

A Poetic Exploration of Literacy to Zillennial Teachers: Stories of Early-Career Educators in
Ontario

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Abstract

This research project is a braided weave of literary analysis, stories, and poetry. Using the arts-based post-qualitative research method, poetic inquiry, and the phenomenological interview process, this study explores how early-career educators born between 1995 and 2000 approach literacy instruction at the intermediate and senior levels. This project presents what teachers at the beginning of their careers notice about the literacy skills of youth and adolescents (aged 12-18), and how these teachers address students' needs while balancing social and curricular expectations. Through distilling the stories of young, novice educators and presenting their felt experiences in poetic form, this work draws attention to the ways that young people are responding to the materials which have altered the role of the literacy teacher in Ontario and offers a meditative way of thinking about literacy and the efforts of new teachers. This research is significant as it contributes to the overall study of literacy pedagogies and teacher identities within the ethos of our time.

Table of Contents

<i>Chapter 1: Introduction</i>	1
Project Purpose	3
Research Context	5
Research Design	8
Theoretical Position	10
Thesis Outline	13
<i>Chapter 2: Methodology and Research Design</i>	14
Personal and Theoretical Background	14
Methodology	17
Research Design	22
<i>Chapter 3: Literature Review</i>	30
The Turns in Literacy Scholarship	30
Ontario Teacher Training and the Curriculum	46
Teacher Identity Research	55
Generational Theory in Educational Research	59
Conclusion	68
Vox Theoria	70
<i>Chapter 4: Vox Participare</i>	76
Findings and Discussion	76
Next Steps	91
Vox Participare	94
<i>Chapter 5: Conclusion</i>	103
<i>References</i>	112

Chapter 1: Introduction

This project examines how early-career educators trained in the intermediate and senior divisions of general education in Ontario are navigating literacy curricula and pedagogies, given the various social and institutional complexities shaping the Ontario education system in the current decade of the twenty-first century (the 2020s). Using the arts-based post-qualitative research method known as poetic inquiry, I present the stories of novice Ontario educators born between 1995 and 2000, the so-called Zillennial generation, and highlight how they are navigating literacy pedagogy in middle and high school classrooms. This work contributes to the growing understanding of “what it means to be literate” in the ethos of our time.

This project has been crafted in reflection of the turbulent times in which we are experiencing in this era of the twenty-first century, and how these times are supposedly altering the “values, dispositions, understandings, and skills” underpinning the concept of literacy and its pedagogies (see Downey et al., 2024, p. 4). It has been said that what a “literacy learner looks, lives, and acts like” in this specific stage of the 21st century is quite different from that of previous generations (Lemieux, 2020, p. 29). This is due to a wealth of factors that have altered the entire landscape of Canadian education in recent years, including the proliferation of aesthetic modes of communication (van Leeuwen, 2017) and the rapid evolution of new technologies that outpace education systems' ability to develop (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2023). While some postulate that recent sociotechnical changes have negatively altered the literacy skills of today’s citizens, others have chosen to celebrate the potential of these changes (see Collier & Rowsell, 2020; Ahn et al., 2025; Aukerman & Aiello, 2023; Graff, 2024). Importantly, these developments remind us that the concept of literacy is always “unfinished” (Pahl & Pool, 2020, p. 38) because new meanings and understandings emerge as ways of communication evolve.

This research examines how young adults, specifically those aged 25-30, pursuing educational careers during these turbulent times, perceive the effects of various social, global, and technological developments on literacy and how they respond to digital and non-digital literacy skills in the classroom. Through a poetic and phenomenological study, this project asks: What do early-career educators observe and conclude about their students' literacy and language skills, and how do their teaching experiences support or challenge prevailing narratives around education? How are the dominant social and academic understandings surrounding English "literacy" affecting teachers born within the Zillennial generation? The findings from this work provide social and academic narratives with more evidence to better understand the nuances of our current Canadian educational landscape, specifically as it feels and looks in Ontario.

Given that literacy teaching is closely intertwined with identity (Ives & Juzwik, 2015) and circumstance (Kaya et al., 2022), this project is approached with critical mindfulness of the following: the extent to which technology has shaped the way young people see and know the world (Collier & Rowsell, 2020), the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on teacher training programs (see Danyluk et al., 2022), and the economic struggles of many of the Ontario school boards (Stuart-Hitchcox & Parker, 2025). By emphasizing the circumstances of this current era of teaching, this project aims to cultivate greater love and empathy for how literacies and literacy instruction are actively unfolding in contemporary, intermediate, and senior Ontario classrooms. The focus of this research is on events in grade 7-12 classrooms, specifically because this age group of citizens (12-18) has been uniquely affected by recent social, political, and technological changes, including but not limited to the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing social lockdowns (Fell, 2020; Hatfield, 2025; Höfrová et al., 2024). The work consults educators born in or after 1995, though no later than 2001, because this era produced individuals who have

“been witness to major changes all around the world” (Prakash & Tiwari, 2021, p. 101). It is also supposedly a generation “caught between two worlds” (Paul, 2025b, n.p) as a group of citizens that is often too young to be considered a Millennial yet too old to be considered a member of Generation Z, largely due to their experiences with technology and use of social media websites (Ward, 2023). As such, this cohort of citizens has been labelled as the Zillennial microgeneration.

This research contributes to the endeavour of naming where we are, how it looks, and what it feels like in the current era of Canadian education, a challenge that curriculum theorists have long since faced, but one that is particularly important to undertake in this precarious era of social, cultural, linguistic, and economic inequality (Hasebe-Ludt, 2016). It does this by attending to how three educators, all in their mid-twenties, who all secured full-time jobs in middle and high school classrooms immediately after graduating from their formal teacher training programs, discuss their students' literacy skills and how they craft their pedagogies in light of their students' abilities and curriculum expectations. The findings in this project are presented in poetic form because poetry is a strategy that highlights human experiences (Prendergast, 2009), invites meditative thinking (Harvey & Karrow, 2025), and allows the full weight of the experience to be felt by the reader (Heidegger, 1971).

Project Purpose

The rationale for this research was well articulated by Claudia Mitchell (2025) in the plenary address for the Canadian Society for the Study of Education Annual Conference, held at George Brown College in Toronto, Ontario, on June 1st, 2025. As the abstract for Mitchell's speech states: “the agency and well-being of new teachers, many of whom are young people, remains an under-studied area both in youth studies and in teacher education” (CSSE-SCÉE CSSHE, 2025, n.p). Mitchell's speech, which addressed the changing spaces of education and

the impact of generational shifts in educational contexts, highlighted the importance of seriously considering the well-being and actions of early-career educators. Understanding the agency and well-being of novice educators in Ontario, and therefore how to support this cohort of young adults better, is particularly pertinent given the high rates of teacher attrition among early-career educators, which remains a significant issue in Ontario (Kutsyuruba et al., 2024; Wong, 2025).

It is not the intention of this work to display or attempt to formulate a general theory of a contemporary teacher or literacy aid. It does not seek definitive answers or truths about the meaning of literacy, and it certainly does not seek to contribute to the debates known as the reading wars (see Downey et al., 2024) or the literacy wars (see Olsson, 2020). This research aims to contribute to the scholarly understanding of the new literacies and realities faced by the present-day generation of young teachers, without creating new definitions. Though this project may prompt readers to think differently about literacy at the intermediate and senior levels of education, it does not claim to have substantial transformative power for the audience of this work.

This work is imagined to be a love letter to the teaching and researching professionals who attend to the literacies of today's society with love, openness, and empathy (see Ehret & Leander, 2019). It is hoped that, through creating poetry that emphasizes new teacher resilience and creativity, this project "can challenge the present rhetoric of despair" (Pahl & Pool, 2020, p. 38) circulating in current narratives about education. The primary audience for this work is educational researchers and literacy instructors exploring how these turbulent times (see Downey et al., 2024) are affecting literacies and schooling more broadly, as well as professionals in teacher education programs who prepare the next generation of teachers to enter the field. This research is significant because it includes the voices of early-career educators working in middle

and high schools in the dialogue around literacy. The decision to focus on educators who are newly trained, recently qualified, and exclusively teaching in intermediate and senior schooling contexts was made because, in matters of literacy research, this group of teachers is often underrepresented (see Kavanagh & Rainey, 2017). This decision was also made because I, the author of this work, am a 25-year-old educator with 2 years of formal teaching experience.

Research Context

This project is exclusively concerned with how intermediate- and senior-level teachers in their twenties, trained and working in the province of Ontario, conceptualize literacy and approach literacy pedagogy. At the time of this research, the governing party in Ontario is the Progressive Conservative Party, led by Premier Doug Ford. Ford's Conservatives have been in power for most of the time that the participants in this research were obtaining their post-secondary education; indeed, for most of their adult lives. This is noted here because "literacy education is always a situated response to particular political economies of education" (Luke, 2018, p. 169 as cited in Kaya et al., 2022, p. 48). However, it is outside the scope of this research to analyze in detail how Ford's recent changes to the Ontario public school system (see Boyd, 2021; Friesen & Hennessy, 2024; Jackson, 2025; Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, 2025; Raveendran, 2025) influence the pedagogies of the participants in this project. Although the details of Premier Ford's changes cannot be discussed in detail within the scope of this project, the reader is strongly encouraged to consider such developments when reading this project's findings.

Ontario has been recognized as one of the leading provinces in Canada for student reading and writing achievement (Cummins, 2023). Yet, interestingly, the Ontario Human Rights Commission, in its official release of the 2019 *Right to Read* inquiry report results, claimed that, in the Ontario provincial school system, it is "time for change" (p. 68) in areas of language and

literacy learning (including curriculum and instruction). The report prompted many Faculties of Education to modify how teachers are trained in literacy-related areas and led to some curricular changes (Friesen & Hennessy, 2024). This is key contextual information for this project, as the participants in this study have entered an educational system in the aftermath of a “significant paradigm shift” (p. 11) surrounding literacy and language instruction. Indeed, they were teachers-in-training during the implementation of these changes, which presumably has impacted these individual’s ways of approaching literacy in their pedagogy. It is of interest in this project to assess the extent to which these participants have been engaged in discussions about the 2019 *Right to Read* inquiry report, or if the resulting changes from the Report have impacted these teachers’ understandings of literacy and language instruction.

Additionally, key contextual information that grounds this research can be found in the narratives surrounding the generation to which this group of teachers belongs and the generation of learners they teach. Although defining members of society by their generation or broadly generalizing people’s characteristics based on the generation in which they were born is deterministic and often irrational (Jones, 2011), studying generational identities remains an essential and legitimate area of research (Urlick, 2012). Generational theory has persuaded educational research for some time, especially in areas around literacy, as the end of the twentieth century saw extensive conversations about the “digital generation” and how the digital trends of the 1990s and early 2000s within society would alter the intellectual ability of children born within this era (see Burnett, 2011; Greenhow et al., 2009; Prensky, 2001).

The teachers recruited for this study were born between 1995 and 2000. While some claim that Generation Z, commonly referred to as Gen Z, began in 1995 (Höfrová et al., 2024), others suggest it started after 2000 (Poláková & Klímová, 2019). The starting point of

Generation Z is complicated by the various ending points for the Millennial generation; while some say the Millennial generation ends in 1991, others claim it ends in 1996 (Jones, 2011; Szymkowiak et al., 2021). In response to disputes over the appropriate generational title for individuals born between the early 1990s and early 2000s, and the fact that many in this era do not feel they qualify as Millennials or Generation Z, the term “Zillennial” has emerged (Paul, 2025b; Ward, 2023). Many different narratives exist around these generations, as will be explored in this project’s literature review. Both Millennials and Generation Z are part of the so-called “digital generation,” which is supposedly vastly different from the analogue generation that preceded it. The students the participants teach are either the youngest members of Gen Z or Generation Alpha (Höfrova et al., 2024; McCrindle & Fell, 2020), which began in 2010 or 2012, depending on one’s view of when Gen Z ends. Generation Alpha, known as Gen Alpha, has also been highly scrutinized due to their age during the COVID-19 pandemic and their upbringing in a world where technology is omnipresent (see McCrindle & Fell, 2020; Fell, 2020).

Pointedly, this thesis explores how intermediate/senior level teachers born in the latest years of the Millennial generation or the earliest years of Generation Z – the era of time that has produced the microgeneration known as Zillennials – have navigated the role, agency, and identity of the literacy teacher given their schooling experiences, lifelong exposure to digital tools, and their responsibilities in supporting students who supposedly faced extensive “learning loss” due to the pandemic (Aukerman & Aiello, 2023). This thesis is based on the prediction that the attributes of the current generation of young teachers, presumably shaped in response to the complex societal eras in which they have matured and become professionals, suggest that they will hold certain beliefs about literacy and understandings of effective pedagogies that differ

from those of previous generations, and that these understandings matter to the field of educational research.

Poetic inquiry, a research method *and* methodology (Vincent, 2021), is chosen for its fundamental strength in distilling and demonstrating human experience (Prendergast, 2009). As it is the intention of this work to embrace the diversity within and across these teachers' conceptions, poetic inquiry, for its ability to honour "a plurality of fissions and margins" (Prendergast, 2020, p. 23), seems especially suitable. Poetry is introduced twice in this project: first, in response to the literature/as the literature review (see Prendergast, 2006), and second, to present the participants' stories.

Research Design

The research questions that inform this study are as follows:

1. What do early-career educators observe and conclude about their students' literacy and language skills, and how do their teaching experiences support or challenge prevailing narratives around education?
2. How are the dominant social and academic understandings surrounding English "literacy" affecting teachers born within the Zillennial generation?

These research questions are supported with a semi-systematic literature review (Snyder, 2019). As such, this project views the literature review not only as a step in the research process but also as part of the research method. The process of reviewing the literature not only contextualizes this research but also informs the line of questioning directed towards the participants, aiding in the analysis and contextualization of the teachers' perceptions, habits, and beliefs. The literature review can be distinguished as semi-systematic because it is primarily focused on how "research within a selected field has progressed over time or how a topic has developed across research

traditions” (Synder, 2019, p. 335). This approach was deemed necessary due to the vast extent of literature available on literacy, not all of which could be reviewed for this project.

The second research question is well served by the phenomenological interviewing process (Bevan, 2014) with a pool of Ontario-based educators who can generally be regarded as “young” and “novice.” This is because phenomenological research, as a method, helps develop a comprehensive, thoughtful, and relevant understanding of literacy (Heydon & Rowsell, 2015). For this research, ‘young’ is defined as individuals 30 years old or younger as of 2025, meaning it consults educators born in or after 1995, though no later than 2001. A ‘novice’ is understood as working as a qualified Ontario teacher for three years or less.

This project qualifies as arts-based educational research (Barone & Eisner, 2012) because it uses poetry as a method of analysis and data presentation (Cahnman-Taylor, 2003). Poetic inquiry (Prendergast, 2009), as this methodology/method has been named, is undertaken as the principal means for analyzing both pools of “data” – the literature as well as the stories of the participants. I engage in creating found poetry (Butler-Kisber, 2002) and poeticizing (Harvey & Karrow, 2025). Poetry inquiry can be understood as a “member of the family of [arts-based research] methods that involve[s] poetry writing” (Hanauer, 2025, p. 47) and has been approached in a number of ways by scholars across disciplinary backgrounds (see Prendergast, 2009; Galvin & Prendergast, 2016). I poeticize the academic discussions of literacy as I poetize the stories of participants, offering readers a new way to experience academic dialogue and relate to the participants (Harvey & Karrow, 2025).

I engage with what Prendergast (2009) identifies as *vox theoria*, a category of poetic inquiry that includes poems written “from or in response to works of literature/theory in a discipline or field” (p. xxii) or as “poems about self, writing and poetry as method” (Galvin &

Prendergast, 2016), and *vox participare*, which are participant voiced poems. I pursue the creation of found poetry, which is formed from words drawn directly from the texts (Butler-Kisber, 2002; Prendergast, 2006). This collection of research poetry (Prendergast, 2006) is produced by drawing on my skills and approaches to poetry and by following the guides for engaging in poetic inquiry outlined by Faulker (2019) and Prendergast (2006).

In pursuing this line of inquiry, I am reflecting the ethnographic axiom that “gradations of change in habits and beliefs (though seemingly minor on the surface) correlate with shifts in structures and uses of language and multimodal literacies” (Heath & Street, 2008, p. 8). How young educators conceive of and approach literacy in their teaching practice is actively shaping how literacy can be studied, discussed, and practised by researchers, teacher educators, and future teachers. Highlighting the decisions and practices of young teachers may deepen academic understanding of the impact of social dialogue and public narratives about literacy, language learning, and the broader state of education on these teachers as they develop their pedagogy.

Theoretical Position

This project has been built from the understanding that literacy is a phenomenon constantly unfinished and becoming anew, because it is deictic, context-specific, and ideological (see Dernikos et al., 2023; Leander & Bolt, 2013; Leu et al., 2013; Mills & Stornaiuolo, 2018; Pahl & Pool, 2020; Rowsell & Pahl, 2020). I am especially concerned with the affect of literacy and literacy research, and how we are moved by literacy (see Ehret & Leander, 2019; Leander & Boldt, 2013; Perry, 2019). I also work from the position that the essence or purpose of education is not to prepare people or train students to exit or move beyond their current reality, but rather to help them navigate it (Freire, 2000/1970). I am interested in the ways that the COVID-19 pandemic, post-truth era politics (see Parker & Smith, 2022), and proliferation of Artificial Intelligence software, alongside other forms of digital communication tools, have altered our

experiences with and meaning of “literacy.” This interest stems from the understanding that such changes have affected teachers' roles and agency.

The notion of “the ethos of our time” is integral to this work, as this research is concerned with the *now*: the characteristics, spirit, values, and societal attributes that define the 2020s. I view space and time not only as elements to consider in dwelling on significance or as mediators of meaning, but also as elements we interact with in our journey of becoming literate (see Kuby et al., 2018), interwoven in our relationship to literacy. In pursuing this line of inquiry directed towards young teachers, I take the view that young people are distinguishable from older generations in many respects, not necessarily because of their chronological age, but because of their unique experiences with technologies and with societal norms that differ from those of previous generations. This difference is something to learn from, not avoid or obscure.

Fundamentally, this work is grounded in the understanding that literacy encompasses more than the ability to read and write; rather, it is a “meaning-making resource” (Ellis & Simpson, 2020, p. 3) and something that we embody (see Leander & Boldt, 2013). I have been influenced by the perspective that literacies ought to be thought of as “communicative practices for forming and making sense of the world through intentional and sustained encounters with human and more-than-human entities and for opening spaces for new becomings” (Lenters & McDermott, 2020, p. 4). I especially feel passionate about the notion that “it is not the case that deviations from the literate norm are negations and losses of refinement so much as increasingly refined, nuanced, mobile and dynamic differentials” (Masny & Cole, 2012, p. x), and, critically, that difference is something that needs to be better recognized in our educational settings as something that teaches us about relationality and inspires us to share our experiences, histories, and memories (see Donald, 2009).

*Who am I to say a thing?
 It is cowardly to say I'm nothing at all.
 I am a daughter
 a white woman
 a sister
 a born-on-this-stolen-land citizen
 a lover of words
 a survivor
 a listener
 a growing body
 a mobile, feeling entity
 raised quietly in privileged places
 loved artistically inspired gently*

*I am not alone
 I do not pretend to be*

*I am not special
 I do not want to be*

*who am I say to a thing!
 who am I to think I can let these things rage inside of me*

*It is my greatest weakness
 the need to think aloud.*

...Maybe?

perhaps the greatest thing I can do

is write thoughtfully.

