after their writing had been evaluated. Diana praised mark sheets that show "where we go wrong and what we could fix up...You want to know what you're doing wrong so that you don't make that mistake [again]." Angelica also enjoyed having a precise marking criterion that formed the basis for discussing her writing with the instructor. " If you would get a 4 or 5 or maybe a 3 or whatever, you would know what you had missed out when you would go back to [the

instructor]...[The instructor] would tell you 'From what I explained, can you see how you have gone off?'"

Writing Conventions

One area of writing instruction on which opinions differed sharply was the teaching of writing conventions. Angelica felt that instruction on basic conventions would not be of interest to her; she preferred to be taught more about the writing process. Patricia said that she had been taught conventions extensively in her pre-high school class and had improved her writing skills as a result. Two of the participants thought that more instructional time should have been spent on writing conventions. Kelly said she would have appreciated having a grammar textbook during her upgrading because "I have always had a real hard time with my grammar...Even to this day I still have trouble with verbs and stuff and like the grammar part." She also mentioned that "I still cannot comprehend where the comma would go and the apostrophe and all that." When she asked one of her instructors for assistance, she was referred to extra help sources in the institution. Susan also felt that conventions had not been stressed enough in class. She recalled some conventions instruction at the pre high school level but said such material was covered "very briefly." Now, she still wonders "What's the difference between a verb and a pronoun? I can't remember...What's third person singular? They should spend enough time doing that." She perceived that the teaching of grammar would be useful because it is "something that we'd be using in everyday life" even though "it would sort of be almost like being in elementary school again." Both women felt that being taught

more grammar would have helped them to see their own writing errors and, therefore, would have resulted in higher marks on their writing assignments.

You get handed a paper and said, 'Do it.'

Participants felt that the main factor that would have improved their writing was more time spent in class on the actual writing process. Patricia recalled that she did most of her writing at home and that she had only received essay writing assistance in the extra help room. Diana explained that more teaching time was necessary because "a lot of the people that are in my class right now are coming into school straight into 23. They have no clue how to write an essay. We're given a week teaching material on essay writing and that's it. Then you're told to go to the [extra help] room." Susan felt that instructors gave students the message that " 'I want you to learn how to be a better writer' and everything but it's just that they don't really spend the time." For Angelica, the lack of time spent on the teaching of writing was the major disappointment of her English upgrading experience. Writing improvement had been her major goal but "I don't feel I'm ready for college yet cause it's just that my writing that was not too good." Her teachers had told her " 'it is going to get better with the time'" but "it doesn't get any better." Diana also felt "I don't write any differently than I have before" and Patricia admitted that addressing some literary topics was "still a little hard."

Discussion

A number of principles of adult learning are inherent in the participants' comments on instructional issues. Using students' existing background knowledge as a

starting point for developing literacy skills has only recently become a priority in adult classrooms. In the 1960s and 1970s, literacy programs were likely to adopt a deficit perspective, focusing more on adult learners' weaknesses than their strengths (Fingeret, 1990). Instructors often viewed their students as " 'containers'... 'receptacles' to be filled by the teacher" (Freire, 1970, p. 58). Recently, however, there has been a trend away from viewing literacy education as "an act of depositing" (Freire, 1970, p. 58). "Rather than assuming that students are 'blank slates', we know that they bring a wealth of knowledge that relates to literacy tasks" (Fingeret, 1990, p. 27). Working with instead of ignoring this "wealth of knowledge" appears to have several affective and instructional advantages. First, since adults often perceive themselves in terms of their experiences, an instructor who acknowledges and values their experiences is often perceived by students as appreciative of who they are (Knowles, 1984). Another advantage is that relating new classroom material to learners' background experience tends to acts as a motivator for further learning (Fingeret, 1990). Also, research in cognitive development implies that learning occurs most effectively when adults are able to relate new information and skills to existing cognitive structures (Brundage & MacKeracher, 1980; Fingeret, 1990; Knowles, 1984; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). Patricia had obviously felt that her background was valued when her instructors related classroom material to her experiences as a mother and an artist. As a result, she felt more motivated to and more capable of learning new concepts.

Adults also arrive in literacy classrooms with preferred learning styles. Since "every adult has his [sic] own individualistic style for processing information and for learning...every group of adult learners will...be extremely heterogeneous in nature" (Brundage & MacKeracher, 1980, p. 45). Instructors also possess preferred learning styles and tend to teach according to the style that would help them most as learners (Brundage & MacKeracher, 1980). "When a mismatch occurs between the learning/cognitive style of the learner and that of the teacher, the result is likely to be unsatisfactory to both" (Brundage & MacKeracher, 1980, p. 51). In this study, an instructor who did not write anything down frustrated Kelly, who seemed to prefer visual learning. One of Diana's instructors expected her to write down answers for the discussion of a story, even though Diana felt that she could participate better using her oral communication strengths.

Perceptions of who they are as learners and how the teacher expects them to behave as students accompany adults to the upgrading classroom as well. They may arrive with negative self-concepts of themselves as students (Knowles, 1984), based on prior learning experiences. They may also perceive that they have little background knowledge to deal with the new topics being addressed in the learning situation (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). The new learning situation may therefore be perceived as "novel, emergency, or traumatic" (Brundage & MacKeracher, 1980, p. 38) and students may cope by adopting passive, dependent behaviors (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). As well, memories of their public school experiences may lead adults to believe that passive learning will be the expectation in their adult learning environments. Even though in

other areas of their lives they may feel confident and self-directing, many adult learners "harken back to their conditioning in their previous school experience, put on their dunce hats of dependency, fold their arms, sit back and say 'Teach me'" (Knowles, 1984, p. 56). These passive learning attitudes were particularly evident in Angelica's perception that the teacher should be the most active person in the classroom and in Susan's comment that instructors are the only ones capable of explaining to students the meaning of success in the classroom.

Another instructional concern of this study's participants, the pacing of instruction, relates to adult learners' perception of time and to the adverse effects of time pressures. Brundage and MacKeracher (1980) states that "an adult tends to perceive time as including an ever-increasing past, a fleeting and pressured present, and a finite future" (p. 35). This "finite future tends to create the illusion of a need to hurry, to change and learn quickly, and to get on with life" (p. 36). Jackson's comments about "wanting to get on with things" may be related to this perception of time. However, the comments of other participants in this study show that productive learning may not occur under time constraints (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Brundage and MacKeracher (1980) state that adults tend to "learn best when they can set their own pace and when time pressures are kept to the minimum" (p. 23).

Adult time perceptions may also be related to the meaningfulness of instruction. Since adults sometimes feel that learning should occur rapidly so that they can continue with their lives, "they are often reluctant to engage in learning activities or content which

does not appear to have immediate and pragmatic application within their life" (Brundage & MacKeracher, 1980, p. 36). Knowles (1984) concurs, stating that adults' orientation to learning is more likely to be "life-centred... task-centred or problem-centred" (p. 59). Adult learners will therefore experience a " need to know" (p. 55) why they are learning what they are learning and how to apply learning to their lives. If their "need to know" questions are not answered to their satisfaction, adults may begin to "resent and resist" (Knowles, 1984, p. 56) instructor-chosen material and activities. If Jackson's and Susan's instructors had helped them to relate certain essay writing skills to job writing, Jackson and Susan may not have resisted writing essays as much.

Participants' concerns about writing also embody a number of instructional principles about a more specific area of adult literacy, that of teaching writing to adults. Kazemek (1984) stated that "there is little professional literature on writing and adult literacy; the little there is reflects a lack of awareness or understanding of current writing research" (p. 614). Fifteen years later, this situation remains largely unchanged. Writing in the adult high school classroom is too often a process of, in Jackson's words, "You hand it in. You get a mark. That's it." Current research-based models of teaching writing (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1998; Pates & Evans, 1990) "are as much concerned with process as with outcome" (Pates & Evans, 1990, p. 4) and "start with the students' concerns and needs [and] value the learners' mastered language...as a basis for further learning" (Pates & Evans, 1990, p. 4). These models also offer learners time and support at each step of the writing process. For some instructors of the participants in this study, these features of

writing instruction seem to have been eclipsed by the need to "do the curriculum" as expediently as possible. These participants had rarely been given the opportunity to write on topics of their own choice or to begin with their mastered language. They were expected to accomplish literary essay writing which features what Gee (1989) calls "'middle-class mainstream' sorts of Discourses" (p. 11). These types of discourses involve "using language...[to] write the right thing in the right way while playing the right social role and (appearing) to hold the right values, beliefs, and attitudes" (p.6). Since many learners in adult literacy programs are not members of the middle-class, mainstream (Malicky, Katz, Norton & Norman, 1997), it is understandable that the participants in this study would experience difficulty with the type of discourse required in a literary essay.

New models of teaching writing also involve regular conferencing with an instructor who is able to provide support, feedback and ideas to help writers progress. This is the stage of writing at which, as Atwell (1984) states, "Writers are vulnerable. That's the writer there on the page, his or her essential self laid bare for the world to see. A writer wants response that is courteous and gentle, that gives help without threatening the writer's dignity" (p. 66). For adults, gentle response is particularly important since many have experienced public school instructors who handled their writing harshly. Patricia is an example of a learner who was obviously taught that "spelling must be perfect [and] that if you can't spell you can't write" (Kazemek, 1984, p. 616). Gentle feedback, however, does not imply that adult writers do not want help to polish and edit

their writing. "A writer wants response that takes the writer seriously and moves him or her forward...Writers...need teachers who help them discover the meaning they don't yet know by helping writers discover and build on what they do know" (Atwell, 1984, p. 66).

Peer editing and the infrequent formal teaching of conventions to the whole class are two features of recent writing models that may cause some concern to adult learners. The instructor is not viewed as the only classroom expert on writing; students are encouraged to receive feedback from their peers as well. However, knowledge of conventions and the ability to find errors in writing may be necessary to students fulfilling their roles as peer editors (Madraso, 1993). This can be difficult for adults who are inexperienced writers and readers. They may not be familiar with the reading process required to edit their own work, much less that of another student. Also, they may experience short-term memory difficulties so that they have forgotten the first half of a sentence by the time they read the second half (Madraso, 1993). In this study, Angelica perceived that peer edits were of little value because she could not trust the editing skills of her peers. Diana and Susan validated this perception, saying they did not feel skilled enough to provide help to another student.

The two participants who were concerned that they had not been taught enough conventions raise another issue that is difficult for teachers of recent writing models. The specific teaching of conventions as a subject separate from their application to writing has fallen out of favor. However, adult students may expect that any English program that does not offer "grammar teaching" is deficient (Black & Sim, 1990; Padak, 1992; Smith-

Burke, Parker & Deegan, 1987), creating conflict for both instructors and students over this issue.

Affective Issues

In this study, the participants' comments revealed that affective issues have a significant impact on their ability and motivation in the English upgrading classroom. The three sections that dominate this category are the effect of past situations on present classroom experiences, relationships with peers and relationships with teachers.

