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Honouring the Adult Learner Through Recognition: Critically Exploring Immigrant
Experiences of PLAR Considerations in Saskatchewan

by

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Abstract

Prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) denotes a broad range of activities that make prior learning visible and supports attaining formal recognition for that learning, specifically for adult learners. With immigration increasing worldwide, the need for foreign credential recognition innovation is crucial. While the validation of knowledge, skills, abilities, personal attributes, and competencies is seen as an essential part of the immigrant integration process, using PLAR as part of the assessment and recognition of prior learning experiences of foreign educated professionals has not been an area greatly explored. Critical research has illuminated persistent challenges in the underlying structures of PLAR with some researchers expressing concern about PLAR's deskilling and exclusionary practices when it comes to assessing immigrants' prior learning. What seems to be missing are the voices of immigrants using, or considering using, the PLAR process.

This research study explores the experiences of immigrants in Saskatchewan who are considering using PLAR at post-secondary institutions in Saskatchewan. Using a narrative inquiry methodological approach, and guided by an integrative intersectionality framework, the experiences of seven participants were storied from interviews and analyzed thematically using existing theories on PLAR.

This study amplifies the stories of seven persons seeking to use PLAR to better understand their needs and experiences drawing on interviews. This study found that persistent barriers to recognition and commensurate employment exist for immigrants moving to Saskatchewan including unemployment/underemployment, and negative impacts on mental health.

Keywords: prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR), immigration, post-secondary, intersectionality, narrative, adult learner, credential recognition

Preface

This dissertation is original, unpublished, work by the author, Tenielle McLeod. This study was covered by Ethics Certificate number REB23-1562, issued by the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board on March 10, 2025, for the project “Honouring the Adult Learner Through Recognition: Critically Exploring Immigrant Experiences of PLAR Considerations in Saskatchewan,” and with the certificate of completion TCPS 2: CORE 2022 #0001242952, issued by the Panel on Research Ethics on November 3, 2023.

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Dedication

To the late Dr. Len Findlay whose work continues to challenge and to inspire me and countless others.

To Tim, my husband of almost 25 years and my best friend. I could not ask for a bigger supporter and champion. Your unwavering belief in me and support throughout this journey was remarkable and I will never take that for granted.

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I wish to acknowledge that a significant part of my learning and recognition during this doctoral journey has taken place at the University of Calgary, located on the traditional territories of the peoples of Treaty 7, which include the Blackfoot Confederacy (comprising the Siksika, the Piikani, and the Kainai First Nations), the Tsuut'ina First Nation, and the Stoney Nakoda (including Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Goodstoney First Nations), and also home to the Métis Nation of Alberta.

I also wish to acknowledge that much of my learning and recognition occurred in my home province of Saskatchewan, Moose Jaw referred to as Treaty 4 Territory which encompasses the lands of the Cree, Saulteaux, Dakota, Nakota, Lakota, and on the homeland of the Métis Nation. I respect and honour the Treaties that were made on all territories, and acknowledge the harms and mistakes of the past, and am committed to move forward in partnership with Indigenous Nations in the spirit of reconciliation and collaboration.

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Definitions of Key Terminology

The following terminology is taken from the Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials (CICIC), Statistics Canada, the Canadian Council for Refugees, and Canada Revenue Agency.¹ The terms listed below will be used throughout this study.

- **Advanced Placement/Standing:** When a student is awarded advanced standing in a program based on prior experience (e.g., if a student is assessed to begin in the third year of a four-year degree program). (CICIC)
- **Assessment Methods:** The methods with which the institution assesses and measures the student's prior knowledge in the prior learning assessment process. (CICIC)
- **Course-specific:** When a student is granted credit for specific courses; measured against the learning outcomes of specific courses. (CICIC)
- **Evidence:** Refers to documents or artifacts that demonstrate a student's prior learning. Evidence can include: professional certificates or licenses, work samples, training records, performance evaluations, military records, self-assessments, letters of reference, job descriptions, publications, awards and recognitions, and continuing education records. (CICIC)
- **Flexible Assessment:** Prerequisites for a course or program are waived based on prior learning and experience. (CICIC)

¹ Education/assessment terminology was taken verbatim from the CICIC as they are the body providing up to date lists of all recognized post-secondary institutions and are an authority on post-secondary terminology across Canada. Statistics Canada did not include the terms refugee or newcomer in its Glossary; however, I used Statistics Canada to define “immigrant.” I used the Canadian Council for Refugees as an appropriate resource to define “refugee” and Canada Revenue Agency for the “newcomer” definition as this was the entity to provide specific parameters for this term. All terms are verbatim from the indicated sources.

- **Formal Learning:** Guided by a formal curriculum, including for credit courses and programs offered at postsecondary institutions and other education providers, and leads to a formally recognized credential. Types of formal recognition of prior learning include transfer credit and credential recognition. (CICIC)
- **Immigrant:** A landed immigrant or a non-permanent resident. A landed immigrant is a permanent resident who was not a Canadian citizen at birth. A non-permanent resident is a person who holds a study or work permit or who is a refugee claimant or is a family member living with this refugee claimant. (Statistics Canada, 2023)
- **Informal Learning:** Incidental (unplanned) learning, knowledge and skills acquired through life and work experience outside of formal learning environments. It often arises from work, volunteer, and community activities. There is no formal curriculum and no credits are earned. Samples of informal learning include: self-study, reading articles, performance support, coaching, mentoring, trial and error. (CICIC)
- **Newcomer:** Refers to someone during their first year as a resident in Canada. (Canadian Council for Refugees)
- **Non-formal Learning:** Learning that is not provided by an education or training institute, and usually does not lead to course credit, a credential, or certification (such as a diploma, certificate or degree). Is often organized through participation in organized workplace-based training, non-credit courses, and workshops. (CICIC)
- **Program-based (block-credit award):** When a student is awarded a block of credits towards a program; often based on the graduate competencies of the institution or program. (CICIC)

- **Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR):** A structured method of assessing a student's prior knowledge and skills acquired through non-formal and informal learning or experience in relation to a specific goal. This can include learning that has occurred outside of traditional classroom settings through work, life experiences, and self-study. (CICIC)
- **Refugee:** A person who is forced to flee from persecution. (Canadian Council for Refugees)
- **Types of Prior Learning Assessment:** Methods of awarding/assessing credits through PLAR. The methods used in postsecondary institutions to assess prior learning include written challenge exams, oral exams/interviews, performance assessments, product assessments, and portfolio assessments. The methods used to recognize prior learning include advanced placement, flexible assessment, course-specific, program-based, and credit bank. (CICIC)

List of Acronyms

- ACAT:** Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer
- APEL:** Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning
- APL:** Assessment of Prior Learning
- BCCAT:** British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer
- CAPLA:** Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment
- CAEL:** Council for Adult and Experiential Learning
- CICan:** Colleges and Institutes Canada
- CICIC:** Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials
- CIRL:** Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning
- CMEC:** Council of Ministers of Education Canada
- CPL:** Credit for Prior Learning
- CSMLS:** Canadian Society for Medical Laboratory Science
- ECA:** Education Credential Assessment
- ENIC-NARIC:** European Network of Information Centres and National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union
- ÉRA:** Évaluation et Reconnaissance des Acquis
- ESDC:** Economic and Social Development Canada
- FAST:** Facilitating Access to Skilled Talent
- FCR:** Foreign Credential Recognition
- FNTI:** First Nations Technical Institute
- FSC:** Future Skills Centre
- GRALE:** Global Report on Adult Learning and Education
- IELTS:** International English Language Testing System
- ILO:** International Labour Organization
- IRCC:** Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada
- LMIC:** Labour Market Information Council
- NQF:** National Qualifications Frameworks
- NWPTA:** New West Partnership Trade Agreement

OaSIS: Occupational and Standards Information System
OECD: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
ONCAT: Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer
PCCAT: Pan-Canadian Consortium on Admissions and Transfer
PLAR: Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition
PLIRC: Prior Learning International Research Centre
QAF: Quality Assurance Framework
QR: Qualification Recognition
RAC: Recognition of Acquired Competencies
RDAl: Reconnaissance des Acquis pour l'intégralité du Programme
RNFIL: Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning
RPL: Recognition of Prior Learning
SATCC: Saskatchewan Apprenticeship and Trade Certification Commission
SCC: School Community Council
SINP: Saskatchewan Immigrant Nominee Program
STCLPC: Saskatchewan Transfer Credit and Learner Pathways Council
UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
VPL: Validation of Prior Learning
WES: World Education Services

Chapter 1: Introduction

Overview

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)² is a process of earning post-secondary credit for prior learning. Prior learning includes a broader scope of considered learning that is formal, informal, non-formal, and experiential. The three latter activities include learning that has been acquired through volunteer activities, work experience, informal training, and similar opportunities that reflect learning that takes place outside institutional walls. As a phenomenon that seeks to award recognition and credit for this learning, PLAR has been associated with life-changing benefits for adult learners seeking credit for learning acquired through lived and professional life experiences. Some of these benefits include: saving time and money, increased self-esteem, obtaining commensurate (corresponding in size or degree) employment, increased work-life balance by reducing program course load, and improved equity and access to education. These individual benefits have been connected to broader claims of PLAR's role in improved social justice. That is, it claims to remove barriers to adult education and place value on adult learning thereby challenging the notion that learning can only take place within the academy. PLAR may, for instance, place value on the learning gained from professional careers and in cultural settings. It is important to note that while PLAR may challenge the claim that learning only takes place in the academy with its transplanted colonial

² Other iterations of PLAR include: recognition of prior learning (RPL), credit for prior learning (CPL), validation of prior learning (VPL), assessment of prior learning (APL), assessment of prior experiential learning (APEL), qualification recognition (QR), recognition of acquired competencies (RAC), reconnaissance des acquis pour l'intégralité du programme (RDAi), évaluation et reconnaissance des acquis (ÉRA). These names vary from province to province to territory, and across institutions.

roots, it does not acknowledge and honour the deep longstanding roots of Indigenous knowledge traditions within these lands now known as Canada. In considering immigrant experiences as the basis and scope of this study, I acknowledge that there are others, such as the First Peoples of Canada, who have prior and longstanding claims to having their knowledge traditions ignored. As a result, any claim of PLAR's benevolence is problematic when we consider the value, or lack of value, placed on learning from a variety of peoples and locations from this nation as well as across the globe. In the specialized case of immigrants taking up PLAR processes to transition into the Canadian labour market, it has been argued that there are significant difficulties in the process (Riffell, 2006). So much so that questions have been raised as to whether PLAR is an appropriate tool for assessing immigrants' prior learning (Guo, 2015; Klages & Mustafa, 2022; Liu & Guo, 2021). It is also unclear if PLAR could be or is being used as a mechanism of recognition for Canadian organizations and industries who hold rigorous and high standards of care and quality for those who enter the workforce. Drawing from the literature focused on PLAR, I have found there is little known about immigrant knowledge of or experiences using PLAR, particularly from the point of view of immigrants considering the process in Saskatchewan.

In this study, I explored the storied experiences of immigrants as they considered using PLAR as an alternative to foreign credential recognition at Saskatchewan post-secondary institutions. These institutions³ are also members of the Saskatchewan Transfer Credit and

³ Primary Council Members: Ministry of Advanced Education, Saskatchewan Polytechnic, University of Regina, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies, Briercrest College and Seminary, Saskatchewan Association of Regional Colleges. Affiliate Members: Regional Colleges, Federated Colleges, Affiliated Colleges, Aboriginal and Northern educational institutions, Saskatchewan Apprenticeship and Trade Certification Commission.

Learner Pathways Council (STCLPC) which is a partnership of credit-granting institutions and the Ministry of Advanced Education in Saskatchewan. This provincial council is focused on facilitating increased accessibility, mobility, and academic success of learners. They do this by promoting learner pathways among Saskatchewan's post-secondary institutions within and outside the province. Given that PLAR is generally considered from the perspective of post-secondary institutions with assessment and evaluation methods rooted in Eurocentric and androcentric epistemologies, it is anticipated this equity-based inquiry could generate new knowledge around assessment and evaluation from the vantage point of diverse PLAR users to help inform and improve PLAR practices in Saskatchewan. It is also my hope this study might improve the practices of immigrant integration services in Saskatchewan by providing immigrants with information on PLAR as an alternative method of earning Canadian post-secondary credit. This credit could be for formal learning acquired either at a post-secondary institution outside of Canada or for non-formal and informal learning acquired elsewhere. That is, PLAR could provide credential recognition to immigrants who are unsuccessful in obtaining credit through the foreign credential recognition process. PLAR might also provide recognition to those who have received credential recognition but have not obtained employment commensurate with their education. The ability to gain Canadian post-secondary credits through a PLAR process might further improve immigrant unemployment and underemployment realities in Saskatchewan through recognition. By acknowledging the learning and inherent value of those who have considered PLAR processes, but have not formally entered into the process, this research employs qualitative narrative inquiry methodology to better understand the experiences of immigrants who are considering PLAR. For this study, I recruited seven participants who are immigrants considering pursuing PLAR at one of Saskatchewan's post-secondary institutions.

By placing an emphasis on the adult learner in my research, I draw attention to the knowledge, skills, abilities, personal attributes, and competencies⁴ unique to each adult learner where intersections of oppression may exist depending on their unique backgrounds and experiences. Oppression in this study represents the continued perspective of difference as deficiency (Guo & Shan, 2013; Annamma & Booker, 2020) where PLAR, if not viewed with an intersectional lens, is at risk of becoming a reductive tool that “obscure[s] the fullness of human experience and hinder[s] learning” (Annamma & Booker, 2020, p. 300). Therefore, processes that recognize the unique knowledge, skills, abilities, personal attributes, and competencies of each adult learner need to be equity-based. My focus in this study is to honour the adult learner through recognition and I was deeply influenced by works that speak to its focus and chosen methodology. The first work is by scholars from the Linköping University and the University of Calgary, Andersson and Guo (2009), *Governing through non/recognition: The missing ‘R’ in PLAR for immigrant professionals in Canada and Sweden*. The second work is by Adult Education and Learning scholars, Kawalilak and Wihak (2013), *Adjusting the fulcrum: How prior learning is recognized in university adult education contexts*. The article by Andersson and Guo (2009) helped me to think about participants’ complexities and to challenge PLAR’s historical connection to Western assessment and evaluation practices. The second article by Kawalilak and Wihak (2013) reminded me of the power of dialogue to address tensions; for the authors, the tension is between honouring the learner and honouring the curriculum.

⁴ The reference to knowledge, skills, abilities, personal attributes, and competencies is to acknowledge and respect terms used in both the post-secondary sector and the workforce sector as reflected in Economic and Social Development Canada’s Occupation and Skills Information System (OaSIS) in the hopes of supporting the pan-Canadian dialogue on skills and competencies.

By interrogating the previously unquestioned “assessment” part of PLAR and by centring “recognition” in PLAR processes, my research speaks to a pedagogy of hope, potential, and social justice and inclusion possibilities. It hopes to further social justice aims and by readjusting the central role of assessment in PLAR, which seems to value the curriculum and its Western approaches over that of the learner and their diverse experiences, I am placing recognition at the centre of PLAR and honouring the adult learner. Here, the emphasis is on action towards the ultimate aim of equitable inclusion.

In this introductory chapter, I introduce myself to the reader with narrative beginnings, my personal stories and experiences that brought me to this research, along with considerations of who I am in this narrative inquiry, so the reader understands the purpose for this study and what brings me to this work. I do this by outlining justifications (personal, practical, and social) because narrative inquirers are part of the “phenomenon under study” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 36). After providing an overview of how I am situated in this research, I explore the origins, background, current context of PLAR in Saskatchewan, and the problem statement to frame and focus my study. This context will highlight how little is known about immigrant experiences using PLAR in Saskatchewan and how the aim of this study is to better understand these experiences and why this is important. Finally, I provide a brief account of my chosen methodology, and the study’s rationale and significance.

How I am Situated in This Research

My master’s supervisor, Dr. Len Findlay, passed away in 2023 and although we had only connected a few times over the last 15 years or so, the sense of loss was significant and difficult for me to express. I was not only feeling a personal sense of loss, but rather a sense of loss for everyone, for higher education, for society, and I could not exactly find the words to explain

why. However, Dr. Ron Cooley, one of Dr. Findlay's colleagues, captured it well in a social media post:

In my 26 years at the University of Saskatchewan, there were some colleagues who were better teachers than I was, some who were better scholars, and some who were better citizens. But only one could make the University of Saskatchewan the envy of every English department in the country and gave us a standard to aspire to. (Cooley, 2023)

Although my former supervisor was highly critical of both the university and Canada, it was clear that his criticality was rooted in care and a deeper ethical commitment to academic freedom, and a love for both Canada and the university. He was widely respected and admired because of this commitment. He brought topics such as globalisation, internationalisation, and Indigenization to my attention over 20 years ago. Dr. Findlay continually questioned the university's role in society and advocated for academic freedom, the decolonizing of Canadian universities, and required faculty and students to continually reflect on positionality; this to me, is the life lesson. It was because of him that I started to see myself in higher education long term and it will be because of him that I work through the discomfort that comes with being critical of dominant structures.

After only one year of working as faculty at Saskatchewan Polytechnic, I welcomed the first of three children. My well-laid plans to return to work after her birth transformed with my new role as a mother. I was compelled to stay home and instead finished my master's degree in the short period of time when she slept. I did some invigilation and marking as well but did not return to any kind of full-time capacity until my youngest child was almost three. Having children highlighted what I truly valued. I understood that doing this well took a great deal of time, commitment, and care, and it had great value to me. The topic of *value*, in terms of what

has worth in contemporary Canadian society, brewed over and over again as I was repeatedly asked why I would have as much education as I did, yet not work outside the home. It was as if childrearing had little or no *value*. Despite money being tight, I unapologetically believed that I was the best person for the parenting of my children, and I did not care what others thought. It was enough for me to know my time with them had value, an embodied occurrence of sorts that depicts a kind of tacit knowledge which is intuitive and difficult to make explicit (Groen & Kawalilak, 2014). In 2014, I felt a need to reconnect with higher education. I returned to work as a part-time instructor and took courses to complete an advanced certificate in adult education as part of the employment requirement. It was during this time that I encountered PLAR as a candidate for a leadership course that was part of the advanced certificate program. All of the courses in the program were designed with the alternative completion pathway that PLAR provides. Therefore, I completed the self-assessment for the leadership course and decided to pursue PLAR. I was successful in obtaining credit for this course via PLAR and was deeply grateful for having my informal leadership experience outside formal settings recognized and valued. I had leadership experience running a household, and as a School Community Council Chairperson serving in this capacity for five years at my children's elementary school. Later on, I came to appreciate the value of informal leadership experience in my role supporting faculty as an educational developer and later as a PLAR facilitator. I started to see the full potential of PLAR. During this time my love of teaching through a relational way emerged. I took up the challenge of co-creating rubrics with learners, exploring universal design for learning to employ in course design and instruction, authoring papers to critique the overuse of exams, creating workshops on authentic assessment and multiple means of representation, and so on. These practices were new for many of my colleagues and not widely supported as they challenged the

power relations between teacher/learner; they were good practices among our learning and teaching faculty but challenging to colleagues who were not ready to “deepen and broaden their understanding and pedagogy” (Kawalilak & Groen, 2020). It seemed logical for me to apply for positions in the learning and teaching division. I have since held positions as a learner pathways facilitator supporting faculty and initiating change to policy and processes to improve pathways for learners and also as an educational developer supporting faculty in creating authentic assessments, rubrics, and so on.

My past supervisor once called me the “sense maker,” someone always needing to make sense of how things worked, an attribute she valued. I spent a great deal of time focused on prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) processes at the institution where I was employed. This interest expanded to institutions beyond my present place of employment and provided insights into assessment practices, both traditional foundations and current practices. I acknowledge that a great deal of thought and effort had gone into the current policy and processes for PLAR at my institution anchored in diverse, reliable texts on the topic of recognition of prior learning, ways of knowing, and assessment. I built on this excellent work by asking colleagues where the challenges remained with mobilizing institution-wide PLAR. While PLAR was captured in policy and processes were clearly outlined, it was not practiced or promoted in all programs. Institutionally there was still lack of understanding of PLAR and/or lack of faculty buy-in. I proposed a project that would provide candidates with access to learning outcomes as the first step of self-assessment outlined in the PLAR processes. This proposal would ensure learning outcomes were available for self-assessment, but programs would not yet need to provide information on the specific PLAR assessments themselves. This proposal provided access to information while mitigating faculty concerns around accessing specific

course assessments. Based on their feedback our small team of three staff used institutionally approved technology to streamline PLAR processes for the benefit of staff and incoming students.

I have worked in the post-secondary sphere for many years as an instructor and educational developer in a few roles which included assessment consultant and as a facilitator for learner pathways. In these roles, I supported faculty with developing and using PLAR assessments, implementing dual credit into programs, establishing transfer credit agreements, creating authentic assessments, aligning assignments with learning outcomes, and implementing evidence-based pedagogies. I had also been a recipient of the PLAR process who knew the process from a student perspective. I dedicated my time to program review policy and other institutional initiatives focused on quality assurance. I have incorporated student feedback into course design and delivery to improve learner access and experience, and I have revised PLAR processes incorporating a student lens. All to say, I am passionate about learning and supporting access and equity in education.

In reflecting on why I chose qualitative research to undertake this PLAR study, I do not have to look far to see alignment between my ontological, epistemological, and axiological views and the primary characteristics of qualitative research. Former adjunct and current professors at Teachers College, Columbia University, Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) studied qualitative research from an educational lens and noted key characteristics of this approach that include: delving deep into the research topic; adopting a researcher role that seeks to understand; sharing power with research participants by remaining flexible and reflective; bringing researcher personal experience to the study; designing the study with small samples; and using flexible methods and analysis that consider context (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, pp. 39-42). I see

many of these characteristics reflected in my own professional behaviours and approaches to teaching, such as an emphasis on a more balanced teacher/learner relationship, learner involvement, collaboration, and knowledge exchange, so qualitative research is an intuitive and natural fit for me. While I appreciate numerically grounded studies as useful approaches, I believe metrics are only one part of a wider account. My insatiable curiosity compels me to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon or process to help inform better decision making, and this means multiple perspectives need to be included. As Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) maintained, “deep understanding about what a subject matter is, in all its real-world complexity, and an ability to describe, explain, and communicate that understanding lies at the core of qualitative research” (p. 38). PLAR, the phenomenon under exploration, is extremely complex, nuanced, and contextually situated and therefore, to deeply understand this process, a qualitative research study is essential. While quantitative data is a useful starting point, a richer understanding of PLAR emerges in stories of how learners experience the process. For instance, even if we could *see* success in numbers that particular post-secondary institutions might claim by having large amounts of learners successfully complete the PLAR process, information about what makes the program and its participants successful requires more than the linear reporting of completion rates. Moreover, the successful completion of PLAR does not always yield the employment goals of learners. Once more, PLAR completion rates do not reflect this reality. So, while quantitative research on PLAR can provide an institutional barometer or starting point, it is insufficient for this study which sought to understand immigrant experience. Thus, my primary interest rested in better understanding immigrants’ experiences and how their insights can better promote social justice and inclusion in post-secondary spaces. My study aimed to further and

deepen institutionally specific quantitative reporting and sought to understand the experiences of immigrants using a qualitative research approach.

Background and Context

The need to facilitate the transfer of knowledge, competencies, and qualifications of learners between countries, provinces, and institutions persists as migration numbers continue to increase globally. Governments are actively working to improve foreign credential recognition, with renewed focus in Canada. For example, at the national level, the Labour Market Information Council (LMIC), a pan-Canadian non-profit that produces evidence-based insights into Canada's labour market, released a 2025 report exploring the gaps in Canada's foreign credential recognition (FCR) process (Camargo, 2025). Key findings highlight lack of timely information and data, scattered and inconsistent data, opaque processes, financial and time burdens, technology gaps, and disconnect with employers as significant gaps persistent to the FCR process. Provincially, the government of British Columbia released a joint report from the Ministry of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills (2023), *What we heard: Public engagement on international credential recognition* which highlights the continued barriers and urgent call to expedite and streamline credential recognition processes for internationally trained professionals. There are both economic and social justice implications bound to non-recognition of immigrants' skills and education. In 2001, the Conference Board of Canada released a report outlining the economic costs of not recognizing learning and learning credentials of immigrants in Canada. This report found that Canada is failing to fully realise its human resource potential, and, because of this, Canadian businesses are not achieving employee and profit goals. An update to this Conference Board of Canada report in 2015 found that Canada is still lagging behind other countries in using learning recognition to increase returns to human capital and to

realize wider benefits for the Canadian economy. In 2019, World Education Services (WES), one of Canada's national credential assessment organizations providing immigrants with Education Credential Assessments (ECA), explored labour market outcomes of skilled immigrants. The results of this study showed that "many immigrants still encounter persistent barriers to commensurate employment in the Canadian labour market" (p. 5). In this report, it was noted that, despite having their skills and education acknowledged and awarded points for the purpose of becoming part of Canada's immigration programs, these attributes were not being fully valued in the labour market. Shirley Walters (2014), a leading scholar in adult education-based South Africa, unpacked reasons behind this lack of attention paid to the recognition of immigrants' skills on a global level. Her study illuminated what might have happened and is still happening in Canada as well to bring about this undervaluing. Of note, Walters (2014) has linked this concerning lack of recognition to the capitalist project of commodification of learning. If the official claim is that immigrants do not possess the skills to enter the labour market, then it logically flows that they would need further training, which of course comes at a price. In an examination of globalization and the effects on adult education, Walters (2014) explained there are two camps of thought; one camp is represented by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and other economical giants which is designated "competitive globalization" where the primary focus is on accumulation of capital. The other camp is represented by social movements and social justice activists and is designated "cooperative globalization" which has as its internal logic, human capacities and human development (p.186). Walters (2014) convincingly argues that "globalization has been a driving factor in the commodification of learning, transforming it into a possession that can be traded in the marketplace" (p.186). She further points out that "shifts in the global economy have not actually resulted in an increasing

demand for skills and knowledge, but that there is an underutilization of knowledge and skills, rather than a real skills shortage” (pp.186-187). In other words, this is a problem of recognition, of underrecognizing and therefore underutilizing existing knowledge and skills. It may well be the case that more time and effort should be spent on improving processes to recognize and leverage these pre-existing skills, through such processes as PLAR, rather than focusing on training for perceived skills gaps.

If PLAR is a way to fully recognize immigrants’ existing knowledge and skills, we also need to undertake this process responsibly. PLAR can be used to facilitate access to education and upward mobility for immigrants, yet some claim it reproduces the very barriers it claims to remove (Klages & Mustafa, 2022). Canadian immigrant scholars, Guo and Shan (2013) addressed “new” at the time foreign credential recognition policy changes including PLAR initiatives claiming these initiatives were found to play an “instrumental role in reinforcing the ideals of market individualism and procedural fairness” (p. 465). They argued that immigrant voices were left out of the PLAR process and were further objectified by universal occupational standards. More recently, Britta Klages and Lea Sophie Mustafa (2022), lifelong learning and inclusion scholars, conducted a systematic review of PLAR literature between 1990-2020 on recent immigrant use of PLAR. Their study primarily focused on Canada and Sweden, and a few other European countries, as these countries met the criteria set for the systematic review. Their findings “raise the question [of] whether PLAR is an appropriate tool for the assessment of immigrants’ prior learning, as the plurality of knowledge and education is not valued during the process” (Klages & Mustafa, 2022, p. 637). With the resurgence of foreign credential recognition initiatives more recently via the Canadian federal government, the increase in competency frameworks as a way to explore and increase labour mobility, increased initiatives around open

education and open recognition, and updates to Canada's national occupational and skills information system (OaSIS), it may be time to reexamine PLAR as a possibility for recognitive justice and the acknowledgement and validation of diverse experiences and ways of knowing. The authors acknowledged, in the context of immigrants, that PLAR is under-researched and that many questions remain around the context, difficulties, and effect/impacts of PLAR for immigrants wishing to advance their life opportunities.

Some of these difficulties include Canada presenting as a principled democracy as there are concerning limitations and realities upon arrival. The Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) branch of the federal government and the associated Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) work to ensure positive experiences for those entering Canada such as creating four new classes of immigrants who can enter including refugees, families, assisted relatives, and independent immigrants (Library of Parliament, 2023). However, a disconnect exists between Canada's federal immigration messaging and the lived experiences of immigrants. There are dangers that PLAR may reproduce social inequalities if the processes do not adequately consider how race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and any other complex challenges immigrants face in the host society are inherently implicated in evaluative processes (Guo & Liu, 2021). Critical adult education scholars Shibao Guo and Jingzhou Liu (2021) explored how intersectionality affects the immigrant's life experience after arrival in Canada, and maintain that:

Canada qualifies as an immigration society characterized by a principled framework to regulate admission; programs to facilitate the integration and settlement of immigrants; entitling immigrants to all rights, including permanent residency and citizenship; and

seeing immigration and immigrants as society-building assets and central to national identity. (p. 245)

Yet, despite Canada's qualification as an immigration society, Guo and Liu (2021) argued that this principled framework is a blatant example of neoliberal dominance through "a tight control of age, language proficiency, education credentials and occupational skills" (Guo & Liu, 2021, p. 245). By overemphasizing things such as official English or French language proficiency, and only Canadian recognized skills and education, our nation is overlooking the many attributes and specialized knowledges that immigrants bring with them.

With these concerns at the forefront, I set out to explore immigrants' experience of considering PLAR through a Saskatchewan post-secondary, to earn credit and achieve gainful employment. PLAR has been practiced in Saskatchewan as far back as the 1990s. There was some good momentum in the early 2000s with the launch of Campus Saskatchewan and the implementation of a Saskatchewan Council on Admissions and Transfer, otherwise known as SaskCAT that was a database used to record transfer decisions between post-secondary institutions. SaskCAT improved the process for students looking for transfer credit when transferring from one post-secondary institution to another as it did not require assessing learning outcomes between courses for each request. Once a transfer decision had been made, the database recorded it making subsequent requests for the same transfer, almost instantaneous. There was a future focus on including PLAR in the database in the same way. The database that gathered transfer information for learners did not, however, last long with it shutting down in the early 2000s. There was a resurgence of interest in PLAR and the associated RPL between 2007 and 2018 with the provincial government designating a webpage that highlighted RPL initiatives and collated a collection of PLAR/RPL resources. There was also significant work accomplished

at Saskatchewan Polytechnic (formerly the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology or SIAST) where clear and accessible institutional resources were developed, including a guide to PLAR published in 2000, and RPL facilitator training for those wishing to support learners (Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition Committee, 2000). This training was promoted by the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) indicating a best practice. In addition, in 2012, Sask Polytech (SIAST at the time) established overseas PLAR assessment centres in Ukraine and the Philippines targeting skilled trades. Despite these promising moves, Campus Saskatchewan, SaskCAT, the RPL website, the overseas PLAR centres, and the facilitator training have all been discontinued.

While both post-secondaries and government stand to benefit from well-established recognition processes, there is a disconnect between initiatives. Post-secondaries are institutions who hold primary responsibility for PLAR assessment and admission processes since they are the formal entities who hold the authority to issue academic credentials. However, their efforts to advance PLAR have been piecemealed over the years as the take-up and implementation of PLAR continues to face issues. These issues include barriers to access by learners, availability of PLAR assessment and/or trained practitioners, a lack of coordination with the labour market, and ongoing sustainable, evaluative processes. In addition, while the Government of Saskatchewan has established a credential recognition unit to support immigrants navigating credential recognition processes, PLAR is not currently included as an alternative method to obtain credit. The Government of Saskatchewan recently released updates on initiatives related to foreign credential recognition that are meant to reduce barriers. These initiatives include:

- Increased legislation, which limits the requirements that regulatory bodies can impose on internationally trained and mobility applicants when applying for assessment through the regulatory body.
- Shortening the time allowed for regulatory bodies to register and communicate an assessment decision.
- Providing information and advice on available services so applicants can better understand licensure requirements.
- Providing applicants with credential recognition grants to offset some of the cost of having credentials recognized.