I have a loving appreciation for the perspective that the conditions of our social reality are negotiated through our stories, poetry, myths, and how we articulate our memories and imagination (Hasebe-Ludt, 2009). I therefore believe it is of the utmost importance to focus on the stories, tales, and poetry that demonstrate our strength, growth, and holistic concern for our collective well-being. My relationship to literacy has evolved from being a child with a speech impediment to an undergraduate who worked as an intermediate classroom literacy aid, and now to a substitute teacher who is constantly privy to the discourse surrounding today's youth and

teenage intellectual deficits, especially those related to literacy skills. My positionality is further discussed in the next chapter.

Thesis Outline

This thesis is segmented into five chapters. Methodology and research design are presented in the next chapter, followed by the literature review. The decision was made to explain the methodology and method prior to the literature review because I wish for readers to enter the literature review with a developed understanding of how I have approached the literature review and why I approach literacy research as I do. The findings chapter includes participant-voiced poetry, meaning the reader encounters the findings immediately after reading the literature-voiced poems. This project concludes with a summarizing, reflective chapter.

Chapter 2: Methodology and Research Design

The present study uses the arts-based qualitative research method known as poetic inquiry (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Prendergast, 2009), both prior to and following phenomenological interviews with three participants (Bevan, 2014). It employs poetic analysis (Faulkner, 2019) to highlight the affective dimensions of literacy research (see Perry, 2019) and to present what young, novice educators who teach the intermediate and senior grades in Ontario notice about literacy (Ellis & Simpson, 2020). A semi-systematic literature review (Synder, 2019) is woven into this project's research design and is framed as critical to the overall work because it demonstrates how understandings of literacy/ies have evolved over time, often in response to changing societal contexts that affect schools. Together, the literature review, interviews, and resulting poetry offer a sort of literary *métissage* (Chambers et al., 2008; Donald, 2009; Hasebe-Ludt, 2016), a methodology that allows researchers to interweave different realities and dwell in inquiries, desires, and tensions.

This chapter provides the methodology and research design for this project. It positions me, the author, in relation to this research and topic at hand, while clarifying my artistic approach. My background and positionality are presented in this chapter specifically to honour the importance of researchers' "bracketing" their personal positions in phenomenological research projects (Bevan, 2014), and because I am passionate about keeping a researcher's positionality close to the conversation of data analysis, as my positioning and experiences undeniably shapes the way I interpret and present the research (Green et al., 2021; Perry, 2019).

Personal and Theoretical Background

I can locate my interest in literacy scholarship as emerging from my childhood speech impediment, and from my experiences working as a literacy aid for youth in Thunder Bay and in remote Indigenous communities during my undergraduate studies. My childhood experiences

with literacies and languages are what intrigue me about the “felt intensities of literacy learning and teaching” (Ehret & Leander, 2019, p. 2). I take the perspective that literacy is not incidental, as Ehret and Leander (2019) explain; rather, it is an unfolding result of the learning experiences that affect us.

*I learned to speak loudly.
If there is one thing my father taught me, it was how to communicate viciously.
The bite, the snap -
I mastered these rhetorical skills before I could wrap my tongue around the
sounds of /l/ /s/ and /r/
my violent journey, it is what made my literacy*

*I am told I was mute
until I started kindergarten.
But Once the gates were open, I never shut up. My mother told me this over a cup
of cold coffee, I do not know if she meant it lovingly. Afterall,*

*when it finally emerged, my language was twisted.
my first therapist - a speech pathologist.
the second, the school's designated literacy instructor
met in dusty broom cupboards, crying over bent laminated cards –*

*Years of remedial work, an unsatiating dessert - I could not articulate clearly
until the day I was forced to use my father's tools on him in protection of another
- that is when I became a Rhetorician, A Literate Citizen
A Beholder of a Linguistic Whip
I learned language when I Needed it, not when I was expected to Speak quietly.
The difference - still worries me.*

*I distinctly recall when I learned I was not unique.
Haven't stopped thinking about the emotional connection since.*

Working with youth and adolescents in Northwestern Ontario changed my understanding of literacy and my own experiences with literacy development. My speech was “delayed” for many years. I used signs and gestures and chose specific songs to communicate with family members. My “illiteracy” was further problematized because I had immense trouble with holding pens and pencils, which meant I could not write legibly. To this day, I get comments that I hold pens “strangely.” When I did start speaking, it was with garbled sounds, a lisp, and a slight

stammer. This, paired with my difficulty holding a pen, meant I was categorized as a struggling student for most of my junior elementary years. I received a lot of support from speech therapists and educational assistants. I recall these support sessions making me feel inadequate and frustrated, because I felt I could comprehend texts, but I just could not communicate my understanding in the “right way.”

I spent most of my time in elementary school thinking of myself as a “bad student.” Things only changed when hardships at home meant my family faced problems that went far beyond my literacy. Circumstances dictated that my literacy support was replaced with other kinds of support. With age, my speech eventually improved, and my writing became legible. In reflection on my experiences as a frustrated student in a literacy specialist's office, I recall one day feeling that oral and written language were something I could never have, and the next day that they were no longer a concern. These memories lead me to question the effects of how we assess and discuss literacy skills and the meaning of literacy itself.

I worked with many middle-school-age students in Northwestern Ontario who demonstrated similar “weaknesses” in literacy areas as I did when I started working with United for Literacy at the age of 20. I was hired as a literacy tutor, where I learned about the science of reading, the phonics approach, and various pedagogical strategies that ground “the literacy wars” (see Olsson, 2020). I facilitated private and group tutoring for youth aged 7-13 who were identified as students with learning difficulties. The work led me to reflect on how I had been socialized to understand the “right” way of communicating and “being literate” (see Thomas et al., 2020). I quickly saw that these strategies I was encouraged to use were not resonating with the youth I was working with. Over time, with the support of the wonderful people I worked with at United for Literacy, I began transitioning away from pencil-and-pen literacy instruction and

pursuing techniques that I later learned reflected the multiliteracies framework (see Mills, 2011; Rowsell & Walsh, 2011; Watts-Taffe, 2022; Whitelaw, 2019). I incorporated more opportunities for artistic reflection and played games that were specifically crafted to help learners develop their knowledge of sentence structure, vocabulary, letter sounds, word recognition, and meaning. The art- and game-based approaches I used in literacy tutoring helped me and the learners form a bond that ultimately encouraged me to think more critically about how we approach literacy in the classroom, specifically at the intermediate and senior levels.

Many of these learners confessed that they felt uninspired to learn in their classrooms, and that the learning we did together in the tutoring space resonated more strongly with them. Their stories, shared with me in confidence, cultivated my interest in the sensorial, affective, place-based, and political forces that shape literacies and language instruction (see Toohey et al., 2020). As Ehret and Leander (2019) explain, institutional approaches to literacy instruction have often dehumanized language, framing it as a science rather than an art. This has had severe consequences on literacy instruction, curriculum, and pedagogy (Ellis & Simpson, 2020), and something I believe needs to be recognized and remedied in this era of creating or imagining a more equitable education system (see Pahl & Rowsell, 2020). I work from the position that a way to support this endeavour of recognizing and remedying is to privilege the epistemic knowledge of teachers (see Honeyford & Watt, 2018), and join those who urge us to call upon the art of storytelling in our development of literacy pedagogy and curriculum (Pahl & Pool, 2020; Thomas et al., 2020).

Methodology

As will be discussed in the literature review, literacy has increasingly been recognized as something plural, multimodal, and highly influenced by lived experiences (Lemieux, 2020; Pahl & Rowsell, 2020). This view of literacy has led to more discussions about the potential of the

arts within literacy scholarship and the applicability of arts-based or informed methodologies (Huber et al., 2015). As Whitelaw (2019) writes, “we lose something with inattention to the arts in an age of multimodalities and multiliteracies” (p. 4). Auto/biographical writing, poetry, and narrative inquiry have been increasingly accepted within literacy research because such forms of research are an “opportunity to write scripts of hope as well as resistance” (Pahl & Pool, 2020, p. 33). These forms of inquiry, which have historically been framed as unscholarly and illegitimate ways of knowing in educational institutions (Bhattacharya, 2016; 2021), are an act of resisting the colonial roots of education and academic scholarship (Thomas et al., 2020). It is due to the acknowledgement of the diversity within and across literacy pedagogies and the importance of the arts in literacy scholarship that poetic inquiry is pursued as the principal method of engaging with the literature and the data that support this project.

Poetic inquiry, as it was named by Monica Prendergast (2009) in a postdoctoral research project that identified over 230 published examples of researchers using poetry as a major element of the research process, is one tree in the forest of arts-based research. As explained by Tom Barone and Elliot Eisner (2012), the scholars who are attributed with the development of the discipline, “arts-based research is an effort to extend beyond the limiting constraints of discursive communication in order to express meanings that otherwise would be ineffable” (p. 1). Scholars in the field of education have been using the arts in various research capacities since at least the 1970s (see Sinner et al., 2006). From the various contributions of these scholars, different frameworks for using the arts in educational research projects have emerged (see Knowles & Cole, 2008; Leavy, 2023).

While others prefer the specific practices of arts-informed inquiry (Cole & Knowles, 2008), arts integrated research (Sameshima et al., 2019), or a/r/tography (Irwin et al., 2006), I

find myself drawn to arts-based research (Barone & Eisner, 2012) because I have been influenced by the scholars who have worked to define and summarize arts-based inquiry. The description of the arts-based researcher as someone with a responsibility to create entrances to emotional, spiritual, and ephemeral discussions, someone who demonstrates that art is a legitimate way of knowing, and someone who connects people with their everyday experiences and others (see Finley, 2008) resonates with me. Fundamentally, research that uses the arts involves:

“Envisioning a research approach, engaging in inquiry (questions emerge over time), selecting sources of information and ideas, and then offering interpretations with “intellectual openness and creativity” within practice, in essence, portraying new understandings textually, visually, and/or performatively (Finley, 2003, p. 283)” (Sinner et al., 2006, p. 1225)

This quote effectively summarizes the importance of artful scholarship as I understand it and has been extremely influential as I have imagined this project. While there is immense variety within the field of arts-based/integrated/informed educational research (Cahnman-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008; Knowles & Cole, 2008; Leavy, 2023), this excerpt does well to show how these variations are unified by the shared understanding that openness and creativity are of critical importance.

There is significant variation in how researchers have used poetry (Hanauer, 2025; Prendergast, 2009; Vincent, 2018; 2021). Poetic inquiry as a “fruiting field” has been a popular metaphor for understanding the shape, function, and value of poetry as a research method (see Borhani, 2021; Vincent, 2018). Prendergast (2009) identifies some of the leading ways researchers have used poetry as a research tool over the years, categorizing these approaches as *vox theoria*, *vox autobiographia/autoethnographia*, and *vox participare*. Additional voxes have been named since the original 2009 publication, and the ways in which these voxes are defined

have also evolved (Borhani, 2021; Galvin & Prendergast, 2016). The present study pursues *vox theoria* in its initial stage of this project to explore the field of literacy research and *vox participare* in the second stage as I create found poetry.

The first pool of poems can be identified as literature-voiced research found poems (Prendergast, 2006). These poems can be understood as my effort to poeticize the field of literacy scholarship (Harvey & Karrow, 2025), to create a new entry point into academic discourse for those who do not have the time to read lengthy articles or research. As previously explained, *vox theoria* poems are understood as poetry written “from or in response to works of literature/theory in a discipline or field” (Prendergast, 2009, p. xxii), or as it was later amended to encompass: “poems about self, writing, and poetry as method” (Galvin and Prendergast, 2016, p. xv). This poetic process is undertaken to align participants’ experiences with the debates, theories, and philosophical and epistemological positions in the field of literacy scholarship, not just in discussion but also in form.

By distilling the essence of how literacy has been understood as a field and discipline over the last forty years, I aim to demonstrate how it has been transformed and pluralized (Rowse & Pahl, 2015). These poems have been crafted in reflection of my experiences in trying to enter this field as an emerging scholar and educator, experiences steeped in confusion, frustration, exhaustion, and feelings of stupidity for not fully understanding the theories and concepts. I work from the understanding that I am not alone in these experiences because literacy is a territory with an ever-expanding map (see Masny, 2012) that many individuals have become lost in. I view these poems as tools for other novice educators and teachers who wish to deepen their understanding of the academic discourses around literacy.

In conceiving these poems, I have thought deeply about Faulkner's (2019) guide to poetic analysis, namely her encouragement to ask myself the questions articulated by Baxter (2011), who Faulkner cites: "What does a listener need to know in order to render this textual segment intelligible? What socio-cultural and interpersonal discourses need to be invoked to understand what this textual segment means?" (p. 165). With these questions addressed, I approached the *vox theoria* with the intention of transforming theoretical ideas about literacy into language that readers without extensive exposure to academic language could more easily engage with. The reader is encouraged to consider that there is no "right" way to read these poems, but to instead allow their eyes to be captured by whatever terms or metaphors resonate with their language and understandings, and to consider what any given phrase says about the meaning of literacy and the function of literacy research. These poems have been etched with the knowledge that "meaning does not belong to a single 'speaker'" (Sameshima et al., 2019, p. 50), and the reader is encouraged to consider the implications of that sentiment in relation to literacy.

The second pool of poems follows the format of found poetry (Butler-Kisber, 2002). Found poetry transforms participants' words into poetic form to evoke an emotional response. As Butler-Kisber (2002) explains, it is not a linear procedure; it requires revisiting the data set and reflecting on my (the author's) interpretations and understandings of the participants' words. Found poetry is simultaneously a mode of representation and an analytical tool (Faulkner, 2019). As an innovative research method, it fosters inclusivity and relationality (Sameshima et al., 2025). It is the hope that these found poems offer a glimpse into the ways that young people are navigating the identity and responsibilities of a teacher in the context of our politically and socially tense times, when "what it means to be literate" is ostensibly changing (Ahn et al.,

2025), and thus allows young, early career educators to feel seen within formal educational research.

Research Design

This research project is a braided weave of literary analysis, stories, and poetry (Chambers et al., 2008). The research questions for this project are: What do early-career educators observe and conclude about their students' literacy and language skills, and how do their teaching experiences support or challenge prevailing narratives around education? How are the dominant social and academic understandings surrounding English "literacy" affecting teachers born within the Zillennial generation? To qualify for this research, participants must have been born in or after 1995 and before 2001 and must have been working as a fully qualified teacher in Ontario for 3 years or less at the time of this research. They must have graduated from an accredited Bachelor of Education program in Ontario, from the intermediate/senior division, and be qualified to teach grades 7-12.

Teaching experiences must have been accumulated in a school where the Ontario curriculum is mandated, and English is the primary language of instruction and assessment, although educators trained and who teach in French or an Indigenous language are not excluded from this study on that language basis. Although the Ontario Ministry of Education regards any teacher with five or fewer years of teaching experience in Ontario as a new teacher, based on the eligibility requirements of the New Teacher Induction Program (NTIP) (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2021), this study sought teachers with three or fewer years of teaching experience to increase the likelihood of teachers drawing upon their experiences in their initial teaching training to discuss their understandings. Due to the time constraints of this project, teachers were recruited from my (the researcher's) personal network of professional colleagues and contacted

via text message and email. All teachers were graduates from the same Bachelor of Education program. Participation in this research was entirely voluntary.

While I frame this work as an arts-based project, I am drawn to the research design of arts informed research as explained by Sameshima et al. (2019). The arts informed research design upsets the traditional research methods which maintain that research questions should always be “answered” and “closed” by the end of the project; alternatively, the arts integrated research design instead welcomes new questions, new thinking, and celebrates the generation of knowledge that comes from a given research focus (see Sameshima et al., 2019, p. 44). This project has been approached with the hope that new knowledge and new questions would grow from the final product.

The two sources of “data” for this research project are the literature and the participants' stories. In reflection of the research questions, namely in pondering how they may be best approached within the time constraints of this project, I determined that the traditional, systematic literature review is not suitable nor even possible due to the extent of literacy research available; a semi-systematic literature review was chosen instead, a method which focuses on the common themes and how a phenomenon has developed over time (Snyder, 2019). My goal with the literature review is to assess how literacy pedagogies have been (re)made over time and how literacy has been conceptualized through different theoretical perspectives. In conducting this literature review, I work to ground this research in the “debates, theories, philosophical, and epistemological positions, as well as the momentous issue of meaning” (Suddick et al., 2020, p. 2) within literacy scholarship at large, so as to explore how young teachers' understandings of literacy fit into or stand apart from dominant discourses.

This objective dictated the usage of keywords such as "definitions," "conceptions," "discourse," and "pedagogy" of/as/in "literacy" when collecting the literature. The literature was retrieved from the Lakehead University library, the OMNI database, and Google Scholar. As this research is concerned with how literacies and their pedagogies are unfolding in middle and secondary educational contexts, resources that were primarily concerned with early childhood education were avoided by pairing the keywords: "intermediate senior," "middle school," "adolescents," "high school," with "literacy" and "teacher identity." To narrow the pool of available resources when needed, I included "Ontario" and "Canada."

As this thesis was partially inspired by Claudia Mitchell's plenary address for CSSE 2025, I took her acknowledgement that, within Faculties of Education, "*you have a group of Millennials, or a group of Gen Zs, being instructed by Gen Xr's on how to teach Gen Alphas*" (as recorded in my notes during the presentation), as encouragement to review the theories and understandings about these generations as they unfold in educational discourse. In reviewing the literature on "young teachers" and "early-career educators," I used the advanced search function to include these terms. This enhanced my understanding of the ethos of our time and the narratives that new teachers must contend with as they navigate their roles and responsibilities.

My approach to the literature review requires a detailed explanation because my semi-systematic literature review was not merely a contextualization of my research; it was an integral part of the research itself. Indeed, it was because the literature review felt so consequential to this project that I decided to apply the same analytical procedure to the literature as I apply to the participants' stories: creating poetry. The poetic analysis of the literature was inspired by Prendergast (2006) and Vincent (2020), who use poetry to showcase previous research.

In the spirit of openness, I abstained from developing a codified, regimented method for analyzing the literature. This refrain from creating a strict plan for approaching the data is apparently common amongst many post-qualitative researchers (Kuby, 2017). To begin my creative process of producing a literature-voiced suite of poetry, I copied lines from especially informative peer-reviewed articles into my journal and returned to them when I felt the call to write poems and work them into a piece. If I did not directly copy the text, I would sit with it for a few moments after finishing and then allow my poetic muscle (see Faulkner, 2019) to create something in my journal. After filling a notebook with poetry fragments and half-completed citations, I focused on identifying recurring ideas/themes/concepts that I had evidently been drawn to write about.

I found I often referenced movement, change, and tension within the field. I blended, manipulated, and played with the poetry and prose fragments until I created three long poems, which were built from sentences directly taken from the literature and my own musings. I used footnotes to keep track of where I sourced certain lines, thereby avoiding plagiarism, and I included them in the final product, similarly to Prendergast (2006). The poems are written in response to and in reflection of the literature, showing how literacy research and discourses around literacy have affected me, as a reader, researcher, and educator (see Perry, 2019). They distill the structure and approach to the semi-systematic literature review, as well as the meanings of literacy discussed therein.