Past Experiences and Present Classrooms

The participants in this study viewed their adult classroom experiences through the filter of previous experiences. Memories of work, family and public school situations affected their expectations and their view of classroom interactions with instructors. One participant discussed the influence of her home country's political and economic status on her perceptions of education and Canadian classroom interactions.

Work and School Compared

Two of the participants had extensive work experience and, as a result, expected that their English upgrading classrooms would imitate what was expected on the job. When Jackson discussed students having more choices, he related this to his work experience. "A manager goes up to one of the employees and says, 'Here's your options. You can do three or four or five options. I'll leave it up to your discretion.' Ninety-nine per cent of the time they will choose a good option.'" Angelica also thought upgrading

rules should be similar to those of a work situation. "If you were working, you cannot make an excuse that 'I was late because of day care...you cannot really miss out on work for three days and then still come in, so as an adult, why your expectations [of school] should be different?"

Abused in your own home, abused at school.

Diana discussed two situations of personal abuse that had affected her perceptions of adult classroom interactions. She felt that her father's expectations of her school progress as a child were often unrealistically high. "If I got all As and Bs, my dad would focus on the B, not all the As." This affected her attitude in public school. "After a while, you just give up and say 'Screw it anyway.'" Therefore as an adult, she often felt that teachers' expectations of her were unrealistically high. Diana also had experienced the pain and loss of self-esteem that accompany an abusive spousal relationship. She realized that she would need to address this loss of self-confidence since "self-esteem and self-worth is all important and if you don't have that, you ain't going to succeed." However, it seemed to Diana that some of her English upgrading instructors did little to raise her self-esteem. Some instructors, in fact, seemed to imitate the abusive situations she had faced in the past at home and in school. "When you go from being abused in your own home to being abused at school, would you want to go to school?"

They said they cared but they didn't.

A number of the participants remembered public school teachers who seemed to be insensitive to student needs. As a result, these students often feared that their

upgrading instructors would embody this attitude as well. Patricia recalled an elementary school teacher who held up her writing errors so that all the class could see them. As an adult, this experience had made her wary about having her errors dealt with insensitively. She enjoyed having an instructor who assured her it was acceptable to make mistakes and was discreet in pointing out her errors.

Kelly discussed many negative memories of public school interactions with teachers. She recalled that "when I was in school earlier, a lot of my childhood, the teacher told me I was really slow and I was a slow learner and I just didn't want to learn." In junior and senior high, she had clashed with a teacher who told her "I was gonna be nothing, that I am nothing. I was never going to accomplish anything." As a result of these insults, "to this day, there is the odd instructor where I still feel the same way. Like they watch you and it's like 'Well, they're not gonna be anything. They don't wanna learn.'" She also recalls that when she asked for help from her teachers in public school, "it always felt like if you were one of the slower learners, they weren't as willing to help you." When she began her pre high school English class, she felt as though this situation was repeated. "I felt like because I couldn't understand a lot that was being discussed that the instructors weren't as willing to help me." Kelly also recalled the reaction of her elementary teachers when her father died when she was eleven. Although Kelly was worried about "my mom raising me on her own and all the trouble I was giving her," her teachers seemed to communicate to her that "I couldn't worry about that. I had to worry about school, right?" Years later, this sentiment seemed to be echoed by one of Kelly's

English upgrading instructors. She was experiencing a highly stressful situation in which she was worried about the safety of her children. Her schoolwork suffered as a result. The instructor told her " 'When you're at home, that's home. Right now, you're in school. School is your life. School is going to make a life for you."

I lost all respect for teachers completely.

As a result of many negative interactions with teachers in the past, two participants discussed the attitudes towards teachers that accompanied them to school as adults. Diana recalled that as a young student she had no respect for teachers "because they had no respect for us back then. Kids were seen and not heard." At times, she didn't feel that this instructor attitude had changed much. "Now we're still not seen and heard except we're adults." Diana's lack of respect for some upgrading instructors was reinforced when she perceived that they harshly criticized students. She reasoned "those comments shouldn't even enter our [con] text cause 90% of us quit school because we felt like failures and you shouldn't feel that way." Although Kelly had also entered upgrading with a well-established attitude of disrespect for teachers, positive experiences had convinced her that instructors "have a heart" and can be "understanding" and "human."

From where I come there is no extras.

The types of hardships Angela had experienced were very different from those of the Canadian-born participants, stemming from the political and economic status of the African country in which she was raised. She had a stable and supportive home life.

education was viewed as important and reading was encouraged. However, "we [had] to pay... for our education." As a result, although family members completed high school, there was no opportunity for them to continue with further education. Therefore, when Angelica came to Canada, she cherished the opportunity to return to school. "I really wanted to make a go of it and get somewhere in life."

What I was looking for, it's not there.

Angelica's memories of public school in Africa also influenced her expectations of what should be taught in an upgrading class. "When I was in my younger days, we had more of a understanding class than a writing class." Angelica felt this focus had produced a gap in her English background and therefore wanted more writing taught in English upgrading. Angelica also recalled that classrooms in Africa were very structured and corporal punishment was still employed. She expected that this would be the way in which adult classrooms in Canada were organized and sometimes felt disappointed when they were not as rigid as she remembered. "My school setting was more that kind of disciplinary way rather than a give and take way so maybe this is what I'm looking for."

In- Class Relationships with Peers

Interaction with other people. That's important.

A number of the participants mentioned the importance of interactions with their peers in class. Various schedule and classroom arrangements and activities seemed to foster this. Patricia had enjoyed having a double block of English during one term. "Being

that we were so many hours every day, really got to be a very tight unit...We got really, really, really close." Also, Patricia appreciated having a cohort group that accompanied her into the next level. "There was four or five of us in last semester's...course. It was very intense. We got very close. We brought that into this [English 30] classroom atmosphere." Patricia felt that her English 30 instructor's technique of having the students sit in a circle enhanced this sense of closeness. "You see everybody, big time, whereas if you're sitting in a straight row atmosphere, you only see the head in front of you and then the instructor which means, you know, intimidating. For a shy person, it's not bringing you out at all whereas in the group circle atmosphere, I found that it was like a conversation as we are having now, face to face." In another of Patricia's classes, although the teacher "did not want to move the chairs [into a circle] every day", the students found other ways to enhance their closeness. "There was quite a few chairs so not everybody showed up everyday so there was quite a few gaps. We had our own little groups." The instructor of this class, however, did promote a group feeling by having students participate in solving classroom problems. "Every now and again...she would have a group discussion. 'Come on, give me all your grievances and I'll give you guys my grievances...She'd get the whole group...and say, 'Does anybody else feel the same way about that particular area that she had a problem with?" So it was kind of a learning experience for the whole class as far as problem solving...I thought that was fabulous."

Diana had also experienced a feeling of classroom community based on seating arrangement and activities. In this class, the students "sat around in circular groups."

Once again, this seating arrangement had positive effects for Diana who felt she was working "as a team" with other students. Also, the teacher of this class gave students a variety of activities that encouraged teamwork. "We did presentations, we did group work, we read out loud." Diana particularly enjoyed reading plays orally in class because "you all get different perspectives, more interaction with your fellow peers." The effect of this interaction for Diana was that the class "seemed to be a productive part of school." In her later classes, she was disappointed that "there's no working as a team." Students were more often expected to do their assignments independently. "It was like 'You take it home.' It's not the same."

[I don't] talk to people who I'm not going to benefit from.

Angelica had a very different perspective on interacting with classmates. "I like to hang around people whom I can get stuff from educational wise, I can broaden my horizons." Angelica did not feel that most of her classmates had much to offer her in this regard. Even though Angelica chose not to interact with peers during class time, she occasionally felt drawn in by the conversations her classmates had with each other, becoming curious about them and their worlds.

It makes total difference when you're working side by side.

All six participants appreciated the opportunity to work in small groups. There were a large variety of reasons for student enjoyment of this arrangement. Jackson, Diana and Susan mentioned that they enjoyed receiving other students' input in discussion. Jackson and Diana realized that group work allowed students to distribute the workload

and that the results of group work were often "better" than work done independently. Both students mentioned that group work had honed their social skills. "Group work is such a vital part of learning how to work with other people," commented Diana. Jackson agreed. "You...have to be really flexible and compromising. You have to hear all sides of the story. Otherwise, there's no point of even being in a group discussion." Diana wondered, "How can you go to a job and not have those skills?" The final benefit of group work mentioned by Patricia and Diana involved the friendships that arose from working cooperatively. "We did a lot of group work together in that class...Very much, lots and lots, every other assignment was group work. You sure got to know the other students quite closely and intimately, sort of, kind of, if you want to put it that way." Diana felt that group work "could make a difference with people because you're so isolated anyway being a single parent and going to school. You've lost all your friends...because you don't have time for them."

<u>There's times... I prefer to work by myself.</u>

Jackson, Angelica, Susan and Patricia all said that they wanted opportunities to work independently. "Independent, you can do a lot of stuff a lot more faster and just for your own opinion and that's it," Jackson pointed out. Sometimes, preferring independent work arose as a result of unpleasant experiences involving group work. Angelica discussed several of these situations, which seemed to occur when she had worked with people whom the teacher had chosen as partners for her. Sometimes, these group members did not contribute much to the group and Angelica felt she had to "carry the

whole load." She had also been left to present group work by herself when group members were absent on the presentation day. In one such situation, the instructor had given Angelica a higher mark than her partner in an effort to credit her work. This action resulted in conflict between the two women for the remainder of the term. As a result, Angelica had decided that "if the teacher would agree for me to do it on my own...I would rather do it by myself."

Patricia had also experienced some unsatisfying group interactions. Once again, absences before group work started meant that some members brought less classroom knowledge to the discussion. "I feel that if you're in a learning environment, your participation from what you have learned before goes into the group too so if you're not there, you're not able to contribute." Patricia had experienced shouldering the responsibility for group work as well. In this instance, she appreciated receiving full mark credit from the instructor. In another situation, however, she was penalized for not assisting in resolving a personal conflict between two group members. "I shied away because like these guys were literally fighting...My mind is 'Just go away, you know, let those two do whatever they're doing.'" She protested the mark penalty. "I said to [the instructor] that [one] gentleman... tried [resolving the conflict] and it just seemed to add more fuel to their fire." Nevertheless, the mark Patricia received remained unchanged.

Out of Class Relationships with Peers

Participants stressed the many benefits of maintaining relationships with their peers outside of English class. Peers provided students with knowledge about others, job ideas, encouragement, social contacts and help with class assignments.

"I realized... that this is what I'm going to be."

Patricia had participated in a work experience program that assigned her to scribe for a physically disabled peer. Working with this student provided Patricia with the realization that the physically disabled student "gave back more than what I could actually give." Once she realized this, Patricia said "there wasn't a single day that didn't go by that I didn't run eagerly to be there." Patricia is now interested in becoming a rehabilitation practitioner.