With sporadic and largely misunderstood processes, little is known about how, or if, immigrants in Saskatchewan are utilizing PLAR processes or are considering using them.

Given the aforementioned limitations, my research sought to understand the experiences of immigrants in Saskatchewan who considered taking up the PLAR process at a Saskatchewan post-secondary institution. By illuminating their user experiences, this study highlighted how PLAR might be better utilized as a tool in the broader credential recognition process by focusing on the recognition of *learning*. This study also examined the ways in which “PLAR continues to be influenced by race and global hierarchies in knowledge production” (Klages & Mustafa, 2022, p. 657), in an effort to make the process more transparent and therefore equitable in terms of proposed solutions.

Problem Statement

It is unclear whether PLAR, which is available in varying degrees at several post-secondary institutions across Saskatchewan, will become part of the provincial plan to address credential recognition issues and labour mobility. In 2022, the Government of Saskatchewan

introduced *The Labour Mobility and Fair Registration Practices Act*. This act aimed to ensure that skilled workers (including immigrants and people from other provinces within Canada) will have their skills and credentials recognized. Currently, the provincial Saskatchewan Government is looking to assist regulatory bodies in removing unnecessary delays to their qualification assessment processes, while maintaining rigorous assessment practices. The Government of Saskatchewan recently called on all provinces to join the New West Partnership Trade Agreement (NWPTA) who has as part of its mission to improve labour mobility across provinces (Government of Saskatchewan, 2025). If PLAR is to play a role in increasing labour mobility, it is important to understand the experiences of immigrants using this process. As post-secondary institutions work with the Saskatchewan Government to increase mobility through recognition of expertise from other countries, we need to interrogate claims of rigorous assessment and to understand if and where standardization is possible. Because there is little information on immigrant experiences using or considering PLAR in Saskatchewan, this study provides much needed information to make informed and equitable decisions. Further, how might those directly involved in a PLAR process collaborate with policyholders to find effective and equity-driven solutions.

Purpose of the Study

I believe that lived experiences, no matter the country of origin, hold strong life lessons if we are open to learning about, and recognizing, these experiences as invaluable life skills. I am thinking of those immigrants who have navigated the immigration process in Saskatchewan. As a post-secondary instructor with extensive experience in prior learning assessment and recognition, my own lived experience as a former PLAR candidate, assessment consultant, competency framework developer, and learner pathways facilitator working on PLAR projects in a post-

secondary institution in Saskatchewan, I recognize the potential of PLAR. I have liaised with the wider community, government, and other post-secondary institutions on PLAR-specific issues and immigration challenges. The need for, and interest in, exploring how PLAR could be better utilized is apparent. PLAR processes may be improved across institutions, improving transfer practices, recruitment and retention efforts, and learner mobility for the entire sector. Another obvious gap to address is how PLAR can be better integrated into existing immigrant integration services to gain more suitable employment. Finally, improving PLAR processes at Saskatchewan post-secondary has the potential to fill labour market shortages by matching the right people with the right skills to the right job.

Research Questions

My primary research question for this study draws from my own lived experiences and belief that PLAR can deliver much more than what is currently offered to immigrants in Canada:

- What were the experiences of immigrant adult learners in considering PLAR at a post-secondary institution in Saskatchewan?

The following secondary question was added to support this initial research question:

- How did using an integrated intersectional framework reveal insights into immigrants' overall experiences with recognition and agency and how might these insights inform more inclusive PLAR practices?

Research Approach

In my study, I took up narrative inquiry as it is intimately connected to PLAR. Narrative inquiry is a “collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). It requires that we think about the temporality, sociality, and place of experiences and is a way to

understand experience. PLAR has a similar aim of helping candidates make meaning of their experiences through reflection to uncover learning that took place. Two of the more influential scholars on qualitative research, Jean Clandinin and Jerry Rosiek (2007), draw inspiration from Dewey's classical work on experience as learning and maintain that narrative inquiry is "the study of experience as story" (p. 38). Experience, as Dewey conceives it, is characterized by "continuous interaction of human thought with our personal, social, and material environment" (p. 39). Clandinin and Rosiek go on to explain that the regulative ideal, or goal, for inquiry would be to "generate a new relation between a human being and her environment—her life, community, world" (p. 39). They explain that once an experience is reflected on using narrative, the intensity of the new experience is lessened and if this individual were to encounter a similar experience in the future, they would be less overwhelmed as they have prior experience to draw from. As these influential scholars argue, the learner would gain deeper understanding and even agency through the thoughtful and deliberate use of narrative. This stance reflects and shows a valuing of Freire's (1978) *conscientization* with its focus on developing a critical awareness of one's social reality as an impetus for future agency. Narrative inquiry, which seeks to understand experience, can help to develop this critical awareness. Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) explain that "narratives are the form of representation that describe human experience as it unfolds through time [and] therefore narratives are...the most appropriate form to use when thinking about inquiry taken within a pragmatic framework" (p. 40). Both PLAR and narrative inquiry are pragmatic in that they help the learner to gain a deeper understanding of experience and to develop agency through this understanding. By using narrative inquiry as the primary methodology, by sharing the stories of immigrants who considered using PLAR in Saskatchewan, perhaps immigrants who are considering or who undertake PLAR in future will

have a greater sense of agency. With this agency, they can then better navigate these experiences and advocate for themselves.

Additionally, narrative inquiry places value on stories and narratives as data sources, an approach that challenges the more dominant quantitative approaches to research. People and their experiences are complex, and narrative inquiry invites us into this complexity, asks us to sit with it, to reflect on it, and to negotiate meaning. While I do not discount the validity of numeric data within research, numbers alone do not tell the whole story. Narrative inquiry as a methodology invites in the voices, those who are rarely heard from, to make greater sense of the PLAR processes in Saskatchewan. Their stories, their life experiences, and their reflections will reveal how PLAR is, or is not, working and provide recommendations on what can be done to improve the overall process.

Researcher Assumptions

I hold the assumption that learning can take place anywhere and at any time, and that everyone has the right to receive recognition for their life learning. I also hold the assumption that while institutions may have PLAR processes in place, improvements can be made as I see many barriers, particularly for equity deserving groups. Finally, while employability is not the intended focus of this particular study, I have noted and hold the assumption that immigrants continue to face significant underemployment as a result of the non-recognition of knowledge, skills, abilities, personal attributes, and competencies and this negatively affects the whole of Canada.

Rationale and Significance of Study

This research study contributes to the somewhat scarce literature on PLAR, specifically from a Saskatchewan-based lens, and from a critical integrative intersectional framework. The

latter seeks to understand immigrant experiences and how they see PLAR and thus “goes beyond the existing triple analysis [race, class, gender] embracing racialized immigrants as actors and agents of change” (Guo & Liu, 2021, p. 135). This critical framework indicates a shift for “building inclusive learning spaces that are capable of assisting marginalized immigrants in overcoming multifaceted challenges in the host society” (Guo & Liu, 2021, p. 135). By exploring life experiences from the integrative intersectional framework, we can move towards an inclusive prior learning assessment and recognition process “that acknowledges and affirms cultural difference and diversity as positive and desirable assets” (Liu & Guo, 2022, p. 738). Practically speaking, the findings from this study could help immigrants in Saskatchewan receive credit for prior learning to gain employment that matches their knowledge, skills, abilities, personal attributes, and competencies. It also has the potential to inform assessment practices in post-secondary contexts making these spaces more socially just and inclusive. My hope is that this study helps to inform policy around PLAR processes in Saskatchewan post-secondaries and to further government policy around immigration initiatives including nationally funded programs. I am thinking here of my local community, where there are several federally and/or provincially funded initiatives working in both direct and indirect service of immigrant integration.⁵ Currently, these programs offer resources, services, and connections within the community, but none offer information on PLAR even though they acknowledge a need for this type of information. If we can better understand the experiences of immigrants considering using PLAR, how they heard about it and/or what they know about it, the benefits as well as the barriers and gaps that persist, recommendations stemming from this research may help address

⁵ The list includes Moose Jaw Newcomer Welcome Center; Moose Jaw Multicultural Council Inc.; Prairie Skies Integration Network; Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot, renamed Rural Community Immigration Pilot.

the problem of labour market shortages, unemployment, and underemployment, while promoting social justice and inclusion.

To reach these goals, my study forefronted the voices of equity deserving groups who recently considered undertaking PLAR. I wanted to better understand the reasons for why immigrants are considering PLAR at Saskatchewan post-secondary institutions. Understanding how they came to this particular crossroads could promote better learning pathways for post-secondary institutions in Saskatchewan by supporting more equitable PLAR processes. Findings from this study could also help inform current PLAR processes, specifically in areas of access and equity, to see what gaps reside in current foreign credential recognition processes.

Summary

In this chapter, I provided an overview of my research study. This included: narrative beginnings, background and context, research purpose, rationale and significance, methodology, researcher positionality, and researcher assumptions. Additionally, I identified primary and secondary research questions.

In Chapter Two, I provide a detailed review and synthesis of scholarly literature that forms the context and backdrop that informed my research study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Overview

There is a significant challenge in assessing knowledge for the purpose of awarding academic credit when considering the diversity of the learner, the assessor, and their experiences. This challenge arises because “assessors and candidates are situated in the contexts of their own histories, biographies, and cultures—a challenging situation in which to reach shared understandings of what is expected and what has been achieved from assessment” (Van Kleef, 2014, p. 21). These words highlight the immense challenge of PLAR, but nod to its potential as well. The purpose of this chapter is to interrogate and to provide context to this complexity. This literature review consists of four sections. It begins by providing a historical review of PLAR tracing it from foundational beginnings to more contemporary contexts. This section critically examines the ways in which prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) lays claim as a tool for social justice and inclusion. I then move on to contextualizing PLAR globally, nationally, and provincially and focus on its use in the post-secondary context in Saskatchewan. I introduce credential recognition processes for immigrants in Canada, the impacts of globalization, internationalization and neoliberalism on immigrant experience and explore how using an integrated intersectional framework to reimagine PLAR might have meaningful implications in a local context. Finally, I will explain my theoretical framework and how it will guide each phase of the research process. The literature search was undertaken to support an understanding of PLAR in the post-secondary context internationally, nationally, and provincially, and the implications of its use by immigrants in Saskatchewan. The following databases were used in the search: ERIC, Education Research Complete, Academic Search Complete. I also used Google Scholar as an alternative to internet-based bibliographic and full-

text databases. This tool allowed me to select and search all library databases for which I have access which includes the University of Calgary, the University of Saskatchewan, the University of Regina, and Saskatchewan Polytechnic. Grey literature that sits outside the typical scholarly scope, including national frameworks, provincial reports, blog posts, and literature reviews that provided current and ongoing insight into PLAR processes, were also examined.

What is PLAR?

As adult education and PLAR scholars Groen and Kawalilak (2014) explained, “individuals and societies, and more specifically, educators, governments, and employers, interpret lifelong learning through multifaceted lenses” (p. 23). This type of learning is made even more complex through the variety of names used to describe it. That is, there is a “lack of clear and consistent language with which to describe prior learning [resulting in a] difficulty of language” (Conrad, 2008, p. 90). On a global level, recognition of prior learning (RPL) is the phrase and acronym used that appeals to the largest global readership (Conrad, 2022). This term is commonly used as an umbrella term to include practices and processes that aim to support the recognition of prior learning acquired throughout adult life. This learning can include volunteer work, hobbies, on-the-job experience, independent study, as well as other informal learning experiences. The following definition from CAPLA clarified the term:

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a set of processes that allows individuals to identify, document, be assessed, and gain recognition for their prior learning. The focus is on the learning, rather than on where or how the learning occurred. Knowledge, skills, abilities, personal attributes, and competencies gained from life experiences may be formal, informal, or non-formal. RPL processes may serve several purposes, including licensure, credit or advanced standing at an academic institution, employment, career

planning, recruitment, or self-knowledge. (Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment, 2015, p. 1)

It is important to note the tensions between recognition and validation. Bohlinger (2017) asserted that recognition “refers to the idea of (publicly) accepting, accrediting and somehow valuing learning results and/or previously received formal qualifications and certificates...[while] validation refers to the process of identifying, assessing and recognising knowledge, skills and competencies an individual has acquired in various learning contexts outside formal education training systems” (p. 589). The distinction is not entirely clear and becomes even more muddled when we interrogate who is providing the recognition or validation. It is also important to note that both recognition and validation provide identification, verification, and recognition of learning that cannot be recognized through more traditional processes such as credential assessment, transfer credit, articulation, or accreditation (Van Kleef, 2009). While the various terms listed in Chapter 1 used to describe the recognition of prior learning will be revisited in the following sections to provide specificity in terms of context, the focus of this study is on PLAR in a Saskatchewan post-secondary environment. I will employ these terms synonymously, using the term that each author uses for their research, recognizing that the processes of each may vary slightly. Broadly speaking, they all share the underpinnings of gaining credit for learning, no matter where the learning took place.

CAPLA (2019), the national voice for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Canada, has been supporting national recognition efforts since 1997. CAPLA was developed with support by First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI) in Ontario and has maintained its legacy by sustaining beliefs in respect towards learners, inclusion, formal recognition for learning, reduced barriers to education, and improvements to credentialling systems (Canadian

Association for Prior Learning Assessment, 2008). As the first of its kind, this national body explains that prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) “defines processes that allow individuals to identify, document, have assessed and gain recognition for their prior learning. The learning may be formal, informal, non-formal, or experiential” (Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment, 2019). Of course, PLAR has its theoretical framework grounded in research that sees education as a transformative tool that promotes social justice and inclusion and challenges unequal power structures (Freire, 1993; Sen & Grown, 1987; Hamer, 2011; 2016; Kabeer, 1994; Moser, 1993). International scholar, Salma Ismail (2006), emerita associate professor at the University of Cape Town, South Africa who holds an interest in adult learning and social movements, explored the “processes of learning within a low-cost community housing project” (p. 151) under a theoretical framework grounded in the idea that education is “a transformative tool [that can work to] combat poverty and unequal power relations” (p. 151). She argued that this approach “validate[s] local knowledge and the learning process and challenge[s] the view that education can only take place through the mainstream [processes]” (p.152). Her research set out to understand how women learn during a community housing project. She wanted to understand how this social action could contribute to theories in adult education particularly drawing on connections made between learning in action and theories on learning in development. Ismail (2006) explained that in her South African context where prior learning is being formulated into policy as an entry way into higher education, “it is essential for educators to explore knowledge and learning in all its different forms” (p. 152). This exploration of knowledge and learning needs to happen in a Canadian context as well if PLAR is to fully reflect equity-driven values. PLAR must place value on all forms of learning in theory and in practice and especially in cases of equity-deserving groups.

PLAR is further rooted in theories of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984). In his second edition of *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, Kolb (2015), an American psychologist and educational theorist who developed the four-stage experiential learning model that continues to have significant influence on adult learning theories today, defines experiential learning as “a particular form of learning from life experience; often contrasted with lecture and classroom learning” (p. xviii). Kim Browning (2020), a scholar from Manitoba, identified the connection between experience, learning, and recognition of that learning by explaining that “the term *experiential learning*, is often used in conjunction with non-formal learning that adult learners achieve through concrete experience [and] when applied [formally] to post-secondary education in Canada, this is known as Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)” (p. iii). It is important to note that some institutions use the PLAR process when formal or informal learning cannot be recognized using the transfer credit policy and processes. This non-recognition occurs because the originating institution is not a recognized/authorized educational institution in Canada which is a common prerequisite to awarding transfer credit. Most importantly, when done well, PLAR considers the complexity of how adult learners come to know and to be in the world. For this study, I take up CAPLA’s definition of PLAR as this definition includes the recognition of formal, informal, non-formal, and experiential learning.

PLAR as a Key Issue in Adult Education and Learning

There is an important distinction between adult education and adult learning although one might easily view them as the same. Adult education scholars, Groen and Kawalilak (2014) clarified this important distinction. In this way, adult education represents “formal structures, activities, and initiatives designed to support adult learning” whereas adult learning is that which

“occurs by and within the learner when participating within or beyond the formal structures of adult education” (pp. 20-21). This distinction is important “as it emphasizes that learning can occur at any time, in any space, and at any pace” (Groen & Kawalilak, 2014, p. 21), a perspective that continues to influence adult learning and education practices. For example, according to Colleges and Institutes Canada (CICan) micro-credential development is a current and much debated topic in higher education. A micro-credential is defined as a “certification of assessed competencies that is additional, alternate, complementary to, or a component of a formal qualification” (2023). Even with micro-credential frameworks available, there is still much disagreement on what they are and how they should be developed and/or assessed. Developing micro-credentials with an emphasis on the idea that learning can occur at any time, in any space, and at any pace will lead to different outcomes than if we develop micro-credentials with the emphasis on the formal structures and activities designed to support adult learning. Some of these differences might be how micro-credentials are accessed, their length, and how they are assessed, and whether or not PLAR is considered in the overall assessment strategy.

PLAR is connected to both adult education and adult learning. An expert in PLAR/RPL in Quebec, Moss (2017) acknowledged that RPL is “based on the philosophical tenets of andragogy” (p. 47), a term often associated with Malcolm Knowles (1989) who coined the term andragogy for teaching adults in contrast to the pedagogical model for teaching children.

Knowles’ (1980) model of andragogy was based on six assumptions regarding adult learners.

According to these assumptions, the adult learner:

- is self-directed and has a mature self-concept
- has experience that becomes a resource for learning

- has a need to know and learn
- has a need to connect learning to life and solving real problems
- is intrinsically motivated to learn
- has their eye to the future and developing increased competence (pp. 40-59)

Over the years, Knowles' work has received multiple critiques: for placing pedagogy and andragogy in opposition; for wrongly assuming education is value neutral and apolitical; for promoting solely white middle-class values and learners; for ignoring diverse ways of knowing, and thereby silencing voices and reproducing inequalities and finally; for ignoring the relationship between self and society (Hartree, 1984; Sandlin, 2005). Knowles (1990) responded to these critiques in 1990 and offered instead a continuum of learning where a more dependent learner would require pedagogical approaches and a more independent learner would require andragogical approaches. These andragogical assumptions are useful in conceptualizing PLAR as specific to adult learning and adult education. That is, for PLAR, we must pay particular attention to Knowles' andragogical assumptions that are relevant and specific to the adult learner. The two most useful assumptions in conceptualizing PLAR are the role of the learner's experience in learning and the desire to increase competence and how this is evaluated.

The role of the learner's experience in learning is important to the PLAR process. As mentioned above, PLAR has roots in the theory of experiential learning where learning happens from experience (Groen & Kawalilak, 2014; Harris, 2018; Lange, 2021). David Kolb (1984), American psychologist and educational theorist, and best known for his development of the experiential learning cycle, expands on the work of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and Jean Piaget and their theories around pragmatism, reflective thought and action, and the role of the environment in cognitive development, to form a definition that has had far-reaching impact:

“Experiential learning is the process of gaining knowledge from experience and applying it to education, work, and development. It occurs when the learner directly experiences the realities of the theory, concept, or fact they are learning” (p. 40). Working within a higher education setting, Groen and Kawalilak (2014) identify the complexity of experiential learning. They call us to move into theorizing both the practice of experiential learning as well as discussions around the desired goal of this approach to learning. To explain, the result of experiential learning is an expansion of our perceptions of adult education and adult learning that deliberately and intentionally includes the learner’s experience in learning as part of the overall process. Groen and Kawalilak (2014) draw on Weil and McGill’s (1989) categorization of experiential learning into four ‘villages’ to provide us with ways in which we might reflect on this theory of learning. The first village is concerned with the assessment and accreditation of experiential learning through prior learning assessment and recognition processes; Village Two is concerned with locating experiential learning as a basis for change in post-secondary education structures by emphasizing learning that occurs through relevant hands-on experiences; Village Three is concerned with the importance of experiential learning for consciousness raising, community action, social change; and Village Four is concerned with using experiential learning to focus on personal growth, development and self-awareness for the purpose of group effectiveness (Weil & McGill, 1989). To some extent, PLAR shares the aims of each village and is concerned with all four goals identified by Weil and McGill (1989) for experiential learning. The common thread is the necessity to include the learner’s experience in learning as a basic tenet.

Heading back to the second assumption as identified by Knowles (1980) which states that the adult learner has their eye to the future and developing increased competence, we are reminded of the adult learner’s desire to develop and to have this learning recognized. This

assumption aligns with ‘village one’ outlined above which is concerned with the assessment and accreditation of experiential learning through prior learning assessment and recognition processes. This is an area of much contention at a global level (Beckett & Hager, 1999; Lather, 1992; Michelson, 1996, 2015; Usher & Edwards, 1994). Scholars argue against the view which “suggests that learning from experience can be made equivalent to a disciplined academic way of learning” (Shalem & Steinberg, 2006, p. 426). Although Shalem and Steinberg (2006) share some of this concern in a South African higher education context, they also offer a solution. Rather than trying to make experiential learning equivalent to the learning that takes place in academia, Shalem and Steinberg (2006) call for a re-examination of the social relations of assessment. They problematize the power structures that exist in the teacher/learner relationship and challenge what forms of knowledge count as learnings. In Canada, RPL/PLAR scholar and practitioner, Judy Harris (1999; 2013) made a similar claim when realizing candidates whose “cultural capital did not resonate with that inscribed in the Diploma course and in the RPL program were being disadvantaged” (Harris, 1999, p. 125). She then identified ways of theorising RPL and pointed to the work of Usher and Johnston (1997) who call for “a more equal, dialectical relationship between disciplinary knowledge (theory) and experiential knowledge (practice)” (p. 7). As these scholars make clear, we need to consider the assumptions that we are employing when we create assessments that focus on the evaluation of adult learning. Those participating in prior learning assessment and recognition are adults, and we should consider applying adult learning theoretical assumptions to the evaluation of this learning. Most notable here is that andragogical theory prescribes “a process of self-evaluation, [where] adults get evidence for themselves about the progress they are making [and] evaluation is a mutual undertaking, as are all other phases of the adult learning experience” (Knowles, 1980, p. 49). The

evaluation of learning comes into question as andragogy challenges the teacher/learner relationship and the idea of an adult being judged by another adult. Knowles (1980) calls for *evaluation* to be replaced with *rediagnostics* of learning needs, a retheorization of the teacher/learner relationship, and assessment rooted in andragogical principles using emphasized experiential techniques (p. 50). These calls describe several of the principles outlined for PLAR, yet PLAR continues to be mostly absent from the retheorization of assessment practices in higher education and remains underutilized in adult learning and adult education today. This is a contested issue with significant implications for adult education and adult learning.

PLAR and Claims of Benevolence

In order to understand the disconnect between the claim of PLAR's potential and its reality of underutilization, we need to interrogate claims of benevolence. This action will help us to better understand this disconnect and explore the ways in which PLAR can become a more equitable process. Prominent theorists in the field of adult education and adult learning emphasize the need for institution wide processes and support for prior learning assessment and recognition in the post-secondary sphere (Morrissey et al., 2008; Wihak, 2011). This stance is supported by andragogic principles outlined in Knowles' six assumptions about the ways adults learn (Dewey 1938; Knowles 1980), particularly the principle which highlights the role of the learners' experience in learning. Research has revealed that PLAR has resulted in practical benefits such as increased completion rates and money savings for students (Carr, 2023; Conrad, 2022; Klages & Mustafa, 2022; Kleins-Collins & Framularo, 2022). In a 2020 study, Klein-Collins et al. (2020) published results that targeted 72 institutions in the United States and their experiences of prior learning assessment in terms of adult student outcomes, including benefits

such as cost savings, time savings, and increased post-secondary completion rates for adult students.

Recognizing PLAR's practical benefits is important; however, if PLAR is to reach its full potential, to deliver on its claims of benevolence, we need to return to its core principles and its origins in social justice and inclusion and the epistemological assumption that learning can take place anywhere and at any time. Former CEO of the Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning (CIRL) who has studied in the field of prior learning for over 30 years, Joy Van Kleef (2007) identified three basic beliefs that underpin PLAR: post-secondary-level learning occurs outside the sponsorship of academic institutions through work and other life experience; it is possible to assess prior learning without jeopardizing student success, credential integrity, or institutional credibility; relevant learning should be assessed and recognized by post-secondary institutions (p. 4). Elana Michelson (1996), an academic at Empire State College in New York called for alternative epistemologies when examining the assessment of prior experiential learning (APEL). Michelson (1996) traced PLAR origins to the assessment for college credit of students' experiential learning. She explained that PLAR developed in the United States "as an alternative to the rigidities of academic disciplines [and emanated] out of the student-centered educational movements of the late 1960s and 1970s" (Michelson, 1996, p. 185). That is, the recognition of prior learning "was consistent with the spirit of the times...tying the recognition of prior learning to educational fairness and social mobility [encouraging] more permeable borders between the academy and the community [and affirming] the liberal humanist faith in the meaning of experience for human agency" (Michelson, 1996, p. 185). These claims serve as a reminder of the potential for PLAR as a tool for social justice and inclusion and can be found in more recent research as well. An academic at Athabasca University in the Centre for Distance

Education, Diane Conrad (2022) asserted that this assessment of experiential learning can contribute to a more full and equally valid expression of learners' knowledge, skills, abilities, personal attributes, and competencies than traditional assessment and can mitigate issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion by valuing various learning opportunities and by interrogating epistemologies and knowledge ownership (p. 1). Indeed, academics undertaking research for the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), Rebecca Kleins-Collins and Kari Shafenberg (2023) explain that research on PLAR has equity considerations "including efforts to expand the reach of these options to more working learners" (p. 41). This expansion of PLAR also has important equity implications for an increasingly diverse workforce.

Amongst the claims of benevolence, there also resides critiques for those who call for a deeper examination of the assumptions about experience and knowledge (Andersson & Guo, 2009; Cooper, 2003; Fenwick, 2003; Harris, 2016; Shalem & Steinberg, 2006). Michelson (1996) points out that the approaches to the recognition of prior learning "are consistent with, and in some respects, trapped within Enlightenment theories of knowledge" (p.185). Deepening the multi-institution study from 2020, Klein-Collins et al., (2021) point to what they call "an equity paradox" which found that equity-deserving students (particularly Black and lower income) received the "lowest completion boost from having received credit through PLA/CPL" (p. 1). Despite data that shows PLAR increases completion rates among students, equity-deserving students are not benefitting from this process and are therefore being further marginalized. This study uncovered problems with PLAR's claims of benevolence by researching underserved students who arguably needed the most support. Similarly, Andersson and Guo (2009) argued that in the context of immigration in Canada and Sweden, "PLAR acts as a technical exercise and an assessment tool [and] has created a system of exclusion,

normalization, and governing...the 'R' (recognition) is often missing from PLAR as the process has become techniques and non-recognition" (p. 27). Despite these many critiques, scholars are willing to offer a host of recommendations. In addition to more recent trends around equity, diversity, and inclusivity, there is a call for goal-oriented and authentic assessment practices thereby removing substantial barriers. Reflecting this movement, Kleins-Collins et. al., (2021) suggested prioritizing equity in the design of PLA/CPL in developed nations such as the United States and Canada, as Andersson and Guo (2009) highlight that PLAR might reach its potential if we prioritize research that incorporates a more inclusive framework and focus on the goal of recognition. A deliberate focus on recognition within PLAR-focused research might serve to reestablish PLAR's claims of benevolence where learning is held central, rather than assessment.

PLAR Around the Globe

Of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, approximately 22 member countries report on the Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning (RNFIL) practices (Werquin, 2010). University of Technology (Dresden, Germany) scholar, Sandra Bohlinger (2017) published a study comparing RPL/PLAR in ten different countries, namely: Austria, Canada, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, and Switzerland. The countries chosen for their diverse origins, experience, and traditions with RPL explored RPL processes for professional and vocational education and also provided a general sense of RPL across the globe (Bohlinger, 2017, p. 592). The project lasted two years and focused on credit point systems as well as learner mobility. The report included data from national statistics, training regulations, policy documents, research papers, national/regional program evaluations including interviews with national stakeholders, and policy and research documents provided by international stakeholders such as the International Labour Organization

(ILO), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). This substantive research revealed telling results around international PLAR practices such as huge discrepancies with reporting on PLAR applications and processes, large variances in funding fees and mechanisms to make validation sustainable, and hugely differing assessment practices and criteria. This 2017 study calls into question whether PLAR has perceived value globally, whether we can expect some kind of consistency in the future, and whether these discrepancies are replicated at the national and provincial levels.

Given the discrepant approaches to PLAR, there have been, and continues to be, efforts to create and disseminate resources and information on PLAR by international groups for a global audience. In 2018, the ILO, International Labour Office Skills and Employability Branch, published a comprehensive RPL package that is directed at a broad audience including ILO constituents, senior government officials, employers' and workers' organizations, assessors, and facilitators. In August 2025, the ILO also published open-source guidelines on costing and financing RPL. As Bohlinger (2017) points out, the lack of consistent regulations alongside persistent institutional, organizational, cultural, and individual obstacles (work-life balance, family obligations, work demands, illness, and so on) make measuring the impact of PLAR very difficult (Bohlinger, 2017, p. 602). Unfortunately, the organization that was doing work of connecting educational research on RPL/PLAR and the politically driven international initiatives no longer exists. Established in 2009, the Prior Learning International Research Centre (PLIRC) was in Thompson Rivers University's Open Learning Division in Kamloops, British Columbia. It was headed by RPL enthusiast and expert, Dr. Christine Wihak. PLIRC's membership included many RPL scholars whose work appears throughout this dissertation including Judy

Harris, Helen Pokorny, Nan Travers, Joy Van Kleep, Patrick Werquin among others. Although not PLAR specific, the European Network of Information Centres and National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union (ENIC-NARIC) coordinate an international initiative to improve navigation to relevant online resources. This initiative aims to support organizations and individuals find information maintained by each member country on the recognition of qualifications. The goal in sharing this information is to improve international academic and professional mobility.

In an effort to dig deeper into international discrepancies of practice and to substantiate the value of PLAR, significant research continues at an international level. In 2012, an international journal on theory, research, and practice in prior learning assessment named Prior Learning Assessment Inside Out (PLAIO) was developed and is currently edited by well-known PLAR/RPL/PLA advocates, Alan Mandell, Nan Travers, Ruud Duvekot, and Susan Forseille. This journal includes a collection of articles from the 2023 and 2025 Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) Biennale conference on PLAR and aims to disseminate global best practices. This journal fills a gap that the PLIRC database left behind and provides ongoing PLAR research studies at an international level. Another conference took place in 2024 in Ireland, a collaboration between Canada, Ireland and the United States titled *People, Validation and Power: Democracy in Action?* The Reconnaître-Open Recognition Alliance, a French non-profit association dedicated to fostering open recognition practices, technologies, and processes hosted ePIC 2024, an international conference on open education, open recognition technologies, and practices. As a contemporary alliance, ePIC 2025 took place October 21st-23rd 2025 in Paris. Recordings of presentations from conference proceedings are publicly available on their website in an effort to share and advance work in open recognition. Promisingly, PLAR/RPL work

continues in the United Kingdom, perhaps most notably and consistently in Ireland and Scotland who have National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF) which arguably support “the complex relationships between education, training, and work” (Stromquist & Monkman, 2014, p.189). These frameworks also support RPL/PLAR generally as mapping qualifications and competencies makes overall recognition easier and more valid. The Gronigen Declaration Network is a key influencer in the space of international learner mobility; their goal is to ensure learners can share their education documents and credentials when and where they want to advance greater access to education and work. Their vision is strategic partnerships for a global, interoperable digital learning ecosystem. CAEL is an American based non-profit organization who has been leading the credit for prior learning (CPL) space across states for over 50 years. They provide free resources to institutions and provide members with additional benefits such as regular newsletters, access to webinars, and the ability to network. There is clear interest in further exploring the potential of RPL/PLAR and recognition generally at an international level and there is no shortage of research on models, frameworks, recommendations that should be employed or are identified as a priority in policy agendas across multiple disciplines (Cedefop et al., 2019; Duklas 2014, 2020; Duvekot et al., 2005; Hoffmann et al., 2009; Ravet & Grandjean, 2025; Travers & Evans, 2011; Werquin, 2007, 2010, 2012). Notably, there are several RPL scholars and groups on LinkedIn who regularly contribute to global discussions on the topic with a desire to advance recognition. What is less obvious is how these recommendations are put into practice by participating countries and to what degree they deliver on the social justice claims that PLAR makes.