The goal of this project was to meet with three to five participants twice for one-hour-long interviews within a two-week timeframe. All questions were designed to be open-ended and grounded in language that is common to the participants. The first interview focused on contextualizing questions, and the second interview aimed to give participants an opportunity to

expand, elaborate, or clarify their thoughts and, as such, served as a form of member checking. The second interview was embedded in the research design in recognition that reflection cannot and should not be rushed. The time between the interviews was intended to give participants an opportunity to reflect on what was discussed in the first session and, if necessary, amend it, thereby giving them some control over how their stories are represented in the final project.

These meetings followed the structure of one-on-one semi-structured phenomenological interviews as recommended by Bevan (2014). They began with descriptive/narrative context questions to gauge participants' attitudes and key contextual information, such as the grades and subjects they were currently teaching and their opinions on technology use in the classroom. These interviews were supported by descriptive questions to initiate critical, reflexive dialogue about the strengths and areas for improvement of today's youth. Each interview concluded with what Bevan (2014) identifies as imaginative variation, questions that clarify the participant's experience through identifying what/how particular variants influence the participants' actions or understandings. Due to the one-hour time constraint, the questions designed to clarify participants' experiences and allow them to dwell in their imagination were often saved for the second interview.

Over the course of two weeks, I met with three participants via digital online conferencing platforms. Two participants met twice within the set time frame, while one met with me only once. Follow-up communication with the participant who met with me only once occurred through email, in which they were asked to confirm that the transcript from our initial meeting accurately recorded their responses and whether they wanted to expand on their thoughts. The two participants who met for a follow-up interview were similarly asked to review the transcripts to confirm their reliability. Out of the three participants, two secured full-time

teaching contracts in Northern Ontario immediately after graduating from their Bachelor of Education programs, while one was completing their second, full-time, one-year Long Term Occasional (LTO) contract in Southern Ontario. Two of these teachers work in high schools, teaching grades 9-12, while one is a grade 7 teacher. Two are employed within the Catholic school system, while one works for the public board. Each of these participants was eager to discuss their students' literacy skills and capabilities, while simultaneously unsure that their understandings were important enough to include within formal research.

These interviews did not aim to develop a general theory of literacy; rather, they were intended to clarify the nature of literacies in Ontario today, as understood by young people, by explicating their experiences, which is the aim of phenomenological interviewing (Bevan, 2014). Importantly, these interviews were approached with ease and flexibility, and participants were encouraged to share what they wished and to discuss what they felt was most pertinent. The second interview was even less structured than the previous. As a result, the poems sourced from the interview process can largely be defined as dialogue poems (Faulker, 2019), poetry that reflects the most poignant moments of the conversation and reflects larger cultural conversations currently unfolding in educational circles, such as those surrounding technology.

In honour of the research question, "How are the dominant social and academic understandings surrounding English 'literacy' affecting teachers born within the Zillennial generation?" I listened for references to educational concepts and professional material, any allusion to dominant discourses, as well as evocative phrases, metaphors, and personal revelations as they unfolded during the interviews (Faulkner, 2019). I tuned into the presence of emotions: moments where the interviewee expressed frustration, exasperation, passion, or anything else. These resulting *vox participare* poems reflect the memories, present experiences,

and hopes/fears (Prendergast, 2006) of these young, early-career educators. The shape of the poem, how I arranged the words on the page, aimed to honour the pace of the speaker's language and the emotion in their voice at the time of the interview (Vincent, 2021).

Although the technology that facilitated the interview certainly disrupted my ability to fully perceive the physicality of the participants' emotions, I still noticed how they shifted in their chairs, how their eyebrows furrowed during thought, and how their voices shifted from question to question. In sorting out the found poetry and pursuing my poetic analysis (Faulkner, 2019), I dwelled in the sensations that were provoked by the interview (Perry, 2019); the ways that participants reflected their (dis)comfort discussing the phenomenon of literacy, their frustration with discussing students' areas for improvement, their incredulity when discussing students' strengths, all feelings revealed through their body language, tone of voice, and speed of speech. Passion, fear, frustration, hesitation, and confidence were what I repeatedly noted as I received their stories. I also noted the sensations *I* experienced while listening and later when reading their words. I felt reverence, disappointment, confusion, excitement, and nostalgia. I decided that my poems ought to reflect the key emotions that emerged from the interview, honouring this project's interest in the affective dimensions of literacy pedagogies.

I built the poems from the words and phrases in the transcripts that best reflected these feelings, along with the notes I made in my notebook during the interviews. Although dozens of poems were made, the ones that made the final version of this project are those that focus on the understandings, phrases, and emotion revealed by each participant, such as the description of the teaching profession being a battle, the role of teacher being like a cop, and the guilt surrounding the belief that they are not adequately fulfilling all their duties and responsibilities as educators. It is the hope that these poems work independently and in unity to represent the look and feel of

Ontario intermediate and secondary classrooms in the ethos of our time. The reader is once again encouraged to read the poetry in this work with an open mind and willingness to see *multiple* meanings. Allow the poems to paint a picture of what intermediate and senior classrooms in Ontario look and feel like today and allow them to challenge your expectations and affirm your suspicions. Read the poems about practice after reading the poems about theory and consider how they come together to create a murky puddle of literacy – and then recall that the sludge is what novice, early career educators are swimming in and guiding their students through.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

This chapter reviews the evolution of literacy as a concept within academic/educational discourse to illustrate how literacy research, like poetic inquiry, is a field that is constantly evolving (Borhani, 2021; Masny, 2012; Vincent, 2018). This chapter then covers how literacy is defined by the Ontario Ministry of Education and how teachers emerge in the Ontario education system. It concludes with a brief discussion of teacher identity research, focusing on generational theory and its application to scholarship on learner identity. Given the extensive body of research on literacy in English-speaking contexts, this semi-systematic literature review (Snyder, 2019) focuses on the leading schools of thought that have defined literacy scholarship over the last 30 years. Although numerous, the various points of discussion in this chapter are necessary to explore, however briefly, to contextualize the understandings of/surrounding literacy and teaching that the participants in this study have.

The Turns in Literacy Scholarship

According to Green and Cormack (2015), history is often overlooked in the field of literacy scholarship in favour of discussions of the present and the future. The decision was made that the past cannot be sidelined in the present study because history “can be used to show that things can change” (p. 200), and it is this project’s desire to explore how the various changes within literacy discourse and curriculum have affected teachers and to dwell in the newness – or oldness – of their interpretations. As Leu et al. (2013) explain, literacy is “ephemeral, continuously being redefined by a changing context” (p. 1151). This positioning of literacy as ephemeral or as a concept that is “unfinished” (Pahl & Pool, 2020, p. 38) is valuable to highlight as we aim to resist the negative rhetoric that pervades contemporary educational discourse, particularly in relation to literacy (Aukerman Aiello, 2023; Graff, 2024).

Kuby et al. (2018) explain that literacy research is best understood as a field of scholarship that has undergone many “turns,” acknowledging the “cognitive, linguistic, sociocultural, affective, critical, multimodal, and digital” turns specifically, adding that more recently, there has been a “material turn” (p. 25). Similarly, Lenters and McDermott (2020) note movement in literacy research, noting the sociocultural, sociolinguistic, multimodal, and critical turns “to name a few” (p. 5). Each development in literacy scholarship, fueled by advances in digital technology and global relations, has impacted curriculum development and subsequent research in education (Leander & Boldt, 2013; Pahl & Rowsell, 2012). The theoretical turns are valuable to reflect upon as they explain how “what counts as literacy” has evolved over time (Bloome & Greene, 2015; Mills & Stornaiuolo, 2018) and because they have had a substantial influence on classroom pedagogies in that they affect what teachers are led to notice about their students and how they assess their skills (Ellis & Simpson, 2020).

It is interesting to attend to the origins of the concept of literacy. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term “literacy” first appeared in the English lexicon in the 1880s, derived directly from “illiteracy” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). It is notable that literacy, as a concept, was forged in this relational manner, out of concern for differences in cognitive ability. Prior to “the social turn” (Gee, 1999), as will be discussed in what follows, literacy was largely defined by reading and writing text-based resources, and, more importantly, conceptualized as something that “people did inside their heads” (Gee, 2015). In social and academic discourses, it was a psychological phenomenon with innate power, which an individual acquired at some point in their learning life and could thereafter become successful (Graff, 2022). It would be inaccurate to say that this view of literacy no longer exists, as our standardized ways of assessing literacy and the notion of “school-readiness” rest on this idea that literacy is a cognitive function (see

Masny, 2012, p. 16). Yet it has been largely disenfranchised by many educational professionals, if not by educational institutions (Ahn et al., 2025).

The late twentieth century witnessed the emergence of new perspectives on literacy and new debates about literacy education (Rowse & Walsh, 2011). Many, if not all, of the more recent theories about literacy that have emerged in the twenty-first century have been justified—if not made possible—by the turn towards sociocultural theories in literacy scholarship, nearly a century after the term “literacy” first appeared in the English vernacular. According to Rowse and Walsh (2011), the “new” way of discussing literacy around the turn of the century, which stemmed from the popularity of sociocultural theory, represented a “radical social and semiotic” change (p. 55). It was perceived as radical because, apparently, for the first time since the concept of “literacy” emerged in popular educational and social discourse, the notion that it is a thing with inherent power, or as a thing-in-itself distinct from practice or location, began to be questioned.

When reviewing the development of literacy scholarship over time, there is almost always a reference to the period when Brian Street, an anthropologist, identified the so-called autonomous and ideological models of literacy (see Street, 1997; 2003). The autonomous model of literacy, or the viewing of literacy as an autonomous entity, as it was initially conceived, is not concerned with context or practice because this model positions literacy as a universal and stable concept. It is a thing with power that exists apart from other elements of lived experience, a thing “tied exclusively with schooling” (Rowse & Pahl, 2015, p. 13). Conceptualized in this way, to teach literacy, an educator requires knowledge of phonics, print and text structures, letter writing, and other related skills, such as decoding, almost exclusively. These things make a person literate, which, from this perspective, is considered a universally experienced phenomenon.

Alternatively, the ideological model of literacy “argues that literacy not only varies with social context and with cultural norms and discourses regarding, for instance, identity, gender and belief, but that its uses and meanings are always embedded in relations of power” (Street, 1997, p. 48). In this regard, literacy is not only knowing how to read or write but “knowing how to proceed in specific social interactions” (Gee, 1999, p. 3). Therefore, literacy encompasses a “repertoire of changing practices for communicating purposefully in multiple social and cultural contexts” (Mills, 2010, p. 247). While we may be inclined to take it for granted that this is widely understood, it is worth remembering that this notion took some time to gain traction in education and is still not always emphasized.

Prior to the social turn, which Gee (1999) famously called the shift towards considering literacy as something nestled within social, cultural, historical, political, and economic contexts that emerged in the 1980s, there was a largely unquestioned understanding that literacy was an stable and universal cognitive function that referred to knowing how to read and write print or text based content (Graff, 2022). A byproduct of this view was the understanding that attaining a specific skill set enabled an individual or group to exert some level of power in society (Bloome & Green, 2015). The social turn called attention to the more complex meanings of “literacy,” and the issues of marketing literacy as the gateway to “limitless power” became increasingly discussed (Graff, 2022). Considering it this way, we see how the social turn in literacy scholarship is closely related to developments in critical theory, or, more specifically, rooted in the era when language began to be understood as something used to structure and control social relationships and social institutions (Pahl & Rowsell, 2012). The notion of a critical literacy arose in this era. The linguistic turn in literacy scholarship, as noted by Bloome and Green (2015), is closely intertwined with the social turn. It was through the study of how people use

language in their everyday practices that the autonomous model of literacy was challenged (Pahl & Pool, 2020). The social and linguistic turn is understood as the time when researchers and practitioners came to see that the practices or events that led someone to become “literate” varied across different social and cultural contexts.

The developments in literacy research at the end of the twentieth century directly followed broader changes in the world's communicational landscapes, as globalization brought multiple languages into closer proximity and multimodal means of communication grew in popularity (Pahl & Rowsell, 2012). Two important schools of thought emerged from the new direction for discussing and recognizing literacy as a social practice: the capitalized New Literacy Studies (often referred to as NLS) and the pedagogy of multiliteracies, both of which arose from the application of critical sociocultural theory to literacy (Perry, 2012) or, framed another way, the view of literacy as a social practice (Masny, 2012). The bodies of work that define these philosophical schools have had an immense impact on literacy research, curriculum, and assessment strategies (Graff, 2022; Leander & Boldt, 2013).

At the heart of NLS is the understanding that literacy cannot be studied in a passive or decontextualized manner. The core argument from NLS is that literacy itself is neither agentic nor capable of conferring power on people or groups. Rather, it is how people *use* their literacy that allows them to gain power (Prinsloo, 2005). Therefore, “what literacy is” – which differs between different groups – is best understood through the examination of the texts that mediate or represent social events, and crucially, the meaning of these texts is “determined by the social, cultural, historical, and institutional practices of different groups of people” (Gee, 2015, p. 44). This is why an artifact of literacy (see Pahl & Rowsell, 2012, p. 49) can never be studied without consideration for the context that produced it, because communication is “never isolated from

social influences” (Prinsloo, 2005, p. 4). Artifacts of social relations, in this view, are always representational of what literacy is or what it means to be literate.

NLS scholars emphasize that it is beneficial to consider literacy as something plural, because there are “different ways of using written language within different sorts of sociocultural practices” (Gee, 2015, p. 44). Street (1997) clarifies that discussing multiple literacies is valuable because the pluralization of the term reminds us that there is no single form of literacy that can be transplanted into new environments, as each community has its own communicative strategies. The concept of literacies emerged from observations of the diverse range of literacy practices worldwide, as well as the various literacies that can coexist within the same community. There are multiple literacies because there are multiple social realities, and within those realities, individuals practice literacy skills in different ways. Through this perspective, we can see how NLS encourages place-based pedagogies (Prinsloo, 2005), as it leads teachers to consider the texts that students encounter outside of school. Critically, however, when the field of NLS was formed, it was still acutely concerned with written forms of communication (Gee, 2015).

Pahl and Rowsell (2012) claim that the field of NLS led to the field of multiliteracies (p. 8). Perry (2012) instead explains that the field of multiliteracies is “both derived *and* distinct” from NLS (p. 58, emphasis added). Masny (2012) clarifies that it is not necessary to consider one as emergent from the other, but rather to view both as offshoots from the perspective of literacy as a social practice that exists in relation to one another. Though it is hard to disagree that they are indeed overlapping frameworks (Mangen & van der Weel, 2016), it is beneficial to consider how they simultaneously exist as separate frameworks for approaching/conceptualizing literacy when forming one’s epistemic understanding of the field of literacy scholarship.

In contrast to NLS, within the field of multiliteracies, literacy is recognized as having multiple variations because there are various ways to make meaning through different visual, audio, spatial, behavioural, and gestural modes (Leander & Boldt, 2013). It stems from observations around the multiplicity of communication strategies and of the diversity of languages and cultures, made visible by globalization and digital developments. It, like NLS, emerged at the end of the twentieth century and shares the same concern for recognizing social and linguistic diversity (Mills, 2010; Perry, 2012). However, the core argument of multiliteracies is that the developments in society and communication practices at that time did not merely warrant a new way of discussing literacy, but a new way of understanding literacy altogether. This was because, by that time, people could represent themselves in ways that expanded beyond linguistic conventions: they could use a wide range of communication modes, affecting the very meaning of literacy (Perry, 2012; Rowsell & Walsh, 2011).

The theory of multiliteracies was brought forth by a group of linguists, educators, and theorists known as the New London Group. This group met in 1994 to ask the question: “What constitutes appropriate literacy teaching in the context of the ever more critical factors of local diversity and global connectedness?” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p.3). This question remains relevant thirty years later. While the field of multiliteracies holds that literacy is a social practice, it also suggests that there are multiple literacies because people use multiple channels of communication in their everyday lives (Collier & Rowsell, 2020). Each of these literacies has its own grammar, and they should all be honoured in the classroom.

Notably, the theory of multiliteracies emerged as a pedagogical approach (Mills, 2011). As a school of thought, multiliteracies provides a “programmatic manifesto” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2013, p. 2) that posits that literacy instruction needs to serve students in such a way that helps

them succeed in the “new economy” (p. 6) of the twenty-first century. This means that literacy lessons need to teach much more than print-based reading and writing; educators must reach beyond traditional literary resources in this pluralized view of literacy. The New London Group conceptualized texts as “any artifact of production broadly conceived” (Leander & Boldt, 2013, p. 24). Perry (2012) explains that “those who ascribe to the multiliteracies perspective actively reject definitions of literacy that focus solely on print or written texts and instead view literacy as involving multiple modes of visual, gestural, spatial, and other forms of representation” (p. 58-59). Mills (2011) clarifies that the fundamental position of the theory of multiliteracies is that literacy programs that solely focus on teaching basic literacy skills, whole language, critical literacy, or indeed follow any other singular approach to literacy, ultimately fail to help students meaningfully participate in society, a society that constantly uses multiple modes – i.e., visual, gestural, auditorial, etc., – in day to day communication.

The multimodal turn in literacy scholarship followed the establishment of the multiliteracies framework. As did the digital turn, because, as Leander and Boldt (2013) explain, in envisioning a “grammar” for using technological and multimodal forms of communication, the New London Group added legitimacy to the study of behaviour in online environments within the context of literacy research and pedagogy. The multiliteracies pedagogy leads teachers to focus on “meaning making in real-world contexts” (Mills, 2011, p. 15), which inevitably means focusing on multimodal means of communication and digital spaces, as such is the nature of most people’s everyday literacies (Rowse & Pahl, 2020). Rowse and Walsh (2011) clarify that “multiliteracies scholars claim that the screen governs our understanding of the world and curricula need to reflect this dramatic shift in our ideological and interpretative frame” (p. 56). As such, educators who align with the multiliteracies framework refrain from privileging text-

based resources over visual, auditory, spatial, and gestural modes of expression, recognizing that everyday literacy in today's contexts *is* a multimodal literacy (Watts-Taffe, 2022). While multimodal literacy is a popular area of teaching and learning in today's contexts, including within the Ontario education system, misunderstandings persist about the concept and barriers to prioritizing it in the classroom (Loerts & Belcher, 2024).

Understandably, the digital turn in literacy scholarship directly follows the social, linguistic, and multimodal turns. As social life and regular communication increasingly shifted into online environments, there was a call to consider the dimensions of literacy in these spaces and to examine how “reading” means something different there (see Mangen & van der Weel, 2016). Mills (2010) recognizes the period of 1999 to 2009 as the “years in which the nexus between literacy and technology has become an important and recognized strand of literacy research” (p. 247). In this era, a plethora of research has emerged, contributing to the growing understanding of youth's digital practices and how these practices are transforming our conceptions of, and pedagogical approaches to, literacy.

As the social turn in literacy scholarship transformed the very meaning of literacy, so did the digital turn. It is an extremely identifiable turn in literacy scholarship, as by a certain point, scholars from a variety of different theoretical backgrounds had to agree that “old logics of literacy and teaching are profoundly challenged by this new media environment” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2013, p. 8). By the turn of the decade, the proliferation of digital tools and multimodal means of communication meant that there was little need to defend the multiliteracies theories or, at the very least, a multimodal approach to literacy instruction (see Mills, 2011, p. 123). Digital advancements also necessitated that the theories of literacy and semiotics derived from NLS needed to evolve (Mills, 2010). In the era of scholarship identified by Mills (2010) as the

digital turn, we see greater support for the idea of a unique “digital” or technological literacy, though what it entails certainly differs.