If it wasn't for a lot of my friends...I wouldn't have made it.

Angelica and Kelly both mentioned that peers help to encourage each other. Kelly gave an example from near the end of the school term when her friends were feeling discouraged. "These people come up to me and they'll almost be in tears. They'll go 'I can't take it anymore.'" I'm like " 'OK, you guys. We graduate just two more weeks. We graduate. OK?'"

Patricia, Kelly and Diana mentioned the importance of socializing with peers outside of class. Going for drinks or coffee provided students with the opportunity to relax. Kelly summed up the situation by saying "It's great when I'm with my friends because you can lighten up. It's like no classes, just lighten up and do whatever."

Hey, can you help me with this?

Five of the six participants had peers with whom they discussed classroom assignments. Susan commented that she thought she could get "more help with doing my homework with my friends than I would with my instructor." This happened because her schedule often did not match the instructor's so she sought her friends' help instead. Angelica and Kelly achieved more complete understanding of classroom assignments by discussing them with their peers. Angelica and her friends would find a book in the library that they thought might help them and "go through it together." If Kelly's peer group was given a challenging reading assignment, members would "go up to the cafeteria and say, " 'Is this what you got from it? Cause this is what I got from it.'" Then we kind of combine it and it's like OK, maybe that's what we were supposed to get out of it. You get the full story." Kelly and Patricia maintained study group ties with students who were no longer in their classes. "Whenever we got together in the library, we always studied the same ways that we used in... class which was very nice," commented Patricia. Diana appreciated having phone numbers of her classmates to call in case she had been absent. "When I was struggling I could just call...and the person there would help you on the phone to get the work done." Diana was disappointed that this practice of students exchanging phone numbers had not occurred in her English 23 class. She was aware of the hazards of people not relying on each other. "There's lots of cracks and we're all going our own separate ways and there are going to be a lot of people who will fall through the cracks."

Relationships with Instructors

For all the participants, high quality relationships with their instructors were crucial to a satisfying English upgrading experience. Participants valued instructors whom they viewed as intelligent and who used classroom methods and created in-class atmospheres that matched their expectations. Participants also enjoyed having an instructor who seemed similar to them and who displayed interpersonal skills such as honesty, forgiveness, patience and willingness to talk. In the eyes of these students, the most important interpersonal skill for an instructor to possess was respect: for them as individuals, adults and equals, for their expertise and effort in class and for the demands of their personal lives outside of class. Students also realized that they must give respect in order to receive it. When mutual respect characterized a student-teacher relationship, students were likely to continue interacting with former instructors in subsequent school terms. However, conflicts occurred when students felt respect was missing in relationships with their teachers.

They were brilliant.

Two students mentioned that they admired their instructors for their intelligence. Patricia said that she enjoyed not only her instructor's "brilliance" but also the instructor's "confidence in knowing what she was talking about." Jackson marveled at all the projects his instructor had undertaken outside of school time, calling the instructor "very intelligent."

They're teaching the way they were teaching sixteen years ago.

Two students mentioned they wanted their instructors' methods to match their expectations of the way classroom teachers "should" teach. Angelica admired her instructor for being from "the older school of thoughts" in which strict enforcement of rules and a structured approach were used in the classroom. This matched with her expectation of an atmosphere in which she could learn best. On the other hand, Kelly praised her teacher for being "more up-to-date." She was not happy that "a lot of the instructors that are there, they've been teaching for so long that they're teaching the old way."

We had lots of fun times.

Enjoying the time they spent in the instructor's classroom and being able to relax were important to five of the participants. These students mentioned that their instructors had allowed them to "have fun." Jackson pointed out "if it's not going to be fun to learn it, what's the point in being there?" Kelly said that one of her instructors helped the students to see the humor in literature selections they read in class and sometimes began the class by writing a phrase or quote on the board to make the students laugh. Patricia characterized the atmosphere in one of her English classes as "not formal...not intimidating...a friendly atmosphere...an open environment." She felt that this type of classroom climate "encouraged the learning. If you're able to sit down and relax with the people beside you, you seemed to open up for impressions to come out from the class and the instructor." Patricia also believed that having an instructor who was "ALWAYS

cheerful" helped to promote this friendly atmosphere. Kelly felt that she was learning more effectively after transferring from a class in which there was a less relaxed atmosphere. "I'm more comfortable in this classroom and I don't feel the pressures that I felt before." Kelly was adamant about the importance of being able to relax in the classroom. "I can't go into a classroom where the instructor is 'You're here to learn and that's it; you're not here to have fun." Diana disliked this type of atmosphere as well, talking unhappily about one classroom in which, as soon as the instructor entered, the atmosphere became "down to work, no time to unwind type thing."

We had our serious times too.

Although students stressed the need to have fun, two also mentioned that a balance was needed between pleasure and work. Jackson commented "It's like pleasure is pleasure, business is business. There's a time and a place for everything."

Closer relationship...when you're able to relate.

Common ages, interests, backgrounds and values were often responsible for students feeling they could relate closely to an instructor. Being of an age similar to their instructors was important to both Kelly and Angelica. At first Kelly had felt somewhat intimidated that the instructor was younger than she was, but later enjoyed a close relationship with the instructor because she felt that their ages meant "you know where [the instructor's] coming from, [the instructor] knows where you're coming from." Patricia appreciated that one of her instructors shared her interest in art and "communicated with me...on an artist's level." In teaching her how to write, the

instructor encouraged her "to make the words appeal to the senses like painting." Both the instructor and Patricia were also "strong Christian[s]". One of Jackson's instructors shared his interest in technology and often asked to borrow the "toys" that Jackson brought to class. Angelica felt she could relate well to one of her instructors because this person had not only experienced an impoverished background but also mirrored her values of determination and hard work. She also appreciated that the instructor agreed with her philosophy of associating with people of whom you are not ashamed. "I think that's what I always tell my kids...so that's why I think I kind of click on more onto [the instructor]."

Honesty is a big, big thing, I think.

Two students mentioned that instructors should be honest with their students. Kelly related an incident in which she had initially conflicted with an instructor but the two had eventually forged a close relationship. In retrospect, the teacher had told her how she dreaded having the student in class, which the two women laughed at later.

He was very forgiving.

Two participants were grateful that instructors were able to forgive them for negative behaviors. Jackson had cheated on a homework assignment but later felt guilty and confessed to the instructor. The instructor rewarded his honesty by allowing him to keep the assigned mark. As a result, Jackson said, "I've never done that again." Kelly had a similar experience in which she had "basically told [this instructor] what I thought of them." During a case conference that ensued as a result of this incident, the instructor did

not agree with the decision to expel Kelly from upgrading. "This instructor went, 'No. This is the place that's keeping her going. Don't kick her out. Don't make her quit. Because if you make her quit, who knows if she'll ever come back?'" Kelly was shocked that the instructor defended her and "after that, I had the utmost respect for this person."

Just be patient.

For several students, patience was an essential characteristic for adult upgrading instructors. Susan thought that instructors sometimes forgot that "some of the students...take a while to comprehend things." Patricia felt that instructors could "be a little more sensitive to the students because they're new, right, so they've never done this before." Kelly provided a personal example of an instructor's impatience. In her pre-high school class, Kelly lacked confidence in her ability to learn. She often felt "no matter what I did, I was just making a mess out of it 'cause I was always making mistakes or I was always answering the questions wrong...Everybody else was basically getting pretty much the same idea and I wasn't." When she asked the instructor to repeat an explanation, the instructor responded, " 'Well, aren't you listening to anything I'm saying?'"

She's always given me that opportunity to go and talk to her.

Individual conversations with instructors outside of class were also important to five of the six participants. To these participants, an instructor who was a willing listener indicated a high degree of personal concern for students. Jackson summed up this perspective by saying, "Don't ever say you don't have time for a student. That is a bad

thing to say because then they don't care about the student. They don't care about their job. They just want to get done with their day and get on with their life." Jackson and Diana had both experienced instructors to whom they felt they could not talk, a situation that Diana found troubling. "If you have to go running to a counselor because you can't talk to your English teacher, there's a problem." Also, she felt that she needed to access one of her former teachers to receive the praise and encouragement she needed. "Why can't my own teacher do that?" However, Jackson and Diana as well as the other three students who discussed accessing teachers outside of class had all found at least one instructor to whom they could talk "on a personal level." Students discussed many topics including assignments for that instructor's or another instructor's class, career possibilities and personal problems. Kelly thought being able to discuss personal difficulties was particularly important because then teachers could come to a realization as to why students were having difficulties in their classes. For Diana, one instructor had given her the opportunity to "just vent." If instructors could not help students with their difficulties directly, they often acted as advocates, referring students to other sources for assistance. Instructors also provided feedback, praise and encouragement. Jackson and Kelly both appreciated having instructors point out their personal and academic strengths. Diana returned to her former English teacher, seeking positive feedback. "I'm constantly going to that person and showing her my work and she's going, 'Way to go. I know you can do that.'" Kelly said that offering encouragement was one of the most important parts

of an instructor's job. "You could cry and you can say 'I've had it, I gotta quit' and they kind of sit here and they look at you and go 'No. You gotta do it, you can do it.'"

These participants realized that their instructors' time for talking to them individually was often very limited. Angelica said "They don't have too much time...I wish I had that time with [the instructor], not in a class setting, getting to know a little bit more or learn a little bit more." Kelly had felt rebuffed by an instructor whom she had tried to access outside of class. She felt as though she had "two seconds to talk...It was like 'I've got things to do.' Whether [it] was intentional or not, [the instructor] made you feel like you were intruding on [the instructor's] time." Two of the students discussed ways that instructors, in spite of their busy days, had shown students they wanted to talk. One of Jackson's instructors saw students after school and also encouraged them to use electronic mail to stay in contact. One of Kelly's instructors told Kelly, " 'I've got to go to class right now but come back and see me and I'll do whatever I can to help you.'" Jackson suggested yet another way instructors could assure students they wanted to help them. "Say, 'Well, you got three minutes of my time right now. Maybe we can book another time.'"

Have the respect to look into US.

Teacher respect for students was an area that all six participants talked about in detail and often with great emotion. Students appreciated teachers who respected them as individuals, adults and equals, who respected their expertise and effort in-class and the

demands of their personal lives outside of class. Participants also mentioned that respect between teachers and students must be mutual if their relationship is to be effective.

I would really appreciate if people would recognize me for who I am.

Four participants thought it was important for teachers to respect their students "on a each and every individual level." Patricia felt that an interest in students as individuals "goes with teaching." Although they wanted teachers to understand them as individuals, participants also wanted teachers to respect their privacy. Jackson felt that at the beginning of the term teachers should say " 'I want to know a little bit more about you. Write a little bit about yourself on a paper and hand it in to me if you want to share. If you don't, that's fine." Kelly sometimes felt that one instructor invaded her privacy in judging her mood by the expression on her face. "I go 'Appearances can be deceiving...I can walk around this school with a smile a mile long but yet what's really going on inside, it's like I'm falling right apart."