In his large-scale study comparing RPL across countries, Bohlinger (2017) identified certain areas where there were discrepancies; however, one area not mentioned was equity. More

recent research on PLAR interrogates how credentialling has become a serious equity issue and advocates for making the postsecondary credentialling system fairer (Travers, 2023). Similarly, Klages and Mustafa (2022) called for more research to be done in three areas: “(1) on long-term impacts and outcomes of PLAR practices for individuals and society, (2) on new approaches to PLAR for immigrants that consider systemic constraints, and (3) on PLAR in the context of hierarchies of knowledge production and systemic racism” (p. 654). The growing popularity of micro-credentials⁶ where competencies are assessed has also impacted the post-secondary and labour force landscape and has renewed discussions around learner/learning mobility and the possibility of integrating immigrants into the labour market. As a result of several factors including the growing popularity of micro-credentials, the need for authentic assessment particularly in post-COVID times where typical labour trends and typical higher education assessments were upended, and continuing calls for equity-informed responses in higher education, means recognition for learning gained more international interest than ever before. This renewed interest in PLAR is similarly taking place in Canada.

PLAR in Canada

Canada’s interest in PLAR as a tool to help address the national labour market shortage requires a better understanding of long-term implications of PLAR in relation to learner and worker success, and its connection to and applicability for lifelong learning. Some groups are taking up this opportunity including several leading national organizations whose interest in PLAR is evident in their strategic priorities, reports, and frameworks. The Council of Ministers

⁶ Colleges and Institutes Canada (CICan) launched a micro-credential definition and framework in 2021. The framework defines a micro-credential as a certification of assessed competencies that is additional, alternate, complementary to, or a component of a formal qualification.

of Education Canada (CMEC), founded in 1967 by ministers of education, is an intergovernmental body which has been providing pan-Canadian leadership in education for over 50 years. Because education falls under a provincial/territorial jurisdiction, Canada does not have a national department of education. Therefore, the CMEC has responsibility for the Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials (CICIC) which is a central player in the PLAR discussion as it “fulfills Canada’s obligation under UNESCO conventions to facilitate the mobility of talent” (n.d.). CICIC houses significant information at a national level regarding credential recognition including a Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) for the assessment of international credentials which is a promising move. In fact, the framework includes 13 recommended best practices and guidelines where PLAR is noted on this list as a best practice. This federal entity houses links to all six international credential assessment services, and it hosts a database of all recognized, authorized, and registered and/or licensed institutions and organizations in Canada. CICIC provides information not only to individuals looking to have their credentials assessed but also to institutions seeking information on the transfer credit landscape in Canada. It also provides detailed terminology on transfer credit and RPL in general and an overview of the different types of PLAR awards and assessments that may be used in Canada. Information on this site has informed institutional policy and procedure on RPL/PLAR/transfer credit at many Canadian post-secondary institutions. It is heartening to see that the website has had a recent refresh and inclusion of resources as this indicates a continued national interest in PLAR.

There also seems to be renewed interest in “connecting the dots between mobility and credential recognition” (CICIC, n.d). In other words, there is renewed interest to better understand how people are moving across the globe and seeking qualifications. In CMEC’s

2023-2027 strategic plan, a priority area focuses on creating inclusive education for all learners. The pillars specific to post-secondary education focus on skills and labour-market alignment, supporting lifelong learning, promoting sustainable and adaptable post-secondary education systems, and using data to inform assessment programs. These pillars recognize the need to value all forms of learning and to provide recognition of that learning for equitable education. CMEC also spearheaded a Canada specific contribution to the Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE) where the recognition of prior learning was mentioned several times as a key priority area. These initiatives provide clear evidence of a renewed interest in PLAR in Canada's education sector.

The pressures to respond to labour market demands and continued growing immigration numbers has sparked renewed interest in PLAR and a national credentialling system to improve mobility. Responding to a significant need for national PLAR standardization, CICA released a Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) Reference Framework in the spring of 2023. More recently, a branch of the federal government, Economic and Social Development Canada (ESDC) sent out a draft chart capturing RPL activities across Canada which meant to inform their foreign credential recognition program. ESDC also held a virtual meeting in 2024 to provide post-secondaries from across Canada an opportunity to share insights on PLAR at their home institution/organization. The federal government continues to stream key investments for improving immigration programs and securing permanent residency through both the ESDC and IRCC branches of the government. This also includes ongoing initiatives around equity-informed needs in the labour market, supported by the Future Skills Centre (FSC). Initiatives supported by FSC include funding for projects like the one launched by the Immigrant Employment Council of British Columbia's Facilitating Access to Skilled Talent (FAST) program which offers free,

online, sector-specific employment preparation for newcomers to Canada. These programs, while important, focus solely on providing immigrants with skills training, but do not consider the role of skills recognition. Moreover, the connection between PLAR and foreign credential recognition programs is not made explicit. The responses to the increased pressure of labour market demands needs to consider recognition practices as much as it considers upskilling. There is a place for PLAR here as part of an overall recognition initiative which would also support equity.

As another promising point of impact, CAPLA, as a national body that has been supporting the recognition of prior learning since 1997, has been a site of renewed interest and activity. I was encouraged to join the organization as a volunteer board member in the fall of 2024. The board consists of learning recognition enthusiasts who themselves hold a wide variety of backgrounds and skills. CAPLA provides resources on RPL/PLAR, conducts research, hosts webinars, and coordinates monthly national communities of learning. Most importantly, this national group published a manual for the Quality Assurance for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Canada in (2015) which explains the RPL process and outlines nine guiding principles for quality RPL practice.⁷ This resource is widely used and is referenced by both the CMEC and UNESCO's Institute for Lifelong Learning. Currently, there are discussions on updating the manual and making it an open resource. The CAPLA website includes dedicated resources for practitioners, information on past projects and reports, links to past and future webinars, links to several external institutions/organizations, and a host of other helpful resources. There is work happening to update this website to make it even more useful. The

⁷ Nine Guiding Principles for Quality RPL Practice: Accessible, Consistent, Fair, Respectful, Valid, Rigorous, Transparent, Professionally Supported.

ongoing engagement from RPL enthusiasts, practitioners, and researchers in CAPLA's spring webinars and their continued presence in the monthly community of learning meetings suggests that there is renewed interest in PLAR/RPL across Canada. Specifically, CAPLA has future plans for more robust collaboration with British Columbia Prior Learning Action Network (BCPLAN), Manitoba Prior Learning Action Network (MPLAN), Ontario Council on Admissions and Transfer (ONCAT), Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer (ACAT), Quebec's Recognition of Acquired Competencies (RAC) initiatives which is robust and tightly tied to Quebec's competency-based education model, and nationally, with the Pan-Canadian Consortium on Admissions and Transfer (PCCAT). A May 2025 press release⁸ evidenced CAPLA offering its help to federal, provincial and territorial partners in support of learner mobility through recognition of skills, knowledge, and abilities. Alongside these efforts to work at a national level, CAPLA hosted its first in-person conference since 2019 on May 26-28, 2025, in Antigonish, Nova Scotia. The positive attendance at this conference and the plans for CAPLA to host future events demonstrates renewed interest in PLAR's possibilities.

In a comparison of PLAR processes and practices across Canadian post-secondaries, an article written by Andy Brown and Susan Forseille (2023), *Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) Persistence: A Canadian Post-Secondary Comparison*, highlights the factors implicated in PLAR candidate/student persistence, the rate at which candidates complete their PLAR course or program, all based on different PLAR service models. Their study reaffirmed the importance of a quality student-faculty interaction to facilitate PLAR student persistence (p. 6). The findings also reiterated the need for ethical considerations of student's

⁸ [May 2025 CAPLA Press Release](#)

personal circumstances and potential barriers to improve persistence/completion rates. The study also suggested ways that post-secondary PLAR teams in Canada could work to remove these barriers and thereby increase social integration. Investment in these areas could result in people taking up PLAR feeling more supported, included, and engaged in Canadian society. It is evident many positive outcomes are arriving through studies at the national level, and my Saskatchewan-based study aims to explore these recommendations to consider personal circumstance and potential barriers in the PLAR process are being met at a provincial level.

PLAR in Saskatchewan

Reflecting much of the disparity at the national level, PLAR methods vary at the institutional level across provinces. In 2011, Dianne Conrad applauded Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom for having national frameworks on RPL and criticized Canada for not having a national framework thereby leaving all the educational decision-making on RPL/PLAR to provincial jurisdictions. CICan recently launched a national PLAR reference framework in May 2023 to address this need; however, it remains to be seen how post-secondary institutions and PLAR practitioners will apply this framework at the provincial level. Looking across Saskatchewan, there are a wide range of policies, practices, and promotion of PLAR across the post-secondary landscape that appear to have little provincial cohesion largely because there are no government policies or guidelines regulating PLAR in Saskatchewan. For example, consider the three post-secondary institutions in the province with the highest student enrollment. The University of Saskatchewan does not have a presence on the Government of Saskatchewan, Ministry of Advanced Education webpage that lists institutions which offer PLAR. Brief mention of prior learning appears on their articulation and transfer credit policy webpage; however, PLAR specific policy and process information is not available; it is instead buried

within program specific sites. As the next two major enrollment institutions, the University of Regina and Saskatchewan Polytechnic are both listed on the Government of Saskatchewan webpage under the PLAR-specific section, and both have readily available information on PLAR. This information is also available online on institutional webpages and includes PLAR policies and processes. The University of Regina has a landing page for the recognition of prior learning which includes a general outline of PLAR and its processes. There are also resources for students such as guides for portfolio development. The self-assessment process requires a faculty advisor, and it seems that the majority of the process happens at the program level. While Saskatchewan Polytechnic follows similar general processes, they provide more information. Saskatchewan Polytechnic has a broad overview of the PLAR process on their “Get Credit for What You Know” webpages with detail on the PLAR process and implications. They include access to self-assessment candidate guides for every course in almost every program which includes contact information for the program head who oversees PLAR at the program level. From a promising practices point of view, these candidate guides support the first step of PLAR which is self-assessment. However, in practice, PLAR at Saskatchewan Polytechnic varies at the program level with some programs fully integrating PLAR and even using it as a recruitment tool, while others do not use it at all. Finally, when considering how institutional policy, process, and practice are informed, the University of Regina and Saskatchewan Polytechnic rely on different resources and therefore, different standards. The University of Regina uses CAEL as its guide, while Saskatchewan Polytechnic uses CAPLA and their nine guiding principles.

The STCLPC, a partnership of credit-granting institutions working with the Saskatchewan Ministry of Advanced Education, was established around 2014 to address some of these inconsistencies and to fill the need for a formal council for admissions and transfer which

would include a searchable database that students can access. Previous to this, the Saskatchewan Council on Admissions and Transfer (SaskCAT) was active between 2006-2009; unfortunately, this entity no longer exists and the database to track pathways did not exist for long.

Comparatively, several other provinces still have councils on admissions and transfer (CATs), including Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia (ONCAT, ACAT, BCCAT) and this work include databases to track transfer credit data and pathways. Perhaps the province with the most robust recognition practices, Quebec’s reconnaissance des acquis et des compétences (Recognition of Acquired Competencies, RAC) system is fully integrated within their competency-based education model as programs are aligned with the Ministry’s competency frameworks for all programs. It is of note that there are varying levels of activity within each of these groups including varying degrees of collaborations with each other. The table below provides an overview of various councils and consortiums on admissions/articulation and transfer across Canada.⁹

Figure 1

Table of Provincial Councils on Admissions and Transfer

Province/Territory	Council Name	Role
Alberta	Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer (ACAT)	Manages credit transfer agreements and maintains course articulation databases.
British Columbia	BC Council on Admissions & Transfer (BCCAT)	Oversees BC Transfer System, articulation, and transfer guides.
Manitoba	Campus Manitoba (CMB)	Acts in transfer and articulation — part of the inter-provincial council network.
New Brunswick	Council on Articulations and Transfer of New Brunswick (CATNB)	Facilitates transfer within New Brunswick; collaborates nationally.

⁹ Links to councils/consortiums: [ACAT](#); [BCCAT](#); [CampusMB](#); [CATNB](#); [CATNS](#); [ONCAT](#); [CERACOB](#); [STCLPC](#); [PCCAT](#); [CATCan](#); [ARUCC](#)

Nova Scotia	Council on Admission and Transfer for Nova Scotia (CATNS) — Supported by MyNSFuture; MyTransferCredits; MySpring&SummerCourses; MyTranscripts — Formerly NSCAT	Develops systems for student mobility and transfer credit.
Ontario	Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT)	Supports transfer among Ontario public post-secondary institutions; operates ONTransfer.ca.
Quebec	No formal council — Recognition of Acquired Competencies (RAC) system integrated throughout the CEGEPs and connected to Quebec’s competency-based education model	Uses unique credit-recognition systems; no formal provincial council.
Saskatchewan	Saskatchewan Transfer Credit & Learner Pathways Council (STCLPC) — Early 2000s there was a SaskCAT and RPL working group	Facilitates student mobility and transfer pathways; partnership of post-secondary institutions and the Ministry of Advanced Education.
Pan-Canadian	CATCan Network & PCCAT (Pan-Canadian Consortium) CATCan—formerly WestCAT and is currently housed on ACAT website. Current CATCan partners include Alberta, BC, Manitoba, NB, NS, Ontario, Saskatchewan	National consortium connecting provincial bodies like STCLPC, ACAT, BCCAT, ONCAT, etc., to enhance learner mobility. PCCAT is research/policy/practices focused.
Projects in Canada	ARUCC (Association of Registrars of the Universities and Colleges of Canada)	National Association stewarding important projects related to credential recognition, student mobility, transcript and transfer guides, online credential wallets. For example, MyCreds online national credential wallet.

In Saskatchewan, the primary purpose of the STCLPC is to fill the gap of no longer having SaskCAT and to explore how Saskatchewan post-secondary institutions can collaborate more effectively in the broader area of learner mobility and increased accessibility to post-secondary institutions inside and outside of the province. I attended some STCLPC meetings and so far, have learned that while there are some pathways between institutions, there is not a lot of momentum, coordination, or leadership to scale up. There has been some planning for council

members to join ACAT to help facilitate the process of transfer credit and one post-secondary has joined so far; however, it is still unclear how the institutions can share information and mobilize PLAR. The provincial “CATs” or learner pathways councils are all members of the Councils on Admissions/Articulations and Transfer of Canada Network (CATcan Network), a voluntary network of operational leads from provincial “CATs”; however, the website does not seem to have been updated since 2017 and there is no evidence of recent activity of what used to be annual meetings. Some provincial CATs are also members of the Pan-Canadian Consortium on Admissions and Transfer (PCCAT) but there has been no update to provincial collaborations since 2022.¹⁰ Interestingly, in Saskatchewan, while the University of Regina renewed its 2025 PCCAT membership, the STCLPC, Saskatchewan Polytechnic, and the University of Saskatchewan do not have memberships. It is unclear if they were former members and decided not to renew or if they were never members. This lack of consistency, coordination, and momentum among and between Saskatchewan-based post-secondary institutions, who are active in PLAR or not, can produce challenges for learners looking for recognition.

Immigrants and The Role of PLAR for Successful Integration

Although immigration numbers continue to increase in Canada, there are varying opinions on whether Canada is doing well and to what extent PLAR might play a role in successful integration. In the Immigration Levels Plan 2023-2025, Canada plans to welcome between 1.282 million and 1.597 million new permanent residents from 2023-2025 (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2023). However, there are varying perspectives regarding Canada’s status as an immigration society with some applauding its immigration

¹⁰ [Credit Transfer Collaboration in Canada](#)

model and others remaining highly critical of it. Some perspectives view immigration as unproblematic and these perspectives are outdated, taking a more monolithic approach to Canada. For example, Reitz (2012) describes Canada as “one of the three traditional ‘nations of immigration’ along with the United States and Australia, [one that] continues to receive relatively large numbers of immigrants and with what would appear to be relatively few problems” (p. 518). These perspectives do not appreciate complexity and similar to other Canadian national projects, such as the Truth and Reconciliation commitments, make generalized assumptions and oversimplify what is a deeply complex process. The description of Canada’s immigration system used by Reitz (2012) may be deceiving when we compare it to other similarly complex national projects. The federal immigration policy is continually changing, yet notably in 2012, Canada was applauded for its immigration model. The model included policies around selection of skilled immigrants and the points system, multiculturalism as a means of integrating immigrants into the labour market and society, and provincial autonomy for the administration of immigration (Reitz, 2012, p. 520). In contrast to this positive view of immigration policy and practice, higher education organizations and adult learning scholars insist on the importance of recognizing a plurality of knowledges in connection to successful integration and retention. They point to the difference between immigration and successful integration and highlight the need for PLAR improvements as a strategy towards successful integration (Riffell, 2006; Simosko, 2012). This sentiment has been expressed more recently as well. In proposing a new model for the immigration system for Canada, CICan insists “as Canada evolves, so too must its immigration system” (CICan, 2023, p. 4). They also highlighted that reskilling, and the recognition of [immigrants’] prior learning and experiences, are key to their integration and positive labour market outcomes (CICan, 2023, p. 10). Moreover,

immigrants experience a paradox when it comes to what Ku et al. (2013) describe as the exclusionary “Canadian Experience” discourse which places full responsibility of entering the Canadian labour market on immigrants themselves. There is the additional complexity of balancing rights and responsibilities. For instance, Bauder and Breen (2023) argued that Indigenous perspectives are often not considered and input is not solicited which is “particularly problematic given the key role that immigration policies have played and continue to play in the colonization process” (p. 369). Therefore, given this complexity, PLAR needs to attend to broader views of experience and to consider broad perspectives. As Klages and Mustafa (2022) argued, if we continue with the “current adaptation of PLAR [that] remains limited” (p. 654), we will fail in supporting newcomers to Canada to engage in their field and will continue to block advancement rather than promote equity.

In Saskatchewan, the Ministry of Immigration and Career Training released their 2023-2024 report on immigration in Saskatchewan which acknowledges an increase in immigration alongside increasing demands for a skilled labour force. In this report, there is an ambitious target to achieve an immigration retention rate of 85% for those who have chosen Saskatchewan as their destination. Some scholars remain critical of this goal. Melissa Kelly (2023), a Canada Excellence Research Chair in Migration and Integration Programs at Toronto Metropolitan University argues that despite the several programs and initiatives developed to “attract and welcome international migrants to Saskatchewan’s rural areas...retention is poor, with many immigrants moving to other destinations” (p. 939). Additionally, University of Regina professor, Andrew Stevens (2022) draws attention to the provincial governments attempt to regulate the “unfreedom” experienced by foreign workers. Although the Ministry report’s goals of meeting employer demand for a skilled workforce, developing skills for in-demand jobs, and attracting a

stable labour supply do touch on important areas of credential recognition, improving awareness of career supports, and expanded experiential and work-integrated learning opportunities, surprisingly there is no mention of PLAR. The report states that the ministry's mission is to help citizens realize their full potential. The omission of PLAR is curious; it is unclear whether this is an oversight or perhaps a move away from past endeavors. While the work outlined in this report is impressive, PLAR could play a key role in fulfilling this mission. A research brief produced for Prairie Skies Integration Network (PSIN¹¹) in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, was published in March of 2022 by scholars from the University of Regina. A survey of industry stakeholders identified that employers expect immigrants to have previous Canadian work experience and Canadian educational credentials as a baseline for securing employment, but no suggestions on how to get there. Key recommendations included the need for further research on newcomers and employment in south central Saskatchewan and offering PLAR to newcomers to facilitate a validation of their life experiences and credentials from their home country, or in other words, a need for improved pathways to foreign credential recognition. While PLAR policy and processes exist at several Saskatchewan post-secondary institutions, it is unclear whether it is currently being promoted by immigrant integration services or recognized by immigrants as one way to obtain credit for learning. There are many gaps in understanding the immigrant experience of PLAR in Saskatchewan and its implications for their future employability.

International Credential Recognition for Immigrants

Credential recognition, recognition of prior learning, and the discounting of immigrant skills are listed again and again by scholars and immigrant service organizations as barriers for

¹¹ [Prairie Skies Integration Network Research Brief](#)

immigrants in obtaining meaningful and equitable employment in Canada (CICan, 2023; Conference Board of Canada, 2011; Ghadi et al., 2023; Guo, 2007; Hawthorne, 2007; Kilkulwe et al., 2017; Klages & Mustafa, 2022; Ogilvie et al., 2007; Shinnaoui & Narchal, 2010; Wane, 2015). Moreover, the recognition that learning takes place anywhere and at any time is missing from credential recognition processes and this has significant implications for immigrants. The focus on measurement of learning and data collection is problematic because national surveys and institutions for measuring learning outcomes such as Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC¹²) “fail to recognize the role of informal, transformative, and experiential learning” (Regmi, 2021, p. 239). The CICIC offers information on credential recognition including information on the six entities that offer educational credential assessment (ECA), but little is known about the experiences of immigrants navigating these processes or whether they are aware that PLAR is an alternative to formal credential recognition.

Accessing information on PLAR is not a blanket solution for immigrants receiving credit for learning. The PLAR process may have a sub-goal “to motivate participants and give them a sense of pride in their past achievements...[but] the value of PLAR for integrating immigrants into the labour market and society remains questionable” (Klages & Mustafa, 2022, p. 650). So, while Ministry reports and institutional research in Saskatchewan call for better international credential recognition processes and PLAR for improved immigrant integration, it is essential to be mindful of potential risks in this process. If PLAR is to be used as a tool for social justice and inclusion rather than a practice of non-recognition, PLAR-focused research requires a criticality

¹² It is of note that Future Skills Canada released a September 2025 report highlighting a Canadian PIAAC Research Agenda. [Skills for Productivity, Prosperity and Well-Being in Canada](#)

that will look at systemic limitations and discriminatory practices that remain invisible in the PLAR process (Klages & Mustafa, 2022, p. 650).

Challenging PLAR's Claims to Considerations of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

The call to evolve Canada's immigration system that CICan (2023) identifies in their proposal must include post-secondary institutions who have a broadened understanding of assessment and evaluation and an appreciation for the recognition of learning. Any recognition of learning must be viewed as a meaningful and equitable consideration of lifelong learning and how this learning can equate to integration into the labour market. Even the most thorough approaches to recognition of learning, must balance competing interests. For instance, the approach put forth by Harris (2006), which combines theoretical rationales, the development of practices, and the realization of political and policy objectives, needs to be careful not to create obstacles that overprioritize language proficiency, the prioritization of labour market needs over valuing a plurality of knowledges, or systematic limitations in the PLAR process rooted in Eurocentric assessment practices (Van Kleef, 2007, p. 2). An evolved immigration system needs to look at new ways to recognize learning in all its forms.

Theoretical Framework

Adult education, adult learning, and work must be discussed within broader socioeconomic and political contexts of the nations and jurisdictions within which they reside (Walters, 2014). PLAR, as a thread linking adult education, adult learning, and work, must be discussed within this broader context as well. This understanding influenced my chosen theoretical framework. As such, my research study draws on the integrated intersectional framework as outlined by Guo and Liu (2021) to look deeper into Canada's claim to exist as a principled framework for immigration. An integrated intersectional framework encourages us to

take a closer look into the person, the multiple characteristics in their identity, and promotes inclusion by better understanding how these various characteristics may compound disadvantage (Thomas, et al., 2021) thereby making space for broader individual considerations.

Prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) is an essential element of adult learning and adult education that could challenge what are largely neoliberal agendas in developed countries such as Canada. The very notion of PLAR, of awarding credit for learning that takes place outside the academy and outside our national borders, challenges us to consider and re-consider the philosophy of education, to rethink boundaries, purpose, and processes in the field (Lange, 2021, p.69). There is significant potential for PLAR to fill a gap in foreign credential recognition processes as Saskatchewan continues to launch initiatives to increase immigration. The PLAR landscape is complex, and I am mindful of the effect or influence of neoliberalism on immigration policy and the idea of the “ideal immigrant” or “good citizen” “who embodies the neoliberal ideals of self-sufficiency, hard-work, and effective and efficient labour market participation” (Root et al., 2014, p. 5). For PLAR to be successful, it needs to appreciate the complexity of social differences, to avoid superficial changes that do nothing to fundamentally change power relations in society, and to avoid reinforcing a racialized skills regime that requires individuals to conform to the host country’s norms and workplace cultures (Guo, 2015). I do not want PLAR to simply be an example of this “one-way street integration process in which the newcomers are solely responsible for making the adaptations to fit into the receiving society’s system of established values and institutions” (Root et al., 2014, p.6). I argue that by applying an integrative intersectional framework to PLAR, we can challenge current assessment practices and social inequality more holistically and comprehensively (Guo & Liu, 2021) and purposefully ask adult education initiatives to promote equity and to challenge wholly

neoliberal agendas. The inclusive lifelong education model put forth by Liu and Guo (2022) which “proposes an anti-colonial and anti-racist approach that aims to decolonize the ideological underpinnings of colonial relations rule, especially in terms of their racialised privileging of ‘whiteness’ and Eurocentrism as normative processes of knowledge accumulation” (p. 748), is applicable to this study as it looks at PLAR’s rootedness in the same Eurocentric process. The model put forth by Liu and Guo (2022) examines individuals’ intersectional identities to scrutinize institutional relations implicated in “perpetuating labour market inequality” (p. 740). As one process rooted in these institutional relations, PLAR needs to be scrutinized in a similar way. By exploring the experiences of immigrants considering using current PLAR processes at Saskatchewan post-secondary institutions, we can explore the assumptions of what knowledge counts in an effort to better understand how we can make our PLAR processes in Saskatchewan more equitable.

Intersectionality: Understanding People as More Than Demographics

For PLAR to be equitable, we need to consider the ways in which current practices may simply reflect the neoliberal discourse on lifelong learning and its narrow and normative framing of knowledge accumulation. This reflection may ignore PLAR’s rootedness in Eurocentric assessment and evaluation practices thereby maintaining structural barriers experienced by immigrants as they seek to enter Canada’s labour market. Intersectionality is “a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences” (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p.2). In their work on social justice, Patricia Collins and Sirma Bilge (2016) frame intersectionality “as a form of critical inquiry and praxis” (p. 245) that helps us to understand and explain the complexity in the world, in people, and in experiences. Guo and Liu (2021) trace the origins of the concept of intersectionality to the work of African-American law

professor Kimberlé Crenshaw who coined the term, and its development through the era of social movements led by women of colour in the 1960s and 1970s. Crenshaw used the notion of intersectionality “to explain how interactions of gender and race/ethnicity influence black women’s access to the American labour market and how women...experience marginalization in both analysis and politics” (Kaushik & Walsh, 2018, p. 29). Her work illuminates the flaws in mainstream activism which tends to neglect the intersection of marginalization. For example, “American antidiscrimination laws impeded efforts by Black women to secure better employment opportunities [because the] cumulative vulnerabilities of Black women/immigrant women of colour were not accounted for” (Kaushik & Walsh, 2018, p. 30). Myra Marx Ferree, Professor of Sociology (emerita) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison authored a thought-provoking review of two books, *Intersectionality: Origins, Contestations, Horizons* by Anna Carastathis and *Intersectionality* by Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge for the American Sociological Association in 2018. In the review, Ferree (2018) highlights key arguments made by the authors in addition to sharing where she sees commonality. These approaches are like those taken by Guo and Liu (2021) and Annamma and Booker (2021), who call for an integrated intersectional approach which can reveal interlocking oppressions. Guo and Liu (2021), Collins and Bilge (2016), and Carastathis (2016) identify the limitations of simply theorizing with intersectionality. That is, intersectionality needs to be rooted in praxis (Ferree, 2018). Guo and Liu (2021) see the possibility of integrated intersectionality as “a practical intervention in a world characterized by extreme inequality” (p. 246) while Collins and Bilge (2016) and Carastathis (2016) hold the view that “positivist versions of intersectionality [are] misleading” (Ferree, 2018, p.128). If PLAR research is to become a tool to combat the undervaluing of immigrants’ skills, education, and life experiences, it will need to consider the six core ideas of

intersectionality: social inequality, power, relationality, social context, complexity, and social justice, amongst primarily employability-based factors (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Liu & Guo, 2022).

I draw on the work of Guo and Liu (2021) and Liu and Guo (2022) on the use of an intersectional framework to advance key critical ideas in my PLAR research. They draw on three models for employing an intersectional framework (Choo & Ferree, 2010; Guo & Liu, 2021). The three models of intersectionality are group-centred, process-centred, and system-centred and together these represent three distinct characteristics of intersectionality—inclusion and voice, analytical interactions, and institutional primacy (Guo & Liu, 2021, p. 247). Elements of each model are relevant to my research: i) the group-centred model centres the voices of the multiply marginalized, ii) the process model analyses the structural processes that organize power, iii) the system model highlights the complexities and deficits associated with social inequality. Using an intersectional lens uncovers “the relationships among social location and other factors in employment oppression rather than treating...workers as homogeneous” (Guo & Liu, 2021, p. 247). As Dei (2016) states, it is “difficult to place individuals into neatly compartmentalized boxes that will allegedly capture the complexity of their identities and experiences” (p. 11). Intersectionality, in its aims of society inclusivity, will ensure consideration of how race, gender, class and other intersections of oppression shape immigrants’ experiences using PLAR at Saskatchewan post-secondary institutions.

Implications of Applying an Integrated Intersectional Framework to PLAR for Immigrants

As a PLAR advocate and adult educator, I am mindful that not all learners receive the same rights and advantages as others. Guo and Liu (2021) state that, to confront social inequality in Canada, there needs to be a move towards an integrative intersectional framework in

understanding immigrants' experiences. This framework is important for future directions in adult education and acknowledges the complexity of immigrants' experiences. Rather than a view of learning that focuses on "making the multiply marginalized more like the powerful [and ignoring] the ways power is inscribed in learning contexts and the resulting damage" (Annamma & Booker, 2021, p. 299), integrated intersectionality can be used to reveal multifaced systemic barriers so that equity in adult learning and adult education remains the priority for PLAR. One area where barriers may be revealed is within the processes and procedures themselves. Guo and Liu, (2021) state plainly that "despite Canada's expressed preference for highly skilled immigrants, studies reveal that many highly skilled immigrants experience deskilling and devaluation of their international qualifications and work experience after immigrating to Canada" (p. 248). If the process for foreign credential recognition is too lengthy, and PLAR is an option to obtain credit via post-secondary institutions, it would be interesting to see if PLAR could be used as an alternative method for achieving Canadian post-secondary credit for learning. However, one major limitation to current PLAR processes is its mandate to reduce students' status from full-time to part-time. Some post-secondary institutions caution international students against considering PLAR as it may affect their course load and therefore their loans, sponsorship funding, immigration eligibility, and study permits. If PLAR is equal to course credit, if it takes time to accumulate indirect evidence, build a portfolio and/or perform the assessment, it should be questioned why registering for a course via PLAR is not equal to registering for a traditionally delivered course. Equating PLAR to a course at the systems level, would allow international students to maintain full-time status without the negative implications to financing and immigration via study permits. An integrated intersectional framework provides

the requisite intellectual space to interrogate whether these complications are more processual or if they are structural barriers and social oppression.