Henrichsen and Coombs (2014) suggest that the concept of digital literacy can be envisioned as an arena, within which the pedagogy of multiliteracies and the field of NLS reside (p. 2). Whether or not we accept that NLS and the pedagogy of multiliteracies exist within it, the metaphor of digital literacy as an arena is helpful because it reminds us that there are multiple ways of understanding and discussing literacy within a “digitally networked multimodal world” (Huber et al., 2015, p. 45). These different ways can be held in all their complexity and diversity, without comparing or diminishing any of them, and we can accept these various approaches while remaining open to how digital media - and therefore digital literacy - continues to evolve (Burnett, 2015). There is room to consider all views of literacy in a globally and digitally diverse world without diminishing any of them.

At risk of oversimplifying the various interpretations of digital literacy (see Henrichsen & Coombs, 2014), we may say there are two critical views of this phenomenon: one that says we apply our “conventional” literacy skills to online environments, and the other that posits we use a distinct set of skills when we operate in digital environments. Various observations fuel the debates behind these positions. Some claim that the non-linear nature of reading in digital environments necessitates a set of critical and unique skills to navigate those discontinuous spaces (Mangen & van der Weel, 2016), and some discuss the notable agency and power of the user in online environments as evidence of a distinct *digital* literacy (see Ito et al., 2009). There has been sufficient discussion of the inadequacy of traditional approaches to literacy instruction in preparing youth to navigate digital media (see Burnett, 2011), which has propelled the concept of “digital literacy” into a curricular aim. Indeed, in countries worldwide, “digital literacy” is

included in curricula, as it has become synonymous with “relevant” or “quality” education (see Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2023).

Though for as long as it has been promoted as something teachers must help students develop, there has been tension; many educators across the different levels of education have felt unsure about how to integrate technology into their classroom and digital media into their lessons (Hao & Lee, 2015; Nagel et al., 2023; Saxena, 2017). It is evident that opinions on how to effectively incorporate digital media into learning environments in ways that meet students’ learning needs vary by teachers’ generational attributes and their experiences with technology (Hatfield, 2025; Höfrová et al., 2024; Smith & Storrs, 2023).

Unfortunately, it is outside the scope of this paper to review all the different ways of defining digital literacies. What is key to highlight is that the digital turn in literacy scholarship has deeply affected “what it means to be literate” (Vorobel et al., 2021), discussing adolescent literacy instruction (Ehret & Hollett, 2014), teacher identity (Burnett, 2011), and for the previous theories that helped clarify that literacy is more than an autonomous entity (see Mills & Stornaiuolo, 2018). The proliferation of digital infrastructure, algorithms, and online services—indeed, all the technological developments of recent years—has led many scholars to recognize that there are questions surrounding literacy that previous theories in the field cannot account for or answer (Leander & Burriss, 2020). This has facilitated a new direction for literacy scholarship, a movement that was certainly made possible by the social, linguistic, multimodal, and digital turns, although it expands beyond the sociocultural lens that has enabled the previous turns (Kuby, 2017). The influence of these turns and their value cannot be understated. However, a paradigm shift has occurred in literacy research, seemingly in response to the digital turn’s impact on our understanding of literacy and the observation that digital, multimodal forms of

communication possess an affective intensity and therefore challenge previous understandings of literacy (Ehret & Leander, 2019; Rowsell & Trzecek, 2020).

As Perry (2012) explains, “sociocultural perspectives are limited in their ability to explain what actually happens when an individual learns to read and write – that is, when someone learns how to decode, encode, and otherwise make sense of written text” (p. 65). There is increased interest in how these moments of learning affect well-being and understanding, namely because there is increased awareness that “singular and everyday acts of writing, new media making and interpreting texts *all produce discourses that matter*” (Ehret & Leander, 2019, p. 10, emphasis added). Moreover, sociocultural theories strongly emphasize the role of humans and human agency in literacy events and practices (Kuby et al., 2018; Kuby, 2017), and developments in algorithms and AI have led many to discuss how humans do not always control what they read or witness in online environments, nor choose how they create meaning (Burriss & Leander, 2024). These technological changes have profoundly impacted the meaning of critical literacy (Ehret, 2024; Leander & Burriss, 2020).

As initial developments in digital media at the turn of the century seemingly rendered traditional notions of literacy anachronistic (Kalantzis & Cope, 2025), it appears that, in many respects, the ongoing digital evolution has made those early twentieth-century discussions of literacy feel somewhat antiquated as well. These more recent turns have been facilitated by questions surrounding the uncontrollability of literacy (Ehret & Rowsell, 2021), the limits of representational form and of thinking of literacy as something developed in a linear fashion (Dernikos et al., 2023), and dismantlement of the notion that literacy can always be reduced to the status of a rational grammar that can mediate or explain all experiences that we have with making meaning (Leander & Boldt, 2013).

The questions scholars are now asking about literacy demonstrate a shift away from humanist traditions in literacy scholarship (Burriss & Leander, 2024) toward posthumanist thinking (Kuby et al., 2018). According to Lemieux (2020), posthumanist thought “has been at the core of literacy research in recent years” (p. 7), displacing sociocultural theories. Lin and Li (2021) provide a strong summary of this paradigmatic shift. This theoretical development is reflected in the so-called “affect turn” (Leander & Ehret, 2019), which is also recognized as the material turn (Pahl & Escot, 2015) or the turn towards new materialism (Dernikos et al., 2023). As Kuby et al. (2018) explain, these turns operate under different names but reflect the same rejection of the interpretivist approaches to literacy that define the previous turns and share a passion for dwelling in the becomings, movement, fluidity, and feel of literacies.

The posthuman framework encourages researchers—and educators—to spend more time recognizing how “materials, time, space, and people intra-act in the world,” which produces “new literacies, new truths, new relationships, new realities” (Kuby et al., 2018, p. 35). This perspective leads to the recognition of the everyday actions of most people that go beyond reading or writing texts, or indeed any linguistic form, yet still define their communicative practices (Pahl & Escott, 2015) as everyday literacy practices. Examples of these actions range from scrolling through social media (Ehret, 2024) to putting on a puppet show (Kuby et al., 2018) or completing nail art (Pahl & Escott, 2015). In this way, we can see how the multimodal and digital turn paved the way for this new era of theorizing literacy.

To analyze the materiality of literacy, it is necessary to adopt the foundational positions of New Literacy Studies and the theory of multiliteracies, namely, the view of literacy as a social practice and the significance of multimodality (Pahl & Escot, 2015). But it is also necessary to pursue new paths for literacy research that depart from the original course set by NLS (Ehret &

Rowse, 2021). Extending beyond the foundations of these previous theories by “making materiality a salient feature in an analytic frame” (Pahl & Escott, 2015, p. 490), teachers are invited to better honour their students’ lived, out-of-school literacy experiences, but more specifically, the way children and young people “draw on a wide range of semiotic repertoires in order to create meaning” (p. 492). While an attention to the materiality of everyday literacies is present in other eras of literacy scholarship (Pahl & Rowse, 2012) - indeed, an attention to materiality was the fuel that lit the multiliteracies fire and the very idea that literacy is a practice-based and socially constructed phenomenon requires a consideration of the materials that facilitate literacy practice - discussions around the materiality of literacy today include an awareness of the *immaterial* dimensions of our meaning-making processes (Burnett, 2015). This involves attention to the relationships between literacies and things, and between literacies and spaces. With an openness to the influences of relationships within the creation of literacies, we see why meanings are always multiple, why unintended meanings can emerge and stabilize, and why literacy/ies is never a simple concept – or at least, with an awareness of the discussions around these observations, we can see why an increasing amount of scholars are discussing why literacy is a concept that is unfinished (see Pahl & Rowse, 2020).

The material and affective turns in literacy scholarship are still actively unfolding and being defined (Ehret & Rowse, 2021). Yet the arguments that literacies in our current society are more “mobile, instantaneous, and pervasive” (Lemieux, 2020, p. 29) than ever before, and that too many previous conceptions of literacy have been rooted in epistemological positions that do not honour “the ontological aspects of literacies,” (Toohey et al., 2020, p. 23) have led to enough widespread discussion to identify these turns. The importance of the affective and material turns is found in the perspective that such frameworks, which are paradigmatically

posthuman (Leander & Boldt, 2013; Kuby, 2017; Kuby et al., 2018), “help [us] imagine how our lessons, classes, and schools might be organized to better support equitable student learning” (Nicols & Compano, 2017, p. 249). Dernikos et al. (2023) explain that developments in literacy discourse and the advent of the affect/materialist turn reflect a shift away from “white sensibilities” and Eurocentric frameworks in literacy scholarship, and, as such, help us better honour other ways of knowing that previous frameworks have reduced and devalued.

These turns circulate around the understanding that instead of discussing literacy as something that is always representational of human experience, of something that can be reduced to a rational grammar in which all members of a community come to have and then operate within, we can think of “literacy” as something that is always come to be known differently. Literacy is an assemblage of feelings, embodied experiences, histories, observations, cultural traditions, spaces, politics, and all the other experiences and knowledges that we call upon when we aim to make meaning from a resource (whether that resource be an Manga book, Instagram reel, online shopping portal, storefront sign, graffiti on a dumpster, a mural, rap song, speech, or t-shirt design) (Burnett, 2011; Dernikos et al., 2023; Ehret, 2024; Ehret & Leander, 2019; Leander & Boldt, 2013; Masny & Cole, 2012; Pahl & Escot, 2015). The affective turn in literacy research reminds us to consider the sensations that arise when a reader encounters a text and to reflect on the implications of the sensations provoked (Perry, 2019).

When we open ourselves up to the idea of literacy as something more than reducible to rationalist terms, we accept that there are always unintended meanings, manifestations, and emotional connections associated with literacy practices. This emergent way of conceptualizing literacy has immense potential to transform the intermediate and secondary classroom (Lenters & McDermott, 2020). In the current era of literacy scholarship, it is this focus on how literacies are

formed in everyday spaces, how they affect our understanding of the world, and how they cannot be properly assessed through traditional schooling approaches that is developing (Perry, 2019). It remains unclear how practitioners have navigated the tension of honouring these new ways of becoming literate, of the felt intensities of literacies, and the demands of their curriculum and governing bodies.

Thus far, this chapter has worked to show the leading ways in which literacy has been discussed among theorists since the turn of the twenty-first century. A long view of the evolving theorizations of literacy reminds us that literacy is a concept that is always incomplete, or, as Lue et al. (2013) call it, deictic. As the materiality of literacy evolves and shifts, and social relations change, ongoing research into conceptions of literacy is always warranted. By dwelling in the ways literacies are being conceptualized, negotiated, and honoured by teachers - specifically young teachers - in the contemporary classroom, as this research seeks to do, we are working to understand “the real-world ways in which real people actually engage with real texts” (Perry, 2012, p. 62) and therefore practice literacy. This concern for the “real” seems to have, in part, fueled the various turns in literacy scholarship, especially the more recent ones. These turns matter because, as Street (1997) acknowledges, “we all have to live with the psychological and social consequences of the new theories” (p. 52). The present study aims to contribute to the community of scholars examining how the “faraway” discourse surrounding literacy is present and influences the “everyday” understandings of literacy (Hamilton, 2015, p. 505), specifically within Ontario schools.

What must be remembered about the Ontario education system is that teachers bear the onus of transforming the curriculum into instruction (Jackson, 2025). While the curriculum significantly influences teachers’ literacy practices and beliefs (Gallagher et al., 2016), what

teachers notice and understand about literacy is influenced by their professional and personal knowledge and experience (Borti, 2023; Ellis & Simpson, 2020). This makes the training and induction of new teachers in Ontario relevant to this study and adds relevance to the participants' generational identities. This chapter now turns to how teachers are trained in Ontario and the province's approaches to literacy, before further contextualizing this work in teacher identity scholarship.

Ontario Teacher Training and the Curriculum

While the Ministry of Education claims that the “heart of literacy instruction” resides in language courses (see Ontario Ministry of Education, 2023, p. 60), the Ministry also mandates that “literacy needs to be explicitly taught in all subjects” (Ontario Ministry of Education, n.d.). As such, we may note the century-old belief that “every teacher is a teacher of reading” (Alverman & Moje, 2019) at the foundation of the Ontario curriculum. However, as Alverman and Moje (2019) emphasize, being a “teacher of reading” is no simple matter, especially at the adolescent level. It requires personal and professional knowledge. Ostensibly in recognition of this - or perhaps in dismissal of it, depending on one's outlook - the Ontario Ministry of Education has devoted much attention to addressing and then increasing teacher capacity in literacy over the last few decades (Gallagher et al., 2016).

The professional knowledge and skills of teachers have been a matter of acute concern for the Ministry of Education since at least 2004, as noted by Gallagher et al. (2016). Teachers' literacy knowledge has been especially under scrutiny in recent social and educational discourse, particularly since the publication of the *Right to Read Inquiry Report*, which highlighted the perceived inadequacy of many teachers' skills and teacher-training programs (see Cummins, 2023). Teacher training programs and approaches to professional development in Ontario have undergone significant changes in response to the report (Friesen & Hennessy, 2024) and since

the COVID-19 pandemic (Danyluk et al., 2022; Falkenberg, 2015; Kitchen & Petrarca, 2022). Some dimensions of teacher training and professional development are reviewed here before the Ontario curriculum is reviewed to further contextualize the participants' understandings.

Teacher training. At the time of this study, all accredited Ontario teacher education programs are four-semester post-baccalaureate degrees. While there is variation, all university-based Ontario teacher-education programs prepare teachers in training (known as pre-service teachers or teacher candidates) in educational theory and pedagogical practices through a combination of coursework, practicum experiences, and mentorship from teacher educators and other educational professionals (Kitchen & Petrarca, 2022). While all teacher candidates in Ontario must complete a minimum 80-day practicum in Ontario-certified schools to become a qualified member of the Ontario College of Teachers, other requirements for graduation vary based on program division, grade level, and/or subject area. Kitchen and Petrarca (2022) provide an informative summary of the various teacher-training programs in Ontario. As of 2025, to become a qualified teacher of general education in Ontario, you must have obtained a bachelor's degree from a postsecondary institution, complete an official teacher training program, and register with the Ontario College of Teachers and complete the Ontario College of Teachers' training modules. (Ontario College of Teachers, 2025a)

The exception to this path to becoming an educator is if a teacher decides to pursue a Technology Education Teacher Program, which qualifies them to teach grade 9-12 technology education classes (Ontario College of Teachers, 2025b). In this case, individuals can apply to an accredited teacher education program after accumulating at least five years of relevant work experience in the business or industry related to the technology (Ontario College of Teachers, 2025b). Although professionals pursuing this route to becoming a teacher receive much of the

same training in educational philosophies and pedagogical methodologies as individuals pursuing general education teacher certification, those on the path to becoming technology education teachers enroll in distinct programs (see Ontario College of Teachers, 2025a, 2025b). Teachers who are qualified in technology education are not recruited for this project.

Individuals pursuing a career as a general education teacher in Ontario initially choose to become qualified in the two consecutive divisions of education. The options are primary/junior (kindergarten to Grade 6), junior/intermediate (Grades 4 to 10) or intermediate/senior (Grades 7 to 12) (Ontario College of Teachers, 2025a). They can become qualified in other divisions by taking additional courses after graduation from their teacher training program. Teachers seeking accreditation in the intermediate/senior divisions require specific training in at least two disciplines, which constitute teachable subjects in Ontario (e.g., chemistry and physics, English and history, general science and physical education, etc.). This means teacher candidates must have attained applicable post-secondary qualifications prior to beginning their teacher training programs. Intermediate/senior teachers enroll in courses that teach the curriculum and leading instructional methods of their teachable subjects (Ontario College of Teachers, 2025a).

While teachers pursuing primary or junior qualifications receive much training in areas that relate to numeracy and literacy, as well as exposure to all subjects that are taught from Kindergarten to grade 6, the focus of intermediate/senior programs is often on preparing teachers to teach specific content areas, or the literacies of their teachable subjects (e.g., financial literacy for math educators). Each intermediate/senior program in Ontario mandates at least one course devoted to literacy or language development (Kitchen & Petrarca, 2022), and teacher candidates enrol in self-chosen electives that may focus on literacy/ies. As previously mentioned, there is

significant diversity across teacher education programs, with each program adopting different pedagogical approaches and educational philosophies.

Teacher education has been and continues to be a “highly scrutinized domain” (Stewart et al., 2021, p. 311). In Canada, education is a provincial or territorial jurisdiction, except for on-reserve education, which falls under federal control. Consequently, there are significant differences between how the various provinces educate their teachers (Danyluk et al., 2022). Teacher education programs have a responsibility to train educators to navigate their province's education system effectively. In Ontario, teacher education has undergone significant changes over recent years in terms of enrolment numbers, program length, practicum adaptations, and key areas of focus (Falkenberg, 2015; Kitchen & Petrarca, 2022; Petrarca & Kitchen, 2017). Many of these changes align with the province's institutional reforms and curriculum developments (Boyd, 2021; Kutsyuruba et al., 2024).

To help streamline the teachers' skills after graduation from their programs, the Ontario government mandates a new teacher induction and mentoring program, known as NTIP (Kutsyuruba et al., 2024). The Ministry defines new teachers as educators hired into their first permanent position or first-year Long Term Occasional Teachers with assignments of 97 days or longer. However, any teacher in their first 5 years is eligible for NTIP support (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2021). NTIP was first launched in 2005-2006 as part of the larger reforms within the Ontario education system at the time, although it has undergone consistent revisions since its establishment (Boyd, 2021). Many of the program's changes have resulted from broader changes to the provincial school system.

Though the Ministry mandates and funds NTIP training, it is a school-based program; school leaders are responsible for assessing the needs of new teachers and collaborating with

them to develop individualized growth plans, while school boards are responsible for submitting plans and reports to the Ministry, as well as ensuring new teachers are participating in Ministry-level programming. Overall, the NTIP program “provides professional support to help new teachers develop the requisite skills and knowledge to be effective as teachers in Ontario” (Kutsyuruba et al., 2024, p.6), as it builds upon and complements initial teacher education programs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019). The four core goals of the NTIP program are to build efficacy, confidence, institutional practice, and commitment to continuous learning, “for the purpose of improving student well-being and learning” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019, p. 2).

It is essential to acknowledge the various factors that shape a teacher's literacy pedagogy before proceeding with this discussion. These factors include teacher education, their beliefs, personal life experiences, professional experiences in the field, and their pedagogical knowledge (Clark et al., 2013). The NTIP program is an important influence to consider in the context of this present study. Teachers who have yet to begin the program, those in the middle of completing it, and those who have successfully finished their training may employ different approaches to literacy pedagogy for various reasons. While the NTIP program does not necessarily lead to additional training in literacy instruction, it can if an individual requires it based on the principal's observations or the teacher's understanding of their strengths or areas for growth. Regardless of what it explicitly results in, its emphasis on improving self-efficacy and developing teachers' knowledge can implicitly influence a teacher's approaches to literacy instruction. This is because teacher self-efficacy has been found to be extremely influential in areas concerning literacy instruction (Ciampa & Gallagher, 2018).

As the NTIP program works to improve teachers' self-efficacy, it presumably has a significant influence on new teachers' relationships with literacy curriculum and pedagogy. Moreover, given that many of the educational reforms implemented in recent years in Ontario have been framed in terms of student success, and student success is closely intertwined with literacy in Ontario (Gallagher et al., 2016), the NTIP program is likely to address teachers' skills and knowledge in literacy instruction. It is also worth noting that the *Right to Read* Inquiry Report mentions that the NTIP program is a means to address the knowledge gaps in new teachers' understanding of early reading instruction (2019, p. 29). While early reading instruction is not typically a concern for intermediate/senior educators, this should be mentioned here.