Some of the teachers actually treat us like kids.

Three of the participants felt that they had been treated as though they were children while one participant believed the instructors had respected her adult status. Kelly was one of the students who complained that students were made to feel "like we're kids back in elementary school." However, sometimes Kelly felt that she *was* back in elementary school, especially when other students had challenged her to fights. After

considering this, she commented, "I know that they [the instructors] see what's going on and it's like 'Why should we treat them as adults if they can't even act like adults?'"

If we aren't all treated as equals, how the hell are we going to succeed?

Five of the participants discussed their relationships with teachers in terms of the equality they felt the teacher had accorded them. Kelly, Diana and Jackson all mentioned times when they felt instructors had made them feel inferior. Kelly thought that two of her instructors had abused the position their higher education accorded them, making her "feel like knee high to a grasshopper...less than what they are." She also felt that sometimes instructors made students feel inferior when students brought their problems for discussion. However, she also stated that the superior attitudes she sensed may not have been "intentional." Later, she had become friends with one of the instructors but only after she was no longer in that instructor's class. "As long as they're not your instructor anymore, you can get along with them." Diana attributed teachers acting superior to students to a different cause than their education. "I think that because we are most of us from welfare goals, that we're treated like we're nothing. A lot of us are from that situation not by choice – by situation." Diana felt one instructor in particular had treated her as though she were "lower class." Her voice broke as she said, "It's really hard." Jackson had also experienced the attitude of an instructor whom he felt thought "she's higher than everybody." He said that teachers should "be a part of the students. Relate to them on their level. Be a friend to them, not a teacher. Be a friend." For Jackson, however, there seemed to be some conflict about how equal he actually wanted

to feel to an instructor. Later in the interview, he seemed to contradict these earlier statements about the equality of an instructor's role by saying that a good instructor "takes them [the students] on ...under their wing", indicating that instructors should take the role of protector rather than equal partner.

Diana, Patricia, Kelly and Angelica all felt that they had experienced instructors who wanted them to feel they were equals. Diana observed that one of her instructors "was like one of us. She wasn't better than us." Patricia described an instructor who was "able to relate in a eye to eye level...You felt comfortable, not intimidated in any way. [The instructor] never looked down, [I] never felt like I should look down. It was always look up and chat." Angelica used the same phrase as Patricia, saying she thought she could "talk about things eye to eye" with her instructor. "I know they come from a higher educational field but they respected me for not being that educated." Kelly also related an incident in which an instructor didn't "look down on you and talk to you as an instructor." Both she and Patricia felt that it was extremely important for instructors to view and speak to their students "not as a teacher but as a person."

'You just taught me something I didn't even know.'

Three of the participants mentioned enjoying experiences in which teachers admitted that they did not have knowledge and turned to students for assistance. Diana noted that if one of her instructors could not answer a question, the instructor would say "OK, we'll get back to you or ask someone else in the class if they had the answer." One of Kelly's instructors told the class "she's still learning. It's a learning experience for her

as well." Both Kelly and Jackson had received acknowledgment for their computer skills when teachers asked them to assist other students. Kelly had also helped her instructor to access information on the computer and obviously enjoyed assuming the role of proactive instructor. " I'll sit down in front of the computer and she'll sit back. I'm like 'Uh, uh, uh...This is YOURS. YOU do it...You're gonna learn how to do this right." Kelly summed up allowing students to show their expertise by advising teachers, "Don't think you're better than them just because you can do something better than them. Don't feel that way because what you teach them, they'll be just as good as you."

'Well, this is the same old song and dance.'

Some students felt that instructors did not respect their efforts and their abilities. Jackson reported hearing one teacher say "that if a student comes in and fails the test, the student's a loser." Kelly cited an incident in which an instructor compared the students' efforts and accomplishments to those of the instructor's family, some of whom had a university education and one who was much younger than the students. "You know, it's like, there is no comparison." Diana had been particularly offended by the comments of an instructor whom she felt "constantly, constantly criticized." The instructor would allow students to bring assignments late but then "criticize us for it...in front of the whole class." The instructor told the students they were being "lazy" but Diana felt "That has nothing to do with it. We do what we can." The result of such comments for Diana was that she felt the teacher was implying that the students were "stupid." Diana seemed to

realize that the criticism she heard was not always "meant to come across that way...but it does."

He never judged.

Jackson and Patricia had particularly cherished experiences with instructors who had never found their efforts lacking. One of Jackson's instructors "respected me for what I did. They said, 'Well, you've taken a big step. You've come back to school.'" One of Patricia's instructors had never made her "feel like you're being judged for your inability or in your corrections or whatever." This instructor had "always emphasized that it's OK to make mistakes. It's OK, to, you know, learn!"

There are legitimate people who have issues that have to be dealt with.

Students had experienced various degrees of respect from teachers when situations in their personal lives became obstacles in their academic lives. Some teachers had allowed students opportunities to discuss their personal problems, suggested sources of assistance and given extra time to do assignments. Others had not been as understanding. Kelly had experienced an instructor who had initially extended an assignment deadline while she was experiencing a family crisis but then lectured her about the importance of school when she felt too overwhelmed to meet the new deadline. "I went, 'No. Sorry, but right now school is just a pastime. Right now what's going on at home with my kids is a helluva lot more important than what's going on at school.' [The instructor] didn't seem to understand that." Diana also felt that "some people really don't

take a look at the fact that we are most of us single parents and have outside lives. I'm not using that as an excuse but things happen, you know." In one term, Diana had undergone a serious illness and surgery within the first two months, "and [the instructor] didn't care." She was also dealing with the demands of a special needs child. "If I come home and my son's had a bad day, I have to stop my school life and deal with him. And I can't stay up 'til 4 o'clock in the morning to do work just to make [the instructor] happy. And if I'm honest and I explain, [the instructor] doesn't care. [The instructor] doesn't want to hear it."

Two of the participants did not feel that students needed to have special consideration for their personal lives. For Patricia, this was not an issue; she "assumed" that instructors were aware of students' home responsibilities. Although her children were both teenagers at the time of the interview, she recalled still being able to successfully "juggle" their needs with the demands of her education when they were younger. "You hear people saying, 'It's hard. It's time consuming.' It is time consuming but balance your time I think is best. It's up to you as a student to be able to do it." Angelica agreed with this philosophy. She cared for four children, worked at a part time job and still felt able to keep up with school demands. Therefore, she felt no special allowances needed to be made for students' lives outside of school. "I think if I can do this, what is it an excuse for other people not to do it?"

Courtesy begets courtesy.

Diana and Angelica both spoke at length about the importance of mutual respect between teachers and students. Diana had experienced an instructor who seemed to communicate that certain rules applied only to students. Although the instructor was often late for class, the students were expected always to be punctual. The instructor expected student assignments to be handed in on time; when the students requested their term marks, the teacher replied, " 'If I get around to it.' " Students were expected to be responsible in maintaining their work; teachers lost their recorded marks and asked students to look for their marked paper. For Diana, this attitude represented a "double standard" and an attitude that certain standards do "not apply to teachers." The best solution, Diana felt, was for students and teachers to "treat each other like human beings", in other words, with the mutual respect which characterizes all healthy relationships.

Angelica agreed. She felt that her teachers had generally respected her because "they did not look at me as somebody just coming there for the sake of coming or just for the sake of making money. They could see right away why I was there and they respected me for that." However, when a teacher fell asleep in one of her classes, she was disappointed. "I think if you are my teacher and if I would be dozing off in class, you would not have respect for me. I felt the same way for [this instructor]." On the other hand, Angelica had also seen students asleep in class. "I think OK. If that's the kind of respect you are going to give your teacher, how do you expect them to respect you?"

I want my teacher back! I want my teacher back!

When participants developed a strongly positive relationship with an instructor, they often wanted their association with that person to continue. One of Kelly's former instructors had asked why she wanted to be part of this instructor's class in another term. "You and I get along. You understand me. I've had you before. You know where I'm coming from." Angelica had actively tried to switch class sections so she could be placed with a former instructor, feeling, "I could have...gained a lot more from [the instructor] than the teacher I was put with." Even when participants were not successful in accessing the same teacher for another of their classes, they often continued their relationships by visiting teachers in their offices. Four of the six participants mentioned strong, ongoing relationships with former teachers.

My English teacher and I have had war of words.

Three of the students discussed major conflicts with their instructors and one related observed situations in which students verbally confronted teachers in class. All of these participants suggested that these conflicts were inappropriate. Kelly mentioned, "I've told this one instructor off I don't know how many times. I'm just kind of going [to myself], 'You're lucky you're not kicked out of this place.'" Diana said "What I told her on Friday was she should just go back to bed and wake up on the right side." In reaction to her own behavior, she added, "I feel bad" and also admitted "I have a hard time expressing myself without getting angry." Jackson described engaging in an escalating cycle of sarcastic comments with his instructor. "If a student does a smart comment...to

the teacher, the teacher really throws a really smart, degrading comment back to them. That's not proper for the teacher, but that's not proper for the student." Because of these incidents, Diana, Kelly and Jackson had also experienced thoughts of not going to class or dropping out. Sometimes, they did not attend the class. As Jackson reasoned, "Some days you've got so much anger built up with the teacher, what's the point of even being there?"

Patricia had rarely been involved in conflicts with her teacher but offered an interesting observer's perspective. Initially, "it shocked me that people actually talked this way to other people in a classroom setting." She was "put off" by the "hostility" of some of her classmates whom she characterized as "confrontational." Because of these student characteristics, Patricia felt one of her instructors could not have avoided confrontation with the students because "they were coming, they were coming, [the instructor] had really nothing to do with whether or not they were going to come." Patricia was not against students expressing their opinions, "but you know there's ways of talking about your problem. The instructor or whoever you're having the problem with go someplace and have it out. Don't just blurt it out in class and expect the sparks not to fly one way or another."

Teachers had reacted to confrontations in a variety of ways. When Jackson's instructor thought students were being rude, "she does the smart tongue back." During another incident, the same instructor "just snarled and walked away." Diana's instructor "just shakes her head and turns the other way. 'If I ignore her long enough' maybe I'll be

quiet...I think she just thinks to herself, 'A couple more months and I'm done.'" Patricia's instructor had asked for the students' input on student grievances, turning the problem over to the class for discussion.

Jackson and Patricia had advice for instructors who are confronted by students. Jackson said instructors of adults need to expect "outbursts in class" and have to learn to "take the good with the bad." Patricia said, "These people...can be very intimidating as a student, demanding. I think you have to accept that and try not to take it personally."