The use of an integrated intersectional framework may reveal invisible oppressions, such as governmental and organizational policies that reflect colonising practices and a devaluation of immigrants' prior qualifications and skills (Liu & Guo, 2022). Associate Professor of Educational Policy, Sara Carpenter (2021) provided an example of such a project in the Agency of the Future (AF) modelled on a set of concepts developed by the Canadian national settlement sector including settlement agencies and umbrella associations, Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC, which was renamed Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, IRCC) and Pathways to Prosperity (P2P). Carpenter argued that this project shifted from a "service delivery for newcomers toward the marketization of knowledge" (p. 340). The Agency of the Future project proposal, to reorganize the resettlement sector in Canada, calls for shifting a service provision organization to a business model where governments and commercial enterprises become the clients, and newcomers its products (Carpenter, 2021). Carpenter (2021) delves into the contentious waters around what education should be, when she "illustrates how neoliberalism has been taken up by adult education and how adult education has been taken up by neoliberal interests" (p. 335). She points to the ethical dilemmas posed in the Agency of the Future initiative and she asks readers to be aware of similar problems in future initiatives. We are reminded to be mindful of possible dominant agendas and how programs (like PLAR), while providing a service to those in need, might be advancing predetermined political agendas at the same time. Currently, most PLAR has its focus on summative assessment, and there are implications and dangers of assessments being "rooted in Eurocentric, androcentric thought" (Lange, 2021, p. 69). The deliberate application of an integrated intersectionality framework

within my study served as one way to scrutinize intersecting systems of power and acted as “an academic frame and as a practical intervention in a world characterized by extreme inequalities” (Guo & Liu, 2021, p. 246). Applying an intersectional framework to the study of PLAR allowed me to better understand any unequal power relations and how these power relations intersect. The use of this critical framework also illuminated how immigrant experiences connect to the broader socioeconomic and political contexts by hearing from immigrants themselves.

Summary

For PLAR to be able to deliver on its claims of benevolence, we need to return to certain foundational beliefs and values. We need to build on a conceptual model which clearly links experiential learning theory and PLAR and call for learning and assessment activities to reflect as closely as possible their real-world settings (VanKleef, 2007). As explored in this chapter, PLAR’s full potential has yet to be achieved; its processes and applications remain varied across provinces and institutions, and highly complex. Yet, at the same time claims of providing broader access to higher education remain unquestioned. With the focus of this study on immigrants as adult learners, a critical framework such as integrated intersectionality allows me to explore the culture of higher education in relation to immigrants. It also requires an examination of the current state of assessment and evaluation practices in PLAR and how these may or may not continue to constitute social inequality. The next chapter on methodology explores ways that we can propose solutions to more equitable PLAR processes in Saskatchewan post-secondaries by speaking to those most affected.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology and Design

Overview

As an educator, I know that we can all learn from experience – the choice is ultimately ours to make. In reflection and preparation for the methodological approach to my study, I found that, broadly speaking, the concepts of experience and narrative as they are conceptualized by a host of scholars became so interconnected for me that it almost seemed an impossible task to separate one from the other (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, 2007; 2013; 2023; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007; Josselson, 2007; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Jean Clandinin, Professor Emerita at the University of Alberta and Jerry Rosiek, Associate Professor of Education at the University of Oregon (2007) assert “experience is the fundamental ontological category from which all inquiry—narrative or otherwise—proceeds” (p. 38). As seminal authors in this area, they acknowledged divergent views on narrative inquiry and on what narrative inquirers employ this methodology. To illustrate this diversity, they provided a metaphorical map to represent the complexity of views as well as the borders and borderlands that are part of this work. The map allows readers and practitioners to locate themselves and their narrative work. I reflected deeply on the role PLAR could/would/should play in validating experience as learning and deserving of post-secondary credit. Could PLAR serve as a tool for social justice? After some reflection, I realized that it was essential to locate myself on Clandinin and Rosiek’s (2007) metaphorical map of narrative inquiry in order to confirm my methodological orientation. A mapping of the narrative inquiry methodology and what became my final plans for the research is outlined below for the reader.

PLAR is envisioned as a segway into formal learning spaces for learners who participated in informal, non-formal, or experiential learning or for learners who cannot receive credential

recognition for prior formal learning. It is an important point of entry, particularly for immigrants seeking permanent residency and commensurate employment and as an alternative to, or complementary function of, the complex foreign credential recognition processes. Fittingly, there is a complexity in these learning experiences and in how PLAR is experienced that requires a methodological approach that appreciates and reflects this complexity. In asking: What are the experiences of immigrant adult learners as they considered engaging in PLAR processes at a post-secondary institution in Saskatchewan, I am attempting to honour a small slice of this complexity. The following secondary question was added to support this initial research question: How did using an integrated intersectional framework reveal how PLAR promotes inclusion or compounds disadvantage? This chapter is organized into six parts to provide a detailed overview of my paradigmatic orientation, the research methodology, and the research design including ethical considerations, limitations, and delimitations of the study.

Paradigmatic Orientation

My paradigmatic orientation is social constructionism, albeit a “loosely defined” (Lincoln et al., 2018, p. 113) form of social constructionism that provides room for flexibility. In their chapter that forms part of the *SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Lincoln et al. (2018) presented their original table from their first edition of the handbook that sets out four paradigms (positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, and constructivism) alongside a “new” table which adds the participatory paradigm column to the right of the constructivism column. Both tables outlined the basic beliefs of alternative inquiry paradigms. What is interesting about these two tables is that the “new” table has included the authors’ original formulations, but also the “amplifications” (p. 109) made by Heron and Reason (1997) which includes the addition of the participatory paradigm. They explained this addition to their first formulation of the table as an

example of “the hermeneutic elaboration so embedded in our own view, constructivism” (Lincoln et al., 2018, p. 109). That is, they chose to embrace elaboration and methodological interpretation and opened up their theorizing with the purpose of encouraging others to build on their conceptions. They saw benefits of including various viewpoints from multiple paradigms for learning and growing individually and as a research community. In other words, their initial ideas had expanded and evolved. Constructivism is rooted in educational and psychological theorist Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of “situated cognition,” which “combines the individual and the social in order to learn” (Groen & Kawalilak, 2014, p. 130). Bloomberg and Volpe (2018) explained that constructivism “is concerned with how the complexities of the social and cultural world are experienced, interpreted, and understood in a particular context at a particular point in time” (p. 42). Constructivism aligns with an “interactive paradigm” as outlined by Reid et al. (2017). As a researcher working within this newly expanded constructivist paradigm and who was leading this study, I grew to better understand the inherent complexity of PLAR and what participants had experienced. There is complexity in how PLAR is conceptualized, theorized, and practiced and I believe understanding participant experience is critical to future conceptualizations, theorizations, and practices. Therefore, social constructivism, as a learning theory with its emphasis on learner involvement, discussion, and knowledge exchange, deeply informed how I approached this work.

The most important element of my paradigmatic orientation to social constructivism and constructionism is my affinity for meaning-making and understanding experience. I align with adult education scholars Janet Groen and Colleen Kawalilak (2014) who draw attention to the distinction between constructivism which “focuses on the experiences and process of engagement *for the individual*...[and] social constructionism [which] is concerned with

interpersonal dynamics and collective activity across learners; therefore, social status, gender, and cultural background play a central role in how we make meaning” (p. 129). It is this meaning-making, and the inclusion of multiple perspectives and consideration for interpersonal dynamics that is so very important to me because “it is the meaning-making, sense-making, attributional activities that shape action (or inaction)” (Lincoln et al., 2018, p. 113). I saw myself following in the steps of Lincoln et. al, (2018) who ask that research serve as a “call to action...embodied in critical theorists’ and participatory action research perspectives” (p. 113). When I considered their articulation of the criteria, items, and issues of the positivist, post-positivist, critical, constructivist, and participatory paradigms, I imagined myself positioned within the critical, constructivist, and participatory columns, moving fluidly back-and-forth between them. When I was asked to reflect on my paradigm and the way I viewed the world, I was initially concerned that I did not neatly align with only one. Rather I found myself aligning with, and influenced by, certain aspects of the aforementioned three paradigms. What I appreciate about the formulations put forward by Lincoln et al. (2018) is the acknowledgment of fluidity and continual shifting of the paradigms, as representations of the commitment to learning. My continual movement between the paradigms is therefore not problematic, rather it signifies a commitment to remaining flexible and reflexive throughout the research as decisions were made with the participants. As an adult learner who sees value in additions, revisions, and amplifications to current interpretations, and honouring the influence of the research participants, this flexibility reflects a commitment to learning and making meaning while simultaneously looking forward to future action.

My way of seeing the world (ontology) and the assumptions I hold about how we come to know what we know, along with who can be a knower (epistemology), are influenced by my

belief in a social constructivist, however loosely defined, orientation (Reid, 2017). I tend toward the antifoundational which denotes “a refusal to adopt any permanent, unvarying (or ‘foundational’) standards by which truth can be universally known” (Lincoln et al., 2018, p. 137). However, I do think that truth and what counts as valid knowledge can be more fully understood as a result of participation in dialogue and communal discourse which “should be bounded by moral considerations, a premise grounded in the emancipatory narratives of the critical theorists, the philosophical pragmatism of [philosophers like] Richard Rorty, the democratic focus of constructivist inquiry, and the ‘human flourishing’ goals of participatory and cooperative inquiry” (Lincoln et al., 2018, p. 137). My paradigmatic orientation, ontological, epistemological, and axiological stances, and the value I place on dialogue, discourses, narratives, stories, meaning-making, and understanding experience explain my methodological choice of narrative inquiry outlined below.

Methodology

I begin this section by defining narrative inquiry and situating myself in this methodology first by outlining where I am located in, what Pinnegar and Daynes (2018) explain as, the four “turns” to narrative inquiry. These four turns include: attention to relationships among participants, the move to words as data, the focus on the particular, and the recognition of blurred genres of knowing (p. 3). After defining these terms, I will then explain how I plan to balance the commonplaces of temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin, 2007) and by reflecting on Clandinin’s (2023) twelve touchstones of narrative inquiry. From there, I will explain what I see as an intimate connection between narrative inquiry and PLAR as the phenomenon under study and, finally, I will speak to researcher narrative identity throughout the whole of this process.

Narrative inquiry “begins in experience as expressed in lived and told stories [and always has] experiential starting points” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2018, p. 5). This rootedness of narrative inquiry in experience and the experiential, and seeking to understand these experiences, is what compelled me to take up narrative inquiry. As I began to learn more about the “turns” narrative inquirers make before choosing this methodology, I realized that I shared many of these characteristics and had naturally and intuitively embraced the stance of a narrative inquirer (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2018). In other words, I embrace the role of the narrative inquirer who “focuses on the way the relational, temporal, and continuous features of a pragmatic ontology of experience can manifest in narrative form, not just in retrospective representations of human experience but also in the lived immediacy of that experience” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p.12). This realization solidified narrative inquiry as my chosen methodology.

As a first point, the authors Pinnegar and Dayne (2007) outline a change in the understanding of the relationship between researcher and researched. They explain that “narrative inquirers recognize that the researcher and the researched in a particular study are in relationship with each other and that both parties will learn and change in the encounter” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 9). There is a focus on interpretation and understanding that takes place during any human encounter. As an instructor, I shifted my teaching approach several years ago, moving even further away from a traditional understanding of the hierarchical teacher/learner relationship towards a more balanced approach where power is shared. I realized I held an affinity for knowledge exchange. This is acknowledgement that learning is occurring for both the teacher and the learner; the interaction is not simply that of the teacher imparting knowledge to the learner.

The second “turn” to narrative inquiry is where I felt a pull away from numbers to consider words more fully as data. Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) clarify that this turn does not mean a complete abandonment of numbers, rather it is a commitment to and valuing of the “nuances of experiences and relationship in a particular setting” (p. 15). Early on in this research design process, I reflected on what it was I wanted to discover through my research. The reporting of numbers of candidates using PLAR was interesting but, for me, did not provide a fulsome picture of the process from the vantage point of those directly experiencing it or by those considering it. I knew I wanted to understand instead how to improve the process and make it more equitable, and to accomplish this, I would need to fully capture participant experiences. Numbers could not provide the full account, therefore stories offer the provision of more fulsome accounts along with a rich description of the broader purpose of the study.

The third “turn” is that from the general to the particular. At first, I thought I would research accounts of a larger group of people to explore a general understanding of the barriers to PLAR at Saskatchewan post-secondary institutions. However, the PLAR phenomenon is complex across post-secondaries and so is the experience of candidates using it. I understood that what I was really interested in was a deeper understanding of the complexities across institutions and an opportunity to help facilitate greater agency for the participants. When I reflected on the meaning of “value,” a term which is commonly attributed to things of monetary worth, and what holds value, whose knowledge counts, I came to understand value as “a particular experience, in a particular setting, involving particular people” (Pinnegar & Dayne, 2007, p. 21). There is the potential for this research to inform PLAR processes across institutions at a provincial level and more broadly, but I firmly believe that it will be the stories that hold the potential to make the processes more equitable. If storied experiences illuminate certain barriers, there will be pressure

for policymakers to change. People like me, who have a voice within the PLAR space in the post-secondary sphere, can use knowledge of policy and processes to advocate for and advance these changes.

The final turn involves the blurring of knowing (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). This final step involves a turn from a singular way of knowing towards “multiple ways of knowing and understanding human experience” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 25). It is a shift away from a more positivistic and post-positivistic understanding of what constitutes so-called validity. As an instructor who challenged traditional assessment in my own learning spaces and advocated for a shift away from timed exams towards more authentic assessments, as an assessment consultant advocating for co-created rubrics, and as a PLAR facilitator advising faculty on the recognition of prior learning and its role in valuing and recognising a plurality of knowledges (Maher, 2014), I had made this turn in my professional practice some years ago. These actions in my professional life evidence a shift toward “acceptance of multiple ways of knowing the world...[and] establishing findings through authenticity, resonance, and trustworthiness” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 25). Further, these life choices deliberately and carefully reinforced that my choice of narrative inquiry, which makes room for valuing and recognising multiple ways of knowing and learning that takes place outside of the academy, is a sound methodological choice for this study.

Feeling confident that I had made these “turns” as outlined by Pinnegar and Daynes, (2018) I engaged more fully with Clandinin and Connelly’s (2007) commonplaces and Clandinin’s (2023) twelve touchstones of narrative inquiry and the concept of resonant threads or patterns within participant narrative accounts. Professor Emerita and founding director of the Centre for Research for Teacher Education and Development at the University of Alberta,

Dorothy Jean Clandinin is well-known for her contributions to narrative inquiry. As a novice researcher with no experience undertaking a research study of this nature, it was difficult for me to imagine how I might attend to all twelve touchstones outlined by such an experienced scholar in the narrative inquiry space. The commonplaces provided the broader framework for how I undertook the study and the 12 touchstones greatly influenced my study design and how I moved from initial to interim to final research texts. I continually revisited Clandinin's (2023) view of narrative inquiry: "Narrative inquiry is how we understand human experience. It carries with it a view of the phenomenon of experience. We lived storied lives on storied landscapes. Experience itself is fundamentally narrative" (p. 151). Each of the twelve touchstones are woven throughout her book in much the same way as I attempted to weave them throughout this study. The twelve touchstones as outlined by Clandinin (2023) are as follows: relational responsibilities; in the midst; negotiation of relationships; narrative beginnings; negotiating entry into the field; moving from field to field texts; moving from field texts to interim and final research texts; representing narratives of experience in ways that show temporality, sociality, and place; relational response communities; justifications (personal, practical, social); attentive to multiple audiences; and commitment to understanding lives in motion. It is with these touchstones in mind that I wondered how I might live out this narrative inquiry. Fittingly, my firsthand experience taught me all I needed to know to move forward.

Narrative Inquiry and PLAR

As a recognition of prior learning (RPL) researcher and well-known champion in this space, Thompson Rivers University scholar, Judy Harris (2018) connects (reconnects) Dewey's conception of experience as learning with that of PLAR: "Dewey's thinking has obvious affinities with the values and practice of PLAR (he uses PLA), most particularly, the central

importance of both experience and learning from experience, and a commitment to their development, legitimization and valorization in educational and social terms” (p. 80). Harris brings in Knowles’ ideas around andragogy and explains what she sees as the underlying problem of PLAR: “working with experience is not enough; learning from that experience needs to be brought into relationship with formal knowledge and the structuring principles and practices of postsecondary education” (Harris, 2018, pp. 79-80). Here, Harris (2018) employs Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning theory to help solve the problem of trying to link learning that takes place outside the academy to post-secondary education learning. However, she points back to Dewey to help address this problem as Kolb’s learning theory is arguably indicative of “overly cognitive, rationalistic, and dualist thinking” (p. 80). Harris identifies the problem of excluding the recognition of multiple ways of knowing by relying only on Kolb’s learning theory. She points back to Dewey’s conception of experience and its criteria of interaction and continuity as it creates space for multiple ways of knowing. It is Dewey’s conception of experience that further informed my choice to use narrative inquiry.

Narrative inquiry, as Clandinin and Connelly (2007) theorize it, takes a “Deweyan view of experience” (p. 69). It has the potential to expand on what Harris (2018) calls the “knowledge question” a central issue in PLAR that recurs when what counts as knowledge is brought into question (Cooper & Harris, 2013; Harris & Wihak, 2017). As I see it, there are parallels in Harris’s (2018) conception of experience and theorization of how it can be assessed for learning and the way Clandinin and Connelly (2007) connect narrative inquiry to Dewey’s theorization of experience. That is, there seems to be a similarity between Clandinin and Connelly’s (2007) application of Dewey’s conception of experience and its influence on their conception of narrative inquiry, and Harris’ (2018) call for a repurposing of PLAR as a “specialised pedagogy”

within adult learning, one which addresses the problem of bringing learning from experience into relationship with formal knowledge and the “structuring principles and practices of post-secondary education” (p. 81). As major theorists within narrative inquiry, Clandinin and Connelly (2007) perceive narrative inquiry as “relational, temporal, continuous” (p. 44) and these are the shared characteristics within Harris’ specialized pedagogy, so important to PLAR practices, and are consistent with Dewey’s view of experience. Narrative inquiry, Dewey’s view of experience, and Harris’ conception of PLAR practice as specialised pedagogy, call into question grand narratives and Enlightenment thinking which view “knowledge as universal, externalized, decontextualized and value free...in favour of its locatedness or situatedness in complex sets of socio-historical relations, cultures of knowing and sites of practice and its non-innocent implications in power formations and relations” (Harris, 1999, p. 126). Narrative inquiry proved effective in eliciting the stories of immigrants considering PLAR in a way that appreciated the complexity of their experiences.

My chosen methodology for this research study adopts many of the qualities outlined in Harris’ specialized pedagogy necessary for successful and equitable PLAR. Harris argues that PLAR should resemble a qualitative research study. I draw the connections between my chosen methodology, the phenomenon under study, and Harris’ theorization about PLAR, to reassert the importance of stories in qualitative research and how they can be used as a tool for promoting equity. Harris’ (2018) conception of PLAR “recognizes certain *specialized forms of experiential knowledge* that have the potential for articulation (possibly in a contested way) with formal knowledge” (p. 82). Narrative inquiry, as Clandinin (2007; 2013; 2023) understands it, is an impactful way for this articulation to occur as “the focus of narrative inquiry, is not only valorizing individuals’ experience but is also an exploration of the social, cultural, familial,

linguistic, and institutional narratives, within which individuals' experiences were, and are, constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted" (Clandinin, 2007, p. 18). In hearing the stories of participants, specifically of immigrants considering PLAR at Saskatchewan post-secondary institutions, we are centring their voices so that they can contribute to, and interrogate, existing knowledge. Both Harris (2016, 2018) and Michelson (2015) call for a reconceptualization of PLAR as a disruptor to what currently counts as knowledge. Michelson (2015) asserts that PLAR should be taken up in a similar way to qualitative research and insists that PLAR should start "not with academic norms...but with adults' complex system[s] of networks consisting of material, social, discursive, technological, and organizational relationships" (p. 131). Harris (2016) explains how Michelson's claim resonates with Dewey's idea of development from within:

Even rich ethnographic accounts of experiential learning/knowledge and workplace practices have to be brought into relationship with some notion of academic knowledge and formal education, both for accreditation purposes and for those adults wanting further access to specialized knowledge to enhance their life chances and livelihoods. (p. 4)

In using narrative inquiry as the methodological approach for this study, I explored the experiences of those trying to bring experiential learning/knowledge and working practices into relationship with academic knowledge and formal accreditation. As the immigrant stories of PLAR are lived, told, retold, and relived, they could disrupt the knowledge field or what counts as legitimate knowledge, ultimately disrupting the recontextualized field or what knowledge will be selected, adapted, recast, reorganized into curricula, and disrupt the pedagogic field or what happens in the pedagogic space of teaching and learning (Harris, 2018). In seeing some of the issues that are currently at play with PLAR processes, I sought to bring in voices from the

margins to both disrupt current PLAR processes and to also reach the “regulative ideal... [of generating] a new relation between a human being and her environment” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 39). This stance harkens back to Dewey (1938), and Clandinin and Rosiek (2007), who explain that this new kind of experience can be less overwhelming and oppressive. It is akin to American psychologist Dan Siegel’s (2012) coined phrase “name it to tame it” which describes naming as the first step to managing big emotions thereby reducing our emotional reactivity to them. This approach to experience reminds me of Freire’s (1978) *conscientization* with its focus on developing a critical awareness of one’s social reality to then develop agency.

These conceptions of experience as theorized by Dewey and Freire include dialogue, reflection, action, and representation. They see experience, and the use of narrative to understand experience, as pragmatic. PLAR, as the process which assesses experience for learning, often uses narrative as a tool for reflecting on that experience, and falls under this pragmatic framework. Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) explain that “narratives are the form of representation that describe human experience as it unfolds through time [and] therefore narratives are...the most appropriate form to use when thinking about inquiry taken within a pragmatic framework” (p. 40). PLAR has been an underutilized tool used to validate learning and experience. Using narrative inquiry to research the conception of experience rooted in Dewey’s pragmatic framework, could help elevate experience as a valid source of knowledge within academia. That is, narrative inquiry will serve as “an approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honoring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 42). Importantly, narrative inquiry is appropriate to this study that makes space for multiple ways of knowing that could ultimately transform PLAR and make it a more equitable process.

The Commonplaces of Temporality, Sociality, and Place and the 12 Touchstones

Storytelling, or narratives, are time-honoured traditions exploring experiences that are embedded within social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional complexities (Clandinin, 2023). Clandinin and Connelly (2000; 2007) reassert narrative inquiry's distinctiveness through a term they label *Commonplaces*. These shared commitments in narrative inquiry, commonplaces, are temporality, sociality, and place. I take up these terms within my study as they honour the ontological commitments of narrative research as a tenet of, and commitment to, all forms of learning. As Clandinin and Murphy (2009) explain, "the three features of a Deweyan ontology of experience are well suited for framing narrative research: emphasis on the social dimension of inquiry, temporality of knowledge generation, and continuity that is not merely perceptual but ontological" (p. 600). PLAR also has an ontological commitment to all forms of learning and to providing recognition for that learning. By anchoring this PLAR study in the commonplaces, I am maintaining ontological alignment with recognizing all forms of learning throughout the study.

Temporality is life "as it is experienced on a continuum...and educational landscapes we study undergo day-by-day experiences that are contextualized within a longer-term historical narrative" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 19). In order to attend to the temporality of experience, narrative inquirers must describe the events, people, and objects under study, with a lens of past, present, and future (Clandinin & Connelly, 2007, p. 69). For this research, I incorporated participants' social identity maps in informal discussions prior to the interviews and asked them to describe their past, present, and future in relation to their experiences immigrating to Saskatchewan (see Appendix C). I also shared my own social identity map with participants as a way to be transparent about my positionality in the study (see Appendix C).

The second commitment within the commonplaces, *sociality*, has multiple dimensions. First, it draws on Dewey's notion of interaction, the idea that people are constantly interacting with their environment during life experiences. The conditions are both personal and social conditions including things like feelings, hopes, desires, morals, the environment, people, and other surrounding factors, all of which determine an individual's context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Moreover, sociality includes the relationship between participant and inquirer. Clandinin and Connelly (2007) explain that throughout the inquiry, narrative inquirers "are in relationships, negotiating purposes, next steps, outcomes, texts, and the other concerns that go into an inquiry relationship" (p. 70). I considered these conditions by fostering thick description of experiences throughout the study to elicit rich stories. The participants and I collaboratively wrote stories with participants having the final say. We discussed the possibilities for dissemination of the findings after defense and what future collaboration might look like.

The final commonplace, sequence of places, asks the narrative inquirer to consider where the stories are told and stresses the importance of the quality and impact of these places on the lived and told experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2007). For this study, I asked participants to tell me about their home country and their circumstances, the hopes they had in immigrating to Canada, where they were and what it was like after immigrating, and what they hoped to accomplish or what they hoped PLAR might do for them. We also discussed place in relation to the interview(s). We chose virtual interviews for convenience for both participants and me as researcher, and in order to maintain consistency. However, we discussed place and where we were in relation to each other including our backgrounds and places we had been before the interview. Final consideration was given to where this research takes place (Saskatchewan), and its place in the current landscape of narrative inquiry. I explained the goal of the research was to

center their experiences and their stories in this study, negotiating throughout and making sure they understood that they had the final say on their story. By constantly dialoguing and negotiating with participants, the storying process was collaborative, and I ensured that I attended to all three commonplaces outlined as good practice in narrative inquiry.

The idea of commonplaces holds narrative inquirers together ensuring my research study has a “distinct place on the methodological landscape” (Clandinin, 2007, p. 70). These commonplace elements also align well with intersectionality as my theoretical framework. It offers meaning-making, a “mechanism by which individuals can re-tell their self-narratives with consideration of how systems of power and privilege impact the unique intersections of their identities” (Johnson & Thacker Darrow, 2022, p. 446). In this knowledge exchange, where I am receiving the participants’ stories firsthand, there exists the potential to challenge whose knowledge counts and to affirm “the necessity of immigrants to actively determine the direction for social change through participation in structured settings of local resistance and political, economic, and social transformation” (Guo & Liu, 2021, p. 252). The notion of commonplaces confirmed for me as a researcher that this research would shift, would be distinct, and would occupy a specific place free from generalizations yet full of rich descriptions of each participant’s unique experiences.

Learning happens everywhere all of the time and my learning about narrative inquiry continued throughout this study. Clandinin (2023) notes that significant shifts occurred for her as well while trying to write her doctoral dissertation. These shifts include changes in how she perceived herself as she “did not intend to become a research methodologist or even to become someone who would think about lives as narrative compositions” (p. 149). In addition, her understanding of *narrative* deepened and evolved as well. During my doctoral study, the idea of

narrative inquiry and how it might be carried out deepened for me as well. While the commonplaces still provided the framework for how to proceed, engaging with Clandinin's (2023) second edition of *Engaging in narrative inquiry* and the 12 touchstones informed decisions particularly with regard to how I moved from initial research texts to interim texts, to the final research text. This engagement accounts for the addition of notes "from the field" that can be found alongside participant narrative accounts, for the inclusion of my own stories as a way to navigate stories as they happen in the midst of working to honour them, and for the inclusion of justifications of the study in an intentional way. The decision to capture my deepened understanding of narrative inquiry, from commonplaces to touchstones, is an attempt to acknowledge the learning that took place and will take place as I move from novice researcher to a researcher hoping to acknowledge the power of a narratively understood world.

Researcher Narrative Identity

I see my role in this research as a collaborative researcher. Clandinin (2007) explains that because, "the narrative inquirer seeks a knowledge of human experience that remains within the stream of human lives... [narrative inquiry must] simultaneously [be] a description of, and intervention into, this human experience" (p. 44). This intervention could take many forms, and my role required thoughtful consideration. My role as researcher has significant implications and responsibilities and, as a result, the role of my voice in this study had to be thoughtfully and carefully considered. As I thought about representing my participants' stories in my study (Kim, 2015), I thought carefully of what my role in the wider story should and could be. I returned to my paradigmatic orientation, my ontological, epistemological, and axiological views, aligned myself with those values and at the same time, considered the unique worldviews of those I worked with. My values include a deep commitment to collaboration, an affinity for meaningful

dialogue and co-constructed meanings, and a critical framework that asks whose knowledge counts and why. My researcher's narrative identity did not take an objective stance. I was written into the story by sharing my own stories with the participants and by taking extensive field notes. I also continually journalled and revisited my social identity map to remain carefully aware of how my positionality affected the study. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) attest, narrative inquirers:

must become fully involved, must "fall in love" with their participants, yet they must also step back and see their own stories in the inquiry, the stories of the participants, as well as the larger landscapes on which they all live. (p. 81)

I reflected on this passage continuously throughout the research process to maintain a commitment to honoring participants' voices, feelings, and experiences.

Research Design

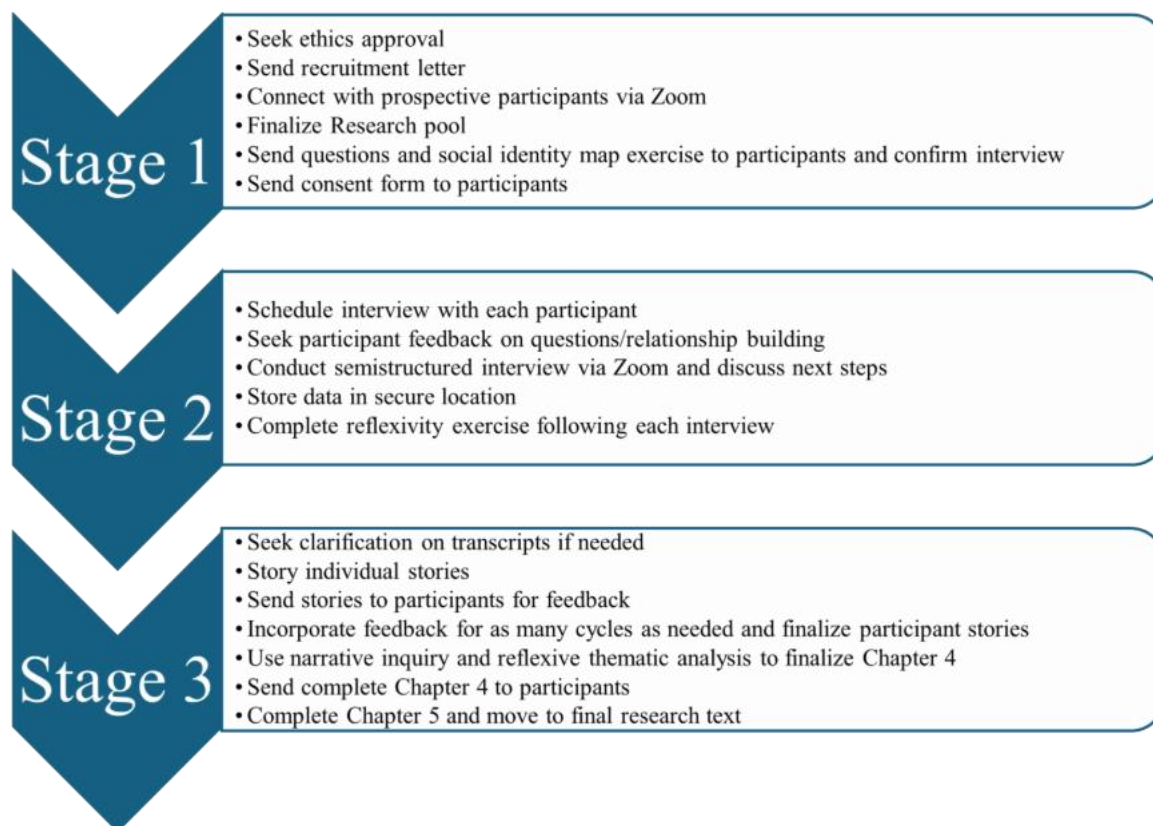
This section of the chapter outlines the "doing" part of what was conceptualized and the steps taken to enact the study. I begin by providing rationale and steps taken for participant recruitment and selection. I then outline the data collection methods as well as methods for data analysis and synthesis aligning with the theoretical framework I have set out as appropriate for this study. Finally, I provide a detailing of the ethical considerations, limitations, and delimitations of the study.

In conceptualizing the final design of the study, I continually returned to my role as educator and the values that guided me in this role. As an adult educator, I structured this research study to reflect on the intentional way I facilitate learning as an instructor as well as learning and teaching facilitator and educational developer. I view myself as the kind of instructor who seeks to empower the learner and whose course and classroom structure have

intentionality in all possible ways. This intentionality includes things such as focusing on learner needs, facilitating learning opportunities that can be applied to specific contexts and circumstances, sharing power, and collaboration. The goal is to foster open and welcoming learning environments that hold the potential to become transformative experiences. This vision requires collaboration, mutual trust, and relationality, and includes truly trying to understand the learners and their unique experiences. In order to accomplish this relational approach, relationships needed to be developed. The visual provided below illustrates the research design and steps within the process that are reflective of many of my educator practices.