As the COVID-19 pandemic normalized digital online learning and teaching across all levels of education in Ontario, from kindergarten to post-secondary, remote learning and teaching practices have been a significant concern for teacher educators (Doyle-Jones et al., 2022). The ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted teacher education programs are well discussed in Danyluk et al. (2022). One of these impacts has been an increased awareness of how new communication technologies offer interesting opportunities for literacy learning and multimodal instruction. The pervasiveness of online learning in teacher education programs is assumed to significant influence on new teachers' approaches to literacy instruction.

Teacher education and professional development mandates for early career educators are relevant to this research because they are topics that are increasingly scrutinized under the deficit-oriented narratives about young people's literacy skills in the ethos of our time (Cummins, 2023) and because they directly affect how a teacher comes to assess literacy skills (Ellis & Simpson, 2020). Before reviewing teacher identity scholarship and the pertinence of

teacher identity within literacy pedagogy, this chapter elaborates on how literacy is framed within the Ontario curriculum.

The Curriculum and Literacy. A teacher's approach to enacting the curriculum depends on the educational landscape before them (Loerts & Doyle-Jones, 2024). There are numerous factors impacting the educational landscape in Ontario right now, which include issues surrounding funding (see Stuart-Hitchcox & Parker, 2025), increased Ministerial involvement (see Raveendran, 2025), teacher shortages (Council on Ontario Directors in Education, 2025; Wong, 2025), and the rollout of new curricula in some subjects and a lack of curricula updates in others. For instance, both the language curriculum for the K-8 grades and the Grade 9 English curriculum were updated in 2023; English courses from 10-12 are still following a 2007 curriculum document. This is also true for mathematics and science courses: Grades K-9 have received updated mandates in the last few years, but no development is in sight for Grades 10-12. It is likely that more curricula will be released, but their release dates have not been announced. The provincial resources that teachers are expected to navigate range from brand-new (released in 2023) to almost 20 years old (2007). It is necessary to acknowledge this before proceeding with the discussion, because it further indicates how young teachers are navigating the field in times of immense tension, and (ongoing, impeding) change.

The Ontario Ministry of Education's approach to literacy in its curricula and supporting documents has undergone substantial changes over time (Boyd, 2021; Gallagher et al., 2016). As of 2025, literacy is positioned as a cross-curricular and integrated learning aim; literacy skills are "embedded in the expectations for all subjects and disciplines of the Ontario curriculum," but it is also recognized as something that needs to be explicitly taught in all subjects (Ontario Ministry of Education, n.d, n.p). The Ministry also emphasizes the subject-specific literacy skills

students must acquire to be successful in school and beyond. Interestingly, the Ministry distinguishes digital literacy from literacy and even from critical literacy, identifying it as one of the seven transferable skills that all educators help students develop. Digital literacy, according to the Ministry, involves “the ability to solve problems using technology in a safe, legal, and ethically responsible manner” (Ontario Ministry of Education, n.d.). As a transferable skill, digital literacy is framed as something that all teachers should help all students work towards, regardless of the subject or discipline.

Equally pertinent contextual information about the Ontario education system and literacy pedagogy is the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT), which serves as the standard for assessing the literacy skills of adolescents in Ontario in grade 10. A recent analysis by Ahn et al. (2025) reveals a distinct disconnect between the current conception of literacy in the curriculum and the exam notions of literacy. This standardized test perpetuates the autonomous view of literacy, which suggests literacy is the ability to read and write; it does not allow students to demonstrate their skills through multimodal means of communication, nor does it honour the theory of multiliteracies. This is not obscured by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), the organization behind the OSSLT, as this governing body explains that “for the purpose of the OSSLT, literacy comprises the reading and writing skills required to understand reading selections and to communicate through a variety of written forms” and that “all students must attain a minimum level of literacy” to graduate from the Ontario education system (Education Quality and Accountability Office, n.d., p.1).

Communication in the OSSLT occurs through responding to selected-response questions (i.e., multiple-choice questions) and typing an opinion essay in paragraph form, as the OSSLT is computer-based (Education Quality and Accountability Office, n.d., p. 3). A student may also

have the opportunity to enrol in the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course (OSSLC), instead of taking the OSSLT, if they have been unsuccessful in passing the test after taking it at least twice, or if the principal deems it is in the best educational interest of the student to take the course rather than the test (Education Quality and Accountability Office, n.d.) This course is technically a grade twelve-level course, as the OSSLT is technically meant to be undertaken in the tenth grade; however, students outside of the grade twelve and grade ten can take the test for the first time or end up in the course (I myself, the author of this work, took the OSSLT in the 11th grade). As the OSSLC curriculum document explains, “the reading and writing competencies required by the OSSLT form the instructional and assessment core of the course” (2003, p. 3). Following the ideology behind the OSSLT, the course defines “the competent reader” as one who can read informational, narrative, and graphic texts (p. 6), and “the competent writer” as one who can state and support main ideas, organize writing clearly and coherently, and use the conventions of standard Canadian English (p. 7), though the curriculums still encourages educators to use various types of media to help students develop their literacy.

As previously mentioned, the Ontario Ministry emphasizes that literacy skills are developed across all subject matter, rather than being taught in isolation or exclusively in language courses. The Ministry is clear that “the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test assesses reading and writing skills that students are expected to have learned *in all subjects* by the end of Grade 9” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2024, emphasis added). It is for this reason that this research does not solely recruit participants who teach English or language courses or focus on grade 9 English courses but extends the inquiry into how literacy functions in all intermediate and senior grades and subject matter. It is essential to remember that literacy is a learning goal in all curriculum areas. Indeed, even if it was not promoted as the “basis of all

learning” by the curriculum (Ontario Ministry of Education, n.d), it is still true that “literacy is not just incidental content or subject area” in classroom exchanges (Ehret & Leander, 2019, p. 2); it is at the core of all educational aims.

While most researchers, teachers, and other educational professionals agree that viewing literacy as the ability to read and write is insufficient in our current world of multimodal meaning making and communication, grade 7-10 teachers especially are required to facilitate literacy instruction in a way that supports students to be successful when it comes to taking the OSSLT (Ahn et al., 2025). While teachers are not required to “teach to the test,” they do need to navigate the “discrepancies between the Ministry’s understanding of literacy found in their curricular documents, classroom practices and standardized assessments” (p. 20). As the Ontario Ministry continues to require teachers to help students cultivate “twenty-first century skills,” an umbrella term under which digital literacy and media literacy reside, and for which there is no distinct pedagogical methodology behind (Boyd, 2021), teachers are increasingly required to go inward to reflect on their knowledge and beliefs and how they position themselves in relation to the content and skills they are expected to teach (Borti, 2023). The complexity of teaching literacy and fulfilling curriculum aims is why the next section of this chapter is devoted to professional identity scholarship.

Teacher Identity Research

Teacher identity is a popular area of focus for educational research. It has been claimed that teacher identity is a pedagogy in itself (see Alsup, 2019). As Mark Conley (2012) summarizes, “considerable research implicates teachers' self-knowledge, sense of agency, and identity as critical for developing thoughtful and adaptive teachers” (p. 142). As the need to develop “thoughtful and adaptive teachers” is endless, so too is the desire to understand the internal and external factors that influence a teacher’s decision-making processes (Mitchell &

Weber, 1999). Teacher identities are understood to be dynamic (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009) and are always situated in the context in which they unfold (Honeyford & Watt, 2018; Zembylas, 2003).

There has been a particular focus on professional teacher identity both before and after teacher training programs (see Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Falkenberg, 2015; Rushton et al., 2023). Among many other areas of study, researchers have sought to explore what drives an individual to enroll in a teacher education program (Chong & Low, 2009), how they grow as individuals over the length of their program (Stock et al., 2016), and what personal values are held by these individuals who decide to become teachers (White & Lemieux, 2015). The findings from these studies, among others, help guide future directions for teaching, training programs, and professional development opportunities. The present study aligns with those that examine how teachers navigate, enact, and perform their professional identity and responsibilities after completing their formal training, considering the perceived needs and expectations of others (see Ives & Juzwik, 2015; Loerts & Belcher, 2024).

Zembylas (2003) emphasizes that narrative inquiry is a particularly crucial methodology in teacher identity research because “not only is there a story of the self, but the self, itself, is narratively constructed” (p. 215). Moreover, opportunities for reflection on personal experiences through dialogical exchange can be an important avenue for professional development (Mitchell & Weber, 1999). Many have suggested that teacher identity is a discursively oriented phenomenon, manifested through stories and the broader cultural dialogue that influence how a teacher sees themselves (Ives & Juzwik, 2015; Mitchell & Weber, 1999). There is also the understanding that identity is highly influenced by material culture and that visual representations of teachers/students/education are critically impactful for teacher identity (White

and Lemieux, 2015). The recognized impact of discourse and materiality on human experience has encouraged the application of a wide range of arts-based or arts-informed research methods to the phenomenon of identity (Hasebe-Ludt, 2016). Meyer (2008) does well to explain how poetry, or poetic inquiry, specifically serves the field of teacher identity scholarship, as poetry can offer “a glimpse inside of the hearts and minds” of teachers (p. 206).

Literacy scholarship has benefited from teacher identity studies because educators' viewpoints and understandings significantly influence the enactment of literacy learning (see Ellis & Simpson, 2020). Professional disposition, how a teacher relates to their profession and their students, also plays a role, as “the ways in which teachers or facilitators and their students interact is already a social practice that affects the nature of the literacy being learned and the ideas about literacy held by the participants (Street, 2003, p. 78). Aukerman and Aiello (2023) note that, when an educator takes the lived experiences of their students seriously, they become less likely to “build a teacherly fence around purposes ordinarily connected with traditional school literacy practices like reading and/or writing” (p. 2). This is particularly true for educators of intermediate and senior grades, as Conley (2012) explains how the declarations that a secondary teacher makes about their professional identity influence their approach to literacy pedagogy. To understand how literacy instruction unfolds in our current context, it is essential to consider practitioners' stories.

Loerts and Belcher (2024) use narrative inquiry in their research into how teachers within the first four years of their careers navigate multiliteracies pedagogy. Of particular interest to the present study is that Loerts and Belcher (2024) found that participants' worldviews strongly influenced their approach to multiliteracies learning. Their study highlights the importance of considering teachers' belief systems, understandings of the world, and “who they are” when

assessing their approaches to literacy instruction. Moreover, Borti (2023) employs positioning theory to further elucidate the significance of a teacher's personal knowledge in their approach to literacy pedagogy, ultimately demonstrating that a teacher's conception of literacy is highly dependent on their lived experiences, both within and outside professional learning environments. Together, Loerts & Belcher (2024) and Borti (2023), add substantial significance for studies that explore teachers' understandings and conceptions in this era of negative social discourse about the form and function of the Ontario education system, specifically surrounding literacies. It is also important to consider that it is not only a teacher's personal beliefs and understandings that influence their identity, agency, and well-being, but also the ways in which a teacher chooses to *perform* or demonstrate those understandings through their pedagogical decisions (Ives & Juzwik, 2015). In thinking of the ways that individuals come to understand literacy and embody the knowledge needed to engage in literacy learning based on their lived experiences and positioning towards the phenomenon of literacy (Borti, 2023), while simultaneously considering the ways that teachers perform pedagogy based on their perception of what their colleagues, students, and curriculum expect of them (Ives & Juzwik, 2015; Loerts & Belcher, 2024), we may become more empathetic towards the ways that literacy instruction is unfolding in contemporary classrooms.

Considering generational characteristics and societal contexts may aid in this journey of uncovering why young, novice educators perceive literacy as they do and why they approach literacy pedagogies in the manner that they do, as these narratives can be perceived as one of the non-human actors that humans are in a relationship with and therefore have to navigate as they practise their agency (see Burriss & Leander, 2024). Literacy teaching in the twenty-first century, particularly in this decade following the COVID-19 pandemic, asks teachers to consider

the diverse learning and emotional experiences of their students and how children today have developed their literacy skills (Aukerman & Aiello, 2023). It essentially asks teachers to consider generational characteristics, or the extent to which technology has impacted their socialization. This chapter now turns to some of the narratives surrounding the generations to which the participants in this study and their students ostensibly belong.

Generational Theory in Educational Research

As previously mentioned, there is debate over the “correct” generational identity for individuals born between 1995 and 2000, the age range of the participants in this study. Individuals in this era are identified as Millennials, Generation Z, or a combination of the two generations, known as a “Zillennial.” The concept of the “Net Generation” is often used to refer to Millennials (Jones, 2011), although it is sometimes also applied to Gen Z as well (see Poláková & Klímová, 2019). Both groups, and the microgeneration between them (Zillennial), have been the topic of much professional and social dialogue in recent years, largely because of the assumed differences about these groups from older generations due to the lifelong exposure to the Internet and technology (Burnett, 2011; Jones, 2011; Prakash & Tiwari, 2021; Urick, 2012).

It is not within the scope of this study to summarize or contribute to the debates surrounding the effects or consequences of the internet and media on learning styles, abilities, or education in general (see Jones, 2011). Though the extent to which there is a professional and social interest in generational learning styles and work values, because of the effects of the internet and other social developments, lends further significance to this work. This review examines some of the dominant narratives surrounding Millennials, Generation Z, and Generation Alpha, so as to illustrate an aspect of the discourse that novice teachers contend with as they navigate their professional identity and agency.

To review, the Millennial generation, also known as Generation Y, is followed by Gen Z, which is followed by Generation Alpha (Höfrová et al., 2024; Poláková & Klímová, 2019). Gen Z is often defined as those born between 1997 and 2012 (Ward, 2023), while the Millennial generation is typically cited as being born between 1981 and 1996 (Hatfield, 2025). Yet, the dates vary, with some stating that the Millennial generation ends in 1991 (see Jones, 2011), while others claim it extends until 2003 (Alsup, 2019, p. 10). Gen Z spans the years 1995 to 2010 (Venida, 2022), although some claim that it does not begin until after 2000 (see Szymkowiak et al., 2021).

Due to the lack of clear start and end points for these generations, many young people in their twenties favour the term Zillennial (Paul, 2025b; Ward, 2023). The Zillennial identity is supposed to encompass both Millennial and Gen Z characteristics, often chosen by those who “weren’t on MySpace like Millennials” but are also “not TikTok dancers like Gen Z” (Ward, 2023, n.p). There is significantly less research into this microgeneration, though it is often mentioned in social dialogue. See Figure 1 for clarification about generational dates. The reader is encouraged to recall that generational titles are heavily disputed categories, and dates often vary. Generations are often defined by historical and cultural markers, rather than by years. For instance, Millennials “were children old enough to understand the significance of 9/11” (Alsup, 2019, p. 10). This is important to remember going forward into the discussion of generational identity.

Millennial Generation (Generation Y) (Early 1980s to mid 1990s)			Gen Z (Mid 1990s to mid 2000s)			Gen Alpha (Early 2010s to mid 2020s)
1981 – 1996 (Hatfield, 2025)	1981 – 1991 (Jones, 2011)	1982 – 2003 (Alsup, 2019)	1997 – 2012 (Ward, 2023)	1995 – 2010 (Venida, 2022)	1997 – 2009 (Höfrová et al., 2024)	2010 – 2024 (McCrindle & Fell, 2020)
		Zillennial (Early 1990s to early 2000s)				
		1992- 2002 (Paul, 2025b)	1993 – 1998 (Lansom, 2021)			

Figure 1: Generational Timeline

Jones (2011) explains that it is often assumed that, because young people have been raised in a society where digital technologies are ubiquitous in everyday life, as all the abovementioned generations have to varying degrees, they are naturally digitally competent and possess superior digital literacy skills (see also Prensky, 2001; 2009; Smith & Storrs, 2023). It should be acknowledged that this is a deterministic view that has been identified as a false assumption and widely contested for several reasons (Jones, 2011; Smith & Storrs, 2023). Namely, because while generational identities *are* largely defined by historical moments and evolving social norms, they are also intersectional and class-specific (Kingstone, 2021). Urick (2012) explains that individuals often choose their generational identity based on their personal

values and perceived values of a distinguished age or social group. This lends weight to the present discussion, which posits that the participants in this study were likely influenced, during the process of forming their professional identities, by the dominant narratives surrounding their generation and the generation they teach.

Though the above-mentioned generations are all closely regarded as “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001), as they were born into a digital world, they have had vastly different experiences with technologies and have different relationships to them (Paul, 2025a; Ward, 2023). The meaning of digital competence has changed with each development of interactive social media, and the pervasiveness of AI-controlled algorithms has largely affected the meaning of critical literacy/literacy skills (Ehret, 2024) and learning styles (Paul, 2025a). Höfrová et al. (2024) distinguish the smartphone as the major technical milestone for the Millennial generation, the Internet for Gen Z’s, and AI for Generation Alpha. These developments matter because technologies shape how people come to know the world, make meaning, and communicate with one another (Collier & Rowsell, 2020).

Alsop (2019) summarizes Millennials as “a generation of visual images, alternate social media identities, and increased tolerance—yet simultaneously one filled with helicopter parents, high achievers, and conventional values concerning marriage and family” (p. 5). Millennials, or Generation Y, have “core values that include community, technology, and affluence” (Jones, 2011, p. 39) and have had the onus of teaching older generations much about technology and digital resources (Chin et al., 2024). The findings from these research studies indicate that Millennials value digital tools and communities of practice as means of knowledge and resources for learning. There is a wealth of negative and positive discourse about the Millennial generation, and most of it contradictory: they are supposedly a generation that is empathetic yet narcissistic,

open to change yet embraces conventional values, optimistic about the future but ambivalent about politics (Alsup, 2019, p. 11). As a cohort, they have been the subject of much research across disciplines in recent years (Prakash & Tiwari, 2021). Within social discourse, Millennials are often severely mocked as a generation (see Hamilton, 2025).

While Millennials are recognized for their proficiency with visual forms of communication, Gen Z are said to not just have good visual processing skills, but to have brains “wired [to process] sophisticated, complex imagery (Poláková & Klímová, 2019). Moreover, Poláková and Klímová (2019) explain that members of Gen Z are also reportedly extremely proficient at task switching and enjoy game-based learning. This is largely attributed to their lifelong experiences with screens and switching between social media apps. Prakash and Tiwari (2021) note that Gen Z has been less studied compared to their predecessors. Szymkowiak et al. (2021) explain that most of the dialogue about this cohort centers on their experiences with information and communication technologies. Individuals born within the first decade of the twenty-first century have been summarized as a generation with “low tolerance for being without digital resources” as they prefer technology over books (Poláková & Klímová, 2019, p. 4) and have views about the world which have been directly crafted by their exposure to the Internet (Prakash & Tiwari, 2021).

According to Paul (2025a), Gen Z—and Gen Alphas—do not “just *consume* content; they evaluate its relevance, tone, and authenticity in real time” (n.p.), learning from it and forming opinions about it. Ehret (2024) highlights how members of Gen Z approach and navigate social media differently than Millennials, particularly older Millennials, who are less likely to recognize how algorithms can be manipulated to meet personal needs. As Ehret (2024) discusses, social media has evolved from a means for communities to connect to an avenue for learning and

teaching, a space where individuals can exercise their agency and engage in political discussions. Technological developments have facilitated a surplus of discussions about the intellectual skills, emotional maturity, and behavioural traits of the people who use these technologies in their everyday lives (see Ito et al., 2009), and how these characteristics formed in childhood are translating into work values (see Alsup, 2019; Prakash & Tiwari, 2021; Venida, 2022). These discussions are especially pertinent to the present study, as it is assumed that the participants in this work have been influenced by them.