Discussion

Ziegahn (1990) states that an important part of a literacy educator's job is learning to "deal with the whole person, which includes the emotional and affective needs that tie individuals to others" (p. 28). For the participants in this study, these "others" take the form of significant people in their past home and school lives as well as present peers and teachers. As Quigley (1992a) states, adult literacy students are often "influenced—in some cases haunted—by the memories of their prior schooling experiences" (p. 107). Many studies in adult literacy have shown this to be the case (Charnley & Jones, 1979; Fingeret & Danin, 1991; Hindle, 1990; Quigley, 1992a; Sawyer & Rodriguez, 1993; Smith-Burke, Parker & Deegan, 1987; Thomas, 1994; Ziegahn, 1990). This study duplicated these findings. The amount that participants talked about their previous school experiences was particularly interesting since few direct questions were asked about this in the interviews. It is also worth noting that participants related hurtful stories from their past school experiences in great remembered detail and then directly related these to what

had helped or hindered, delighted or depressed them in their adult upgrading classes. Quigley (1992a) states that "adult literacy has long been burdened with the classroom trappings and ideological goals of early school and remedial education" (p. 114). He also believes that due to the "second chance" nature of many programs, "teaching and administrative staff often view adult learners as in a state of personal as well as knowledge deficit" (p. 115). For the participants in this study, the duplication of remembered classroom trappings, ideological goals and insensitive teacher attitudes brought back painful memories. On the other hand, when instructors worked towards changing these, participants responded with surprise and renewed interest and motivation in school.

The second affective category of importance to these study participants was the link to program peers. Fingeret's (1983) study was one of the first to explode the myth that underliterate people live in "isolation and alienation" (p. 135). She discovered that adults with poor literacy skills often have developed "social networks that are characterized by reciprocal exchange [and give] access to most of the resources individuals require" (p. 134). In this study, students developed some of the social networks themselves. Kelly's description of meeting friends in the cafeteria to "get the full story" from each other about instructor-assigned tasks echoes Fingeret's finding that "it may take the combined effort of a number of readers to finally decipher a particularly abstruse message" (p. 139). Other social networks were promoted in the classroom by instructors who were willing to "explore program and instructional designs that

incorporate an appreciation of networks as sources of strength rather than interference" (p. 144). It was obvious that the students in this study were aware of the many benefits of working within a network, as were the participants of many other studies (ABE Promised Land, 1992; Campbell, 1996; Hindle, 1990; Malicky & Norman, 1996). The difficulties experienced by Patricia and Angelica during group work may have been caused by teachers choosing groups for participants and expecting them to cope with the resulting tensions with little or no support.

It is important to note, however, that the participants in this study are all what Quigley (1992c) calls "persistent learners". As such, they often bring with them their public school abilities of maintaining friendships with peers easily. "Reluctant learners" (Quigley, 1992c), on the other hand, may require much more assistance from instructors to develop the networks which could help them sustain their attendance in a literacy program.

The importance of a strong relationship with instructors was another affective category for these participants. Once again, this duplicates the findings of many other studies, both in the significance of the student-instructor relationship and in the characteristics that participants named as valuable (Abell, 1992; Black & Sim, 1990; Darkenwald & Silvestri, 1992; Fingeret & Danin, 1991; Hindle, 1990; Lowden, Powney, Gardner & Mark, 1995; Malicky & Norman, 1995, 1996; Smith-Burke, Parker & Deegan, 1987; Thomas, 1994; Towards the ABE Promised Land, 1992). With the exception of Angelica, all the participants also appreciated an instructor who created a comfortable

classroom climate. It is not unusual that Angelica wanted a more strict, disciplined atmosphere; this is a characteristic of many ESL adult learners (Black & Sim, 1990). "Many of these students may have experienced a more formal and structured education in their own country of birth and [are] unacustomed [sic] to the informality and learner-centred approach characterising 'good practice' in adult literacy teaching" (p. 34).

Once again, it is worthy to note that the close relationships the participants in this study actively sought and maintained with their instructors is a characteristic of persistent learners. Quigley (1992c) has found that reluctant learners rarely interact with instructors and that these students may need "more attention than they ever request themselves" (p. 3-15). Teachers often find it easier to relate to persisters because these students tend to interact more easily with other students and the instructor.

Power and Control Issues

The category in which participants offered the most comments was that of power and control issues in the classroom. Also, this category was the one in which the most internal tensions seemed to occur for participants. Participants often discussed their ideas about the instructor as authority figure. They also offered numerous comments about choices available to them in class time allotment, course content, methods for approaching assigned work, due dates for assignments and evaluation methods. The issue of voice was discussed in length as well, that is, who controls the division of talking and listening in the classroom.

The Instructor as Authority Figure

You're the Almighty One.

Only Patricia and Kelly felt that they had been allowed to share some of the power in the classroom. Five of the participants felt that one or all of their English teachers maintained the control. Susan said "I think pretty much they have it all from what I've seen from my experiences in the classroom." Angelica agreed that one of her instructors "for sure...has had all the power over the classroom." Jackson described one of his English instructors as "If you got out of line, [the instructor] would give you so much of a butt whipping, figuratively speaking. [The instructor] would come down on you good." Diana felt that in one of her English classes "you're treated like a military concentration camp...You don't cross the line. You don't say a word." Concerning her instructor's position in the classroom, Diana perceived "When [the instructor's] in that class, [the instructor] is God." Kelly also felt that one instructor had maintained all the authority in her English class. "I felt like it was an army. [The instructor] was like drill sergeant, constantly having to march to [the instructor's] beat."

Spare the rod, spoil the child.

Three of the participants were happy with the instructor maintaining the balance of power in the classroom. Patricia was pleased that she had experienced instructors who controlled discussions and the behavioral expectations for students in the classroom. She also liked instructors who would "give me a little kick there. I need that." Angelica agreed power should remain with the instructor. "If I'm personally getting what I want

I'm happy with it [no power in the classroom.]" She felt that instructors should "be very strict...I feel like when you have that spare the rod, spoil the child, you know what is to be done but you don't do it. We are there to get something; we should make sure to get it and people should make sure that we get it whether we want it or not." Jackson also appreciated having a teacher in total control. " If the teacher was like that through the whole year, I'd be happy. I'd be bouncing off the wall." For Jackson, "if you kept in line, if you kept in the guidelines, you were fine and that was it." He also mentioned in the interview, however, that some other students had dropped out because their teachers were "really strict."

A middle grounds.

For Kelly and Diana, internal tensions arose when they discussed their reactions to the instructor maintaining absolute authority. Kelly obviously disliked the "drill sergeant" authority of one of her English teachers. However, she acknowledged that she seemed to need the teacher to maintain classroom structure. "I don't like a class that's way too loose like everything's just thrown aside kind of thing. I don't like anything that's too structured. [I like] the one where there's a middle grounds." For Kelly, this "middle grounds" meant that the teacher would set the expectation for students that "you can hang loose but...you got to settle down here. Like you can goof around for so long and then you gotta say enough. Now I've gotta actually sit down and do what I'm doing here." When Diana said that the instructor was "God" in the class and she was not allowed to "cross" the instructor, she commented "that's no way to run a class." She also stated that

"there's no flexibility" in some English classrooms. However, she felt that when teachers gave assignments, they should "tell us these are the questions you want us to do. We do them." Also, she thought that teachers should take action when a student came to class "loaded" because "there are supposed to be standards, there's supposed to be rules." However, in these instances, "teachers just ignore [inebriated students] because they don't want to deal with it. They don't want to be intimidated. Well, what are you there for?" Like Kelly, she also felt that teachers should maintain "semi-structure" in the classroom "because I need structure" and that she would only want a "50/50" share of control with the instructor.

Choices in the Classroom

If you get your work done, you don't have to stay.

Three participants said that teachers chose how much of the allotted class time students were required to attend. Kelly mentioned that "a lot of times [the instructor] would let us go around four or so", twenty minutes before class was scheduled to end. Jackson also said that his instructor's belief was "as long as you get it [classroom work] done, that's fine, the best of your ability, enjoy your day...You don't have to stay. Go and do your other stuff. You got lives." Jackson appreciated this because he felt that it was a "waste of time" to be held in class if there was nothing to do. Angelica said that one of her instructors was "very particular with the time... would like people to be on time." However, she obviously struggled with the same instructor's decision to release students "even as much as 30 minutes earlier" than the official end of class. She thought there

might be several reasons why the instructor was making this decision, including not "wasting the student's time" or "so those who would miss would go and see [the instructor] at that time." She sensed that the instructor was relaying the necessary course material to students and even admitted that she enjoyed being released early. Finally, however, she said "I was kind of resentful of the time that [the instructor] was taking away from me."

Telling us what we were going to be doing.

The participants in this study were often the recipients of instructor directions and expectations at the start of and during their classes. Students were given written assignments, notes, selections to read, topics for speeches and were sometimes assigned to groups for discussion. Participants had varying reactions to instructors making these choices for them. Susan, Diana and Patricia all felt that instructors sometimes assumed that the material they taught was appropriate for all students. "Like they say, 'You need this to get into English 33.' But then I say, 'I don't need English 33, you know." Diana thought that some teachers assumed all the students were going to university. "Well...it's not a goal of mine." Patricia had been in a combined class of English 30 and 33. "It was two different levels, learning at the same time and on the same material and getting different markings. Maybe what's good for her wasn't good for me."

Although Patricia mentioned that she "felt sorry" for one instructor "because he had to keep this [class] going himself. He carried everything himself", she felt that choosing material for students was essentially the teacher's responsibility. "I'm here to

learn. I expect an instructor to be teaching us so I'm assuming at this point that they have the material and be ready for it." She believed that instructors should assign novels because "I'm really not a heavy reader at home." Four participants disagreed, saying that instructor assigned reading and associated assignments were "boring." In Diana's class, students protested that teacher assigned literature was "a waste of time." Kelly did not like the boredom of reading assigned textbooks. "I gottta read something that keeps my attention...I don't see anything interesting in it, like it's gonna take me forever to learn it." She also said "I love reading but to answer questions [on the reading], I hated it." Susan discussed her lack of engagement with teacher-assigned novels, saying "I didn't like them at all...If the book isn't interesting, I have trouble writing about it." Susan had often wondered "Why can't we read our own kind of books? But then I think that's not fair to the teacher because if the teacher didn't read the book, how is [the instructor] gonna know what I'm writing in the essay?" Jackson also felt that boring reading affected his marks. "If you want to get a good mark on something, you gotta read something that you're going to enjoy." He offered an alternative to teachers assigning one novel. "What the teacher should do is say 'Well, there's this amount of books'... and the majority of the students choose one book, that's what everyone reads because then there's more of an option."

Jackson and Kelly mentioned activities in class that they had not enjoyed, largely because the teacher had implemented them without asking students if they were interested or willing to participate. They felt that discussing activities with students would often

positively influence student attitudes and attendance since in both cases, students had registered their disapproval of the teacher's choices by not attending classes during these activities.