Figure 2

A Process Map of the Research Design Process



Participants

Recruitment

The recruitment of participants for this study was purposeful and intentional. Creswell and Poth (2018), respectively professor of family medicine at the University of Michigan and faculty member in the department of educational psychology at the University of Alberta, explain the need for intentional and purposeful sampling in qualitative research as a necessary practice to “best inform the researcher about the research problem under examination” (p. 148). For this narrative inquiry study on how immigrants experience of PLAR considerations at Saskatchewan post-secondary institutions, I relied primarily on the stories from participants. In keeping with the recommendations of Creswell and Poth (2018), a narrative study should consist of one or more individuals who are accessible and willing to share their stories which will in turn illuminate the specific phenomenon being explored. I wanted to understand which factors played a role for participants to consider PLAR and what problem they hoped to solve through the use of PLAR. There is opportunity for the rich narrative descriptions shared by participants to inform an understanding of ways that PLAR processes at Saskatchewan institutions could be improved. In this way, this study has the potential to benefit the larger goal of mobility and pathways between institutions and increase equity across the various centres. Using purposeful sampling as outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018), I ultimately chose to involve seven immigrants who were considering PLAR at a Saskatchewan post-secondary institution.

Selection

I used a combination of purposive or purposeful sampling, which outlines criteria to engage participants who have experienced a phenomenon and can therefore advance the understanding of the research question (Patton, 2015), and snowball sampling, which employs

relational connections to aid recruitment (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To accomplish this, I drew on my connections with Moose Jaw's local immigrant integration non-profit organizations and the provincial umbrella organization for these local non-profits. I felt that there may be the potential within these relationships to plan for future projects for promotion of PLAR. In an effort to better understand the immigration landscape in Saskatchewan, I joined several of these non-profit organizations in communities of practice and research working groups prior to my study. By taking part in these groups, I was able to garner ideas around recruitment. Initially, I placed my participant recruitment letter (Appendix A) through the immigrant umbrella organization who then shared the letter with provincial and local non-profit organizations via newsletters and email. The letter contained a link to a brief survey (mostly meant for basic demographics to ensure a fit for the study) created through MS Forms (Appendix B) and those interested in participating were prompted to complete this preliminary survey.

After the first month, I did not have anyone complete the survey. I reached out to the umbrella organization for guidance and based on their suggestions, shared the letter to places of worship and through personal connections in my community. Still, I was unsuccessful in recruiting and decided to modify my recruitment strategy based on sound advice from my committee to include immigrants who were *considering* PLAR. This decision came about as I shared with the committee that two prospective participants had reached out to ask about the study. While they did not fit the criteria of having *undertaken* PLAR (which was my initial call), I realized that what they shared with me during those preliminary conversations was extremely valuable in considering implications for PLAR. After consulting with my committee, I made this modification, and within one day, I had twenty prospective participants. I narrowed down possible participants by choosing the two people who had reached out to inquire about the study

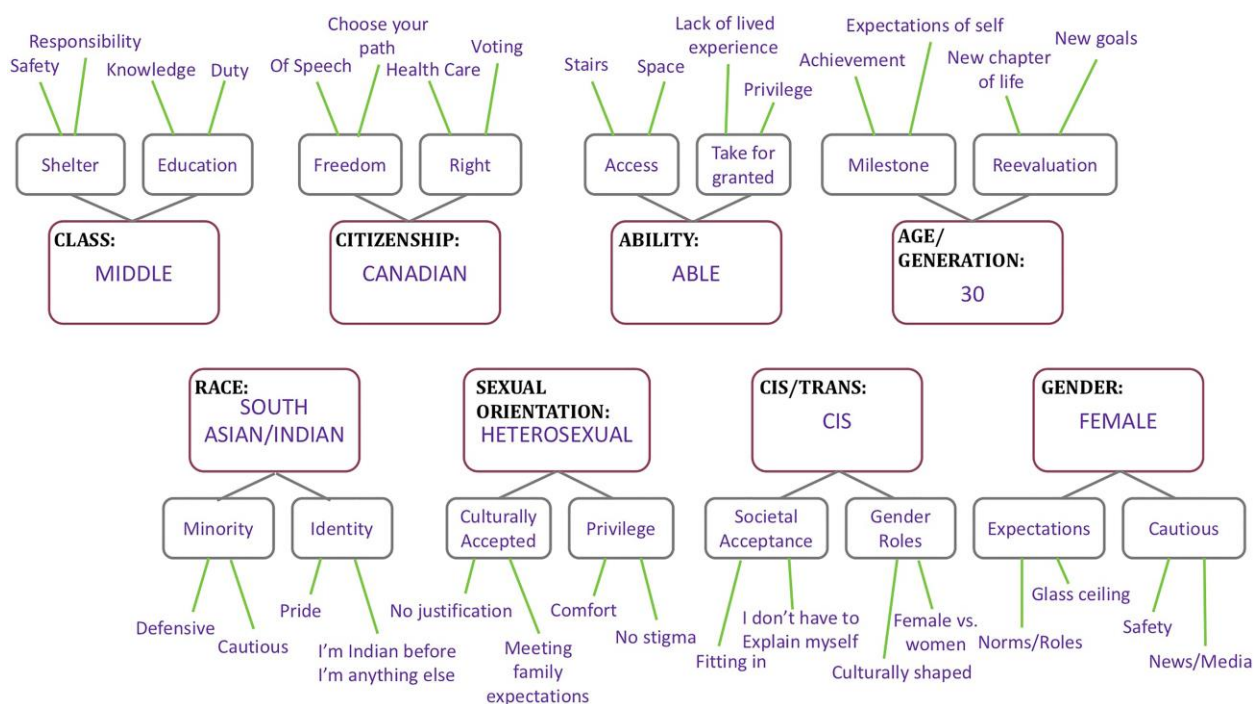
as the discussions with them were the inspiration behind the modification and then attempted to achieve maximum diversity regarding home country, gender, and educational discipline. Patton (2015) explains that there are no specific rules for sample size in qualitative research. Therefore, I tried to balance the goals of wanting to garner rich descriptions while also seeking a wide range of experiences. My initial goal was to involve between six and eight participants to collaborate on this study. After some navigation and modifications, seven people agreed to join me on this research journey.

Because participants were immigrants with diverse backgrounds and experiences, I wanted to make sure that I responsibly engaged in ways that would allow me to better understand this complexity. I also wanted to very deliberately practice positionality. Jacobson and Mustafa (2019) assert that “being reflexive about our social identities, particularly in comparison to the social position of our participants, helps us better understand the power relations imbued in our research” (p. 1). Therefore, participants and I engaged in a social identity mapping exercise, provided in Appendix C, not only as a method of becoming more aware of our own social identities, but as a way for us, as co-constructors of knowledge, to reflect on how our social identities can impact our research (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). A social identity mapping exercise is something I use in my own teaching, and it essentially encourages reflection around how we are socially located, in what society, and how this informs how we interpret the world. It helps us to consider the numerous factors that contribute to our social identity and to understand how this is always in motion and shifts over time. It often acts as a good lead into discussions around cultural competence, cultural responsiveness, and cultural humility in a post-secondary classroom and often results in a more compassionate classroom environment. I hoped that the exercise would communicate an openness and willingness to learn on my part as researcher.

To ensure the participants were aware of what to expect, the research questions and social identity mapping exercise were shared with participants ahead of our scheduled interview. The exercise included general instructions, an example of my own filled out social identity map, and an offer to connect via email or phone if they had questions. I also clarified that they did not need to complete it prior to the interview, but that it would be helpful to begin getting to know each other prior to the interview. Below is an example of a completed social identity map provided by Jacobson and Mustafa (2019) that helped orient the participants and me as we began collaborating on this project (p. 3).

Figure 3

An Example of a Completed Social Identity Map (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019)



The engagement in this activity varied, from some fully completing the map ahead of time and having a lot to say when we met via phone or zoom, to others not completing it ahead of time and not having a lot to say. However, all participants were very interested in my identity map and had questions for me and the purpose of my research. They were curious why a white,

middle aged, Christian woman and mother would be interested in immigrants' experience and in trying to improve the process of recognition. The social identity mapping exercise acted as a tool for all involved in the research to be reflective about positionality and to foster a better understanding of each person's unique social experiences and potential barriers they may face (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019, p. 3). This exercise helped me to better understand some of the lived experiences of participants in this research study, at least relative to the topic of PLAR.

Data Collection

An important part of the PLAR process is not only determining what type of evidence to gather but also how to collect evidence of acquired learning. The same held true in this research study. For instance, conducting interviews is one way to assess prior learning that challenges the use of more common modes of assessment such as tests, quizzes, and written assignments. I collected data in this study in a way that illuminated the usefulness of interviews to not only collect evidence of learning but to promote further learning. This method of data collection aligns both with the chosen methodology and the phenomenon under study. That is, interviews are often used both in narrative inquiries and in PLAR. While "most narrative inquiries involve some sort of conversation—structured interviews to unstructured conversations—and some form of systematic analysis" (p. 149), educators Hollingsworth and Dybdahl (2007) assert that many narrative inquiries "fail to make their methodological approaches transparent enough" (p. 149). I employed Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) four-part structure of living, telling, retelling, and reliving as to acknowledge that the inquiry would begin and end "in the storied lives of the people involved...[thereby] enriching and transforming that experience for themselves and others" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2007, p. 42). In addition, I revisited Clandinin's definition of narrative inquiry and the twelve touchstones outlined for narrative inquiry that are foundational

to ensuring the study is more than simply stories retold. This method of attending to the relational responsibilities in narrative inquiry, in conjunction with the social identity mapping exercise, was useful to ensure my chosen theoretical framework of intersectionality was prioritized at every stage. Based on Connelly and Clandinin's (2000) four-term structure of living, telling, retelling, and reliving, and Clandinin's (2023) twelve touchstones, the data collection methods in anticipation of data analysis/synthesis plan are outlined below.

Living/Telling Methods

My narrative research is primarily grounded in a Deweyan ontology of experience which is explored through the stories that people live and tell to others and are “a result of a confluence of social influences on a person's inner life, social influences on his or her environment, and his or her unique personal history” (Clandinin & Murphy, 2009, p. 578). The method of conversation/interview is a common choice for qualitative research as it allows for flexibility and, as a result, is one that I employed for this study. Interviewing, or as Brinkman (2018) describes it, “the conversational process of knowing” (p. 425) takes on a more flexible form framed by my particular epistemological stance and constructivist orientation. As indicated earlier in this chapter, I noted my constructivist (loosely defined) orientation nudging up against the borders of critical and participatory as outlined in Lincoln et al. (2018). This means that the interviews conducted had much less separation between the researcher and the narrator “as the narratives are socially constructed from semi-structured interviews or conversational interactions, reflecting the theory that participants' intentions and interpretations are as important as the researcher's” (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007, p. 151).

It was important to me that the data collection process remain flexible and to choose the type of interview that would facilitate meaningful dialogue. Careful planning allowed me to feel

confident in explaining the rationale for my decision making but at the same time remaining flexible. First, I held preliminary conversations with participants via phone or Zoom© to explain the process and to get to know each other better. I shared the research plan and the interview questions, provided in Appendix D, with the participants via email in advance of the scheduled interviews and remained open to questions if needed. I communicated that I was open to questions about myself, my position in relation to the topic, and my hopes for this research. Some participants had questions to varying degrees about the aforementioned topics during this preliminary call, and some asked questions at our scheduled interview times prior to commencing the recording. My rationale for communicating this openness is that I wanted to express vulnerability on my part in order to honour the relational way that narrative inquiry is taken up (Clandinin, 2023). In compliance with the ethical standards of the institution and my own ethical stance, I reminded participants about continuous consent where they hold the right to refuse to respond to any of the questions, withdraw selected responses, or to withdraw from the study up to the stage where analysis began. It was heartening to see that all participants were very eager to participate in this study with the hope and understanding that sharing their experiences might help others. At these conversations, we discussed possible dates for the scheduled interviews.

I decided to use semi-structured interviews, because these “make better use of the knowledge-producing potentials of dialogues by allowing much more leeway for following up on whatever angles are deemed important by the interviewee” (Brinkman, 2018, p. 579). For data collection, I used recorded web-based interviews, facilitated via Zoom©. Participants were given the option to use video or not and were told about the captioning features available. Prior to starting the recording, we discussed the social identity mapping exercise. This proved to be a

good ice breaker activity and provided me with information on angles that required follow up. I did follow-up with some participants, therefore using semi-structured interviews proved to be a good choice. As a former instructor and educational developer, the Zoom© platform is familiar to me and I am aware of many of its benefits including recording and transcription features, captioning options, password protection, and e-scheduling, to name a few. As with instructing, it is important to provide some type of structure so that we can maintain momentum and purpose yet remain flexible to anything that comes up in the research process and Zoom© allowed for this flexibility offering captioning which some participants used. When the participants were ready, I started recording the interview and asking the questions that they had been provided with before the session. Providing the questions ahead of time proved useful for some participants who prepared responses in advance. Once the interview was complete, I thanked participants for their time and said I would be in touch with their story for their feedback. I remained available to meet via Zoom© or phone if they had questions, but I also wanted to ensure participant time was being honoured. I checked back in with participants whose interviews had produced some strong emotions to make sure they were alright.

At this stage and throughout the entire research process, I participated in reflexivity which, as Lincoln et al., (2005) explain, is “reflecting critically on the self as researcher” (p. 143). Since my research stems from a critical theoretical framework, my engagement with the reflexive process needed to involve “openly and honestly recognizing one’s location and experiences and deeply considering the implications of one’s power” (Reid et al., 2017, p. 50). To that end, I took fieldnotes throughout the study incorporating thick description and engaged in journaling immediately following each interview. Relevant notes are included in the following chapter to provide the reader with a greater sense of my perceptions. These reflections

provided an additional perspective for consideration as I moved through participant data. The goal of this exercise was to reflect on my perceptions of the experiences described by the participants, to reflect on our social identities including positionality, and to critically reflect on these experiences in comparison to what I know about PLAR processes generally as my professional area of expertise. Moving from this description of my data collection, I now provide the steps taken to engage in data analysis and synthesis.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

The analysis and synthesis stage of this research study is where I employed the power of interpretation to make sense of participants' experiences. I drew on Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) process of retelling/reliving for this phase of the study. Inspired by the master educator Dewey, these qualitative scholars are clear that their "principal interest in experience is the growth and transformation in the life story that we as researchers and our participants author" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 71). I read and re-read transcripts from the participant interviews and revisited the fieldnotes I had written which included uncensored impressions, perplexities, and wishes. As Hollingsworth and Dybdahl (2007) explain the "meaning of narratives comes from analyses or interpretations of the conversation" (p. 153). Various meanings can arise depending on researcher and participant perspectives. These interpretations are intricately linked to the researcher's epistemology and/or their theoretical perspective and those of the participants. I felt it was important to lessen the burden for participants in agreeing to participate in this study. I am also aware that for all participants, English is their second language and asking them to write a story themselves seemed like I was adding additional work and an additional barrier to participating. They all expressed gratitude for this approach and understood that they had the final say in their individual stories and how they were written up. It

is important to note here that I took on drafting the initial stories of participants based on transcripts from the interviews. Therefore, although the stories were collaboratively written and participants had the final say on their stories, the patterns in those stories were researcher identified and where the meaning-making took place. As I read and re-read transcripts, employed reflexive thematic analysis using NVivo, co-composed stories, and revisited my fieldnotes, I identified resonant threads and noted how I might work with these in order to connect them to the broader discourses on PLAR. As Clandinin (2013) clarifies, “researchers also owe responsibility to the scholarly community and must compose research texts that answer the questions of ‘So what?’” (p. 145). Therefore, I continually reflected on the need to balance my responsibility to the participants alongside those I carry with the scholarly community. In this next section I outline how I moved from identifying resonant threads or patterns, to synthesizing and moving to final research texts.

Retelling/Reliving Methods

At this phase of the study, under the broader concepts of retelling/reliving, I revisited two of the 12 touchstones of narrative inquiry as outlined by Clandinin (2023) in an effort to respect the methodological and relational commitments that form part of all narrative inquiries. The two touchstones include “moving from field texts to interim and final research texts [and] representing narratives of experience in ways that show temporality, sociality, and place” (Clandinin, 2023, p. 146). Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) stage of retelling/reliving outlines the steps involved in the construction of an interpretive story from the interview transcripts. While my general overall process included negotiated development of narrative accounts or interpretive stories, for each participant, this process was not linear or simple. I wanted to make sure I was using an intersectional lens as a method of sensemaking in narrative inquiry and of

appreciating the individuality and complexity of an experience that arises from those who have had less opportunity to have their perspectives heard.

A reflexive thematic analysis (TA) approach representing flexible methods was used to interpret, describe, organize, analyse, and report patterns produced during participant interviews and storytelling activities (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2013, 2020, 2019, 2022; Byrne, 2022). I noted resonant threads (Clandinin, 2023) in my field notes as I became aware of them and conceptualized and produced patterns using the core assumptions in reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Working with the transcripts, I first familiarized myself with the data and then engaged in initial coding. I looked for instances of recurrence keeping in mind the importance of meaningfulness over recurrence in the data (Byrne, 2022). In an effort to prioritize meaning over occurrence, I wanted to produce initial drafts of participant stories before starting the next phase of producing themes. Therefore, I read/re-read and reflected on discussions from the social identity mapping exercise, the Zoom© transcriptions and recordings, and constructed a version of each of the participants' stories. Then I drafted the stories in Microsoft Word and used the comments function to point out to the participants any areas where the story might be written differently. I also noted how I might have perceived a particular section of the interview while constructing the story and, when unsure, asked participants for clarification. I then sent this initial draft to participants for their review and garnered their feedback. I revised the story with their feedback and sent it back to them again; this process was repeated until they were satisfied with the final story. We also discussed the question of audience to get a sense of who the audience(s) might be and talked through the uncertainties of audience and how this particular research might be situated.

It is important to note here that in constructing the final research text I realized that I would like to include sections from my fieldnotes and put them alongside participant stories. At this stage, although participant stories had been approved and I was moving to drafting my final research text, my understanding of narrative inquiry was deepening. I realised that my impressions captured in my field notes were critical for attending to temporality and sociality of experiences lived. I therefore added my field notes to Chapter 4. This revised version of the chapter, which included researcher fieldnotes and participant stories, had participants' final approval and formed the findings for this research study which I shared with the participants once the final chapter was completed. My supervisor made this wise suggestion, pointing out that the participants may have different feelings about their story once they see it alongside the stories of other participants. This sharing was a way to reconnect with the participants and gave them the opportunity to make any final revisions.

At this point in the process, I was aware of a certain tension between using reflexive thematic analysis methods and working with participants' stories. I was reminded by Clandinin et al. (2009) and that tensions are understood "in a more relational way, that is, tensions that live between people, events, or things, and are a way of creating a between space, a space which can exist in educative ways" (p. 82). Therefore, I moved to the next stage of reflexive thematic analysis by engaging with the data in multiple ways. I revisited NVivo and initial and subsequent codes, I used features in NVivo to produce word clouds, and I engaged with the participant stories. As Chadwick (2017) explains, "intersectional thinking shows the limitations of focusing only on [your] individual experience and textual story-telling, and highlights the methodological importance of finding ways to explore and analyse the material, structural and political realities that co-construct lives/narratives" (p. 5).

The patterns, as analytic outputs, were developed after this coding process was complete and I felt that I had exhausted the data and through reading/rereading/revising participant transcripts and stories in an iterative process alongside the participants. The stories were anchored by shared patterns and produced by the researcher “through their [the researcher’s] systematic analytic engagement with the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 9) in addition to engaging and reengaging with the narrative accounts. During this phase of the research study, I continually journalled to capture how existing theories, concepts, and knowledge arose as they form part of the reflexive thematic analysis process. My understanding of immigrant experiences of PLAR evolved and deepened during this process and I wanted to capture these critical moments of learning. In this continual engagement and reengagement with the data, two main resonant threads were identified and were utilized to provide insight to readers about the immigrant experiences considering PLAR in Saskatchewan, as well as the gaps that may require further research.

Relational Responsibilities and Ethical Considerations

As my understanding of the methodology of narrative inquiry deepened and as I puzzled over how to live as a narrative inquirer, my own stories started to surface at various stages throughout this study. One particular moment where this happened was when I considered the relational responsibilities and ethical considerations of this study. I recalled a weekend when I was about 12 years old. I had been asked to stay overnight for a few nights at my cousin’s house, and we were having a great time outdoors when my mother telephoned. She explained that a different, older cousin was getting married the next day at our family farm and asked what I thought I should do; she wanted to know if I thought I should cut the visit short and come home for the small wedding. The cousin whom I was visiting had plans to attend the city fair the next

day and I was deeply torn. I knew what I *should* do but instead decided to miss the wedding and attend the fair. I lay awake all night worrying about my choice. The next day when we arrived at the fair, I learned that my cousin did not like rides. I realized that my decision to attend the fair meant that I would miss out on a meaningful day for my family. I was certain that I was being taught a lesson, that God was working on me. Throughout my childhood and into adulthood I had a preoccupation with ethics and with doing the right thing even when no one was looking. The perception that I had chosen badly weighed on me for years; I felt I had disappointed others and that maybe this meant I was selfish. This preoccupation with behaving ethically has always been with me and at times has resulted in paralysis. At various stages throughout this study, I had similar fears/feelings, worried that I would choose badly. However, I chose to voice these concerns regularly with my supervisor, communicating the tensions of honouring and respecting participants' experiences and voices. To avoid paralysis from overly detailed ethical steps, I applied Josselson's ethical attitude throughout the study, drawing on my experience as an educator, to honour relational responsibilities. As Clandinin (2013) explains, "ethical considerations in narrative inquiries are commonly thought of as responsibilities negotiated by participants and narrative inquirers at all phases of the inquiry" (p. 134). My supervisor assured me that my educator perspective and constant concern for my students' wellbeing would serve me well in this research endeavor. Clandinin (2023) explains that we, as researchers, "owe our fidelity first and foremost to sustaining research participants [and] that we owe our care first to research participants" (p. 141). In this section, therefore, I focus my care and attention first on my wonderful research participants, and I acknowledge ethical considerations that necessitate greater attention. I then address each element of my chosen research design.

Relational Responsibilities and Ethical Considerations to Participants

In taking up this study that involves immigrants, I relied heavily on Josselson's (2007) advice around adopting an ethical attitude. Josselson (2007) explains that it is difficult to determine a step-by-step set of instructions to ensure ethical considerations are undertaken and instead defines an "*ethical attitude* toward narrative research...that involves thinking through these matters and deciding how best to honor and protect those who participate in one's studies while still maintaining standards for responsible scholarship" (p. 538). The first ethical consideration, indeed a requisite requirement of the University, was to seek ethics approval. Considering my study included immigrants with complex histories, experiences, and perspectives, and the inherent dangers of power imbalance, I needed to remain deeply aware of how my positionality could influence "both the construction of the narrator's identity and the research product or outcome" (Johnson & Thacker Darrow, 2018, p. 444). The overall design, then, included working towards developing relationships with research participants through dialogue, the social identity mapping activity, and providing participants with transparent information about the purpose and details of the study via the consent form, sharing of research questions, and ready access to mental health information and supports. The "dialogue" I am referring to here is borrowed from two psychiatrists, Quiring and Savage (1995), who are experts in interpersonal control and authors of *Slavery is alive and we are not well*. Their definition of dialogue outlines the limitations of the English language, acknowledges its roots in the German work *Begegnug* and the Greek *koinonia*, and their connections to English terms such as *healing* and *fellowship* (pp. 27-28). Their definition is my favourite so far as it speaks about the dangers of power imbalance and the need for humility and empathy during the exchange. I strove to create a healthy and open research environment by deliberately including considerations of

intersectionality via the social identity mapping activity and through continuous reflection on my own positionality. I did this to ensure that I was aware of the role environments play “in privileging and marginalizing certain identities and experiences” (Johnson & Thacker Darrow, 2022, p. 446). The consent form followed the University of Calgary template and included things like responsibilities to relationships and roles, clear statements on consent, the transparent communication of the purpose of the study and background, the process of data collection, information on if recordings would be used, and clarified that participants can withdraw at any time prior to data analysis and take their contributions with them.

Relational Responsibilities and Ethical Considerations During Data Collection

I used Zoom© to interview each participant and generate transcripts. I remained reflexive throughout the research process by journaling immediately following each interview to reflect on my own perceptions, biases, and impressions based on the dialogue. I took a stance of viewing the “interviewee as the expert” (Josselson, 2007, p. 546). I needed to be mindful that I would be learning something new about the phenomenon from each participant and therefore needed to reflect on and record this learning immediately. Because I understand that how I hear and interpret this information through my lens is where power often lies, I was transparent with participants about how data would be collected, stored, sent back to participants for feedback. I wanted to ensure they understood they had the final say in their stories. I used an “attitude of empathetic listening, of not being judgmental and of suspending disbelief as [I] attend[ed] to participants’ stories” (Clandinin, 2023, p. 134) during our time together. I committed to anonymity and confidentiality by using pseudonyms. Participants were asked if they wanted to use pseudonyms, to provide one if they did, or to let me know if they would like me to select one. All participants chose a pseudonym save one, who asked me to provide one. I sent the

suggested pseudonym to this participant for their approval before proceeding. I removed identifying information from the data and stories, by not including the names of the post-secondary institutions where they were considering participating in PLAR, and by storing data in a password protected database.

Relational Responsibilities and Ethical Considerations During Data Analysis and Synthesis

I again employed Josselson's (2007) ethical attitude and how I approached the data analysis and synthesis stages of this study. What helps to balance this perceived authority of the researcher with that of participants is when the researcher makes explicit their "biases, aims, and positioning (Josselson, 2007, p. 549). The researcher must also consider "the circumstances under which the knowledge was created, with the researcher taking full responsibility for what was written" (Josselson, 2007, p. 549). Although condensed participant narrative accounts are included in the dissertation, it is in my role as researcher to connect these stories to larger theoretical categories and discourses in social sciences. Therefore, I assumed responsibility for identifying resonant threads and for what was written in the analysis/synthesis chapters as this is the work of the aspiring academic. I made this distinction clear to the participants so that they understood that their stories are their distinct contribution. The reflexive thematic analysis and synthesis, and connection to the broader social science discourses, was my responsibility and distinct contribution. This connection to the broader theoretical categories is also useful in maintaining anonymity as what is written has more to do with the resonant threads gleaned from all of the participants stories and produced by the researcher in relation to those categories than it does to the participants themselves. That is, certain parts of the dissertation are about the patterns gleaned and resonant threads that are produced by the researcher through systematic analytic

engagement with the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2022) in addition to listening to and revisiting the experiences of the participants and the phenomenon.

Trustworthiness

As a researcher, ensuring the trustworthiness of this study was important to me, but it was most important for the participants who contributed to the study and for the readers (Lindheim, 2022). For this study I chose to use Lincoln & Guba's (1985) trustworthiness framework alongside Clandinin's (2023) 12 touchstones to ensure the trustworthiness of my study. The four criteria, that of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability are consistent with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness framework and are representative of the choice of most qualitative researchers (Lindheim, 2022). I find it helpful to reflect on the source of or questions trying to be answered when developing criteria in order to determine if my study can answer these questions. Anney (2014) explains that these trustworthiness criteria have their roots in Guba's (1981) concerns which were raised in his first publication with a fifth concern added by Wallendorf and Belk (1989):

1. How can a researcher establish confidence in his/her findings? Or how do we know if the findings presented are genuine? (Truth value concern)
2. How do we know or determine the applicability of the findings of the inquiry in other settings or with other respondents? (Applicability concern)
3. How can one know if the findings would be repeated consistently with the similar (same) participants in the same context? (Consistency concern)
4. How do we know if the findings come solely from participants and the investigation was not influenced by the bias, motivations, or interests of the researchers? (Neutrality concern)

5. How do we know if the findings are not false information given by the study participants? (Integrity concern) (pp. 275-276)

While narrative inquiry is a qualitative approach to research and these criteria and questions apply here, I found myself wondering specifically about trustworthiness in narrative research. Senior lecturer at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Jason Loh (2013) inquired into the issues of trustworthiness and quality in narrative studies specifically. He highlighted the difficulty in finding examples of trustworthiness in narrative research and referred to Clandinin and Connelly (2000) who encouraged narrative inquirers to be thoughtful. Clandinin (2023) does introduce the 12 touchstones as “a quality or example that is used to test the excellence or genuineness of others” (p. 146) but does not directly connect these to those criteria to determine validity or reliability outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Interestingly, Loh (2013) offers a different set of questions to ask when considering a study’s trustworthiness in narrative research:

1. How valid is this narrative approach?
2. How valid is the analysis of this data?
3. How valid and reliable is the collection of these “stories,” and how can a story be valid as an analysis?
4. If the data is collected through the participants’ telling of their “storied experiences,” how do I know if they are being truthful? What if they made up or embellish the retelling?
Will the research be valid then?

These questions are not dissimilar from those put forth by Guba (1981) and Wallendorf and Belk (1989) and could be answered using Lincoln and Guba’s trustworthiness framework. However, I would argue that attending to Clandinin’s (2023) 12 touchstones alongside Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) trustworthiness framework increases the trustworthiness of the study even more. These

criteria and how I incorporated them into this study to increase trustworthiness are outlined below.

Credibility

My study relied primarily on reflexivity, crystallization, member checking, and peer debriefing to establish credibility. These were present in the study in how I attended to relational responsibilities throughout the study, how I negotiated entry into the field, and when I moved from field texts to interim texts. Anney (2014) points to Holloway and Wheeler (2002) and Macnee and McCabe (2008) and defines credibility as “the confidence that can be placed in the truth of the research findings” (p. 276). Reflexivity is “the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher” (Lincoln et al., 2018). As discussed earlier, my participation in the social identify mapping exercise and journalling throughout the research study are reflexive exercises and a practice of self-awareness that ensure alignment with reflexive thematic analysis and the narrative inquiry.

In addition to a study of self (Lincoln et al., 2018), I employed the concept of crystallization, an alternative view of what is otherwise known as triangulation. Laurel Richardson and Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, accomplished sociologists and novelists, speak of crystallization rather than triangulation. They argue that triangulation assumes that there is a “fixed point” that can be triangulated (Richardson & Adams St. Pierre, 2018). They propose instead the concept of crystallization, employing a crystal with its multi-dimensional quality and angles, explaining that “what we see depends on our angle of repose” (p. 822). They elaborate and connect this concept with the activity of employing their collaborative storying process used to describe their travels. In their global travels they each wrote accounts of visiting the same sites but upon sharing these stories with one another, noticed that they had “refracted them through

different professional eyes, gender, sensibilities, biographies, spiritual and emotional longings” (Richardson & Adams St. Pierre, 2018, p. 822). They then engaged in conversations about writing, ethics, collaboration, relationships, and the “intersection of observation and imagination” (p. 822). The collaborative process is outlined in their novel, *Travels with Ernest*, which “honors each voice as separate and distinct, explores the boundaries of observation and imagination, witnessing, retelling, memory and memorializing, and it confirms the value of crystallization” (Richardson & Adams St. Pierre, 2018, p. 822). Inspired by their insightful logic, I decided to employ a similar method given the diversity inherent in my participant pool, and my focus on intersectionality as a factor of study. While my participants did not meet to share their studies with each other, their stories were placed alongside each other and then the final product was shared with all of the participants. This honoured each separate voice and experience as distinct, while allowing space to explore the same phenomenon and see how others experienced it. This strategy brought in different perspectives to investigate the same phenomenon/problem with an effort to strengthen the integrity of the study. The use of crystallization aligns with narrative inquiry as well, as it places participants’ stories at the center of this story as they were “lived, told, retold, and relived” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 71). This approach also aligns with reflexive thematic analysis where “analysis and interpretation of data cannot be accurate...but can be weaker (e.g., underdeveloped, unconvincing, thin, and superficial, shallow) or stronger (e.g., compelling, insightful, thoughtful, rich, complex, deep, nuanced)” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 9). Crystallization and reflexive thematic analysis make visible the complexity of participant perspectives, making the interpretation of data, of the stories as data, stronger.