Poláková and Klímová (2019) and Hatfield (2025) effectively encapsulate some of the more deficit-oriented viewpoints of Gen Z. While acknowledging the well-developed visual abilities of Gen Z individuals and their strengths with task-switching, Poláková & Klímová (2019) also note that a “side effect of this is the inability to focus on and analyze complex information” (p. 4). This group is often perceived as having less-developed critical thinking skills and tends to prefer shorter answers to complex, nuanced responses. The authors emphasize the importance of teachers tailoring their approach to students' learning styles rather than continuing to pursue traditional models of education. Hatfield (2025) makes a compelling case for collecting the stories of experienced teachers (i.e., those with decades of teaching experience) in understanding the learning styles and strengths of emergent generations because they are reportedly “uniquely positioned, having witnessed the radical transformations in education in recent decades shaped by technology and societal trends” (p. 2).

Through a mixed-methods research project, Hatfield (2025) collected the perspectives of 812 teachers with over 20 years of experience on how their students' predominant skills have changed over the course of their careers. Hatfield (2025) summarizes that participants emphasized the presence of many “undesirable trends in contemporary education” (p. 23)

resulting from the influence of information and communication technologies and social media, and acknowledges that there were significantly more negative than positive remarks regarding the attributes of Gen Z and Generation Alpha students. It is interesting to consider that, given the extent of experience, the participants in Hatfield's study were mostly born between 1965 and 1980, if not beforehand. It may be valuable to compare the responses from participants in this study with those in Hatfield's work. Speaking specifically about students from Generation Alpha, those born after 2010 or 2012, depending on one's view of when Gen Z ends (Höfrová et al., 2024; McCrindle & Fell, 2020), teachers mentioned there are higher expectations for top grades, yet lower amounts of effort put into school and increased school avoidance. Hatfield (2025) ultimately suggests that there are more similarities between Gen Z and Gen Alpha students than between Millennials and Gen Z.

Narratives about Gen Alpha are perhaps more prevalent than those about their predecessors in today's context. While there is no systematic evidence that Generation Alpha is qualitatively different from previous generations (Höfrová et al., 2024), this cohort has received considerable attention due to its younger age during the COVID-19 pandemic. The oldest Gen Alpha individuals, who turned 11 in 2020, will presumably remember e-learning, remote classes, and social distancing quite well (Fell, 2020). More information about this generation is likely to emerge as the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to be researched over time, but what is understood now is that this group is extremely well-versed in using technology, having never known a world without it, and being led to use it especially for educational reasons at a very young age. Interestingly, Höfrová et al. (2024) make the case that, given that we already know Gen Alpha is skilled in technology and that they are adept at using it for most daily functions, "research might also best be focused less on children's use of technology and more on the roles

and competencies of adults and teachers to create environments that facilitate both digital and social-emotional learning” (p. 16). This gives cause to devote more attention to how teachers are responding to their students' technological skills rather than to examining Gen Alpha's educational resilience and emotional intelligence.

The translation of learning styles and generational attributes into work values is beginning to be understood, at least for those born in the 1990s, as these individuals are just now entering the workforce (Venida, 2022). Alsup (2019) finds that teachers from the Millennial generation seem to have an especially strong ability to “negotiate multiple, living subjectivities, even within the same professional or personal context” (p. 30) as they are more likely to understand the “professional identity as a harmonious coexistence of opposites, rather than a series of binary tensions” (p. 85). They are especially committed to student-centred learning and demonstrate a strong ability to adapt to change. At the conclusion of her research, Alsup concludes that in the “relatively muddy world of subjectivity, context, generational theory, memory, and conflicting notions of a teacher persona, young teachers... somehow learn to be effective teachers anyway” (2019, p. 86), which is a sentiment that supports the suspicion that social discourses matter in the development of a professional identity, but are not necessarily a barrier to success in the profession.

Prakash and Tiwari (2021) report that many authors who have written about the Gen Z cohort “have encouraged researchers to further investigate the investment habits, risk management, loyalty and organizational commitment, ethics and sustainable behaviours of this generation, to further expound on their characteristics” (p. 114). Within the field of educational scholarship, this group has received more attention as students, even as post-secondary students, than as working professionals. Researching in the Philippines, Venida (2022) discusses how Gen

Z professionals “emphasize personal skills development, professional growth and development, and personal achievement and recognition in terms of intrinsic work values” (p. 7). As teachers, individuals from Gen Z are said to value the work-life balance that a career offers them, as well as its financial stability. They appreciate teamwork and collaboration in the workplace and place a high importance on professional development opportunities.

Venida’s (2022) study reveals much about the intrinsic and extrinsic values of Gen Z teachers but says little about their pedagogy. Given that research has found that Gen Z, as learners, enjoy collaborative, activity-based learning, prefer the use of new technologies in the classroom over traditional teaching methods, and are extremely comfortable with multimodal content and multimedia (Szymkowiak et al., 2021), we may assume that these things are also present in their pedagogy. Yet, some research indicates that among Gen Z pre-service teachers, there are diverse opinions regarding the extent to which new technologies, such as AI, should be incorporated into the classroom and how these tools should influence pedagogy (see Merzifonluoglu & Gunes, 2025). Social discourse similarly reflects how some Gen Z teachers are extremely hesitant towards new technologies, even speaking out against their use in the classroom (see Grace, 2025). Such findings are interesting given that Gen Alpha is a generation primarily “shaped by technology” (McCrindle & Fell, 2020, p. 8). This is one such narrative that Gen Z teachers must navigate when crafting their pedagogy.

There is certainly more that could be said about generational identities, but this brief overview satisfies the present study’s need to explore generational theory as it has been applied to learning and teaching, and its presence in professional and social dialogue. Following the theory that digital developments in our globally connected world have altered our agency and identity (Leander & Burriss, 2020), it is understandable why teacher identity in the twenty-first

century unfolds differently, or at least why the differences between teachers and students, in terms of their digital skills, seem to be narrowing (Burnett, 2011). Given that the teacher self is an intricate blend of personal and professional values and dispositions, which directly translates into pedagogical action (Alsup, 2019), this review of generational theory was necessary.

Conclusion

This literature review demonstrates how theories and discussions of literacy have evolved over time, thereby contextualizing the participants' understandings of literacy within the broader educational/academic dialogue. It has sought to do this while also clarifying the expectations that the Ontario Education system has placed on participants regarding literacy instruction.

Additional expectations participants must navigate will vary by employer. This chapter further grounds this study by discussing teacher identity scholarship, specifically that which has employed narrative research methods to emphasize the influence of a teacher's worldview and lived experiences on their approaches to literacy instruction. By concluding this chapter with attention to generational theory and the ways in which other researchers have considered generational characteristics in their analyses of learners' and teachers' experiences and understandings, this chapter has highlighted some of the details within social and academic dialogues that this project seeks to explore the effects of.

Prior to the presentation of the phenomenological findings, readers will be greeted with a series of poems written in rumination of the literature (Leggo, 1999) as well as literature-voiced poems (Prendergast, 2006). Where excerpts from the literature are present, footnotes are included to distinguish those that are my own words and those that come from the literature. These poems, which I created in my journey of navigating the field of literacy scholarship and crafting this project, aim to represent how research has a powerful, affective charge on a reader

(see Perry, 2019), and offers an avenue for understanding how literacy, as a concept, is always ideological, open to interpretation, and surrounded by questions.

*Vox Theoria***Preface: Unfolding**

L I T E R A C Y / S

the greasiest keys on this device that governs me

Rearrange the letters, drop some in like you do with salt in soup
make *adolescent* – the additional letters, like grounding fixtures, they give the flavour, the spice. call upon
your Boolean operators: ADD *senior*, AND *discourse*, AND *pedagogy*, OR *conceptions AND definitions*
these fingers, sculpted into a cramped shape I dare to know, trying to trace themes like a family tree,
developing my own literacy as I eat the soggy, fallen leaves.

I am

Trying. to reach. every. key.

All at once, finding commensurability, tracing lineage and relation, just trying to become

An Expert Navigator -

A Learned Educator –

?

No.

Omitting, limiting, I Do Not Want Everything

Refining this strategy.

What was this process like for my teachers and their teachers and their teachers before them?
Do I have it easier?

It's not a competition.

(This Cannot Be Simpler.)

I waste time (?) driving to libraries
thinking of citations
seeking hard copies

they smell like mildew and dust with spines that have never been cracked.

just to find

It pays older students no mind

Places literacy below the age of 8

References “adolescents” only alongside “remediation.”

Crossing the ocean of publications

I find the land of studies concerned with identity

Novice

New

Beginner

Teacher

Educator

Advanced search

Combine the first and the last words of this poem

200000 results

Add location

Get place-based pedagogy

Add grade

Get reading intervention strategies

Change course

“Arts-based educational research” / “literacy” / “teacher identity”

There. The Trifecta. My Holy Trinity.

No Records Found.

Remove quotation marks. 175. All 20+ pages in length.

in producing this literature review

I am spelunking in the depths of “opinion” and “fact”

Becoming My Flavour of a Learned Educator,

Navigating history,

Dwelling in perplexity,

seeing the binaries, beaming at multiplicity

who else has time for this study?

This work is for the underfunded full-time classroom leaders

shaping the role of the modern-day Ontario teacher

Part One: Literacy is dead?

Herehere, it was declared!

*The time had come to accept the limitation of singularity,
an acceptance that poured from the noting that, in ways of understanding,
there are two strategies for viewing.*

The reader must know

How education has unfolded – all due to the destruction of the notion of literacy as a singular entity. A radical change in social and semiotic thought¹ - when those literacy gods considered reality. When literacy became honoured as a social practice² rather than an intellectual ability –

They saw it through the written practices of those who came long before you and me.

Multiple ways of being or

Multiple ways to view?

Multiple modalities to facilitate the learning or

Multiple conceptions of its meaning?

Was the destruction of a thought or of the actual thing?

Wait a minute, who called this a war?³ What is the artillery? Who are the victims?

What is the smell of victory?

Herehere, reader, autonomous or ideological: these are your spoons. the entry door is yours to choose, do you see it as something multiple, multimodal, or rooted in community? Your choice, reader, choose a school of thought, your decision, your definition, your musing, your truth.

This literacy war is based in binary, but hey, there are allies too:

*pick a side, expand their frontline, let me know what it does to **you**.*

It's all very rational, logical, and certainly actual

A text is a text that is text.

A text is also a text even when it is not a text

Literacy is capital. We all have different currencies. The market changes, these New Literacies for New Times are good for this economy⁴

Your choice to consider the meaning of plurality.⁵

Your pick of modality (But Remember The Assessment Strategies!)⁶

Are you ready, teacher and teacher educator?

The kids are coming; they need to know. Will you consider their language needing remedy, lacking literacy, will you teach them the proper way to transmit sense? Will you favour the digital, the print, the place, or the book? Enjoy juggling the diversity.

Herehere, they said, it will be better now – we are ready to accept reality!

¹ Rowsell & Walsh, 2011

² Barton & Hamilton, 2000

³ Olsson, 2020

⁴ Cope & Kalantiz, 2013; Graff, 2022

⁵ Gee, 2015

⁶ Ahn et al., 2025

Part Two: Literacy is a Labyrinth

some are sculpted by lawnmowers and weed whackers
 others tall hedges and filled with sphinxes and other creatures
 some of mud. some of tiny pebbles. blossoming flowers and dandelions.

This labyrinth is of brick, each layer of mortar – a different belief
 each turn something you must digest, think about epistemologically⁷
 when you get to the centre, consider it emotionally.

the revolving door of education faddism is always in motion⁸
 literacy is no exception⁹

Just like You.

with two feet and a call for teaching, are moving too. We all have to live with the theories¹⁰ - the
 Minotaur might have been an isolated creature, but he was a collection of fates and odds, animal and man
 and god-like desires, his isolation inherently fragile, based in fiction

he, like me, you, pedagogy, literacy itself: are always in a state of flux¹¹
 as movement and our ways of beings alter our interpretation, disposition, love and convictions.

literacy. Segmented, overcoded.
 saturated phenomena,¹²

literacy,

the keys to power?

literacy.

a meaning-making resource,¹³

a way to make sense.¹⁴

literacy.

ability to understand, use, create, share:

the multimodal, hyperlinked, interactive,
 nonlinear¹⁵

language

used materially and ideologically.

to read in new ways, think creatively, be authentically,

reinvention

does not always involve major change¹⁶

one turn and then the next, each bend: a new possibility.

I'll show you - get me a rake.
 make no mistake: this landscape

it is assembling, unmovable brick it may be:

it is growing –

constantly.

⁷ Lemieux, 2020

⁸ Mitchell & Weber, 1999, p. 229

⁹ Vorobel et al., 2021

¹⁰ Street, 1997

¹¹ Dernikos et al., 2023; Honeyford et al., 2024.

¹² Boyd, 2021

¹³ Ellis & Simpson, 2020

¹⁴ Masny & Cole, 2012

¹⁵ Vorobel et al., 2021, p. 1127

¹⁶ Mitchell & Weber, 1999, p. 231

what curriculum can keep up with me, who is connected to a thousand
knowledge sources, who is a source of shocking perplexity?

“to get to a utopia, we have to change, don’t we?”

*“What do people mean by ‘change’ anyhow?”*²³

young teachers

show me your bloody elbows

lay bare your understanding of algorithms, filter bubbles, and echo chambers²⁴

decide if I – the poet – am your student or your mirrored reflection: the great representor.

unfold your wisdom.²⁵

let me know

how do you navigate the maze of
“literacy”

?

how do you affirm these students’ lives, literacies, and humanity²⁶

?

²³ Mitchell & Weber, 1999, p. 229

²⁴ Parker & Smith, 2022

²⁵ Irwin, 2003

²⁶ Dernikos et al., 2023

Chapter 4: Vox Participare

The following poems have been produced by drawing on the words, gestures, attitudes, and experiences offered by the participants, and, as such, are my version of *vox participare* research poetry (Prendergast 2006; 2009). In creating these poems, I have followed the process of "intuitively sorting out the words, phrases, sentences, passages that synthesize meaning from the prose" (Prendergast, 2009, p. xxiii), as I have engaged in the "surrender and catch" method of highlighting parts of the transcript that feel the most evocative, the most telling, and welcomed the poems that have been formed by arranging these highlighted portions (see Faulkner, 2019). Throughout this process, I have dwelled on the ways the participants' offerings affected me, as a researcher/educator/poet, and on how their ideas connect to and challenge the conceptions of literacy presented in the literature review for this project. These poems are artifacts of school literacy (see Pahl & Rowsell, 2012), and how it is understood as it unfolds in our current times. While it would be ideal if all findings from the phenomenological interview process (Bevan, 2014) could exclusively be presented in poetic form, the participants were so generous in their stories that the number of poems that would be needed to present all findings could not possibly be produced within the time constraints of this project. To honour that which could not be adequately reflected in the poetry, a formal discussion of findings is offered here as an introduction to the poems.

Findings and Discussion

At the time of the interviews, one participant teaches grade 9, 11, and 12 courses, one participant teaches grades 9 and 11, and the third participant teaches grade 7. One participant has already fulfilled all requirements their board has in place to pass the NTIP program successfully; one is currently in the program, and the other, who has not yet secured a permanent position but is in a year-long LTO, has been evaluated and assessed as the program mandates, but has not yet

experienced the other components of the program. One participant works for a Catholic school board in Northern Ontario, one works for a public board in Northern Ontario, and the third works for a Catholic board in southern Ontario.

The participants' responses suggested that they have been influenced by the view that literacy is a "linguistic standard deemed to be crucial to effective communication and the transmission of sense" (Masny & Cole, 2012, p. x). This is an understanding of literacy that Masny and Cole (2012) call normative, and it is a conception that the Ontario curriculum, or at least the OSSLT, evidently supports. These participants believe that literacy is a measurable skill, an opinion that the deficit-oriented view of literacy skills espouses (Aukerman & Aiello, 2023), as all participants readily discussed how they assess literacy and the barriers to assessment. Yet these participants seemingly hold this normative view in tension, as they also resist any decontextualized summary of their students' skill or "what literacy is." When asked, "There are multiple different understandings of literacy. How would you define or summarize the concept?" each participant hummed in thought, their eyebrows raised. Two participants said, "Good question," then paused. All three started their answer with a similar acknowledgement that, "It is obviously reading and writing, but. . ." followed by mention of the creative and critical components of literacy. There are multiple implications of their fractured, hesitant definitions of literacy.

Throughout our conversation, each teacher consistently referred to the various factors that affect their students' learning opportunities and literacy, and spoke proudly of how they, as teachers, always differentiate instruction and triangulate assessment (see Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). The main factors which inhibit their students' learning and engagement (and interest) in school that these teachers referenced were large class sizes, lack of one-on-one

support, inconsistent and unreliable technology, short attention spans, scarce family support, and an overloaded curriculum that ultimately overwhelms the teacher and students alike. These teachers expressed some frustration that many students struggle with simple writing tasks and are reading below grade level, but they also proudly revealed how they have adapted as needed and accepted their students for the skills they have. These teachers defended the students they work with against claims that youth nowadays are not smart enough or that they “can’t read” (Aukerman & Aiello, 2023; Graff, 2024), even without being asked to reflect on the narratives that surround the education system.

This can be interpreted as an awareness of the negative dialogue surrounding their profession, and while they validated some of the adverse rhetoric, as they recognized the many issues affecting the success and well-being of the education system right now, they also brought the negativity into perspective, ultimately expressing the conviction that “it isn’t all bad.” Each participant reiterated this positive sentiment even as they reflected on the pains they had experienced thus far in their careers, particularly in their first six months in the classroom immediately after graduation, when they learned that many of the classroom management strategies they had previously believed in were ineffective with their active, sharp-tongued students. Indeed, these teachers openly and admirably admitted they did not fully expect the complex attitudes and behaviours of the students in front of them when they first began their teaching positions. A large part of their careers thus far has been learning to adapt to students' needs, even when that means forfeiting the plans they had for their classroom.

These teachers refused to let any discussion of students’ areas for improvement go by without also recognizing the skills and strengths of the students’ generation. These teachers all emphasized that they, as teachers, need to learn more, do more, and be more for their students;

that it is their responsibility to adapt to students' needs, not that students need to adapt to a particular way of teaching or learning. These teachers believe this even as they face exhaustion from their efforts to create engaging, productive learning environments that meet the students' emotional, social, and academic needs. There was certainly an element of resistance to any claim that said their students are at fault for their learning abilities, instead drawing attention to the systemic and structural issues in society and the field of education that affect students, such as an unsupportive Ministry of Education. There was also mention of the ineffective ways these teachers felt they were trained to handle Individualized Learning Plans (IEPs). One participant spoke of having classes where over half the class had an IEP, yet there was no Educational Assistant present, and the school only had one Special Education teacher, and this participant had to navigate teaching half of the class who were at grade level and half the class who required almost constant one-on-one support. This participant recognized that students' behaviours are often a result of inadequately supported learning environments, not necessarily the students' fault.