Let the students choose.

Two participants mentioned times when they were given options. The journal writing that Angelica did in class could be about "anything". Patricia described a class in which the instructor had students do lots of group work but seldom assigned the members of the group. At first, "I always worked with the person behind me...It got to the point though towards the end of the semester where I would choose other people for groups. We didn't want to work with the same people all the time...We did explore other group atmospheres on our own...It was really, really nice that way."

Her way of doing it.

Some participants also indicated that they were given few options concerning how to do the assigned work. Jackson recalled "a lot of teachers say 'Either do my way or you're the highway.'" Jackson had resisted doing assignments in the way the teacher expected when he first attended upgrading. "You know like 'What do you mean, do it your way?' And they said, 'If you do it my way, it's going to be better.' I'm like OK, whatever." For Jackson, following the teacher's methods had produced positive outcomes. "I just started doing stuff [the instructor's] way and it really came out bigtime good." For other participants, however, not being shown a range of methods for completing classroom tasks produced anxiety and frustration. Susan recalled that one

teacher expected students to read an entire novel before answering the questions. "I had to read one chapter then answer the questions otherwise I'd forget from the beginning of the novel there because I don't have a very good memory." Angelica discussed an instructor who insisted that students write a formal outline for their written assignments. "I'm not very good at that. I'm more of a cluster person. I would do some mind mapping...and...just branch out. In that aspect [the instructor] did not see me eye to eye because [the instructor] was more of a structured person." Kelly and Patricia had received very specific instructions concerning the modes for oral presentations. Kelly was given a very precise time for her speech, which she felt, was somewhat restrictive. Patricia worked with a group that had decided on a creative arrangement for their presentation. "kind of like picture form where two sat in the front and two stood in the back...which I thought was cool." The instructor, however, docked Patricia marks for not standing when she spoke and Patricia did not protest the mark. "I'll bring it up next time," she said.

Susan felt that the teachers she could work with best were those who would "give you different ways of doing things." Instead of adhering to one method, she believed that students should be allowed to choose "what's ever easiest [and] works for you."

Firm due dates... no leeway.

Both Patricia and Angelica wanted teachers to have absolute power in setting due dates. Patricia felt that having a teacher assign a due date meant "In my mind I can't say 'Well, gee, I can put it off for another day.' " A firm due date for Patricia "seems to encourage me to push that much harder...the actual getting down to doing it and have a

deadline makes it rewarding instantly." Patricia was also "more content with the instructor that you knew there was no way that you could get past this date. They just look at you and say 'Well, better luck next time.'"

Angelica and Jackson also felt that instructor set due dates were fair. As well, these two participants appreciated instructors who deducted marks for late assignments. "If you don't get the work done on time, you snooze, you lose," Jackson believed. Angelica felt this type of attitude towards late assignments was "very fair because for those who have worked very hard and who have made the effort to get things in time. I think they should be given that bonus mark." She realized that students "might hate the teacher for doing that" but felt "as adults. I don't think we should have that flexibility."

The thing that irks me most is these teachers that schedule exams double.

For Diana, having teachers set all the dates for assignments and exams had produced a stressful situation. Sometimes, teachers did not find out about exams the students may be writing in other classes. As a result, Diana faced studying for an English and a math exam at the same time which had caused her to feel anxious. However, Diana still believed it was the teacher's responsibility to remedy this situation. "There's five days in a week. Hello, math on one day, English on another day."

'I expect more.'

Three participants believed that instructors approached classes with set expectations, without finding out what the students expected of themselves or wanted to achieve. Kelly, Diana and Susan all expressed frustration that their best attempts never

seemed to fulfill their instructors' expectations. Susan commented "I tried to do what the instructors would tell you to do...I did it the way it was supposed to be and it's still not right. It gets frustrating." One of Diana's instructors often told students " 'I expect more.'" However, Diana and her classmates felt that "no matter what we do it's not good enough, so why even try?" Kelly had also experienced the "not good enough" attitude from her instructor. "I would be getting marks like 78, 79 but I was just that one mark away from 80 and my instructor would always say to me 'Just one more, just one more, you could do better.' I'm like 'This is the best I can do. I'm sorry I can't give you that 80%." To Kelly, the instructor's insistence on achieving 80% was particularly hurtful because "these [marks] were on exams and I've never gotten these kinds of marks." Kelly also felt that in spite of all the work she put in on written assignments "it wasn't to [the instructor's] satisfactory. Because of it you'd get like a 50 or 60."

A personal best.

Patricia, Angelica and Jackson thought that instructors' expectations were fair. One of Angelica's instructors maintained the attitude " if you would be coming with a 30 mark in... class and you went up to a 40, [the instructor] thinks that you are trying."

Give that student a proper mark.

All the participants viewed their instructors as the primary authority for evaluating their work. Only Patricia had experienced an instructor who had given the students the opportunity to self-evaluate. However, Patricia was not altogether comfortable with students having this power. "I'm sure that [instructor's] there to realize that if you give

yourself 9 out of 10 on everything or 10 out of 10, [the instructor's] there to minimize that a bit."

Jackson enjoyed having the instructor in complete control of the marking process. When his instructor assigned homework, the instructor did not always tell students whether students would mark the homework in class or whether the teacher would mark it. Jackson felt that this uncertainty was motivating because "you never knew if [the instructor] came around and marked it."

<u>There's not much one can do about that.</u>

For other students, being the powerless recipients of teacher-assigned marks produced a feeling of helplessness and confusion. Jackson felt that his poor marks were due to a personality conflict with one of his instructors and that he could do little to change either the situation with the teacher or the poor marks that he perceived had occurred as a result. Patricia told of being assigned the mark of another group member after the instructor lost Patricia's mark. Patricia took a passive approach to this situation, saying "things happen." Diana related an incident in which a teaching assistant had assigned much higher marks to a writing assignment than the teacher was comfortable giving. Although the teacher reevaluated the assignments and lowered the marks, the students were given their originally assigned higher marks. For Diana, this was confusing. "If I don't deserve that mark, I shouldn't be given it." Diana also had the impression that one poor mark during the term could dramatically affect her overall grade. "God forbid, me being a single parent, if my son ends up getting hit by a car and I miss that test, there's

my schooling." As well, she did not have any idea what her own mark was at the end of the term and was forced to ask the teacher "are we going to know what we're going into our exam with, just so that we know if we're going to sink or swim?"

Two of the students felt that instructors maintained an almost mystical control over their marks. Susan experienced a change in instructor during one term of English. "Since we've had [a new instructor]...we haven't really done anything for marking...but my average has gone up...because my average was below fifty there for a while." Patricia had once experienced a decline in her marks "so I'm left wondering how come my marks went down...Maybe there's some magic question out there or answer out there that could help. I haven't found one yet."

I loved getting marks that were encouraging. Self-esteem went up dramatically.

For these participants, there seemed to be a direct link between a favorable teacher-assigned mark and their sense of productivity and self-esteem. Diana said that when she "passed with really good marks...that actually felt like I had accomplished something." Angelica was proud of her excellent mark in her pre high school class but feared the mark and her self-esteem would drop if she took English 10 instead of English 13. "Now I know I could have done it but at that point I really did not know." Patricia summed up the relationship between self-esteem and evaluation by saying "The better you did, the better you felt. The more you felt better, the better you did. So now you just wore a circle that way."

A waste of time because our marks were just pathetic.

When students' marks were low, their sense of productivity and self-esteem decreased. But who to blame for low marks was often a source of tension for participants. Patricia thought that the responsibility was hers; "my mark reflected how much work I actually applied." Jackson agreed, saying his unproductive term was his own fault. Diana could not settle on where to lay the blame for her unsatisfying evaluation experience in one of her English classes. First, she commented that her low mark was "because of the fact this teacher is not doing her job." Later, when the teacher told her that her failing mark had been Diana's "choice", Diana took some of the blame, replying "actually it would be both of us because we're not working to benefit." Later in the interview she seemed to place all the responsibility on herself, saying, "We're all adults. We either make or break our education."

Student Voice

We have a hard time vocalizing ourselves.

All the participants admitted to difficulties in expressing themselves orally. Kelly and many of her classmates felt "very, very uncomfortable" when asked to do oral presentations. Diana felt she was sometimes "stuck when I went to explain myself" and that she and many of her classmates had difficulty in discussing serious topics, "without joking around." She also felt that speaking in class would raise ESL students' self-confidence. Angelica attributed her oral speaking discomfort to inexperience in spoken English since she and her family "don't speak English much, just at the school level, but

not at home." Also, she felt she had "a tendency of going off topic" when she spoke. Patricia reported feeling "very, very shy" in front of a large group and Susan felt "all hot and...like I'm going to faint." Jackson had considered becoming a teacher "but I don't like standing up in front of people." He also felt he didn't have a vocabulary of "big, complex words" for conversations so that other people "are going to be saying 'Oh, ya. This person's not even worth talking to.'"

How to talk properly is more important than writing essays and paragraphs.

Patricia, Diana and Susan all felt that more opportunities were needed for oral expression in the classroom. Unfortunately, many teachers seemed not to provide the opportunities students needed to improve their oral communication skills. To Diana, the teachers seemed to hold the right to do most of the talking. "If [the instructor] wants to yap, [the instructor will] yap forever but if we want to talk about something, [the instructor] cuts us." When students were discussing "the topic of the class" in one of Kelly's English classes, the instructor told students " 'If you want to have a conversation, take it outside the room.'" Kelly grinned when she said, "so 90% of the time all of us would be going 'OK. Let's ALL leave the room.'" Kelly felt that teachers also decided when discussion would occur. "The only time we would be allowed to have discussion is if [the instructor] brought it up. We could not do it." If students brought up a situation from their lives for discussion, the instructor "would push it aside but you have classmates coming up to you after class and going 'Hey, what did you do in that situation?'"

Teachers also controlled who was allowed to speak in the classroom. Diana said "[the instructor] picks the same people all the time for the answers." She felt that this was inappropriate since "we all have different opinions and we all need to be heard." Angelica was the only participant who felt that the instructor should always control classroom discussions. Student input, she felt, should be restricted to "something in regard to the class or the whole class will benefit." In Angelica's experience, "when there is a class discussion other students don't want to listen to what other people are saying." She preferred classes "when the teacher stands up and talk."

Some students had tried to change the balance of who talked and who listened in the classroom, but the results were often less than favorable for students. Diana wanted to suggest to her instructor that she and her classmates would benefit from reading a play aloud. However, she said, "You don't dare...If you ever brought that to the teacher's attention, you're stupid and you don't know what you're talking about...She just says, 'Well that's the way it is' and that's the end of it." Angelica, who characterized herself as "a little bit outspoken" had expressed her opinions several times to teachers but felt " it doesn't mean that I've gone high up in their look or anything." Diana agreed. "If you bring your opinion up, basically you're told, 'Go tell someone who cares.' You're giving input for no reason, you're wasting your time." For Diana, however, this sense of oppression had not hindered her in expressing her opinion. "I still don't think that what I say makes a world of difference, but somebody's going to know that I'm going to rattle their chains." Jackson agreed with Diana. "An honest opinion on how much opinion we

had? Nothing. Nothing whatsoever. It should be changed, it needs to be changed." He recommended that teachers "value [student] opinions, value [student] suggestions."