In addition to reflexivity and crystallization, I also applied member checking and peer debriefing. I continuously checked interpretations of the stories participants shared as they were

gathered, and participants were encouraged to challenge interpretations until they were happy with the final story. Peer debriefing was used in the form of consistent and challenging supervisor feedback and regular meetings with a small group of colleagues who helped me to “be honest about [my] study [and to] contribute to...deeper reflexive analysis” (Anney, 2014, p. 279). Clandinin (2023) calls these peer groups *response groups* and explains that “they are essential to engaging in narrative inquiry” (p. 152). For her, response groups keep the conversation and ideas moving forward, keep us grounded, and allow researchers to attend closely to who we are in the study (Clandinin, 2023). As for my response group, their feedback and questions have been invaluable elements in my doctoral journey, and I continued these check-ins throughout the research study alongside the essential input of participants.

Dependability

The factor of dependability in qualitative research requires that we think about the study and any future implications. According to Bitsch (2005), dependability is “the stability of findings over time” (p. 86). Narrative inquirers look to establish authenticity and resonance in their studies (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Several strategies can be used to ensure dependability, authenticity, and resonance including audit trails and code-recode. An audit trail is a log or reflexive journal and looks at the inquiry process providing an account of all the decisions and activities involved in the research design. Anney (2005) suggests keeping “interview and observation notes, documents and records collected from the field” (p. 278). I engaged in journaling directly after each interview and at various stages throughout the entirety of the study. The journaling allowed me to gather immediate impressions and there was less pressure to remember exact details of the encounter. It also allowed me to record details

regarding questions that arose and decisions that were made including my rationale that I could revisit while collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data.

The code-recode strategy is similar to one I employ as an educator. For my first reading of student essays, I will read them thoroughly and record a mark in a separate file. I then leave the essays for a day and return to them to mark thoroughly and compare the two grades. For this study, I coded and then returned to the data again and recoded to see if I got the same results. In addition, after drafting initial stories I journalled about my impressions. Then I returned to the stories sometime later and recorded my impressions again. I compared these notes in a similar fashion to the code-recode strategy. As Anney (2014) explains, if “the coding results are in agreement it enhances the dependability of the qualitative inquiry [and] helps the researcher gain a deep understanding of data patterns and improves the presentation of participants’ narrations” (p. 278). I employed the “dual processes of immersion or depth of engagement, and distancing, allowing time and space for reflection and for insight and inspiration to develop” (Braun & Clarke, 2022). By doing both the journalling or audit trail and the code-recode strategies, I was able to compare impressions and coded data which aided in confirming identified patterns and the study’s overall dependability.

Confirmability

In quantitative research, confirmability is often associated with objectivity and reliability which are measures of accuracy of the truth in the study. Confirmability in qualitative research, however, is a means to “verify the two basic goals of qualitative research: (1) to understand a phenomenon from the perspective of the research participants and (2) to understand the meanings people give to their experiences” (Jensen, 2008, p.112). Moreover, Jensen (2008) acknowledges that in qualitative research the researcher will bring unique perspectives and

biases to the study but should be as transparent and open as possible in order to own and respond to these perspectives and biases. For this study I engaged in regular reflexive journaling throughout the study, made my justification (personal, practical, and social) explicit, and engaged in member checking by garnering feedback on participants' stories. These activities are consistent with narrative inquiry and this qualitative research.

Transferability

There is potential for this type of research to be applied in other contexts, although the ultimate purpose is not to make the findings generalizable as in quantitative studies. Transferability “refers to the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be transferred to other contexts with other respondents” (Anney, 2014, p. 279). The strategy most employed to facilitate this transfer is “through ‘thick description’ and purposeful sampling” (Bitsch, 2005, p. 85). From a wider lens, Younas et al. (2023) elaborate on what is meant by ‘thick description’ and how it “refers to giving a thorough account of the participants’ views, intents, circumstances, motives, meanings, and understandings...[and] also requires accurately describing the context of the observations” (n.p). This thick description can include purposeful inclusion of elements that allow fellow researchers to replicate the study. The participants were purposefully selected in an effort to understand immigrants’ experiences of considering PLAR in Saskatchewan. I provided demographic information including country of origin, gender, and educational background to provide the necessary context. In addition, I included elements such as direct quotes from participants’ transcripts, entries from my own fieldnotes, a full description of my research design, and documents such as the demographic survey and interview guide. These elements provide readers with enough context to assess the degree of transferability to their own specific context or study.

Limitations and Delimitations

No study is perfect; it is important to account for and acknowledge potential limitations and delimitations in the study to consider the overall impact, to take responsibility for the research design, and to communicate a sense of transparency and authenticity. Adu (2024) describes limitations as those “variables that cannot be controlled by the researcher but may limit or affect the outcome of a study” (p. 137). The more obvious limitations of this study were cultural and language differences between researcher and participant, the degree of participant involvement, and participant and researcher bias. Other limitations include overall global diversity of participants and differing lived experiences. The study was also focused on those who were considering PLAR and have not actually experienced a PLAR process.

Participant stories are the primary data collected in this study. To mitigate limitations regarding cultural and language differences, overall global diversity and different lived experiences I used educator techniques such as the social identity mapping exercise, sending interview questions ahead of time and using Zoom© to conduct interviews. The social identity mapping exercise acted as a catalyst to learn a lot about the participants in a short amount of time. It helped to make my positionality transparent and fostered deep conversations about our different cultures and experiences. By using Zoom© to conduct the interviews, participants had the option to use the captioning function. Some of them expressed that being able to read the questions during the interview was helpful as English was everyone’s second language and there were varying degrees of proficiency. In any study, biases are present in the people engaged in the study including the researcher. We each bring very different experiences and values to the research space and to maintain integrity, I attended to relational responsibilities, ethical considerations, and followed a trustworthiness framework.

The delimitations, or parameters that I, as the researcher, imposed on the scope of the study helped to set out and define realistic boundaries in the research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Adu, 2024). The delimitations for this study include setting the sample size between six and eight participants and choosing participants who are immigrants residing in Saskatchewan. Setting the sample size to between six and eight was to meet expectations for garnering thick description and to attend to the relational responsibilities of a narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2023; Younas et al., 2023). A smaller sample size created the space required to develop relationships and to honour each participant's unique and detailed experience through deep conversation. Additionally, the study was delimited to only include immigrants living in Saskatchewan. I wanted to include this demographic as post-secondary, and immigration policies are determined and enacted at the provincial level. Including participants from Saskatchewan provided good insight into province specific policies and processes.

Summary

In the previous chapter, I provided an in-depth explanation of PLAR and situated it as an equalizer in various contexts: globally, nationally, and provincially. I outlined its role in adult education and adult learning to this point, along with challenging its overall claims of benevolence. Finally, I provided an overview of the landscape of immigration in Canada with particular focus on Saskatchewan and introduced the theoretical framework that will be used for this study.

In this chapter, I explored the methodology of working with immigrants who are considering PLAR as a path to commensurate employment, I provided details pertaining to the methodology and research design employed in the current study. I began by explaining my positionality in the space and connection to the topic. I then explained the chosen methodology

and showed the links between this choice, the theoretical framework, and the phenomenon before addressing ethical considerations. Finally, I accounted for limitations and delimitations in the study hoping to make this research process transparent, more relevant, and to spark further inquiry/action.

Chapter 4: Participant Narrative Accounts

Overview

As I begin the process of writing this chapter that will contain narrative accounts of individual participants, and the resonant threads that bring to the fore the observed patterns across the accounts, I feel immense gratitude towards the participants for agreeing to go on this journey with me. The voices of the research participants, pseudonymously, Omabee, Mike, Syeda, Anne, Lydia, Fergeri, and Smi, are the heart of this study. Their willingness to share was humbling; the common thread that unites these diverse stories is a desire that their story might help someone else. What also struck me was overwhelming support for a vision I have long advocated for, that of PLAR's potential in helping immigrants in Saskatchewan obtain credit for learning that occurred outside of Canada. The storyteller-participants really believed that this study would help others to understand more about PLAR and how it works or could work better. I thank them for sharing a part of themselves through their stories and for doing their part to realize the full potential of PLAR.

I think back to the account I shared earlier about my decision to attend the fair with my cousin rather than return home to attend the wedding of another family member. My need to make ethical decisions, even when no one was around, was largely based in my Christian faith. While my faith still drives most decisions, I have employed an additional tactic to guide decision making. Often when coming up to a need for action I imagine myself explaining my decisions to my children. If I cannot explain it to them and feel confident that even though they may not agree with the decision, they can understand it, then I know that maybe the proposed action is not ethical or perhaps it requires further exploration. Sometimes this is difficult as kids each bring their own personalities, biases, and perspectives (sometimes limited because of their age)

to the dialogue and they do not always see how my actions might connect to a larger social ethic. In addition, all three do not hold the same sense of responsibility to others as I do or as each other and I need to consider these factors into the decision making.

I wrote this chapter during the summer of 2025. During one of my writing sessions, my youngest, who is 13, entered my office with a cup of coffee and his version of a croissant. This was his best attempt at providing my favourite breakfast. He asked how the writing was going, and I explained some of the difficulties I was having with writing these final chapters and some of the decisions that I needed to make. I would describe my youngest as fiercely loyal and very empathetic. These qualities make it essential that I explain my actions and decisions to him in a way that connects these actions to broader social responsibilities. This connection is my best attempt to provide a balance between his fierce loyalty and a social ethic that demands we consider and care about the broader community. Caine et al. (2022) explain that during a narrative inquiry it is important to think with both a personal ethic and a social ethic because this “allows us to see ourselves as part of larger communities with responsibilities and commitments to more than ourselves and our personal and familial relationships” (p. 206). As I considered how to write this chapter, I attended to relational responsibilities by thinking about who I am in relation to the participants within the three-dimensional inquiry space, temporality, sociality, and place, outlined by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). The narrative inquiry space is a vulnerable space, and I tried my best to live up to what it means to live relational ethics. Clandinin (2023) asserts that the narrative inquiry spaces are “always marked by ethics and attitudes of openness, mutual vulnerability, reciprocity, and care” (p. 135). I attempted to live relational ethics by engaging in dialogue with research participants about what this chapter might look like in its co-composition and how the knowledge might be disseminated.

In this chapter I outline participant demographics which were shared in their interviews and through the recruitment surveys. Also included are the narrative accounts of the research study's participants, approved by the participants during the research study. The stories represent their experiences immigrating to Saskatchewan and explore their reasons for considering PLAR. From there, the resonant threads that were identified within the narrative accounts are presented. The final part of this chapter highlights connections between participant narrative accounts and considers implications of their stories for future action to improve the recognition landscape in Saskatchewan.

Participant Demographics

As detailed in the methodology chapter, the journey to securing research participants was not an easy one. Through networking, I knew that there were immigrants in Saskatchewan who had participated in PLAR so I was initially very hopeful that my call for participants would be answered. I reached out in every way I could think of, including taking suggestions from immigrant organizations, colleagues, and friends; still, this approach did not result in participants which meant that I had to consult with my committee. After two months with no response to my recruitment attempts, I consulted with my committee members and made the decision to expand the study to immigrants who were *considering* PLAR, not only those that had undertaken PLAR. Seven participants were selected based on eligibility criteria and on personal availability. Of the seven participants, five identified as women and two as men. The group represents a global group as two participants are from Nigeria, two are from China, one is from Pakistan, one is from Ukraine, and one is from India. Additionally, to maintain anonymity, six of the seven participants selected pseudonyms, and the remaining participant asked the researcher to choose a pseudonym. A pseudonym was suggested by the researcher and approved by the participant.

Table 1*A Table Outlining Participant Demographics*

Number	Pseudonym	Sex	Country of Origin	Occupation/Field Prior to Immigration
Participant 1	Omabee	F	Nigeria	PhD, University Lecturer
Participant 2	Mike	M	Nigeria	PhD, University Lecturer/Social Psychologist
Participant 3	Syeda	F	Pakistan	Master's Degree in Economics
Participant 4	Anne	F	China	Master's Degree in Clinical Medicine
Participant 5	Lydia	F	China	Obstetrician
Participant 6	Fergei	M	Ukraine	Doctor, Laparoscopic Surgery
Participant 7	Smi	F	India	PhD, Molecular Biologist

Interestingly, all participants are mid-career professionals with levels of education obtained from outside of Canada at the master's or doctoral level. As per the revised study criteria which reflects the sound advice of my committee, all participants are immigrants in Saskatchewan and who have considered undertaking PLAR at a Saskatchewan post-secondary institution. None of the participants were enrolled in PLAR at the time of their interview, nor did any complete the PLAR process. Specifics about their current living location were removed in this writing as were details about any institutions where they inquired about PLAR to add an extra measure of security to those that have shared their experiences. In some cases, participants wanted to include the field of study for which they received their international credentials and some family details like marital status and if they had children. I honoured their requests. These

details also add richness to the study as it considers the theoretical framework of integrated intersectionality which seeks to understand people as more than demographics. As Collings and Bilge (2016) assert, intersectionality is “a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences” (p. 2).

The degree of specificity in sharing personal life experiences was completely dependent on the participant’s comfort level. Of note, participants were eager and open to sharing the details of their experiences. Throughout the data collection process, I was acutely aware of a potential power imbalance. Since this study’s aim is social justice, I remained keenly aware of my positionality in this research and the need to negotiate any perceived power imbalances with participants by honouring their identities. Sharing the stories back with participants, incorporating their changes or suggestions, and communicating that the story and the final say was theirs, helped to ensure transparency and accountability. Most importantly, the co-construction of stories and the participants’ final approval helped to mitigate any imbalance in power relations and create a product reflective of their unique experiences and perspectives.

Participant Narrative Accounts

In preparing to listen to and compose stories of participant narratives, I re-encountered feelings of my own discomfort as I considered questions of ownership of stories. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) noted that these questions can sometimes surface when writing the interim and final research steps and suggest instead thinking in terms of relational responsibilities rather than ownership. I acknowledged that this space would be “filled with uncertainties, perplexities, complexities, and tensions” (Clandinin, 2023, p. 137). To that end, I considered that there is tension at the intersection of personal stories and an imposed project of grand narratives that researchers must resist. That is, how was I to “tell” the stories of participants without becoming

influenced by making their stories fit into or reinforce the grand narrative? This grand narrative is one in which the participant makes a life decision, encounters struggle, learns from this struggle through reflective practice (telling their story), but makes out all right in the end. In this heroic form of the immigrant story, the participant has self-knowledge and emerges as a more authentic version of themselves. What do I do if there are no compelling stories of agency in participant narrative accounts? What about the complexity of agency, sometimes seen as an individualistic endeavor and sometimes as a communal one?

I turned to the literature to help me understand my discomfort and determine a path forward that kept relational ethics at the centre. In accounting her experience with students in adult learning, Michelson (2015) highlights “one of adult learning theory’s favourite conceits is that we allow students [or participants] to choose their own plots [so they can] take charge of their lives” (p. 148). This is problematic in that these stories become “suspiciously repetitious” (Michelson, 2015, p. 149). In problematizing this all-too-common narrative, Michelson (2015) challenges researchers to ask how much of “our [educator/researcher] impulse to ‘re-story’ our students’ [participant] histories into more optimistic accounts reflects our own disquiet with those aspects of recent history that are beyond our ability to process or comprehend” (p. 183). In other words, what if the participant gives up or sees no way forward? This social justice scholar probes further via an exploration of trauma stories and reminds us that “telling and listening are political and social as much as they are personal” (p. 184). If we do not want to deny experience, we need to “be open to stories that end in bewilderment” (Michelson, 2015, p. 184). It is in this spirit of being open to stories that end in bewilderment that I approached the listening/telling portion of this study. I pored over the transcripts, re-storying carefully, deliberately avoiding “judgment” language that would make it appear that I had come to a conclusion based on my

own previously held beliefs and/or values. I journalled and kept field notes as a place to “put” my own thoughts and feelings so they could later be used during data analysis. While I acknowledge that in narrative inquiries the researcher is not detached from the data, I wanted participants’ voices to be foregrounded as the most visible and telling in this study. I carefully wove direct words from the transcripts throughout the final story. Given that all participants held English as a second language, I did my best to strike a balance between keeping the direct quotes original to their exact words but also honouring the dignity of the participant.

All stories had the final approval of the participants. Following each story I included a section called “From the Field” to capture my thoughts during the interview process. I included the stories in the order that they received final approval from participants. Therefore, the “From the Field” section is non-linear, a looking back to what was happening as we completed interviews. The field notes do not always portray impressions from the interview itself, sometimes the interview prompted further investigation into a perplexity which I investigated and included. I invite you to read the telling stories of Omabee, Mike, Syeda, Anne, Lydia, Fergeri, and Smi as they navigate immigrating to Saskatchewan in pursuit of promising futures where their skills and knowledge can contribute to a better Saskatchewan. I also invite you to imagine yourself in the place of a person who has been uprooted from their homeland and is trying to find a pathway to securing commensurate employment but most importantly is trying to use their knowledge, skills, abilities, personal attributes, and competencies to contribute to Saskatchewan.

Omabee’s Story (Nigeria to Saskatchewan)

As a mother of two with big hopes for the future, Omabee and her husband dreamed about “lovely” Canada and what their future might look like. “Let’s give it a try. Let’s explore.

Let's have a base for our children, for our future. And also, let's go to learn. And let's go to improve our career, and also to develop ourselves and plan the future of our children." With these lofty goals set out, Omabee and her husband kickstarted the plan to move from Nigeria to Canada. The Saskatchewan Provincial Nomination Program is a provincial immigrant nomination program through the federal government's IRCC branch launched to help address labour market needs in Saskatchewan. The SINP provided Omabee's family with the resources they needed to turn their dreams into reality, and they have been living in Saskatchewan for almost six months. Having a doctoral degree in food processing and storage technology, Omabee knew that there would be required learning in terms of contextual expectations by employers or licensing requirements, but she also expected to be able to bring her skills and experience to Canada and put them to good use. After six months she is still not employed in her field and is trying to make sense of it. "You have to learn their culture here, and when it comes to [this] industry, their guidelines, their principles, you have to learn their principles, which are quite different [from my homeland]. So, you have to learn their own principles for you to be able to get into the system and get a job. When I came in, I found it difficult to get a job which I'm still trying to like, get used to. Because I think Canada, they want someone that has a Canadian experience which I see it as a good thing." In her industry, Omabee learned that Canada requires certification in addition to prior knowledge. She also found that she needed Canadian experience in order to secure employment. "When I first came in, I was putting in applications and I wouldn't get any response. But when I started putting the experience I have here in Canada, the part-time experience, I've been getting some little calls about interviews. I knew to do this because I've been through some newcomer training." Omabee also recognized that getting a job in her field as a newcomer would require more learning. "As a newcomer you are a student

whether on your work permit, or a permanent resident, or with a visitor visa. They want to be sure that you've really understood the basic principles when it comes to working ethics, the working relationship with your colleagues, with the clients, how you relate, how you interact to be able to put you in the system." Although Omabee's husband is working full-time, he too has not secured employment related to his education and experience. Currently, Omabee is working part-time in an unrelated field and insists that she "is not giving up hope to let myself into the career." She believes that further certifications and more work experience will ensure that she has both the academic knowledge and Canadian experience required to obtain employment in the food processing and storage technology industry. Omabee is very open to exploring branches or jobs indirectly related to her industry such as lecturing or research, yet she is always looking for that perfect fit of practical work. When asked why she was considering PLAR as an option, Omabee explained that she felt that "it's a platform that might help to bridge a gap in [her] career." She wanted to know more about it and where to find information despite having plans to obtain foreign credential recognition through WES who offer Educational Credential Evaluations (ECAs). Omabee hopes that these services might help to mitigate the challenges she has faced securing employment in an industry she loves and could also help her to explore other fields where she feels she may already have the knowledge and skills to succeed and give back to her newly adopted country. She thinks Saskatchewan is a great place and appreciates its calmness. Omabee and her family hope to stay in this prairie province and remain optimistic she will be able to get more information and knowledge so she can secure full-time employment in her chosen field.

From the Field

The following field notes were taken on April 7, 2025. They were recorded immediately following my interview with Omabee.

Omabee didn't know much about PLAR but was very curious about its potential.

However, she has two small children and like all mothers, is focused on the immediate needs...food, shelter, secure employment, so I am unsure if she will have the time/energy to navigate the complex PLAR landscape. This also made me frustrated at our current system. If PLAR options were "built" at all post-secondary institutions then it could be promoted to immigrants through immigrant integration services, who could then share it with newcomers. Omabee has engaged in newcomer services and thinks she heard about PLAR but was unsure. She seems to love Saskatchewan and the promise of immigrating here. I hope she is hopeful six months from now if she is unsuccessful finding commensurate employment.

During this interview it occurred to me that participants who have been here less than six months seem more hopeful than those who have been here longer; at least this was my impression. I wondered about the connection between immigrants' feelings of hope or hopelessness and retention relative to their time in Saskatchewan.

Mike's Story (Nigeria to Saskatchewan)

Most immigrants experience some psychological discomfort in the process of travelling to a new country and encountering a culture quite different from their own. We can imagine that culture shock, even on shorter trips for holiday, but especially if the relocation is for a long period of time and includes exposure to a culture very different from our own. As a Doctor of Social Psychology, Mike taught courses on culture shock in his home country of Nigeria, for nine years.

Despite teaching on the subject for a decade, he had never experienced culture shock firsthand until he immigrated to Canada on a student visa. “Experiencing it for the first time in the workplace put me into shock mode. There is a difference between knowing something and experiencing something. If I were to return to my school to teach the same course, [my teaching] would be different.” Culture shock can lead to ongoing feelings of discomfort and uncertainty as people new to a cultural setting or place try to navigate language barriers, rules of etiquette, dress codes, and more. Mike underscores the fact that the consequences can be more serious than simple discomfort. “Culture shock affects our mental health, and now when I speak about it, I’ll be speaking about something that I have experienced.” Even though his goal of immigrating was to create a different environment for his wife and five kids, who still live in his home country, he is now contemplating returning to Nigeria due to the shocking experience of cultural mismatch. “I need to understand the Canadian way of life. I need to understand the nuances, sensitivity, behaviour, dos and don’ts, the rules, and regulations to protect myself from further issues that may affect me. Because, as you see me right now, I feel like going back home.” Mike has three degrees, including a doctoral degree, and wants to contribute to his profession and foster his interest in cyber-aggression, culture, inequality, and social change. Mike has been here for less than two years, has completed one postgraduate certificate and is enrolled in another postgraduate program to “diversify or give [him] an edge” to obtain meaningful employment or, in his words, prepare him for “future entrepreneurial endeavors.”

When asked about PLAR, Mike did not think it would apply to immigrants. He explained how his credentials were evaluated by the World Education Services (WES) to “obtain the equivalence compared with the Canadian education standard.” This process took seven months in 2017 and provided a way for him to apply to postgraduate studies. Mike explained that he was

not told about PLAR as an alternative to WES or as a way of getting Canadian post-secondary credit in the field in which he was educated. After entering a post-secondary program and finding out that PLAR could present a barrier because PLAR may reduce his full-time student status as an immigrant, he was not inclined to investigate it further. He noted that the process needs to be made more accessible if the Canadian educational system really wants to help immigrants. He applied to programs related to, but below, his level of education, such as a Master's in economic psychology, educational psychology, or neuropsychology; however, Mike was not successful in his bid to enter university. "I learned when I came, they felt I was overqualified." So, he used up family savings to go through the postgraduate route, and he also worked to offset some of the financial burdens. However, since immigrants on study visas are restricted in employment and can only work 24 hours per week, he found that his availability was not appealing to employers who are looking for full-time employees. Mike admitted to wondering if he knew enough about the immigration process before he came to Saskatchewan. "Did I do my research before coming and all that?" He wondered if he should try finding work in a larger city in Saskatchewan or if his skills were in demand in Saskatchewan at all. What started as a hopeful decision he felt would open personal and professional doors for himself and his family turned to regret and an overwhelming feeling of doubt about this major life choice. Despite many large obstacles and the recognition that his experience may differ from that of other immigrants, Mike was keen to share his experiences with other immigrants, hoping it might help them in making informed life decisions.

From the Field

The following field notes were taken on March 24, 2025. They were recorded immediately following my interview with Mike.

He wants to use his skills; he does not necessarily have a specific job in mind. Again, recognition is so important here. As Mike said, many skills transfer...to other jobs. He just wants to use his skills to help solve problems and make people's lives better. Mike wants to help and is unable to do so in a way that uses his unique set of skills and competencies. It occurred to me that perhaps we are the problem. If we do not have a workforce or population or employers or post-secondaries that are skilled in emotional intelligence, recognition, competencies, diversity, equity, inclusion, we will continue to be unwelcoming "hosts" to immigrants wanting to come live and work here. For me, there is a disconnect between our provincial immigration plan that asserts wanting to attract and retain talented and skilled immigrants and the systems that are meant to support this goal. I was able to discuss this research very easily. He has a doctorate, is a researcher/lecturer so I was easily able to explain my research hopes, my methodology, etc.

During this interview, I felt as though I was speaking to a fellow academic, more experienced with research and with significantly more publications than myself. He said I was a "problem solver." I felt very humbled because, although I felt extremely grateful for the time Mike was taking to participate in the study and expressed this gratitude, he ended up thanking me for connecting, including him in this research, and for caring. He said the experience made him feel seen and it lifted his spirits. Mike's response left me feeling very moved and very motivated.

Syeda's Story (Pakistan to Saskatchewan)

When Syeda's sister moved to Canada in 2015, she started to think about immigrating to Canada as well. The style of managing the family farm in Pakistan was firm and did not resonate with her. Syeda started to feel like she did not fit in. Syeda longed for a more peaceful

environment. “When you are managing the farm there is stress. Sometimes the workers don’t listen. And you don’t want to yell at them because you don’t have this type of personality. If you want to become someone else you definitely feel some discomfort in this personality. But I learned a lot.” The expectation to manage workers in this punitive style caused Syeda psychological discomfort as this expectation did not match her personality. The first of Syeda’s sisters made the move to Canada in 2008, and at that time, she was not motivated to follow in her sibling’s footsteps. When another sister decided to move to Canada in 2015, she realized she was going to be the only girl in her family left behind in her home country. Suddenly, she was motivated. With additional information provided by one of her brothers, she made the decision to immigrate to Canada. Syeda did not find navigating the websites and processes difficult as she had experience in immigration consultancy services in Pakistan. However, because of COVID-19 and its travel bans, it took about three years before she would arrive in Canada. She has been in Canada since 2022 and will take her citizenship exam soon.

Syeda was surprised and disappointed to have a stressful first work experience in Canada as she perceived Canadians to be polite. “I have some expectation of Canadian people; their people are polite. But in my first job I had a very bad experience where people were yelling and behaving aggressively. I left these types of people back in my home country because it is a stressful thing.” They would give her very few hours per week and some weeks none and this meant that she was unable to fulfill financial obligations. With a continued struggle to communicate with her boss and what Syeda described as a toxic workplace, she decided to quit that first job. She believes stress can be an excellent motivator; however, the toxic treatment and minimal hours finally pushed her to launch formal complaints. “I faced stress in Pakistan, but in Canada I had to face a toxic environment in my first job. Toxicity, abusive behaviour,

wrongdoings and promoting a culture of hatred at the workplace should not be tolerated. Policies should be implemented.” Fortunately, she acquired a seasonal job that is more professional and pleasant, but she will need to find something permanent. “I love this job, and I love to work there. I learn a lot. It’s important to get a permanent job but the environment needs to be healthy. And this thing also motivates me to further my education.” Her first step is to retake the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) exam as hers has expired, and she explained that her lack of proficiency in the English language is a barrier to meaningful employment. There is a fee attached to the exam, and she is mindful of this. Going from what she perceived to be a high social class in her home country to what she described as a low social class here in Canada has been a big adjustment. “That’s a very big fall [in status] I do know.”

Syeda has a master’s degree in economics from her home country that was scored by WES as equivalent to a bachelor’s degree in Canada. She is considering switching fields altogether because she has a “gut feeling” she would be good in something like Information Technology, and she perceives this role to be in demand. Syeda wanted to know more about PLAR and if it could help her in this endeavor. As we talked about it more it was clear she was able to identify where she had skills, and where she may have gaps. “I have some preparations in math, statistics, geometry, I am good at computers but not coding or programming.” Syeda thought PLAR was only available in universities and wondered about the costs associated with this program and if there were fees attached. She wondered if the post-secondary websites would have this information and so she plans to look at the websites and to follow the suggestion of looking into ACCUPLACER as suggested to her by an admissions person. In terms of ideas for making PLAR more accessible, she suggested having easy access to information and clearly outlined fees for would-be users. In addition, samples of PLAR assessments would help her to

know what might be asked of her. She plans to ask about PLAR in her continued endeavors to gain certification or credit in her newly chosen field.

From the Field

The following field notes were taken on April 8, 2025. They were recorded immediately following my interview with Syeda.

Syeda was unsure about PLAR but said she would look into it. She also mentioned ACCUPLACER...I'm curious to learn more about this. She was guided to accuplacer by a post-secondary admissions person and also asked to redo her IELTS as it had expired. I am curious if accuplacer could be "waived" when trying to do PLAR...Accuplacer is free, so this seems a reasonable ask prior to doing PLAR but IELTS is costly. My understanding is that accuplacer gauges student readiness for core course work to determine placement into a program. It shares some similarities with PLAR but I need to investigate this further. I am also curious about the Comprehensive English Language Proficiency Index Program (CELP¹³) as an alternative to IELTS. I know this test is widely used in Vancouver.

I was surprised I did not know more about accuplacer or had not inquired about this before especially in my role as a learner pathways facilitator. My understanding is that it is used to determine post-secondary student readiness; however, having completed several years of post-secondary education it is curious that accuplacer was suggested as a pathway for Syeda. It is also interesting to me that although WES determined that Syeda's master's in economics was equivalent to a bachelor's in Canada, when she was given résumé support it was suggested to her

¹³ [CELP¹³ Website](#)

to list her education at the master's level. Syeda was applying all of the advice she was given but it seemed inconsistent or incomplete. I am increasingly unsure of the value of WES despite it being promoted as part of the immigration process. This interview left me with many perplexities.

Anne's Story (China to Saskatchewan)

The decision to move for work or professional opportunities makes sense to most people as they weigh the advantages and disadvantages of moving or staying in place. But what if this is not the case? With a Master of Clinical Medicine from China, Anne had a good career and career pathways in her home country. Her decision to move to Canada was initiated by her husband who wanted the opportunity to receive a better education for their daughter. Anne trusted his suggestion and agreed to this new adventure but found the first two years to be quite a struggle. "During the two years [since] we [have] come here I [have] had a very hard time. But now it's ok. I will try my best to embrace the change in my life and family." As Anne shared with me, her priorities are her child, getting a job, and connecting/contributing to the community. "Because if I get a job, I will, yeah, I can have the opportunity to... know more about the community, know about the culture here, know more about the people here. This is the first reason. And the second reason for me is to just get a job, to pay the bills, as well as to improve my English. But I feel very confused on what I need to take." Anne wants to either take courses or get credit for prior learning related to her original career path. "Yeah, yeah. This is an ideal situation for me. I want to do some jobs or to continue my career path related to my previous experience." Anne worked in the medical field in her home country and felt very gratified with this type of work. While she understands that for her to be accepted for additional courses in post-secondary, or to be able to receive PLAR, she will need to pass IELTS exam. As Anne sees it, she is open to any healthcare

role as she simply wants to contribute and serve in healthcare in some meaningful way. She had explored the possibility of PLAR at two post-secondaries in Saskatchewan as she felt she needed Canadian post-secondary credit to be able to work in Canada. Anne identified programs such as lab technician where she felt she had the knowledge and skills and considered PLAR recognition for these courses/programs. The professions she is considering are well below her former profession in her home country, but she feels it will be a first step to getting into the healthcare profession in Canada. However, she may need to pass the English exam to be eligible to do PLAR depending on the post-secondary program requirements. Anne is also looking for programs in Alberta as well to see if there is a better fit or if programs there align better with the skills she already has. “For example, in Calgary and Edmonton I compared the different requirements from different schools which I can apply.”