When asked which generation they feel most closely aligned with, each teacher had a unique response, yet all responses indicated support for the understanding that there is, indeed, a microgeneration which straddles two different versions of the "Net generation" (Jones, 2011; Paul, 2025b; Ward, 2023), which they may be a part of. One participant was entirely unsure how to identify exactly: this teacher spoke of feeling much older than the high school students they taught, but also much younger than most colleagues. This participant expressed a lack of interest in identifying with any generational title, though they were intrigued by the fact that their students are known as Gen Alpha. Another participant answered without hesitation that they believed they were Gen Z, but also quickly remarked that they felt their youth was far behind

them, and they are much older than their students. The last participant spoke of being between Gen Z and Millennials; however, they were unsure what to call that. Each participant reflected on their own use of social media and AI and chuckled at recollections of times when students could not believe that, as teachers, they also used the same social media sites. Yet there were also many moments of remembering times when students had made these teachers feel old, even, as one participant said, “like a dinosaur.”

In each interview, there was a moment of remarking on students’ exceptional skills in navigating technology, an understanding of Gen Z and Gen Alpha that permeates both academic and social dialogue. There were also stories of times when students and teachers came together to bond over specific tech use, such as ChatGPT or Snapchat (a multimedia, instant messaging app). These teachers did not exactly concede that our increasingly aesthetic modes of communication (see van Leeuwen, 2017) have altered the meaning of literacy or what it means to be literate, though one participant speculated that how students use Snapchat, specifically the trends of “talking” to someone via the platform, merely by sending empty pictures of their surroundings or by sending one picture to tens of different people at once, may have altered modern day conversational skills. They did not suggest that social media sites such as Snapchat have had a positive or negative effect; they only noted that it clearly demonstrates the significance these youth place on connecting with people. This teacher, who previously identified as part of the generation between Millennials and Gen Z, explained that they use Snapchat very differently from their students, echoing Ehret's (2024) conclusion.

While these teachers shared instances of bonding with their students over technology, they also regularly referenced the relationships they have formed with their older colleagues, as they bond over some of the feelings they have towards their students’ skills and areas for

improvement. None of the participants expressed concern for analyzing or criticizing the pedagogies or opinions of older teachers. However, the teachers who work in secondary settings noted that their students regularly express issues with the teaching styles and discipline strategies of the older teachers, complaints that these participants appeared to empathize with.

The participants in this study share work values similar to those expressed by the Millennial participants in Alsup's (2019) research. The findings from this project also support Venida's (2022) findings that individuals born between 1995-2010, the years in which Venida (2022) claims bracket Gen Z, care deeply about personal and professional development, as each teacher frequently referenced how they have grown and matured as teachers since the previous year and were proud to discuss the training they have experienced since graduating. One participant, only a year and a half out of their initial teacher training at the time of the interview, has already completed five Additional Qualification courses, fully taking advantage of the professional development funding provided by the NTIP program. The other participants have similarly prioritized ongoing learning by enrolling in university classes and earning Additional Qualifications.

This project supports the conclusion that individuals born in the late 1990s are extremely comfortable with multimodal content delivery and with using technology and games in their teaching (Szymkowiak et al., 2021). These teachers respond to their students' technological skills by finding opportunities to integrate technology as much as their school board allows. They evidently believe that their students, many of whom are Gen Alpha, have been shaped by technology (McCrindle & Fell, 2020) and fervently believe it is important to honour that, while also balancing it by integrating paper-and-pen learning opportunities. Interestingly, these participants were less inclined to discuss their students' technological skills – beyond noting

their sophistication - than they were interested in discussing their social, emotional, and intellectual skills, which is significant because that is exactly the direction of the dialogue that Höfrová et al. (2024) deems as most useful going forward in educational research and generational theory. While jokes were made about “feeling old,” these teachers did not express any anxiety about using technology in their classrooms or about feeling unsure how to navigate digital literacy as a curriculum aid. This adds weight to the dialogue that suggests that teachers cannot keep pace with their students’ skills in navigating information and communication technologies, as these teachers directly challenge that notion. These teachers understand their students’ approaches to technology well and regularly find new ways to adapt to it. The participants indicated that the biggest barrier to teaching digital literacy and responding to students’ technological needs (such as developing a more critical eye to some online content) is not their own skill but the lack of funding and restricted access to certain resources due to availability within the school or board.

Only one participant explicitly recognized the COVID-19 pandemic as a cause for some of the issues circulating in the education system today. The other participants spoke of the immaturity of some students, particularly those who are now in ninth grade, but did not speculate on the cause. Each teacher recognized that students are extremely diverse in their learning styles and behaviours, one participant even sharing that it is “hard to paint [the students] with a wide brush.” The other participants shared similar sentiments, revealing an acute concern for individuality and honouring diversity within their classrooms.

Given the recognized diversity and appreciation for it, these teachers are extremely well-versed in alternating between various modes of content delivery as much as possible, within the limits of their resources. These teachers spoke of moving between slideshows, videos, graphic

novels, textbooks, pen-and-paper activities, podcasts, and diagrams to facilitate learning. The purpose of pursuing multimodal content delivery and arts-based teaching methods (see Whitelaw, 2019) is largely to keep students engaged and to respond to their interests. The participants expressed frustration that many of the students struggle to stay engaged in a lesson, articulate their needs without being prompted, and receive feedback. All participants shared that their solution to enhancing learning and motivating their students is to integrate multiple modes of content delivery into any given lesson. These teachers have no qualms about opening opportunities for students to express their knowledge through creative modes of communication. Self-reflective writing is always welcomed in these teachers' classrooms and accepted as material worthy of summative and formative assessment (see Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). Providing students with opportunities to be equally creative and critical is a priority for these teachers. Like the teachers in Loerts and Belcher's (2024) study, these educators are extremely passionate about student-centred learning, and they make the decision to integrate multimodal content instinctively, in response to their students' needs and interests, and in recognition that multiliteracies pedagogy keeps students engaged, even if they do not recognize the pedagogy for what it is.

In discussing their students' strengths, each participant expressed reverence for their students' oral communication skills and their ability to respond to visual or video-based content. These teachers spoke proudly of their students' ability to infer content meaning and engage in verbal communication. Even if they are hesitant to do presentations in front of their peers, they are happy to confer with their teachers and express their understanding orally, though we cannot say this is a new trait specific to this generation of students. These teachers notice that many youths and adolescents nowadays have an incredible ability to retrieve information from video-

based content, thoroughly enjoy and benefit from tactile learning opportunities, and many students do enjoy reading, *if* it is content they connect to (in the case of grade 7, the content the students respond best to has been *Coraline*, *Harry Potter*, *Percy Jackson*, and other fantasy tales that were published over a decade ago), but are not exactly reading at what these teachers deem a sophisticated level.

For reasons largely unexplained by these teachers, many students struggle to complete assignments and submit work in a timely fashion, if at all. When tasked with producing written artifacts of their learning, most students struggle immensely to complete assignments and hand their work in for evaluation. Writing, whether done with a keyboard or a pencil, is a great challenge for many youths, as is supporting their understanding with evidence and extending their thoughts beyond surface-level ideas. According to these teachers, explaining their thinking is a great challenge for the majority of today's intermediate and senior students. For some, this is because they largely struggle to write a complete sentence or build a logical paragraph, despite the teachers' efforts. The teachers of grades 7 and 11 alike spoke of teaching students the subject-verb-predicate sentence structure, the five-paragraph essay, and paragraph structure. These teachers reported that only some students manage to absorb this learning and apply it to their work. Even when conveying their thoughts verbally and having the formula for doing so, many students often lack detailed explanations and fail to integrate supporting evidence.

Each participant shared that many of their students often express a lack of care for school, structured learning, or formal learning experiences. Concepts such as educational apathy, learned helplessness, and lack of metacognition were mentioned by all participants when summarizing the leading attributes of their students. Each teacher expressed the pain of "just trying to get through the curriculum" amid extremely disengaged students who require extensive time to

produce physical work. These teachers expressed frustration that the curricula for many of the subjects they teach have not been updated in recent years to reflect the needs and interests of the generation, and that they place too many expectations on students and teachers alike. This may be an interesting finding to those who examine how initial teacher training programs prepare educators to navigate the curriculum or who study “classroom readiness” for teaching literacy (see Stewart et al., 2021). While these teachers did not explicitly say they felt ill-equipped for navigating the curriculum and for teaching literacy, they did express a desire to have been more informed about all the barriers to enacting the curriculum (such as time constraints and a classroom filled with students who, although they are not actually modified to a different curriculum, still require extensive accommodation).

These educators similarly articulated the opinion that many of their students need to improve their ability to self-advocate and critically reflect on their opinions. These teachers also expressed a desire to see the youth of today given more opportunities, in and out of school, to foster their curiosity, critical thinking skills, and creativity. While these teachers have much to say about their students’ areas of improvement in terms of their writing skills, resilience, and ability to receive constructive feedback, they also seemingly deeply admire their students’ skills at oral communication, using digital tools, and building relationships with their peers and, in some instances, their teachers as well. These teachers all spoke fondly of their students’ wit, ability to extract information from the content, and quick task-switching. Indeed, each teacher made a comment expressing the sentiment that “kids are quite smart nowadays.”

One of the most interesting findings of this work was that these teachers do not use terms such as “multimodal,” “culturally responsive,” or “arts-based” teaching, yet can offer countless examples of enacting those exact pedagogies. These teachers are extremely humble when

discussing their own efforts to reach students and support their learning. Each teacher provided countless examples that demonstrate their care and concern for the educational apathy they see in most of their students, and how they are working to foster better feelings towards school, namely by integrating opportunities for students to be creative and exercise autonomy. While all three teachers shared the same unfamiliarity with the term's multimodal literacy and multiliteracies, they all spoke of assessing students' body language, verbal communication, written understanding, visual demonstrations, and emotional engagement when planning lessons and awarding grades. They also revealed nuanced understandings of how student outcomes are influenced by family involvement, engagement with the community at large, and social worlds outside of school. All of this indicates an understanding of the pedagogy of multiliteracies, despite the term's absence in their discussion.

Recalling that the Ontario education policies mandate literacy be taught in all subjects, it is notable that one participant, who is not qualified to teach English, shared that “this is probably the most I've talked about literacy in my career.” Another individual, who is qualified to teach English, shares that, “I don't even know what our board and our school would mandate literacy as.” This raises questions about the extent to which intermediate senior teachers are engaged in professional discussions of literacy, at least formally. All participants were quick to say that “obviously” involves the ability to read and write complex texts, as well as to think critically and metaphorically. Each participant emphasized the ability to process and produce grammatically accurate texts, as well as to identify meaning and key messages in any given content. Mary Kalantzis and Bill Cope (2025) write that, “multiliteracies is not just an ability to communicate. It is a capacity to know and to act, either for personal or collective advancement across social and educational contexts” (p. 147). The definitions of literacy offered by these participants seem

to reflect this understanding. The equal importance these teachers place on critical, traditional, and digital literacies reminds us that literacy is not a binary or singular concept, nor a phenomenon that can be broken down into distinct, separable parts, though it often has been (Masny & Cole, 2012). Indeed, based on how these teachers reveal their approaches to supporting students in developing their literacy skills, they seem to resist literacies as a sum of “simple polarities” (Street, 1997, p. 54). If presented visually, literacy is a kaleidoscope: twisted and turned, admired, interpreted, and attended to by each teacher in their own unique way. This appears to be an understanding these individuals embody through their teaching practices, as they prioritize innovative teaching methods, differentiation, and multimodal content delivery.

This project aimed to contextualize the young, early-career teachers’ perceptions, habits, and beliefs through its literature review. These teachers evidently hold space for both views: literacy is a cognitive function and a social practice. They are evidently drawn to the view of literacy as plural as well as singular. They do not seem to hold these things in tension; they honour and recognize the literacy students will need to be successful in the workplace, the literacy they should have to participate in our democracy, the literacy they need in order to graduate from the school system, and the literacy they deserve so they can maximize their potential.

These teachers’ abilities to hold complex ideas and various understandings at once, without hierarchically ordering or sorting them into fixed categories, evidently reflect the norms of the age (Alsup, 2019). These findings contribute to the field of education in that they offer initial teacher education programs insights into the sort of learning that young, novice educators believe the next generation of teachers need to be prepared for, perhaps even what they feel all people should know about the nature of being a teacher in Ontario society in today’s world.

What these participants believe teacher educators and fellow citizens should know about their working environments is distilled in the poetry that follows.

The fact that these teachers integrate multiliteracies pedagogy without admitting to having a developed or intimate understanding of what the academic or professional conceptions of that pedagogy are, primarily pursuing it out of observed need so that they can equitably assess their students and keep them engaged in the classroom, may be a finding of interest for those professionals who study the pedagogy of multiliteracies and teach others how to implement multiliteracies strategies. It is extremely interesting that these teachers, who have had a lifetime engaging with Web 2.0 technologies and confess to actively using AI software in their daily lives, still place immense significance on traditional literacies and believe in the necessity of learning textual rules for future success outside of school. This may be perceived as a result of standardized testing, which, although recognized as promoting only one form of writing, still influences how educators support students' success. This may be of interest to those who examine the effects of literacy assessment.

This research has supported the findings of Loerts and Belcher (2024), who explored how novice educators navigated the pedagogy of multiliteracies in the years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as Parker and Smith's (2022) suppositions about the way post-truth politics, critical literacy, and digital literacy intersect and the role of emotional intelligence in navigating today's literacies. Like the educators whom Loerts and Belcher (2024) work with, the teachers in this study are heavily influenced by their colleagues and the teaching norms of the environment in which they work. These participants are evidently deeply affected by the opinions of teachers of previous generations, respect the wisdom accrued over years on the job, and are eager for the advice and direction of others.

This may be the result of feeling as though they have been given very little direction on how to fulfill curriculum aims, properly manage student behaviours, and build a unit plan, feelings that ought to be taken seriously by teacher educators and professional training programs. All teachers spoke positively about using their (older) colleagues' resources to implement learning, suggesting they do not typically regard content from years past as outdated or not serving the present or future needs of the students before them. How might this draw to pedagogies of past generations of teachers affect our society's collective efforts to create a more equitable and relevant education system? How might teacher education programs grapple with the fact that there are young, early-career educators who immediately seek (even believe they *require*) direction from their older colleagues immediately after graduating? What does that mean for teacher education programs, or at least the one that these teachers graduated from? These are some of the lines of inquiry that blossom from considering both the findings from this project and Loerts and Belcher's (2024) work.

Parker and Smith's (2022) discussion of the possibilities of literacy education for democracy is of special interest to this work. Remembering that a leading issue faced by young, novice educators today is keeping students engaged and meeting curriculum requirements amid educational apathy, one story from the grade 7 teacher participant is particularly inspiring. At the beginning of November, this teacher received notice that an organization in their community was hosting a "What does Christmas Mean to Me?" essay contest for local youth. Unfortunately, there was neither time nor opportunity for the teacher to introduce the contest in the classroom when it was received. When another notice went out, the day before the essays were due, the teacher decided it was important to at least try, even with limited time. This teacher told them to be as creative as possible, write whatever they wanted, and hand in the essays after school at a

community location. The students immediately got to work. Several even went to hand in their work, admittedly to their teacher's surprise. And one of their students won the contest for their age group, and another student won the contest overall. After that, the students spent the remainder of the month submitting to as many community writing contests as they could, finding them through various websites and community advertisements. Another student went on to win another contest. These students were invested in these writing contests.

This story affirms that “cultivating space and time for authentic exploration of the dialectical real and virtual world” (Parker & Smith, 2022, p. 212) inspires engagement and passion for learning and serves literacy instruction in important ways. This is a story of hope, nestled in a conflicting image of the state of literacy instruction in the ethos of our time, with teachers giving all the energy they have to inspire students, and students often giving very little energy in return. The participants interviewed for this study expressed incredulity at many of their students' reluctance, or perhaps inability, to express an opinion or emotion about the content, opting for simple agreement or refusal to participate rather than analyzing and critically reflecting on the information. This also supports Parker and Smith's (2024) conclusions about literacy in the post-truth era: that our online practices today fail to make room for criticality and deeper learning, and that our emotions are affected by this. The websites where most people practice their everyday literacies are echo chambers, which are entirely demotivating and affect our function in offline contexts. Opportunities for creativity and criticality are therefore of the utmost importance in today's classrooms, as are communication strategies that allow us to convey nuanced meaning and to expand our thinking with evidence (such as structured paragraphs). This is an understanding these teachers seem to carry, based on what they notice about their students.

Based on the offerings of these participants, it is clear that educational communities are forming across generational divides and blossoming despite the supposed differences between those who grew up with technology and those who did not, and between the old and the new. Our contemporary learning environments are drawing on the learning norms of the past and present, perhaps in recognition of how this post-truth era is affecting our literacy, or of the ways our complex times may require simpler solutions. These teachers' experiences can be interpreted in several ways, but as this research is intended to be a love letter to these educators and the field of education at large, it is only appropriate to celebrate the empathy and admiration these teachers have for their students. It is only right to appreciate the respect these teachers have for their older colleagues and to admire their work towards learning and growth. Their efforts towards growth are demonstrated through these teachers' discussions of the articles they read, the courses they take, and their reflexive practices. I see in these participants' stories an attention to intergenerational learning, an acute awareness of the importance of overcoming arbitrary lines of difference determined by age or experience, and interest in honouring the way we all – teachers and students, teachers and parents, teachers and researchers – relate to one another. Indeed, between the lines of these teachers' words, I see passion and love, relationality and respect, a love for learning and a desire for community. This is what matters; this is what should be further discussed.

Next Steps

The scope of this project was necessarily limited due to its completion in pursuit of a Master of Education degree. The necessity of working with a small pool of participants benefited this work by allowing me, the poet, to hold an appropriate amount of space for each participant's emotions and the gravity of their responses, which is hopefully conveyed in the poetry that follows. Any more participants would have resulted in less time spent on each story. However,

having only three participants severely limits the transferability and generalizability of this project and makes it challenging to answer the research questions it seeks to address. The findings reveal only a few ways in which social and political narratives have affected young teachers; they offer only a glimpse into some Ontario classrooms. I cannot conclusively say that my hypothesis has been proven or not. Instead, this research has generated knowledge that has allowed me to ask new questions and has encouraged new thinking about the nature of literacy practices in the current era. This research does not reflect a traditional research design; it instead has followed the structure of arts integrated research (Sameshima et al., 2019). This is not interpreted as a limitation of this project, but as an indication of the next steps.

I intend to continue dwelling on the ideas illuminated in this study and expand the scope of this research in the future. It is of interest to pursue the same research questions within a community focus group rather than through one-on-one interviews, and to extend the discussion. The participants thrived when I, the researcher, expressed similar experiences as an educator, as if hearing that their opinions and experiences were shared inspired them to tell more. It is believed that even richer demonstrations of learning and care would emerge in a setting where teachers could converse about how they navigate their students' language skills. As early-career educators, these participants have only just begun articulating their pedagogy and reflecting on practice, and their stories are perhaps mediated by their doubt and insecurity that their experiences matter, being young and somewhat new to the profession. In a more communal setting, these teachers may feel more self-assured.

Further evidence of care and effort will only further help us “challenge the present rhetoric of despair” (Pahl & Pool, 2020, p. 38) circulating in our contemporary society. What this research has truly yielded is evidence of the care and concern young teachers have for the apathy

expressed towards education and teachers by their students, their students' parents, and the government. Based on this portrait of adolescents and youth not caring much about what their teachers, school leaders, community members, and government think about their intellectual capabilities – if that is a conclusion we approve of drawing from the teachers' experiences of dealing with their students' educational apathy – then further research may delve into why that apathy and disinterest are so prevalent. As a counterpart, research may then explore what professional education programs are doing to help teachers overcome or address the animosity and the lack of support from the community outside the school.