We had the same questions. It just never came out.

Although Diana had "always been in classes where [students] want to be vocal", Patricia had experienced one class where no one wanted to talk. She struggled to understand the possible reasons for the students' silence. "I was extremely shy. I think the other people too in that class was extremely shy." However, she also wondered if the instructor's domination of the class may have had a role in creating the silence. First of all, her teacher "did most of the talking and pause every now and again and hope for the reaction." When this didn't work, the instructor "tried jokes, tried creating diagrams" and offered "comments now and again, 'Don't be shy...Come out with something, just something, anything.'" The instructor also offered explanations for the students' silence. " 'I know why we're so quiet is because we haven't done this before'" or " 'Let's try to get rid of those old school days.'" None of the instructor's tactics for getting students to talk were successful, however. Instead, "a big silence came back louder than ever."

We all had an opinion. The teacher listened to us.

Not all the participants had experienced having their voices silenced. Before coming back to school, Diana said she "never had an opinion...Before I just shut up and not say anything." As a result of opportunities at her school, Diana characterized herself during the interview as "very vocal" and "very opinionated." First, Diana had experienced having her voice appreciated in two of her classes, which she described as "wonderful."

Also, she had volunteered for a position of student leadership, which had helped her to take on the role of student advocate. In one of Kelly's classes, the teacher was curious about what students were saying to each other privately during class discussions and would ask them to offer their insights to the class. Patricia had experienced two classes in which instructors encouraged class discussion. Even if the students and the teacher did not agree with each other "those confrontational elements actually brought out more in the sense of, you know, freedoms – freedom of attitude, expressed attitude." In the first of these classes, "whatever person brought a comment up, you were expected to explain that comment. For me, I was never able to feel confident enough to come up with something." However, in the next class, "I was really a lot more involved in group participation and class discussions which is really quite exciting, a new experience for me." Patricia thought this was because she "didn't have to put my hand up" and there were "lots of questions, both by the instructor and by the students which is really quite nice." Also, the instructor was "always open, accepting of any comment, never, never questioning a comment...she was able to take that comment anywhere." The instructor also was constantly "bringing in new ideas, encouraging our ideas to come out."

Discussion

"Literacy is a social, political phenomenon that always involves power relations" (Malicky and Norman, 1995, p. 64). In many traditional literacy programs, the balance of power has remained solidly in the hands of the teacher, with students having little choice or voice. Recently, however, "educators...are becoming aware that the status quo can be

changed and that transformations at both the individual and societal levels can happen" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 83). Therefore, some literacy programs, particularly those that are community-based, are advocating a participatory philosophy. This philosophy is based on the work of Freire (1970) who believed that the purpose of literacy programs is to prepare learners to challenge society's existing economic and social structures and their position within these structures. Gaber-Katz and Watson (1991) discuss three principles that guide participatory programs. First, they are learner-centred. Curriculum is based on learners' needs, interests and problems. Students are also encouraged to have input about the methodology that will best address the curriculum. Second, participatory programs give students the opportunity to develop a critical perspective towards social, economic and political systems rather than accepting them. Third, community-building is a focus in participatory programs. Community-based education programs are situated in the learners' home communities to serve those who would not usually attend a traditional program. Also, the community perspective focuses on building communities in which all members are valued and their voices respected.

The participants in this study attended an institution in which students were required to state a career goal before they could be eligible for funding. Based on their stated goals, their reading level on a TABE test and a writing sample, they were placed in an appropriate English class which taught the provincial high school curriculum. Therefore, for the institution in general, as well as for specific teachers and students, the goals of participatory literacy were not a priority. Some of the participants' comments

reflected their more fundamental or functional view of why they were attending upgrading classes. Angelica's view that she was comfortable with having little power as long as she was "getting what she needed" is one example. Patricia's sense that the teachers would have the material selected and she needed to be prepared to handle the demands of the curriculum also reflects the more fundamental philosophy some students hold towards literacy education.

However, comments by several of the participants indicated that they were less satisfied with teachers maintaining the balance of power. Although they sometimes expected instructors to make the decisions, they were not always comfortable with occupying subordinate positions. Giroux's (1983) work on resistance theory states that many disenfranchised people both conform to and resist the dominant ideology found in schools. This helps to explain the inner tensions some of the participants felt when they seemed to want teachers to take control in some situations and relinquish it in others.

One of the features of power and control in the classroom that produced little inner tension for participants was their desire to be allowed to express themselves more frequently. Campbell (1996) calls this "moving from silence into speech." The students' inability and/or unwillingness to express themselves may be rooted in "past experiences where, as working class, nonacademic people, they were not heard because they did not speak the dominant language of academics and professionals" (p. 132). Student silence could also be "connected to the social/power relations between the literacy worker and the students" (p. 132). Campbell believes that students may "not see any space for

'negotiating' these positions, and consequently... remain silent" (p. 133). The participants in this study who had noticed improvements in their ability and willingness to express themselves were also those who had experienced a "positive shift in...power relationships" (p. 133). Diana had stepped into a position of student leadership. Patricia had experienced classroom relationships in which instructors allowed students to share in problem-solving and what counted as knowledge. Their experiences show that it is "possible to reach emancipatory goals even in high school upgrading classes with a mandated curriculum" (Malicky & Norman, 1995, p. 81).

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has explored the question "What are adult high school learners' experiences with literacy education in institutional upgrading classrooms?" This chapter presents an overview of the study's purposes, methods and major conclusions as well as recommendations for the classroom and further study.

Overview

The major purpose of the study was to understand the experiences of adult high school learners in literacy classrooms within an institutional setting. The study was undertaken since there is very little literature on adult literacy learners or literacy classroom approaches and almost none that focuses on adult high school literacy learners within institutional settings. The second major purpose of this research is to encourage instructors and administrators to listen to the voices of program participants when planning, implementing and evaluating literacy programs. At the present time "virtually all programs and research are about or for, but rarely in consultation with or by, the potential consumers of our programs. It is apparent that if we as adult educators are to read and involve more of these adults, we will need to begin to see the world more clearly from their perspective" (Quigley, 1992b, preface).

Six learners from a literacy institution in a major urban center volunteered to be interviewed for this study. The participants included three Caucasian, Canadian-born women, one Caucasian, Canadian-born man, one Aboriginal woman and one immigrant

woman. All six participants were funded for their upgrading, had attended at least two previous upgrading classes and were enrolled in a high school English course when interviewed. The interview questions followed a general interview guide approach. Experiential/behavioral, feeling, sensory and opinions/values questions were asked to attain rich and detailed data.

All interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim before theme generation began. Significant statements pertaining to literacy education were highlighted for each participant, together with the researcher's interpretation of the statement. These statements were then clustered to ascertain common themes. Categories and subcategories were assigned within each of these themes and validated by the thesis advisor. The study participants offered their validation as well to confirm whether the themes accurately reflected their experiences.

Three general themes were generated from the collected data: instructional issues, affective issues and power and control issues. Instructional issues included background knowledge for dealing with instructional tasks, pacing of instruction, learning style preferences, meaningfulness of assigned tasks, passive learning issues and issues involving written assignments. Affective issues involved the effect of past experiences on present classroom experiences, relationships with peers and relationships with teachers. Power and control issues included perceptions of instructors as authority figures, availability of choices and control of student voice.

Conclusions

Instructional Issues

Background knowledge for dealing with instructional tasks

Students may have forgotten how to read literature or write essays or may be approaching these tasks for the first time. Students with less background knowledge may become frustrated when instructors assume they can deal independently with assigned tasks. On the other hand, if information is repeated, more knowledgeable students may become bored. Students appreciated instructors who used their background experiences as a foundation for building new literacy skills.

Pacing

Students in this study varied in how expediently they wanted the curriculum to proceed. One learner appreciated a brisk pace so that he could experience rapid progress towards his career. However, other students were not able to effectively understand, remember or absorb new concepts because of time constraints. Participants realized that their teachers experience time pressures as well in attempting to cover the curriculum in twenty weeks. In spite of this, they expected instructors to accept student questions and to check for understanding among those who may feel uncomfortable about asking for assistance. They also wanted instructors to remember and accommodate individual learning speeds.

Learning Style Preferences

The participants in this study were aware of their learning style preferences and needs. However, their instructors were sometimes unaware of or unwilling to accommodate these preferences, causing frustration for students.

Meaningfulness of Assigned Work

Some participants felt that certain material and activities they were assigned were not meaningful to them. However, when learning activities matched their expectations and needs, they approached learning with enthusiasm. Two participants felt that teachers were responsible for making the curriculum interesting.

Passive Learning

Learners perceived their roles in the classroom as largely passive. Few of the participants understood the concept of learning actively although two suggested that they were actively engaged thinkers during class time.

Issues Involving Writing

These students experienced difficulty in believing in themselves as writers, expressing their ideas in writing and structuring their written work. Features of writing instruction that helped them were notes on how to structure writing, personal experience writing and journals, time in class to practise writing, a slower pace of writing instruction, conferencing with teachers and sensitive, specific feedback before and after evaluation. Peer editing was not perceived as helpful. Participants did not appreciate teachers who

did not edit before marking or whose editing included non-specific feedback. They were also frustrated by evaluation that included terms they did not understand or which included hurtful comments. Participants differed sharply on the issue of teaching writing conventions, including those who wanted more and those who wanted less. The feature that most participants felt would improve their writing was more time spent in class on the actual writing process.

Affective Issues

Effect of Past Experiences on Present Classroom Experiences

The participants in this study perceived that elements of their past experiences would be repeated in their adult upgrading classrooms. Two participants with extensive work experience thought school should imitate what is expected in a job. Most of the participants had experienced negative treatment in their home and/or previous school lives and suggested this treatment affected their expectations and perceptions of situations in their upgrading classrooms. One participant, who was an ESL student, had experienced a very supportive family background and the attitude towards education in her home was positive. She had also experienced a highly structured instructional style in her previous schooling. As a result, her attitude towards education and expectations for classroom activities and behavior diverged sharply from those of other participants.

Relationships with Peers

With the exception of one participant who felt most of her peers had little to offer, these participants highly valued opportunities to develop in-class relationships with peers. However, students relied on instructors to create opportunities for peer interaction in class, feeling uncomfortable in suggesting these themselves. Peer interaction was promoted by schedules that allowed the same students to spend more time with each other, seating arrangements featuring small groups or a large circle of students, whole class discussions, small group work and oral presentations. Small group work was viewed as especially beneficial. It allowed the chance to hear other people's viewpoints, distributed the work load, improved social skills and promoted friendships. Sometimes, students wanted the chance to work independently. This often arose when they had experienced negative situations in small group work due to members not contributing or conflicts within the group.