Although she is willing to take more courses, she likes the idea of getting credit for courses if she possesses those skills as it will save her time and would be “very helpful for newcomers to get a job.” People she knows are doing diplomas at Saskatchewan post-secondary institutions so that they can get the credential to then get a job. The training is in an area where they are not familiar so the idea of getting credit for skills in their area of interest/education intrigued her. She admitted “we do not know more information about the prior learning...your study, it’s my first time to learn about the word...maybe newcomers need to know it...to deliver the information to newcomers.” Anne thinks that although there are many newcomer organizations, the focus there is on getting jobs and PLAR could be introduced there. She suggested that the process be clearly structured and mapped to other options such as survival jobs, post-secondary options, with cost-savings outlined. This would be good for the professional newcomer because from her understanding, the newcomer organizations focus more on entry-

level jobs. There is a mismatch and as she points out, she does not think that this is what the government wants. “From my understanding, the government does not just want newcomers in entry-level jobs.” Anne says that newcomers need clearer direction pertaining to the skills needed for each job and the more specific competencies and requirements so they can make informed decisions. She says when they are unsuccessful in obtaining the interview or getting the job offer, newcomers “really want to know” what the gap is and how they can close it.

In addition, she thinks the government could better link newcomers with employers who are looking for those skills. “Maybe we can have the opportunity of the face-to-face communication, because sometimes from my understanding the job description is just a checkbox.” Anne also thought that the employers would need more information on PLAR and on how to assess skills and competencies. Anne also identified additional barriers to getting the interview. “it’s not a Canadian name on my resume...maybe it contributes to the barrier.”

From the Field

The following field notes were taken on March 28, 2025. They were recorded immediately following my interview with Anne.

This was a really great interview. I felt much more relaxed and able to use more of the prompts as outlined in my interview questions. I felt less “tied” to the script and the interview felt very conversational. Anne identified the disconnect I am also seeing between job ads and the competencies the employer is actually looking for. Anne also asked me questions, and we were able to brainstorm ideas for disseminating the findings. I was starting to feel more confident with the interview process and in following my desire not to follow a script. The field notes here are short and exemplify the realities of the adult learner. That is, learning takes place in snippets of time, between balancing parental and professional

responsibilities. Although I had scheduled ample time for the interview, we got caught up in brainstorming ideas for dissemination, getting to know each other better, and before I knew it I was getting very close to the time I needed to commute to Regina to teach a class. I felt alright leaving these notes with the last sentence about dissemination because I knew that I would revisit them and be reminded of my future responsibilities to participants.

Lydia's Story (China to Saskatchewan)

Lydia wore two professional hats in her home country of China: one working as an obstetrician in a hospital and the other one managing a restaurant. It was the latter job that would secure her employment in Saskatchewan. "This [current] job is a pizza supervisor." Before immigrating here permanently, she had visited Saskatchewan the previous summer and fell in love with the landscape and beauty. "I think this place is very beautiful, especially some museums of science and technology. The sky is so beautiful. So, I think I live in this place yeah, I like this place." Lydia moved here four months ago with her husband who is a businessman and with her four-year-old son. Since moving here, she has even more of an appreciation for Canada. "I feel the friendliness of Canadians, the inclusiveness of the people here, the safety of this country and its inclusiveness towards children as well as support for their studies." Lydia was also pleasantly surprised that she could enjoy the library in every city for free. She and her son were greeted warmly by librarians, and they invited her child to participate in interesting activities. She explained that because of their visits to the libraries, her son's English improved quickly, and he made new friends.

In addition to visiting the library Lydia looked for free English classes for herself. Because of a long waitlist she contacted a post-secondary institution to inquire about English classes, but they did not get back to her. "It is hard to find the organizations that can offer help in

time.” So, for the meantime, while her son goes to daycare, she studies English on her own in the daycare library. Her day includes this activity between 10am-2pm and at 4pm she goes to her restaurant supervisor job. Lydia dreams of returning to her career as an obstetrician, but licensing is a barrier. “I think for most newcomer adults they have really good working experience and strong work ability. However, due to the different license requirements for some professions in different countries, so many people cannot engage in the corresponding work because of the [required] licenses.” When asked about why she was considering PLAR she pointed out the additional challenges of being a woman with a child to care for. “For many adult women due to the family and the children’s influence they do not have more time for university to study again, but I think the PLAR provide us with the convenience and help to solve the problem of shortage of professional staff.”

Lydia has done her homework on the doctor shortage in Saskatchewan and feels like she has a lot of experience to contribute. She points out that due to the high population in China, doctors have extensive clinical experience. “So, for example, in China, I have rich surgical experience and capabilities; however, due to the issue of my English lessons I cannot practice medicine in Canada. But as far as I know, Saskatchewan is in great need of obstetricians.” She is willing to study hard in English and take more university if needed, but the added responsibility of a small child makes this a bigger challenge. Lydia feels that she needs more support navigating the university system and PLAR, to have access to information on pathways with a clear outline of the fees required. Lydia has leveraged resources in her Church such as free English sessions when they run and has inquired after nursing home volunteer positions. She wants to get back to healthcare and will investigate getting a medical license as she believes that a “Chinese doctor license cannot work in Canada.” Lydia also plans to look for information on

PLAR and courses at Saskatchewan post-secondary institutions to see if they can help with her goal of getting back into the healthcare profession within five to seven years.

From the Field

The following field notes were taken on April 18, 2025. They were recorded immediately following my interview with Lydia.

I interviewed Lydia today. This seems like an example of another participant who is very new to Canada and still in the “honeymoon” phase, positive, hopeful, etc. She has a four-year-old son and a husband who is in business and who often travels. She loves Saskatchewan, exploring new places, golf, the free library, the space, the sky etc. What struck me the most is that she said that Chinese medical licenses are not recognized in Canada. I am curious if this would even work through foreign credential recognition yet she seemed so hopeful about PLAR. I wonder if the licensing body would acknowledge PLAR or what additional barriers would remain.

I had given Lydia the interview questions ahead of time as I did with all participants, but this allowed her time to translate the questions, and to prepare responses ahead of time, which was great. This reminded me that I employed similar strategies with students. Lydia admitted that this made her feel more prepared as she was concerned her English was not good. My impression was that her English was quite good, and I did not have trouble understanding her. I was glad, however, that she was able to feel prepared. I felt that she saw the potential in PLAR too and this made me feel hopeful about this research.

Fergei’s Story (Ukraine to Saskatchewan to Czech Republic)

Fergei completed his medical degree in 1999. At first, he was eager just to earn an income, but in Ukraine it was not so easy to earn a sufficient income for a growing family.

Fergei had dreamed about moving to Canada as a teen and as an adult he started to investigate further. He found that the Ukrainian community in Canada was strong and decided to try to secure licensure. He did this work partly for himself, but most importantly to support his wife and children. “You need to work to survive.” When he proved he had medical credentials and experience he was told that his English was not good enough and when he applied to programs below his training at Saskatchewan post-secondaries he was told he was overqualified. Fergei investigated programs in pharmacy, advanced radiology, and others with no luck. Because of these barriers to getting licensure, he explained that “Canada doesn’t make sense, I don’t want to come in.”

In 2019 he decided to start looking for work in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. Fergei has now secured work in the Czech Republic. The process of gaining recognition and securing employment included another doctor taking him under his wing and supervising him. This doctor supervised Fergei performing laparoscopic surgery, completed an assessment of his performance, was impressed by Fergei’s knowledge and skills, and hired him as a doctor assistant. This enabled Fergei to earn an income to support his family while he secured his licensure and improved his knowledge of the Czech language. While the doctor did not speak Ukrainian and Fergei did not speak Czech, they both spoke English and were able to communicate well. When reflecting on these barriers, he wondered about the bureaucracy and the number of online forms needed. Canada needs, and is actively seeking, doctors, so this did not make sense to him. “It’s like being a tree cutter in the tree and cutting the tree down while you are in it.” He elaborated that strict regulations are put in place so that people do not die because of doctor incompetence; however, people with “plain and simple” or less complicated surgeries or procedures, like knee surgery, are suffering while on waiting lists. He mentioned the

many doctors he knows who also feel that the bureaucratic structures of being able to practice medicine are illogical. Fergei explained that to his understanding, things have changed for the better in the USA and Europe so that doctors can work as doctor assistants to at least earn an income while they get credentialled, or fill learning gaps, or improve their English. “In the USA and Europe, for example, for a surgeon assistant position for overseas surgeons you do not need to do exams for five years to become a surgeon. Doctors come to work under the supervision of another doctor. And during these five years, they pass exams. But again, during this time, overseas doctors are preparing for all future exams. But the doctors are in the medical field. If they do not pass exams doctors continue to work as a surgeon assistant because salary is enough to live.” He shared that he felt very welcomed in the Czech Republic and does not have plans to return to Saskatchewan. In the Czech Republic he had been recognized for the skills, abilities, and expertise he brought with him. Rather than being perceived for what he did not have, he was valued for his pre-existing skillsets.

From the Field

The following field notes were taken on May 2, 2025. They were recorded immediately following my interview with Fergei.

Fergei felt very welcomed in Czech Republic...recognized for the skills and abilities and expertise he brought with him. I wonder about our processes. Do we employ a similar type of internship model? Could we? The gap in Fergei’s learning would be his language skills. Why could he not work alongside a mentor while this gap is being filled? Is this not like the conceptual design of current bridging programs? What if we employ retired medical professionals to do some of this mentor work? His major needs of income for his

family were not being met, and this proved the biggest barrier. Could we invest in this type of training with the long-term goal of retaining talent?

This interview left me with so many questions and ideas. I have a good understanding of PLAR; however, I lack understanding of particular regulatory bodies and the variations between them. It was critical that Fergei earned an income for his family while meeting all of the requirements and when he could not, he left. This is a shame as he took his skills with him.

Smi's Story (India to Saskatchewan)

In today's busy world, everyone is trying to achieve some type of work-life balance. After completing her PhD, Smi worked in research for a while and then worked very long hours in the diagnostic industry. In India, jobs are competitive and to work, Smi was travelling by train six hours per day, 6 days per week. She loved her job, so she made it work; however, Smi was thinking about work-life balance as well. "[As our] age grows, we always look for some, you know, stability." So, she and her husband began looking into immigrating to Canada. Her husband came on a student visa and secured work here. She came on a dependent work visa which meant that while her husband had secured employment, she had not. She was able to immigrate to Saskatchewan as a dependent. With her education and work experience she expected to be working within six months of relocating to Canada. However, this was not the case. After two years she still has not secured employment relevant to her education and skills.

Smi made applying for jobs her number one priority. "I applied to almost more than 600-700 jobs and no reply from any of the jobs." Therefore, she set out to learn more about licensing in the diagnostic industry. She thought, if she could not be successful by applying for jobs, she would try another. Smi attempted to secure an administration job in a hospital. She also considered getting a certificate, diploma, or degree in a related area simply to continue to work in

healthcare. The experience of not getting employment became difficult. “But the thing is, for me, coming here in [my] 30s leaving my job behind and then struggling...that was a little bit scary for me in the starting phases.” Smi secured work in a salad bar at a grocery store after three months, which took some of the financial pressure off. Shortly after starting at the grocery store, she got work at an IT company as technical support. Although she did not have an IT background, she learned and has been working a full-time day job and 6-hour nighttime shifts for a year. Smi was ready to give up the grocery position and refocus on getting a job in her area of expertise. She applied for a medical laboratory position at a hospital and spoke with the manager. Smi learned that she needed a license. She offered to work while taking the licensing at the same time, however, the manager could not accommodate this request. She did not blame the manager but was still frustrated. “It’s the rules and regulations; he would also have some seniors over his head. At least you should give an opportunity to an individual with similar experience.” Smi pointed out that as a new employee she would not be permanent for several months. In which case, the employer could let her go if she could not satisfactorily complete the work. She did not think this was fair to people with education outside of Canada who were willing to be observed while on probation. Smi had secured credential recognition through WES, but this did not satisfy the regulatory board. She learned that even with WES, she would still need to complete a prior learning assessment (PLA) just to be able to take the competency exam. There is a fee attached to the PLA. She also sent her WES results to a manager who seemed impressed by her résumé but still received no response. Smi waited thinking the manager needed to further compare courses and then tried contacting this person again. Shortly after this time, she saw the vacancy had been filled.

Her investigation continued and she learned that she is not eligible for the Canadian Society for Medical Laboratory Science (CSMLS) licensure. The licensing only included certain specialties. “So molecular biology and biotechnology were not in their curriculum. They had only four things. I think one is general medical laboratory technology, one is clinical genetics, and diagnostic cytology and one more thing. So, these four streams were only allowed to give those exams.” Happily, she saw a post in 2025 that the regulatory body had expanded with eight more streams/specialties, and she plans to take the exam in the fall. Smi thought that some research must have been completed to improve this process. She also pointed out that as an internationally trained laboratory scientist, she will still have to take the regulatory body’s prior learning assessment (PLA) to be eligible to take the competency exam.

When I explained how PLAR worked at some Saskatchewan post-secondaries, she gleaned that some of that information gathering, and self-assessing could be completed prior to coming to Canada. Smi also acknowledged that making the process simple would be key. Another interesting point she made was that no matter whether a graduate received the credential at the Saskatchewan post-secondary or if they received it through PLAR, there would still be some level of on-the-job training. Likely, the person who has been working in the field in another country would have field experience that a new Saskatchewan graduate would not. A chance to prove themselves through performance would help. In her words,

but at least you should give entry in that industry or in that company so that a person should at least get a chance to prove themselves...when people don’t get this chance they go into depression. People don’t know what to do in such situations now everyone is not that strong.

Smi also pointed out that knowing what the gap is and how to fill it is important to newcomers.

You should be given the proper reason why you are not eligible. When you receive an email with rejection, there is no reason why you are not eligible. They just say we went with another candidate, or we have filled the position, or they will say they have cancelled the position.

She plans to apply for the licensing this fall because of the added streams and is hopeful that this will lead to meaningful employment so she can stay in Saskatchewan long-term.

From the Field

The following field notes were taken on May 2, 2025. They were recorded immediately following my interview with Smi.

Where is our Canadian kindness? I feel like her experience with employers is almost a passive aggressive communication style. Rather than identifying what and where the gap is, some bias is triggered or some personal issue on the part of the employer and Smi is not getting fairly considered for the roles for which she is applying. Something interesting that came out of this interview is that she had the understanding that people took a course AND PLAR. She was advocating for a smoother process and once I clarified what some processes look like (because they vary at institutions) and that PLAR is INSTEAD of taking a course she was very supportive of it and streamlining the process. Smi had some ideas on how it might be better streamlined and shared these.

This interview made me think how important it would be to include immigrant voices in PLAR creation for it to be useful.

Summary of Narrative Accounts

The stories shared above depict unique experiences of immigrating to Saskatchewan. Participants shared the difficulties in obtaining meaningful and commensurate employment and

the hopes they had for PLAR to play a role in this space. Although there were many variations given the participants came on different visas, with different goals, have different expertise in different areas, yet still their stories shared resonant threads that bind them together in meaningful ways. These resonant threads are presented below as a next step in making sense of these individualized and diverse experiences.

Resonant Threads: Navigating a New Life in Canada

Through the interview process with Omabee, Mike, Syeda, Anne, Lydia, Fergeri, and Smi, our discussions became a dialogue, a mutual exploration. I became aware that their stories were changing how I thought about PLAR and deepening what I already knew; I was learning from them as well as discovering new perplexities. This awareness presented itself as a recurring memory of an incident several years ago at my children's elementary school and one that I will include here in detail as it makes a vivid point relevant to this study when we consider the power of stories and whose stories hold power. The School Community Council (SCC) was gathered in the evening to listen to a presentation from a superintendent on changes to grading practices that would be implemented for the following academic year. I appreciated the information; we all know change is hard and this was certainly a good way to mitigate some of the concerns of parents. The presentation went well, and parents soon started sharing their own personal experiences with grading or supporting learning from home along with some of the challenges. The superintendent cautioned that while interesting, these stories were "anecdotal" and assured us that this change aligned with current literature regarding assessment and evaluation in K-12 education and with government priorities in education. In this school leader's account, "anecdotal" seemed to mean based on individual accounts rather than reliable research or facts, and in the superintendent's measured opinion, therefore likely not valid. This was not the first

time I had heard this word “anecdotal” used in an education setting and with this purpose. I had heard it from a variety of educators in the division, usually by those in positions of leadership and by faculty or leadership in higher education. As the superintendent proceeded, they relayed a story of their own child and how this change would have benefited them had this change to assessment and evaluation been implemented earlier. What puzzled me in that moment was that the superintendent’s personal and family story was meant to illuminate, highlight, to add context and impact to the presentation being shared. However, at the same time, the parent stories were perceived to have less meaning, less impact, and were summarily dismissed. How then does one, or a group of people, determine the power of a story and who gets to determine its ultimate value? Surely these parents’ experiences mattered and contributed context to help with sense making? What was at the root of this non-recognition of experience?

I retell this story because it guided my design choices around data analysis. Narrative inquiries outline a process of thinking narratively across multiple narratives where this process gradually reveals the “resonant threads or patterns” (Clandinin, 2023, p. 87). The purpose of drawing attention to these resonant threads is to gain a “deeper and broader awareness of the experiences” (Clandinin, 2023, p. 87) of the participants thereby making the stories, and their meaning, more visible. By laying the stories alongside one another, the power of the stories is shared and non-hierarchical. As I engaged with participant narrative accounts, I became aware of the connections between participant stories of immigrating to Canada, experiences of disillusionment and non-recognition, and shared ideas around PLAR’s potential. I reflected on their stories alongside my own stories of disillusionment and non-recognition shared in Chapter 1 and my own ideas of what potential could be realized through PLAR. That is, as I read and reread participant narrative accounts, and wrote about my experiences alongside their stories, I

saw connections between their stories and mine as a PLAR recipient, and the resonant threads or patterns became more apparent. However, despite awakening to these patterns in participant narrative accounts, they did not simply “emerge,” rather I felt the researcher actively produced them. This belief further reinforced my choice to use reflexive thematic analysis (reflexive TA). As Braun and Clarke (2022) explain, one of reflexive TA’s core assumptions is that “researcher subjectivity is the primary ‘tool’ for reflexive TA; subjectivity is not a problem to be controlled, it is a resource for research [and] is inherently subjective and situated” (p. 9). Braun and Clarke (2022) also assert that “themes are patterns of meaning anchored by a shared idea or concept [and] are *produced* by the researcher through their systematic analytic engagement with the data set and all they bring to the data in terms of personal positioning and metatheoretical perspectives” (p. 10). With the memory of the many times I encountered the term “anecdotal” when powerholders are referring to, or diminishing the power of “certain” stories, I felt the need to re-engage in the data both by reading, rereading, the lived, told, relived, and retold stories of the participants. I also needed to engage with it systematically to ensure a balance between what I bring to the data as researcher and participant voices. Engaging with the data systematically also ensured that resonant threads developed from codes and were not developed too early. This process slowed down coding and engagement with the data in a way that was necessary for me to produce patterns that honoured participant voices. As a novice narrative inquirer, I felt the need to go through the analytic process of reflexive TA which includes familiarization with the data, coding the data, generating initial themes from the codes and coded data, reviewing and developing themes, and defining, naming, and refining them. By doing this, I felt more confident in the resonant threads from diverse participant stories presented below and in narrative inquiry as a methodology more generally. While there are some quotations from participants in the

section below, they are shorter versions of what appeared in their narrative accounts earlier in this chapter. To avoid redundancy, I have not included the full versions here and I invite readers to refer to the narrative accounts above for the full quotations.

Resonant Thread 1: Immigrant Experiences of Disillusionment and Affects to Mental Health

Disillusionment is rooted in disappointment when we discover that something is not as good as it was believed to be. As participants shared their stories, the pattern of disillusionment and the effect on their mental health became quickly evident. The Government of Canada continues to mete out key investments to improve immigration programs and communicates these initiatives through their Government of Canada websites. These federal financial investments, increased immigration messaging, along with the ongoing provincial nominee programs for immigration, communicate that immigration is a priority for Canada and for individual provinces. Therefore, it is not surprising that several participant narrative accounts shared a tone and expression of hope in immigrating to Canada particularly regarding career and personal aspirations for themselves and/or for their children. These accounts expressed a belief that Canada could and would provide the greater life opportunities that they hoped for. There are other good reasons for participants to feel hopeful about obtaining meaningful employment in Saskatchewan. A Saskatchewan Ministry of Immigration and Career Training released its 2023-2024 report highlighting its past and continued work on recruiting, training, and retaining workers, including immigrants, into the labour market (Ministry of Immigration and Career Training [Ministry], 2023). Their mission is to “develop, attract and retain a skilled workforce that supports investment and economic growth in Saskatchewan and helps citizens realize their full potential” (p. 2). These upward mobility goals continue to be highlighted in 2024-2025. That

is, there is clear communication that the province is trying to grow its population and ensure that those who come to Saskatchewan will stay. This welcoming message provides hope to those moving to Saskatchewan that they will have the opportunity to obtain commensurate employment and reach their full potential. But is the government message aligning with the realities of those who arrive in the prairie province full of hopes and wants? Kelly (2023) asserts that there is misalignment between the messaging and actual immigrant retention. In other words, Kelly (2023) wonders if the neoliberal focus on the economic need of immigrants reduces the welcome that immigrants are extended. It is quite likely that the disillusionment experienced by this study's participants has something to do with what is perceived eventually as a reduced welcome. One participant, Mike, shared that he immigrated to Canada "to seek higher opportunity" for himself and his family if he was able to eventually bring them. He has long term "plans of working with the United Nations." Omabee expressed a similar belief that by immigrating to Canada she hoped to improve in several areas of her, and her family's lives: "I want to improve on our career, develop ourselves, and have a base for our children." She had heard many "lovely" things about Canada which filled her with hope for her family's future. Syeda described expectations about Canadians being "polite," while Lydia expressed her views on "the friendliness of Canadians, the inclusiveness of the people, the safety of this country." Fergeri said that Saskatchewan and the open fields "reminded [him] of home" and he considers Canada "the best country in the world." Similarly, Smi thought immigrating to Saskatchewan would bring "something more interesting and more challenging, more exposure to healthcare and better career opportunities." The realities of the participants were in stark contrast to their initial hopes of how they would experience immigrating to Saskatchewan. All narrative accounts

expressed disappointment, disillusionment, and effects on their mental health at unmet expectations.

Immigrants Experiencing Unexpected Culture Shock

The misalignment between immigrant expectations and lived experience, whether by experiencing difficult work environments in Canada or by experiencing different cultural norms, took an emotional and psychological toll on participants. Mike holds significant expertise on the concept of culture shock and explained that “I’ve been teaching about culture shock for a long time, for over 14 years.” However, teaching it on a theoretical level and experiencing it firsthand are very different and Mike admitted that “there is a difference between knowing something and experiencing something.” Mike shared that he experienced culture shock in his first job in Canada and said that “experiencing [culture shock] for the first time in the workplace put me into shock mode [and affected my] mental health...people can commit suicide...it is clear I need to leave my culture behind and get acculturated into the new culture.” Mike reflected on the experience of culture shock and thought about how his experience might help others: “Now when I speak about it, I’ll be speaking about something I do not only know about, but I have experienced.” He spoke about how he will try to cope with experiencing culture shock: “I need to understand the Canadian way of life. I need to understand the language, the behaviour. I need to understand the dos and the don’ts, the rules and the regulations and protect myself from further issues that can affect me.” Syeda shared a similar experience of a “toxic environment at [her] first job” which caused her a significant amount of stress. The environment was “not healthy...not a safe place. I need a professional place with sensible people.” Both Mike and Syeda highlighted what they felt was an expectation for immigrants to learn Canadian workplace

culture and norms but that there had been little effort from employers or colleagues in extending that same effort to get to know them.

Anne also struggled for the first two years in Canada explaining that she “was not so happy to come [to Saskatchewan]...and had a very hard time.” She focused her energy on finding “survival jobs.” Although Smi had a very challenging job in India with very little work life balance as she “used to travel six hours a day for work...with one day off per week,” Smi admitted to struggling after immigrating to Saskatchewan: “leaving my job behind and then struggling...that was a little bit scary for me in the starting phases.” Smi did not expect to secure employment immediately but did think she would get work relatively quickly: “That was in our mind that in at least six months after reaching [Saskatchewan], I will get a job because I have experience and I have a [doctoral] degree.” The difficulty, not only in not finding jobs equivalent to their skills and abilities but in not being able to find jobs at all, created significant stress. Although participants expected that they would need to adjust to living in a new country, factors such as experiencing workplace conflict or not being able to secure work at all, resulted in participants experiencing heightened aspects of culture shock and an increase in anxiety, stress, and frustration, more than what one would generally expect.

Immigrants Experiencing the Non-Recognition of Skills, Knowledge, Abilities

Participant stories included non-recognition as an example of disillusionment from their chosen host province; they expressed some dismay and deep concerns about how this non-recognition affected their mental health. For those who received formal credential recognition through WES, this evaluation led to non-recognition. While it allowed participants to be truthful when adding their qualifications to their resumes, in terms of obtaining commensurate employment, the WES assessment had no positive effect. Prior qualifications were often

devalued by institutions, or participants were deemed “overqualified” to enroll in educational programs “below” their level of education although they held professional experience in a related field. Some participants experienced non-recognition by the licensing bodies in Saskatchewan and others faced non-recognition due to a lack of English language proficiency.

Smi received confirmation from WES who determined her educational credentials in molecular biology to be at the doctoral level. In her home country, after she completed her PhD, she “joined the research industry” and gained meaningful experience in her field. Despite the experience in her home country and this first experience of recognition, the regulatory board in Saskatchewan was not satisfied; Smi needed to get licensed to be able to work in her field: “Then I got to know about the licenses which are valid here, especially for the diagnostic industry, which was my previous experience.” She acknowledged that needing to get licensed under Saskatchewan standards made sense to her as a medical biotechnologist, but that the process took a significant amount of time and energy to navigate. There were also different standards for internationally trained applicants and domestic applicants. International applicants have to take a mandatory prior learning assessment (PLA) before being allowed to take the competency exam. Smi was curious about this extra assessment and wondered why the WES assessment at the doctoral level along with her professional experience would not be sufficient to write the competency exam. Smi wondered if there might be a better way for her to demonstrate what she knows and can do such working probationally in a lab while she gets her licensing: “So then I thought, okay, if I can’t go that way [licensing], let’s try some other way...like starting from some administration job in a hospital, for example.” This redirect did not last long as she learned in order to do that administration job she would need a different type of schooling: “then I got to know even that needs a degree or diploma or certificate.” According to her, one employer who

seemed eager to hire her, expressed that they were unable to do so. Smi explains why getting an opportunity to prove what she knows and can do is so important: “at least [the employer] should give entry in that industry or in that company so that a person should at least get a chance to prove themselves.” This type of on-the-job certification could be in the form of work-based learning or apprenticeship and provides an entry point into a person’s field of expertise and experience. This option also mitigates another risk that “when people don’t get this chance they go into depression.” For those who think in primarily economic terms, the case may be made for recognition as a contributing factor to well-being and productivity.

While national licensing bodies continue to try to balance rigorous standards with filling vacancies, and the pathways to licensure landscape continue to evolve, participants struggled to navigate these processes. Although medical licensing requirements are derived from the Canadian standard, each province or territory sets a jurisdictional license to practice requirement which further complicates things. Lydia experienced non-recognition despite her professional experience and strong work ethic. Licensing expectations and English language proficiency were the sources of Lydia’s non-recognition. “I think most newcomer adults have really good working experience and a strong work ability. However, due to the different licensing requirements for some professions in different countries, so many people cannot engage in the corresponding work.” For Lydia, her doctor’s license is not recognized in Canada. “Yeah, Chinese doctor licenses cannot work in Canada. Even if we have more experience because China has more people and doctors get more practice, we need to get a Canadian medical license.” Lydia also experienced non-recognition because of a lack of English language proficiency. To her understanding, for her to get a Canadian medical license, her English would need to improve. “Due to the issue of my English lessons, I cannot practice medicine in Canada.”

Fergei had similar experiences regarding English proficiency and being unable to obtain a Canadian medical license. “My English is good but not enough to pass exams.” He also experienced non-recognition trying to be admitted into programs “below” his level of education but in a related field as he was deemed “overqualified.” Fergei’s non-recognition and the need to “work to survive” led to frustrations so great he decided to stop pursuing immigrating to Saskatchewan altogether. For Fergei, non-recognition in Saskatchewan was a result of the province not “getting to the bottom of the problem but instead following bureaucracy and rules that are in place.” Non-recognition in a Saskatchewan context translated into a ready path to recognition in the Czech Republic where Fergei could put his skills as a medical professional trained in laparoscopic surgery to use. Not only did he have his credentials considered and recognized, but he also secured employment as a doctor’s assistant earning income while he worked on the skills gaps that needed to be filled on his path to obtaining a doctor’s license.

Anne also experienced non-recognition, unable to secure employment related to her training and original career path despite this being her true passion. “I want to do some jobs or to continue my career path related to my previous experience.” She needed to practice English so that she could take and pass the English proficiency test which would enable her to take the courses she needed which would fill those gaps required to be a lab technician: “to take the lab technician course you need to get the IELTS score of seven before you can take it.” Anne felt that she needed these courses because the training was not identical: “the training is a little bit different even though I have the basic knowledge, I need to learn the operational knowledge.” She did not consider that she may already have, and could receive recognition for, some of the required skills. According to Omabee, her non-recognition occurred because her experience was not “Canadian experience.” It was not until she achieved some “Canadian experience” that she

received calls to be interviewed for jobs. These experiences of disillusionment led to feelings of self-doubt, confusion, frustration and in some cases even depression. It is unclear what advice participants received pertaining to pathways for their particular professions and to what degree participants investigated available resources. However, none of the participants knew about the Government of Saskatchewan's credential recognition unit and the navigators hired to help facilitate credential recognition processes and pathways to employment. While English proficiency is understandably expected in front-facing professions, it is unclear whether participants' barriers stemmed from language, which can be learned, or from unchangeable factors such as gender or race. Navigating the complex system of Saskatchewan's labour market proved difficult for all participants, revealing significant obstacles and barriers to obtaining appropriate employment.

Resonant Thread 2: Immigrant Experiences of Oppression, Devaluation of Skills, and Agency

Oppression, a form of unjust treatment which can prevent people from having opportunities and/or freedom, can significantly restrict individuals' agency and their capacity to make important life choices that will have lifelong consequences. American social scientist scholars, David and Derthick (2018) assert that "oppression is the antithesis of, and greatest threat to, justice...and a significant barrier to a society's quest to be well and healthy" (p. x). Janelle Brady (2017), a scholar from the University of Toronto exposed different forms of systemic oppression in the Canadian education system by calling out the practice of 'Othering' where those perceived to be outside the dominant circle of powerholders are viewed as intrinsically different. Brady (2017) explores the epistemological outcomes to advantaging and disadvantaging particular ways of knowing and examined how these are played out (or replayed)

in education. Brady (2017) insists that to understand how this leads to systemic oppression in education, scholars have an obligation to consider how an epistemology of ignorance where the historical foundations of oppression are ignored, either furthers or limits their own advantage (Alcoff, 2007). The experiences of oppressions that were evident in participant narratives demonstrate covert and overt types of racism alongside an unknowingness. It is helpful to consider barriers and instances of oppression “in relation to the epistemology of ignorance of objectivity, those whose knowledges are validated and legitimized are part of the dominant group, whereas those whose knowledges are disenfranchised are part of the oppressed group” (Brady, 2017, p. 118). As a racialized scholar, Guo (2015) extends the presence of systemic oppression to Canada, and specifically to immigrants who experience a “racialized skills regime” (p. 236). Through the lens of critical race theory, Guo (2015) argues that skill is racialised, socially constructed, and based on ethnic and national origins. If skills, then, are socially constructed and only valuable to those communities where they originate, how can immigrant skills ever be valued in other communities? Immigrants then go through a process of de-skilling and re-skilling because their skills are being measured by how well they conform to Canadian norms and workplace cultures (Guo, 2015). This measuring seems to be unidirectional with little consideration for what skills immigrants bring to Canada. There needs to be an account for racial, gender, class and other differences in the social construction of skill and therefore, an integrated intersectional approach to understanding immigrants’ experiences of immigrating to Canada and obtaining work is necessary for social justice.