In what follows, the reader is encouraged to consider the participants' care, effort, passion, frustration, exasperation, eagerness, and commitment to their profession. The majority of the following phrases, metaphors, and words have been sourced from the transcripts. There is no "right" way to read these poems; the reader is encouraged to allow their eyes to fall on phrases they feel called to, to read these poems in whatever order they feel is the most helpful. The reader is encouraged to let their imagination take them as they read.

*Vox Participare***when literacy thrives**

bro down with your students
roast them and connect
break up the learning with movement
find a rhythm in this mess!

chronic absenteeism
the truth we all know
kids dropping out by October
this expert group of no-shows.

what matters in this world
it's about more than achieving the pass
fail them if you must, triangulate as you assess
find leniency in your approach, try to just relax?

recognize it's all a game, students
teachers they are on the same team
is this about literacy?
what if *none* of it makes sense?

how are we to teach how to find meaning
we went through our high school years with similar means of knowing
we're *still* scratching our heads thinking.
Rolling with the punches

We are finding joy in this state of being.

the literacy learner today feels, looks, acts differently from those of times gone by

a Student came to me

book in hand, Teacher can i read this one?

This precious material, *her* choice to study

This artifact of interest, dated and dusty,

This grade 7 girl, eager to read,

Not on any sort of modified curriculum.

This grade 7 teacher reaches out to hold it as well

Just to recall reading it as a youth –

When i was in grade 2.

But With Way Less Funding.

i hate this word
but it is the nicest one I got
we have to police the children
you need to be, like, you know, a cop.

with my grade 9s, i can't turn my back
it's not a disrespect thing
we have good rapport
they just can't stay on task

we're in this weird battle
against the resources we have
the money we get
the skills of the students here

the tools they need.
the government is trying to break us
they're infringing on these students' rights
who deserve everything we have to maximize their education.
who deserve everything we got.

not everyone has a laptop,
but we need to do as much as we can online
i have to police without assistance for me to police when i am just trying to teach
i need intense emotional regulation
i need to keep myself in check

i have to put myself aside, to be what the school, the students, their parents all need.
there is so much work to get done.

in the end we all know
this is a battle
this is a game
but i am not sure how
it is supposed to be won.

Swimming in Bogs of Should

my teacher told me that i should not be a teacher,
a really unfortunate experience

i'm not trying to discredit their concerns or their questions, but i don't know,
i always just think, like - Well, what are you doing to help, you know?

it's not the students' fault, obviously, you know,
they're giving an effort and trying - a lot of them. you know, literacy

should easily lend itself across curriculum, where it can be easily ingrained. And taught at the
same time i'm teaching science, or religion, or whatever it may be, but

it's nuts.

i do feel like I'm doing all the things, but maybe not as much as i should be doing.
there are all these things i'm supposed to get to. . .

no one is telling me what i should do.

there are students out there that probably should be getting more assistance than they need,

you can only do so much, it's one person, right?
we're hearing all these things about, this is what teachers should be doing
this is what boards should be doing, and all this stuff from people. . . But where are they?

To stay engaged, to focus, to learn something new, to think. That's what's important, right?
that's what students should be doing.
i should have been given a better foundation.

i should do more.

Contradictions Aboard, Resources Galore!

They learn better that way!
 With eyes on paper and pencil in hands!
 Given slideshows, videos, all that jazz too
 Keeps em engaged, to learn: they love a diagram, give them audio to use!

*But - my school it's running out of money
 because we're using too much paper,
 But not everyone has a laptop*

*At my school were told not to give out powerpoints
 Keep it all analogue, forces em to come to school*

*Over here every classroom has a laptop
 Classroom is virtual, they attend both spaces daily*

Participation-based, the ultimate aim
 i don't want to bark at them the whole day!
 Inquiry-based learning, illuminate the clues
 Experiment with all these different things, see what they do!

You get kind of bogged down, I guess, and you lose the bigger picture.

is that a responsible practice for me, to let them pass?

*The onus is now on us to keep the phones away
 but we weren't really given nothing in return*

*look at the curriculum, and it's like, we gotta do all these things, but they can't really write a sentence even in
 10 or 15 minutes, so. . .*

What will you discern?
 Thirty faces in front of you!
 Inclusive of all learning styles, it's what you got to do!
 Depends on how you look at it,
 Depends on what you feel they need in order to get through.

*reflection, too, where they struggle big time, they not able to, like, have that metacognition, and be able to self-
 reflect and analyze*

*i would prefer to post it, just, you know, so students have access to it,
 you know, whenever they want, but. . .*

*i haven't even really got the chance to sit down with any teachers to talk about, you know, what their literacy
 is, what our goals are, all that stuff. . .*

I don't know if we have, like, a literacy lead. I haven't interacted with them if we do.

The onus on us, the teachers, to keep the devices of all this content away!
Pinhole the lesson, lead them to focus!
no one talks about the resources that teachers have, what we **need** to use

It's like. . .

The curriculum. . .

*a bunch of different ingredients in a pot, giving it to us, and saying
cook up a gourmet meal with this.*

You gave me leeks and chocolate and soy sauce, how am I supposed to make something out of this, right?

It is all chocolate soup!

Universal Experiences?

Write a sentence! They can't write a sentence!
 Bit by bit, they are given it all
 Every piece - like a slice of cake
 Given on the finest platter
 Subject, object, predicate
 Topic sentence, supporting points, conclusion
 These palms are sweaty, the handholding - the norm
 This is the formula, but *it is such a bore*.
 Write a sentence! They can't write a sentence!
 Copy and paste, look at the board, produce a thought -
 Take your pick, keyboard or lead,
 Lead or ink,
 Put it into existence, make it concrete!
 The structure, as alien as a critical thought
 The glossary, across the desert
 Independent work? Rarely.
 Trying to tap into creativity
 To be met with *bland composing*.
 Each sentence beginning:
 And then,
 And then,
 And then,
 As repetitive as
 A reel on repeat
 Write a sentence, produce a paragraph
 Note taking? Black and white, all good there it seems
 Information straightforwardly delivered.
 Except they hear it orally,
 Given it on paper and on screen,
 told again and again, even shared amongst friends
 Plurality, differentiation: all the norm.
 Write a sentence, write a sentence!
 Edit it some
 Check the feedback
 Consider it feedforward.
 The well-thought-out, completed, returned rubric is in the garbage again.
 Find it next to the lesson plan
 That tried to do something.
 These settings are getting simpler?
 It's tricky
 It's tough

What sort of teaching is good enough?

So when i think,
This kid is super bright, but, like, literally can *barely* write a paragraph at the same time.
yet

Understand verbally? Oh yes,
Very well.
When they watch it, they
extrapolate information.
Yeah, they understand themes, big ideas, you know what i mean? Visual content, they
Analyze it, come to know it.

When they hear it, they're witty. Quick tongues, sharper teeth.

they engage in the game of back and forth, oral speech, one of their greatest strengths –
School? The students ain't always sure it is worth going to
Teachers? They know realistically

what can one person do? Act
young and be kind – what can we do?
Except be there authentically, act
Zealously, find the motivation, try to take it all seriously.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

“What it means to be literate” is a question of immense magnitude. This project aims to contribute to the discussion of this question by presenting the experiences, perspectives, and interpretations of early-career educators born between 1995 and 2000 who are currently teaching in formal settings at the intermediate and senior levels. It has been the intention of this project to provide insight into how teacher education programs, school boards, and society at large could better support educators as they find their footing in the field, during a time of social turbulence (Downey et al., 2024). This research was guided by the questions: What do early-career educators observe and conclude about their students’ literacy and language skills, and how do their teaching experiences support or challenge prevailing narratives around education? How are the dominant social and academic understandings surrounding English “literacy” affecting teachers born within the Zillennial generation? The “answers” to these questions that this phenomenological study has yielded are curious, inspiring, and inconclusive. They are less “answers” than ideas; ideas that have generated new questions and new knowledge, which is exactly what arts informed research projects typically hope to create (Sameshima et al., 2019). By this standard, this project has been a success.

This research was also guided by the prediction that these young teachers, born during the generationally ambiguous period of the late 1990s, though often known as the Zillennials, would hold different beliefs about literacy and literacy pedagogies than those of previous generations. Based on the responses of the three participants who volunteered for this study and on the literature on previous generations of teachers, this prediction, while not conclusively proven or disproven by this small sample, appears incorrect. What has been suggested is that this specific group of teachers has an admirable ability to hold multiple perspectives and

understandings not in tension but in unity, to honour past traditions while tuning into the demands of the future. This is presumably because this pool of participants can recall technology-free classrooms and paper-and-pen essays, but also because they were among the first citizens to become accustomed to unlimited internet access and highly sophisticated smartphones. As teachers, this cohort of citizens can easily navigate antiquated and new curricula while seamlessly integrating multimodal content into their classrooms. This is not something to be diminished, given the understanding that schools cannot keep pace with technological developments (see Global Education Monitoring Report team, 2023). These teachers seem able to respond to their students' expectations and desires towards technology use in the classroom, even without strict mandates or established policies telling them how to do so. They use their lifelong experiences with digital tools, creativity, and critical thinking to negotiate the best way to do so. This is inspiring.

These teachers recognize and honour both students' expectations and wants, as well as their needs as citizens. These teachers reported noticing that many students have immense trouble with articulating their thinking clearly, concisely, and within a set timeframe. These Gen Alpha students often require extensive time and one-on-one support to complete assignments, and almost all students, almost all the time, would prefer to present their thoughts verbally or creatively rather than write them formally. The participants revealed their understanding that basic literacy skills - writing complete and complex sentences, decoding meaning, reading and analyzing long texts, etc. - remain extremely important for success in the workplace. These teachers did not indicate that our sociotechnical developments and increased use of aesthetic modes of communication have necessarily transformed the basic skills needed to be considered literate. They still view digital literacy as distinct from traditional literacy, and they do not think

traditional literacy has been replaced, nor do they believe it will. Novel studies, note-taking, paragraph writing, and oral presentations are viewed as important literacy practices by these educators, as is the ability to extract and analyze information from visual images, videos, and diagrams. What “literacy” is, according to these participants, is simultaneously complex and simple: it is reading, writing, thinking, analyzing, and creating.

Do the teachers’ observations challenge or support prevailing narratives about youth and education in the ethos of our time? This is a complicated question that does not easily lend itself to a definitive answer. These teachers supported the view that today’s learners, whether due to social media, GenerativeAI software, the COVID-19 pandemic, or other factors, look and act differently than youth in previous generations. This is a strand of discourse often heard in both social and academic contexts. The evidence these teachers used to submit this was largely personal, reporting that, compared to the level of skill they and their peers had at the ages of the students in front of them, today’s youth are extremely “behind.” They meant “behind” in terms of reading and writing skills specifically. These teachers praised these learners’ creative skills and suggested that these students are sophisticated in their verbal communication. This is not a conclusive finding because these teachers are adamant that blanket statements cannot really be applied to these youth and adolescents, who are extremely diverse. It would not be fair for me, the researcher, to then apply a blanket statement to these teachers or their observations.

Loerts and Belcher (2024) examined how early-career educators integrate learning from their professional training as they navigate the expectations and norms of their workplaces. These researchers questioned whether new teachers actually use the pedagogical tools they are given in teacher education programs, or if they discard them in favour of the “old ways of teaching” they remember experiencing as students and that they witness their experienced

colleagues using. This is an interesting question to dwell on at the conclusion of this study, which largely reflects the tensions between literacy theory and practice, a tension that has seemingly always existed in the field of education. It is not clear whether the participants ever learned about New Literacy Studies, multiliteracies pedagogies, or the material/affective/felt dimensions of literacy practices within their formal education. It is not clear that they have ever been engaged in discussions about these topics in their workplace, either. When asked if they were aware of these concepts, each participant said no. Indeed, each participant indicated that their formal training programs did not adequately prepare them to tackle literacy at all (and two of these participants are qualified English teachers).

But as Loerts and Belcher (2024) and Borti (2023) discuss, it is also teachers' worldviews, belief systems, and informal learning experiences that shape their pedagogies, perhaps even more than their formal training. The teachers in this study evidently believe that multimodal content delivery is an integral part of the student-centred approach, because it is through multimodality that students become engaged and invested in their learning. It was not explicitly stated whether these teachers were told to use multiple teaching modes or whether their personal knowledge led them to prioritize such tools, but it appears natural for these teachers to honour multiple ways of knowing in their classrooms.

These teachers expressed that their pursuit of multiliteracies pedagogies, though without being named as such, stems from a desire to be culturally responsive educators (Watts-Taffe, 2022). This does support the discussion that, as time has gone on, the need to justify the multiliteracies pedagogy has lessened (see Mills, 2011). We can assume their professional development programs taught them to draw on students' lived experiences and to address students' needs and interests in lesson planning. We can also assume that discussions about the

need to honour social-emotional learning in our educational systems have impacted these educators, which may explain why they encourage reflexive learning practices. These teachers have evidently taken the advice to be as student-centred as possible extremely seriously.

The discussion surrounding how we are living in politically tense, socially complex times (see Downey et al., 2024; Parker & Smith, 2022) and that within this context, the shape, style, and behaviour of the twenty-first-century literacy learner has changed (see Lemieux, 2020) – indeed that all of education has developed – seems to have affected each participant differently. Each participant, without being prompted, referred to the ways the current Ministry of Education has been approaching the school system, and no participant spoke positively about recent developments. Each participant recognized that schools face immense challenges today and emphasized that they did not wish to diminish them in any way. They affirmed that many of the challenges faced by schools, such as funding shortages, a lack of community support, and staff shortages, were prevalent and often extremely demotivating.

However, importantly, these teachers emphasized that they still enjoy their jobs and are content with their careers despite the challenges. One participant almost appeared hesitant to admit this truth, as if they felt guilty for enjoying themselves while these challenges persisted. This is extremely noteworthy. Most people in Ontario can recall hearing, at some point in the recent past, something along the lines of: “It is a tough time to be a teacher,” or “Teaching isn’t what it used to be,” or even, “I couldn’t imagine working in schools nowadays.” The reasons for these colloquialisms vary, and they are certainly not omnipresent. But they are there, nestled within social dialogue, and the teachers in this research remind us that the rhetoric of despair is recognized by teachers and impacts them, but not always supported. These teachers can speak about the joys of teaching as much as about the hardships; they are proud of the positions they

hold. This provides hope. And this positive hope gives us cause to challenge the rhetoric of despair that surrounds education; it invites us to question *who* is spreading such rhetoric and *why* it permeates.

If we compare the responses of these early career educators with those of experienced teachers, as represented in Hatfield's (2025) study, we might conclude that this generation of teachers is more positive about their students and less critical of technological use. But Hatfield (2025) collected the opinions of hundreds of educators, and this study recruited three, so we are limited in our ability to draw accurate comparisons. This research did not yield sufficient evidence to draw sweeping conclusions about the attributes of the current generation of teachers, but it does motivate further research into their experiences.

All three participants shared that their school boards have stated they are unable or unwilling to create a definitive policy on AI use within the school, due to the rapid pace of its evolution. Though this did not appear to overly concern these participants, who have responded admirably to their board's advice to "use their discretion" when permitting technology and digital tools in the classroom. This advice does not seem to overwhelm these teachers. This reflects these teachers' comfort with using technology in their teaching and integrating multimodal content delivery. We might conclude from these three participants that this is a result of their generational attributes, of growing up alongside the development of the technological tools most Canadians are extremely familiar with today. Might this be the reason these teachers seem to place more significance on traditional literacies than on digital literacy? Is it because navigating digital tools and the technological world comes easily to them, as they know it does to their students, that they therefore devote more attention to what does not come easily, such as producing lengthy texts, reading complex stories, and being grammatically correct? Perhaps.

This project grew from the questions: What understandings of our literacies may emerge from lingering in the stories of young, novice teachers of today's youth and adolescents? How do conceptions of literacy, as found in the research, affect young teachers? The reader is encouraged to consider their own responses to the first question at the conclusion of this work, in reflection of the poetry specifically. The answer to the second question is complicated because the young teachers in this study do not appear to have been as engaged with research-based conceptions of literacy as they maybe should have been during their formal training. The question of how the research affects these teachers is complex because academic conceptions of literacy do not appear to have explicitly informed their pedagogies (at least, not yet!). This reflects a truth (if I may call it that) about research and our society – narratives are not regularly supported by factual evidence, research is not widely disseminated, and research is not accessible enough. This has concerned many who are tuned into the conversation about post-truth and misinformation. This is perhaps something most people know, but not enough are concerned about it. I recognize that my bias is that literacy research should be better known. The extent to which we can discuss the affective dimensions of literacy research is limited because not enough young teachers are affected by research, by no fault of their own. Saying “not enough teachers” is perhaps not a claim I can make given the limited scope of this study; more teachers should be recruited and studied to support that claim. But I write it here to say that this research has *suggested* that much.

That is not to say these teachers have not been affected at all; they seem to know the importance of a multiliteracies approach, but they cannot name it for what it is. Of course, what is in a name? That is true. Do they need to name it? Perhaps not. Perhaps it has been naturalized. But where will it go if it is not named? Will it stay alive? Will it remain “natural” to adopt the multiliteracies approach, or will it fade into the past, joining other education fads that have

disappeared? Is this where the relevance of *felt literacies* comes into play? We *feel* the importance of traditional literacies, as we *feel* the importance of the multiliteracies approach. Is feeling enough? These are the musings, the new questions, that have been inspired by this work. It is important to reiterate that these teachers have prioritized further learning since graduating from their initial teaching training: they welcome learning opportunities and build their resumes by attaining Additional Qualifications, and demonstrate their passion for the field of education by volunteering to participate in this present study, knowing that it was my intention to contribute to the discussion that names the look and feel of education in our present age. Their commitment to their careers suggests that they will come to name their pedagogies more confidently and become more familiar with – and therefore able to further contribute to – the work of New Literacy Studies, the theories of multiliteracies, and other turns in literacy scholarship. Perhaps we ought to consider these teachers' desires for more content-specific learning as we decide the shape and nature of teaching training programs going forward.

Has “what it means to be literate” changed in the twenty-first century? It appears that these teachers do not know. At the end of this project, neither do I. What we do know is that youth deserve committed teachers, they deserve a government that cares about their well-being, they deserve opportunities to be creative and critical, they deserve healthy relationships in and outside of schools, and they deserve to have their ways of knowing to be simultaneously honoured and challenged so they may continue to develop. As do teachers. This is something that the participants in this study are passionate about. It is hoped that the passion these educators have for their students' learning and development, as well as for their own learning, shines through the poetry in this project, and that their care and concern may soften the rhetoric of despair that circulates in education discourse. Perhaps this work has not truly challenged the

hostile rhetoric about education, but it does invite consideration of *who* is spreading such speech and encourages deeper reflection about the various perspectives on the state of education. This work has also been an invitation to those who may not be engaged in literacy research to tune in to the discussion and to more deeply consider the importance of honouring the theories about learning and schooling that, as has been said, we all have to live with (see Street, 1997).

There is something beautiful about how literacy research constantly grows and responds to our social circumstances. Indeed, there is something beautiful about how these young, early-career educators approach their careers in the ethos of our time: with hearts forward, critical minds turned on, and eager to learn.

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