Outside of class, peer networks fulfilled a variety of needs for these participants. Peers provided these students with job ideas, help with homework, encouragement and socializing opportunities.

Relationships with Instructors

To these participants, a satisfying relationship with an instructor was necessary to learning and feeling happy in the classroom. Participants appreciated an instructor who was intelligent and whose methods and classroom atmosphere matched their expectations. An instructor who seemed similar to them and whose interpersonal skills

included honesty, forgiveness, patience, willingness to talk and respect for students was also valued. Participants realized that mutual respect was an important aspect of teacher-learner interactions. When this respect was well-established, students were likely to continue interacting with former instructors. However, when respect was lacking, conflict between teachers and students was likely to occur, inside and outside the classroom.

Power and Control Issues

Instructor as Authority Figure

The majority of participants felt that their instructors controlled most aspects of the classroom. For some students, this was an assumption and an expectation; they were very satisfied with the power role being maintained by the teacher. For others, tensions resulted when the instructor maintained absolute authority in the classroom. Some students wanted the instructor to simultaneously relinquish and maintain power. They preferred a more "middle ground" in which they could share the power but still rely on the teacher to take responsibility for some classroom decisions.

Opportunities for Choice

The teachers of these participants made most of the decisions regarding class time allotment, course content, methods for approaching assigned work, due dates for assignments and evaluation methods. Once again, this was a comfortable situation for some participants. Others wanted more choices and more opportunities to share in decisions.

Voice

All the participants indicated that they felt unable to express themselves well orally due to language deficiencies and shyness. Overall, they perceived few opportunities to overcome these difficulties in the classroom. To most of these students, teachers held the right to do most of the talking in the classroom. Instructors also controlled who else was allowed to speak. All participants opposed this dynamic except one who believed that the teacher's voice should be heard most often in the classroom. Students wanted the opportunity to express their opinions and have them listened to and respected. Some had attempted to change the balance of who talked and who listened in the classroom but had experienced little success in this endeavor. Others had been in classrooms where their opinions were valued, their voices heard. Students largely relied on teachers to provide them with the type of classroom atmosphere that encouraged self-expression.

Implications for Practice

Literacy educators are usually aware of the diversity that exists among the students in their classrooms. In an institutional classroom setting, however, it can be difficult for busy instructors to address students' individual needs while also fulfilling curriculum demands. Therefore, teaching "to the class" too often becomes the norm for lesson delivery. Creativity is required on the part of literacy teachers to address the issue of individualization, but often the teaching day is too hectic to accommodate this type of thinking. Literacy teachers need opportunities outside of class time to reflect on and discuss with their colleagues how to meet individual learner needs.

This individualization will not be possible unless literacy educators communicate effectively with individual students. Before plunging into the curriculum, instructors may need to look for opportunities to become familiar with the knowledge, past experiences, learning styles and expectations students bring with them to the classroom. Instructors could then attempt to tailor their teaching styles to accommodate student needs and explain the reasons for discrepancies between student expectations and actual classroom experiences if they occur.

Instructors may also need to understand that the requirements of a provincial high school English curriculum are only a portion of the education required by adult literacy students. "In view of the generally lower levels of self-esteem, self-confidence and tangible accomplishments among this population...affective outcomes take on special significance" (Darkenwald & Valentine, 1985, p. 21). Instructors could begin to search for ways to incorporate affective skills into their teaching, inside and outside the classroom. These are "not only valuable as ends in themselves, but as means or necessary conditions for continuing personal growth and accomplishment, both academically and in the world outside the classroom" (Darkenwald & Valentine, 1985, p. 21). Educators can use the trusting relationships they build with students to teach what it means to be active, self-reliant learners and to provide strategies to implement and opportunities to practise these skills. Also, instructors need to accept that conflicts with literacy students are likely to occur within the classroom. Overt teaching and modeling of how to express concerns to instructors and other authority figures could be considered as a part of literacy

programs. Finally, instructors may need to consider the social aspect of classroom learning. Group work provides the opportunity to understand diversity as well as to learn strategies for problem solving and conflict management.

In addition to examining affective issues and strategies, instructors may need to examine their roles in relationship to those of their students (Campbell, 1996). Traditionally, the teacher has retained the majority of power in the classroom. Sharing it with students will not happen easily since power roles have been taught and reinforced throughout the lives of both teachers and students. Gradually, however, opportunities for student expression could be provided so that course content, methodology, assignment due dates, mark expectations and evaluation become areas of shared responsibility between students and teachers.

Individual teachers will need support to implement changes in their classrooms. Campbell (1996) believes that incorporating new views of adult literacy and adult literacy learners into classroom pedagogy will be a struggle. "Teachers need to engage in praxis to unify theory and practice" (p. 135). Campbell suggests that "provincial literacy organizations could provide venues, study groups, and opportunities for workers to engage in a pedagogy that explores...issues [of social identity and privilege]" (p.141). Malicky and Norman (1995) believe that support must occur at an even more significant level than provincial literacy organizations. They call for "major partners in the adult literacy enterprise...to critically examine their views of literacy and literacy learning... [to] move beyond the current almost exclusive focus on fundamental literacy to achieve

some of the emancipatory potential of literacy learning" (p. 82). This refocus is needed so that "literacy programs [can] help people to make rather than take their place in society" (p. 82).

Recommendations for Further Research

In general, much more research needs to be conducted with adults who are upgrading their literacy skills at the high school level, particularly in institutions. Researchers could undertake studies on instructional issues such as how to individualize curriculum. Research on affective issues such as peer networking in the classroom and helping students to become more active, independent learners would also be beneficial. Since this study focused on the experiences of persisters, it would also be helpful to hear the experiences of reluctant learners to come to an understanding of how they can be encouraged to persist in literacy programs. Also, reexamining issues of power and control in the classroom could form the nucleus for future studies. Research on instructors who are stepping back from their traditional classroom roles and allowing students more voice and choice would benefit the field of adult literacy as would studies on how to marry the demands of a mandated curriculum with emancipatory goals.

Concluding Statement

The importance of listening to the voices of learners cannot be understated. Literacy programs are more likely to be successful when they work with learners to discover what learners' needs are and how they can best be addressed. These new partnerships will involve re-examining and re-defining power relationships, never a

simple task. However, if learners are allowed to help remodel literacy programs, they may very well look for opportunities to effect change in their own communities. The outcomes of this prospect are too exciting, and too important, to ignore.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW OUTLINE

Present English Class

1. Take me with you now to your present English class.
   a. What would I see you doing for the first fifteen minutes?
   b. What would I see the teacher doing for the first fifteen minutes?
   c. What would I hear during the first fifteen minutes?
   d. What would I see you doing during the last fifteen minutes?
   e. What would I see the teacher doing during the last fifteen minutes?
   f. What would I hear during the last fifteen minutes?
2. Suppose I'm a new student in your class. What could you tell me generally about what will happen in this class?
3. Once again, if I'm a new student in your class, how can I succeed in this class?
4. What is your reaction to the assignments you're doing in this class?
5. Any final comments about your present English class?

Past English Classes

1. What was your goal in returning to school?
2. Before you came back to school, what did you hope you would get out of your English class?
3. So, you had goals in mind for yourself in coming back to school generally and for your English class. Now, take me with you to that very first week back in

an English class. Recreate for me what you remember seeing, hearing, feeling and experiencing.

4. As the class progressed, how was it the same as English classes you had experienced before?
5. How was this English class different from English classes you had experienced before?
6. How did this course give you what you hoped it would?
7. How did this course frustrate or disappoint you?
8. Now, consider all the English classes you've taken, both past and present. I'm going to spread out some pictures for you to look at. Choose any two to talk about in relationship to your experiences in English upgrading classes.

Possibilities and General Philosophies

1. Let's suppose I gave you these books* and told you they'd form the core of the English class. What would your reaction be? (* skills-based textbooks)
2. There are two schools of thought about teaching English. One says that the content is the most important, that is, the literature selections, the skills etc. Another says that "learning how to learn" or the process of learning is more important. How important is it for adults to learn the "how tos" of reading and writing?

3. There are lots of different methods for teaching English – lecture, group discussion, whole class discussion and independent work. How much has each been used? Which one do you prefer?
4. Some teachers have very highly structured, organized classes. Some teachers have very loosely structured classes. Which do you prefer and why?
5. One of the principles of adult education is that students' prior knowledge is respected and activated in the class. Has this been your experience or did you feel you brought nothing to the classroom, knew nothing when you arrived?
6. How much of the power and control have you shred with the teacher about what to study, the mark distribution, due dates of assignments? How much power and control would you like to have?
7. There are a number of different purposes for literacy programs. Fundamental literacy means just getting basic literacy skills. Functional literacy is literacy to get a job. Emancipatory or participatory literacy starts with your personal development then becomes literacy to change the world you live in. What should adult literacy programs be geared towards in your opinion?

To Finish Up

1. You have been asked to address a group of new teachers who are about to instruct their first English class in adult upgrading. What would you tell them?
2. You're now close to the end of your English upgrading experience.
   a. Have you reached the goal you set out for yourself at the start?

b. Did the goal change along the way?

c. What were the unexpected benefits?

d. What could have been done to help you more fully achieve your goal in English?

e. What's your dominant impression of your English upgrading experience?

3. Any closing comments?

APPENDIX B

LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT

It is my responsibility to inform you of your rights as a research participant. Please read these guidelines carefully before signing this letter of informed consent.

1) Anonymity of participants: The administration of your institution is aware that I am conducting interviews with students. However, you and I are the only ones who know that you specifically are participating. To ensure your continued anonymity, do not discuss this research interview with anyone in your institution. I will also keep your name confidential at all times during and after the research.
2) Confidentiality of information: I will be tape recording our session so that I can remember what you have said more easily and possibly quote your words in my thesis. However, you will never be identified as the speaker and no identifying details about you will be included. No one in your institution will ever have access to the tape of your interviews. I will destroy it after I have listened to it for my research purposes. If I decide to use your comments for another purpose besides my thesis. your permission will be requested.
3) Purpose of the research: Please keep in mind that the purpose of the research is to discover your experiences with literacy education in an upgrading classroom. The teaching staff is not being evaluated and the interviews are not designed as a forum for discussing teacher personalities. Therefore, please do not mention teachers specifically by name during the interviews.

By signing this letter, you are signifying that

- you have been informed of the purpose of the research
- you have participated in the research freely and without coercion
- you have been assured that your participation will be anonymous and the information you provide confidential
- you have had the opportunity to assess possible risks involved in participating
- you have been given the right to "opt out" of the research at any time, without penalty

I have been fully informed of and understand my rights as a participant in this research.

_____

(Signature) (Date)