Participants in this study experienced oppression and devaluation in many instances. However, agency is not always completely extinguished under oppression as we can see in the

stories shared by the participants who experienced oppressions in various ways when immigrating to Saskatchewan.

Class, Gendered and Racialized Experiences of Immigrants

Gender played a role in creating dual pressures for women who were primarily responsible for childcare. Despite having a Master of Clinical Medicine and promising career paths in China, Anne agreed with her spouse that Canada would afford their children more freedom and more opportunities. However, the responsibility of childcare fell to her once her husband became employed and she continued to pursue “survival jobs...to make money to feed my kids.” Anne and Lydia had similar experiences of being responsible for childcare after immigrating to Canada which resulted in them facing dual pressures at the intersections of gender and immigration status. As Lydia explained, “For many adult women due to the family and the children’s influence they do not have more time for university to study again.”

Race is another factor that people simply have no control over and, as such, represents a source of many misaligned views. As visible minorities whose names and physical attributes differ from dominant ideas of who a Canadian is, Anne and Mike experienced hiring bias connected to race. Anne observed that having a non-Western name may have contributed to her not getting interviews. “It’s not a Canadian name on my resume...maybe it contributes to the barrier.” Mike reflected on the emotional burden of culture shock which was compounded by race-based exclusion and professional disqualification. He felt that his impressive list of academic credentials, including a bachelor’s degree in psychology, a master’s degree in community psychology, a doctoral degree in social psychology (all of which were given equivalency by WES), his Canadian post-graduate certificate and the one he will soon complete should open doors to many different occupations. Despite what is a clearly high level of

academic standing, Mike felt he “did not fit in” at work. This struggle was to him, a clash of cultures that created misunderstandings, a need to “leave [his] culture behind” and what he perceived to be employment discrimination.

Sometimes the differences in how cultures are either openly stratified, or not, can be the source of the issue. Reitz (2001) refers to ‘brain waste’ or the phenomena which refers to highly skilled migrants’ and their inability to use their skills in the host labour market. Syeda experiences a “fall in class” from being upper class in Pakistan to working irregular hours in Canada and ties this in part to language barriers and employment discrimination. Omabee’s PhD in food processing was not enough to get into the industry in Saskatchewan: “you have to learn the culture here when it comes to the food industry, the guidelines, and principles to be able to get into the system and get a job.” Lydia and Smi both highlighted how not being fluent in English delayed access to licensing and skilled work. Lydia elaborates: “I have rich surgical experience and capabilities; however, due to the issue of my English lessons, I cannot practice medicine in Canada.”

In response to challenges faced by skilled immigrants due to what is perceived as inadequate country language or cultural training, there has been a shift to recruiting international students who are perceived to have fewer hurdles in entering local labour markets (Liu-Farrer & Shire, 2021). They explain, however, that there is not much success in retaining these international students. The difficulties for immigrants entering the labour market seems to have less to do with language proficiency and more to do with “the existence of discrimination against non-Western migrants in local labour markets” (Liu-Farrer & Shire, 2021, p. 2306). That is, the perception exists that immigrants are less skilled simply because they are immigrants. At the intersections of race, class, and gender, immigrants are further marginalized in the socio-

economic sectors. The current immigration, educational, and hiring practices clearly continue to undervalue the knowledge, skills, abilities, personal attributes, and competencies that immigrants bring with them.

Immigrants' Experiences of Agency

Despite a host of challenges and restrictions, the immigrant stories displayed a particularly strong and bright resonant thread where individuals continued learning, job hunting, or adapting their plans to gain meaningful employment. I include these here not to contribute to the grand narrative, but to highlight the determination, resilience, and persistence they demonstrated when trying to find a path to employment. Instead of giving up, Omabee worked at gaining the Canadian experience she was continually told was required by working in the field of caregiving. She made use of the invaluable services offered by the immigrant serving agencies in the province to get some Saskatchewan specific experience: “But when I started putting the experience I have here in Canada, the part-time experience, I’ve been getting some little calls about interviews. I knew to do this because I’ve been through some newcomer training.” Omabee also enrolled in an “online diploma program in my career area.” She demonstrates resilience as well and says she “is not giving up hope to let myself into the career.” Mike has added to his already impressive educational background as a Doctor of Social Psychology. He completed one postgraduate diploma and enrolled in another to “diversify or give [him] an edge” to obtain meaningful employment or, in his words, prepare him for “future entrepreneurial endeavors.”

Syeda obtained seasonal work while she prepared for a retake of her expired IELTS. Syeda cannot get employment in Economics, but she enjoys the work in a seasonal job, and it has motivated her to further her education. “I love this job, and I love to work there. I learn a lot.

It's important to get a permanent job but the environment needs to be healthy. And this thing also motivates me to further my education." Anne demonstrates agency to stay busy and to get any employment and sees this as a way to learn more about Canadian culture. She says, "if I get a job, I will, yeah, I can have the opportunity to... know more about the community, know about the culture here, know more about the people here." Lydia leveraged community organizations such as libraries and "museums of science and technology" to make connections, practice English, and establish some connections for her son and herself. Although Ferger chose to eventually leave Saskatchewan, it was only after he had spent countless hours applying for jobs and/or further educational opportunities. He exhausted all the options he felt were available to him before making what he felt was a difficult decision to leave Saskatchewan. Providing financially for his family was Ferger's priority and he needed to secure employment. Finally, Smi shows a great amount of agency and persistence to getting employment in her area of expertise. After applying for a laboratory technician position and being unsuccessful due to not meeting current licensing requirements, she worked diligently to understand all the requirements for becoming licensed. Smi secured credential recognition through WES and learned that she would still be required to take a prior learning assessment in addition to a competency exam. In preparation for this exam, she learned that only certain specialties were offered, and those specialties did not include her specific specialty. Happily, Smi continued to seek information and in so doing, soon learned that additional specialties were to be added this fall and made plans to prepare for the competency exam.

Agency can include exploring new ways to get one's knowledge, skills, abilities, personal attributes, and competencies recognized. Almost all participants' stories reflected that they viewed PLAR as having potential to assist with their goals of gaining recognition for what they

already know and can do. This is the aim of obtaining commensurate employment. Omabee noted “it’s a platform that might help to bridge a gap in your career.” Anne appreciates the idea of getting credit for courses if she possesses those skills as it will save her time and would be “very helpful for newcomers to get a job.” Lydia considers a more national scope, “I think the PLAR provide us with the convenience and help to solve the problem of shortage of professional staff.” Although Ferger did talk about PLAR, he highlighted the benefit of international forms of recognition and now has employment in the Czech Republic due to this recognition. In terms of process and policy, Smi identified the benefits of PLAR if self-assessment could be completed prior to immigrating to Canada which would make decision making much more deliberate. Immigrants could then find out if they had gaps or if they could be successful through processes such as PLAR prior to leaving their country of origin and their support networks.

Summary

The word “anecdotal” still whirls around in my head, but I no longer find myself puzzling over the value of storytelling or whose story holds value. The stories in this chapter provide significant value to help us better understand the experiences of immigrants coming to Saskatchewan. In addition, we can better understand the difficulties of professional recognition and gain insights into future possibilities for PLAR. In this chapter, I outlined participant demographics and their individual stories and then shared the resonant threads that wove their stories together in meaningful ways.

Chapter Five

Overview

It is an interesting feeling to become aware of the way in which these participant narrative accounts are changing me and how the stories of Omabee, Mike, Syeda, Anne, Lydia, Fergeri, and Smi have already shaped and re-shaped my reading, thinking, and writing. Narrative inquiries acknowledge the sociality, the conditions under which people's experiences are unfolding, of narrative accounts and of resonant threads (Clandinin, 2023). To acknowledge the sociality in which the resonant threads were written and to provide narrative context, I want to highlight events that were occurring alongside the writing of this chapter. This chapter was written during the spring and into the summer of 2025, and there was one day during this time where my middle child and oldest son asked me for some guidance on an English Language Arts 10 assignment. The question my son had was about formulating a strong thesis statement and producing clear supporting points. They were studying *Boy in the Striped Pajamas* by John Boyne (2006), a story about a Nazi-occupied Poland where the son of a Nazi officer befriends a Jewish prisoner of the same age. Ultimately, the German boy enters the camp, dresses in clothing like his Jewish friend, and ends up dying in the gas chamber at the order of his father who does not know his son has breached the fence that surrounds the camp. This fatal story brings up many questions. The question that my son was hoping to answer was how the fence in the story becomes a symbol of arbitrary boundaries between people. As we spoke and critically examined the text and he shared his ideas of strong supporting points for his working thesis, my mind was drawn back to participant stories. My son was focused on the term "arbitrary." He knew generally that it meant "meaningless," but this did not quite get him to the deeper thesis statement he was after. We considered "autocratic in the use of authority," "random" and then

looked at antonyms like “democratic, accountable.” My son searched “arbitrary fence,” and “purpose of fences,” “boundaries” and so on. We puzzled for quite some time on the notion of a fence and how or why it becomes a symbol of arbitrary boundaries. My son gave me examples from the book he was wanting to use. In these examples it became clear to him; the fence became arbitrary because it did not accomplish its purpose. One purpose was to prevent one group of people from going in and/or to prevent another group of people from going out. Another purpose was to keep these groups from being together. When my son came to this realization, that a fence becomes arbitrary when it does not accomplish its purpose, I came to a realization of my own. My mind wandered back to the narrative accounts and an imaginary picture filled my head; one where competency exams, WES assessments, and online forms looked like fences. I thought about our province on fire, the worst Saskatchewan has seen in a decade, and how quickly the idea of fences seemed...arbitrary. The metaphor of the fence in the novel seemed to be playing out in imaginary boundaries in contemporary society today through non-recognition. Death and destruction can quickly shine a light on these fences, actual or imaginary. I puzzled over the fences my participants were encountering and wondered if there was a time in which they had become or would become arbitrary. What was their purpose and were they accomplishing what was intended? If I see potential in PLAR how do I keep it from becoming a fence?

In the following sections I provide a visual representation of participant accounts, highlighting key words and I explain the importance of circling back to the broader concept of learning recognition. I then synthesize the findings and analysis by working with the resonant threads of this study and connect these to the larger discourses around PLAR’s reinscription within alternative epistemologies, learner mobility, and learning recognition. I move back to

PLAR possibilities, offer action-orientated and pragmatic recommendations and future research, and finish this chapter with final thoughts.

A Visual Adds Perspective

Many people use this type of visual (see Figure 5) to show which words were represented most often in a survey or, in this case, in the transcripts uploaded to NVivo. I was able to remove smaller, arguably less significant words, and to recalibrate the visual. I could keep doing that until there were only a few words left, words I felt were the most prominent in the study. I have versions of this visual, both with more words and with less. This particular version really stood out to me, and I decided to stop removing words here because it really spoke to what I perceive to be the larger purpose of this study. It is about *learning* and recognizing that learning can take place anywhere. It is about what *people know* and can do and getting credit for that knowledge. It is about *working* to get a *job* that uses these *experiences, knowledges, skills,* and abilities. It is about *assessment* and thinking about how we might transform these power-laden exercises *differently* to fill a *need* in Saskatchewan.

Figure 5

Word Cloud Depicting the Recurrence of Specific Words from Participants' Transcripts

honoured in our current PLAR systems in Saskatchewan. To work towards a more equitable system, these complexities and perspectives need to be considered when creating, updating, and delivering PLAR in Saskatchewan. Immigrants bring a significant amount of knowledge, experience, skills, and competencies with them and they are eager to have these attributes recognized in order to positively contribute to Saskatchewan. What we need to do in turn is to ensure that those creating the systems for PLAR engage in dialogue with potential users and remain open to changing these systems so that they are more inclusive.

Making Sense of the Threads of Disillusionment and Effects on Mental Health

I ponder the raggy unkempt threads of disillusionment and worry about its effects on the mental health of immigrants. I question if this reality is factored into how PLAR is delivered in Saskatchewan. That is, how can those involved in creating/revising the processes in Saskatchewan ensure that they at least lessen or mitigate experiences of disillusionment. I also wonder if I *listened* well enough to be able to interpret the stories shared.

As I revisit and puzzle over what I have learned about the experiences of immigrants coming to Saskatchewan and their thoughts when considering PLAR, my thinking is interrupted by my daughter and eldest child who entered the office where I was writing. She had some questions for me about her summer work and some university planning as she prepared to return to post-secondary in the fall. Her questions for school were around improving audition tapes and I reminded her that her best performances are always those where she is authentically herself and when she does not overthink things, but instead “goes with her gut.” My daughter and I share a lot of similar qualities, but it is our shared standard of high expectations, especially for how people behave when they are in leadership positions, that often leads to the biggest disappointment or disillusionment for both of us when things fall apart. We share the view that in

any situation, those responsible for the processes and how they operate in the best way possible are key; if they do not, then the responsible parties will work to fix the system. After we finished our conversation, my daughter left the office. I tried to get back to writing but was thinking about participants and disillusionment again. I wondered about the complexity of everyday lives for immigrants and the connections between this complexity and formal recognition by those who may operate in a much less complex world. I wondered if those responsible for the processes and systems appreciate the multi-faceted and complex social realities that immigrants face. For instance, completing these final chapters was not simple and was significantly more complex as an adult learner with work, parental responsibilities, health issues, and constant interruptions (however welcome they may be). I remembered instances during this doctoral journey when flexibility was afforded throughout the process and how much I appreciated it. This flexibility kept me on course. I reflected on my positionality and acknowledged that while I had encountered some barriers of my own as an English speaking, white woman in Saskatchewan, the barriers that immigrants encountered would be significantly more layered and complicated. I wonder about participant expectations and the complexity of each of their stories in relation to their wider and far-reaching experiences of disillusionment. What were the sources of this disillusionment? Where does responsibility for disillusionment lie? Can this be resolved? What would flexibility look like in this space? Why are systems so complicated? I puzzled over broader immigrant-participant experiences and how they connect to the questions in this study.

Structural, Systematic, and Systemic Barriers Contribute to Disillusionment

Sometimes the lack of pathways to commensurate employment for immigrants is found in the structures and systems that are upheld by the host country; oftentimes these barriers highlight neoliberal underpinnings and barriers that are systemic. These systemic barriers

contribute to disillusionment felt by immigrants. Liu and Guo (2022) published a study which explored the experiences of immigrants navigating lifelong learning in Canada. They identified that “newly arrived immigrants encounter multifaceted structural barriers in their struggle to secure a foothold in the Canadian labour market [which] include delays or even refusal in accepting immigrants’ prior qualifications” (p. 733). They go further to claim that, due to the neoliberal underpinnings of the dominant lifelong learning discourse, “lifelong learning is incarcerated in situated social locations and institutional operation, a state of affairs which frequently produces discrimination and exploitation” (p. 738). Therefore, Liu and Guo (2022) call for transnational lifelong learning for recognitive justice of valuing diverse identities, cultures, and experiences. This call includes inclusive citizenship and deliberate engagement of the immigrant standpoint to accomplish it. The same holds true at a provincial level in Saskatchewan. A 2017 report on newcomer adaptation and settlement in Regina was published as a joint initiative between Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), Regina Region Local Immigration Partnership (RRLIP), and the University of Regina (Kikulwe et al., 2017). While this study identified barriers that immigrants faced moving to Saskatchewan that arguably hold true for anyone such as “accessing childcare, educational opportunities, and employment” (p. ii), their report highlights the need to include immigrant voices in further recommendations to improve the existing range of services that appreciates the complexity of immigrant experiences. One recommendation included improvements to credential recognition services and exploration into PLAR. Notably, the participant stories included in my study highlight the overly complex circumstances of immigrants who are navigating much more than job-seeking in their everyday lives. As PLAR is part of lifelong learning and is primarily located within educational institutions, it too needs to ensure individual participation of members of

socially and culturally differentiated groups. This approach would challenge the “neoliberal belief in credentialism [and reject a] deficit model of lifelong learning which seeks to assimilate immigrants to the dominant social, cultural and educational norms of the host society” (Liu & Guo, 2022, pp. 737-738). My study affirms and evidences the need for an inclusive and equitable strategy for PLAR in Saskatchewan that views diversity as a positive and desirable asset.

Identifying ways to improve structures and systems is certainly an important part of increasing inclusion for immigrants in Saskatchewan. However, adopting an intersectional approach to current systems, including PLAR, to explore the dynamics of immigrants’ transition into the labour market will be critical to avoid revisiting social inequality. With an eye to how immigrants could effectively navigate disillusionment, the 2017 report highlighted several practical and structural improvements that could be implemented. Kikulwe et al. (2017) identified the need for immigrant service agencies to provide pre-arrival services for immigrants. Right now, immigration serving organizations focus their efforts in helping immigrants once they arrive with immediate needs such as housing, food, connecting with community members, and clothing. They also offer career service help such as résumé writing and English language speaking. These organizations, while extremely helpful once immigrants arrive, could offer pre-arrival services around navigating the labour market, licensing/certification processes, credential recognition services and so on (Kikulwe et al., 2017). PLAR could be one of these pre-arrival services and how these processes work will be crucial to mitigate disillusionment experienced by immigrants.

In the narrative accounts included in my study, the difficulty of navigating the systems is evident and causes us to question this approach in favour of a more inclusive one. For instance, none of the participants expected to get commensurate employment right away, but all of them

expressed much confusion at navigating labour markets and education systems quite different from their own homeland countries. In fact, Omabee's husband had immigrated through the Saskatchewan Immigrant Nominee Program (SINP), so held awareness of the process that included a list of in-demand jobs. Indeed, Omabee's PhD in food storage and technology meant that she had expertise in one of the in-demand occupations listed on the government website. Yet, by the time she sought employment in this area, she was unsuccessful at obtaining employment in this sector. After looking again, it seems the list of in-demand occupations for the SINP had changed so that her expertise was no longer considered "in-demand." It seems that provincial nominee programs need to follow federally identified lists of in-demand jobs therefore if these jobs change at the national level, provinces need to update their programs as well putting those immigrants who have not yet obtained employment in the in-demand sector, in a difficult position. Although both Omabee and her husband are highly skilled, both are still unsuccessful in obtaining commensurate employment.

Another structure or system that requires an intersectional approach is education itself including current credential recognition services. Several narrative accounts indicated that there was advice to obtain credential recognition through WES, but participants indicated that the process was very lengthy, and it did not improve job attainment. That is, several of the participants successfully had their credentials verified by WES as fulfillment of the requirement for applicants in the skilled worker category (Banjaree et al., 2021), but this verification had no influence on participants gaining commensurate employment or gaining entry to further education. According to Banjaree et al. (2021) the positive effect on early employment rates after obtaining of Educational Credential Assessment "is limited to those with no previous employment experience in Canada" (p. 358). That is, for Federal Skilled Worker Program

(FSWP) immigrants who worked in Canada before landing “there is no significant employment or earning difference after the introduction of the mandatory ECA requirement” (Banjaree 2021, p. 359).

Others like Fergei and Smi had challenges with educational opportunities when trying to apply to programs within their field but below their level of expertise. Here on a student visa, Mike was hopeful that the post-graduate certificate(s) he completed would give him the edge he needed to secure employment. However, as of the time of writing this chapter, although he has completed two postgraduate certificates using his family’s savings, he has no real prospects in either of the two specialties nor in the social psychology specialty for which he received his doctorate. Despite navigating the student visa system and obtaining two additional postgraduate certificates, it is unclear whether this additional education or the education he already had will lead to meaningful employment. If it does not, Mike expressed a desire to go back to Nigeria. It seems the experiences of participants in this study in Saskatchewan resemble Canada’s racialised regime of de-skilling and re-skilling outlined by a number of studies (Guo, 2009, 2015; Guo & Liu, 2021; Liu & Guo, 2022; Reitz, 2014; Shan, 2009) which reaffirms the need for an inclusive PLAR approach for Saskatchewan.

The narrative accounts shared in my research study shed some light on why PLAR might be a better/alternative option to the Educational Credential Assessment (ECA) such as that offered by WES, however their stories also provide a cautionary tale about how this might be done well. The effectiveness or lack of effectiveness of this initiative is important when considering PLAR as an alternative or complement to the ECA requirement. The purpose of the ECA is to reduce or eliminate the devaluation of foreign education. However, there are remaining challenges including discrimination based on race, ethnicity, and national origin

leading to immigrants being denied employment opportunities and ECA seems to have little to no effect on this discrimination (Banjaree et al., 2021, p. 359). Alternatively, PLAR offers Canadian post-secondary credit for prior learning; however, since this influential 2017 report was published there has not been increased availability of or access to PLAR at Saskatchewan post-secondary institutions. What is probably the greatest structural barrier is that it has not been incorporated into immigrant integration services throughout the province. These are the initial points of contact for immigrants in Saskatchewan, and the narrative accounts indicate, participants were given no information on PLAR at all.

While Liu and Guo (2022) address the structural barriers regarding recognition of immigrant prior qualifications, they also assert that these are “shaped by the intersections of race, gender and class [and that] immigrants’ experiences of employability-oriented lifelong learning unveil institutional complexes and reflect colonizing practices among governmental organizations, qualifications assessment agencies, employment institutions and immigrant services agencies” (p. 733). What I am seeing is that while structural and systems/systematic barriers are evident, it is ultimately people, along with their attitudes, capabilities, and biases, that are at the heart of what holds up these systems and structures. Mike and Smi specifically and directly experienced some of these human hurdles in their first experiences of working in Saskatchewan. Their encounters were not examples of folks acknowledging and affirming “cultural difference and diversity as desirable assets” (Liu & Guo, 2022, p. 733), rather their experiences were examples of a deficit model, and this ultimately results in discrimination, racism, and exploitation. All participants in this study are professionals and are highly educated, and all of them expressed significant struggles in navigating the various immigration stages and systems in Saskatchewan. Whether this was a case of linguistic or cultural differences, the

consequence of navigating difficult and confusing systems led to feelings of self-doubt and a loss of confidence in their abilities. Ultimately, this had negative effects on their mental health as they started to question their personal and professional value. If we are to act on the recommendation put forth by Kikulwe et al. (2017) for an improvement to existing immigrant services, making sure the systems are equitable will be imperative.

Making Sense of the Threads of Oppression and Agency at the Intersections

I think ahead with the threads of oppression and agency at the intersections of race, class, gender, age, ability, sexuality, ethnicity, and imagine a ball of string, waiting to be unraveled. I also reflect on times in my own life where I have experienced oppression or non-recognition as a woman. I think ahead to other times where I was able to enact agency or was expected to employ agency in my career and lifelong learning journey. I remember having trouble articulating what was happening but felt that there were multi-layered and complex structural barriers and social oppression at play and how frustrating this felt. After undertaking this study, I now understand that making sense of discrimination is difficult and enacting agency against structural, systematic, and systemic barriers is even harder. I marvel at what I have heard in terms of participant stories and experiences in their even more complex immigrant life histories and how they have endeavoured to navigate and make sense of these experiences.

In order to honour both the patterns in the participants' stories and the complexity and distinctiveness of each experience, the use of intersectionality as a framework to understand these experiences needs to be flexible and pragmatic. In their study of intersectionality theory to understand settlement and integration of skilled immigrants, Kaushick and Walsh (2018) applaud approaches to intersectionality which are flexible. They favour fluid approaches to the theory over fixed categories as "social life is too irreducibly complex" (p. 30) to predict. These

approaches are like those taken by Guo and Liu (2021) and Annamma and Booker (2021), discussed in Chapter 3 of this dissertation, who call for an integrated intersectional approach which can reveal interlocking oppressions. Guo and Liu (2021), Collins and Bilge (2016), and Carastathis (2016) identify the limitations of simply theorizing with intersectionality. That is, intersectionality needs to be rooted in praxis (Ferree, 2018). Guo and Liu (2021) see the possibility of integrated intersectionality as “a practical intervention in a world characterized by extreme inequality” (p. 246) while Collins and Bilge (2016) and Carastathis (2016) hold the view that “positivist versions of intersectionality [are] misleading” (Ferree, 2018, p.128). Moreover, intersectionality, or integrated intersectionality, is necessarily “also a form of praxis that challenges inequalities and opens a collective space for both recognizing common threads across complex experiences of injustice and responding to them politically” (Ferree, 2018, p. 128). There is more work to be done to understand the inequalities experienced by those immigrating to Canada. The perspectives conveyed by the participants regarding systemic barriers are described below.

Lack of an Effective Path to Recognition

In the participants’ narrative accounts, one of the more common threads across complex experiences is the experience of non-recognition of skills, knowledge, and abilities. Participants experienced non-recognition in various ways, often multiple times, and a key finding was that most participants were unable to identify what exactly the barrier was. They were also unable to identify a path to recognition despite going to great lengths to seek the right path. There have been claims made as to why this non-recognition occurs. Stevens (2022) argues that migrant labour precarity is structural and is “enabled by a shallow regulatory system that does not require businesses to demonstrate a readiness to fulfill the requirements of the migrant labour regulatory

regime” (Stevens, 2022, p. 130). Others point to overly focusing on economic benefits of immigration. Kelly (2023) acknowledged the challenges of creating a welcoming community and asserts that “a narrow focus on the economic utility of immigrants has limited the ability of immigrants to fully and easily integrate into local communities” (p. 942). Kelly (2023) also asserts that employers are overlooking the important social or non-economic aspects of immigration. Although the experience of non-recognition itself was common among participant accounts, the ways in which it was experienced were distinct and the lack of a path to recognition became apparent. For instance, some of the participants experienced non-recognition when prior qualifications were devalued by post-secondary institutions; others experienced it from licensing bodies, employers, and co-workers. What was also of note in the narrative accounts was the participants’ experience of receiving a response of “no” without explanation. Also of note, was participants’ persistence to find some pathway to “yes.” What is interesting is that participants were not initially discouraged by a “no” or “not yet,” but they became confused and felt let down when no reason, or “why,” was provided, and when no clear pathway to “yes” was offered.

Although PLAR presented as a possible pathway to “yes”, it was surprising to discover that it was the participants’ keen desire to experience *recognition* that was the key driver to their considerations of PLAR. In addition, it was clear that participants were very aware of not only the knowledge, skills, and abilities they had, but of the gaps they had as well. They simply wanted an opportunity to demonstrate what they know and can do, and then the opportunity to fill in the gaps that had been identified. I am also reminded of the participant narrative accounts and the learning that occurred through and during their experiences immigrating to Saskatchewan. It is evident that they had all learned a lot through that process; they learned how to navigate complex and often imperfect systems, they learned about Canadian culture, libraries,

cold winters and adapting to life on the prairies, and they learned that pathways to “yes” exist. They learned about life priorities and what should be valued above all else. Clearly a lot of learning took place, though very little of it was formally recognized or captured anywhere.

We can learn from the findings in participant experiences so that PLAR does not repeat this cycle of non-recognition. PLAR offers a viable solution to some of the major concerns expressed by the research participants in this study. However, it would benefit from considerations of how intersectionality is a major factor in affirming cultural difference and diversity as desirable assets and creating a more equitable PLAR in Saskatchewan.

Recommendations: How Experience and Pragmatism can Inform PLAR

If PLAR is to become a tool to help combat the undervaluing of immigrants’ skills, education, and life experiences and come closer to its claim of benevolence, it will need to consider the six core ideas of intersectionality: social inequality, power, relationality, social context, complexity, and social justice (Collins & Bilge, 2016). To begin this process, we also need to consider the ways in which concepts of experience and learning (and therefore PLAR) are rooted in Western epistemologies. While PLAR is generally considered a disruptive tool as it advocates for learning from experience which challenges traditional learning that occurs within the institution. Others problematize the theorization of experience itself and further disrupt claims to knowledge acquisition by trying to separate traditional understandings of experience rooted in theories such as Kolb’s (1984) learning cycle. Michelson (2015) argues that Kolb’s learning cycle reproduces Western epistemologies by “staging learning as a two-step process in which unmediated experience is followed by creation of knowledge through reflection, and gendering epistemological values between loving, communal, emotive apprehension” (p. 89). This view of learning as a two-stage process sets up a power imbalance between the knower and

the learner. That is, if the only way learning and knowledge acquisition is to be viewed is through this Western view of experience, it raises the status of the academic as the only one who can judge whether learning has taken place. As an alternative view with which to view learning from experience, she suggests instead a Deweyan and feminist understanding of experiential learning which acknowledges that experience is not concrete, rather it is already “mediated by culture, language, and culturally overdetermined presuppositions” (Michelson, 2015, p. 89). For this reason, we need to consider reinscribing PLAR within different epistemologies if it is to reach its full potential for social justice as social justice calls for acknowledgement of all forms of experiential learning. Michelson (2015) suggests returning to Dewey’s view of experience which challenges Kolb’s version of experiential learning. That is, Dewey’s “integration of thought and action and of mind and world challenges the epistemological individualism of Kolb’s learning cycle” (p. 91). Dewey’s version of experience creates the space required to reinscribe PLAR within alternative epistemologies.

PLAR: Inclusive of Alternative Epistemologies

If PLAR is to reach its potential of challenging conventional categories of knowledge rather than reaffirming them (Michelson, 1995; 2015), a reinscription of PLAR, one that considers and values alternative epistemologies, is required. Additionally, a shift towards, and championing of, open education and open recognition would serve to make assessment practices transparent thereby disrupting conventional categories of knowledge. As discussed earlier in this dissertation, PLAR’s inscription within dominant Western and Eurocentric epistemologies has been criticized by many. For example, Walters and Cooper (2011) point out “whose knowledge counts is very much a question of who is doing the counting” (p. 33) and this is problematic for PLAR if the counting only happens in the academy. Michelson (1996; 2015) suggests that APEL

or RPL/PLAR, has been trapped within Enlightenment theories of knowledge and should, in this era of increased global mobility, be viewed through alternative epistemologies of post-modernist, feminist, anti-racist theory which have broadened and deepened what can be an extremely narrow and limiting view of knowledge.

Reinscribing PLAR within a framing of alternative epistemologies requires higher education being open to changing systems. In their article which examines how to integrate intersectionality into the study of learning as a way of reconceptualizing learning, Annamma and Booker (2020) explore diversity projects in public education institutions to assess if they are actually accomplishing the social justice aims they set out to do, and challenge those engaging in such projects to critically examine what they are doing. They warn that if these diversity projects “do not seem like contribution or collective continuance, it may be because a hierarchical and bureaucratic system is sustained, relatively unchanged” (p. 301). Annamma and Booker (2020) argue that “these approaches toward diversity projects are not undertaken with an openness to *being changed by* the presence of people with a broader range of experiences, either institutionally or curricularly” (p. 302). They go further and criticize institutions of having very little responsibility to change at all: “Responsibility to open a visible pathway for diverse groups asks little in terms of institutional change in learning contexts—in fact, it can be something an institution fights against while using the discourse of diversity—and in turn, little change in power relations occurs” (p. 301). Similarly, PLAR will not reach its potential, especially of being a tool for social justice that can recognize immigrants’ knowledge, skills, and abilities, if the institutions awarding credit are not open to being changed. Like the diversity projects enacted within public education institutions in the United States and critiqued by Annamma and Booker (2020), PLAR runs the risk of reinscribing power to only one way of knowing—the Western

way. As Annamma and Booker (2020) argue while “it looks good for the institution, aesthetically and philosophically, to include a few bodies noticeably marked by difference without changing the institutional structures,” surface level diversity projects create devastating constraints for equity-deserving groups where difference is perceived to be the enemy of power. That is, when the surface level “goal” of employee diversity has been reached in these diversity projects, “the need for correctives like affirmative action and disciplinary developments like ethnic studies [is thereby eliminated]” (Annamma & Booker, 2020, p. 302). While PLAR should work to mitigate “issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion in education by acknowledging and valuing a variety of learning opportunities” (Conrad, 2022, p.1), a surface level version of PLAR, where policies and processes are in place but where learners are asked to offer proof of experience that equates with learning outcomes rooted in Western epistemologies of assessment, runs the same risk. That is, if institutional structures are not open to substantive change and truly valuing difference, PLAR runs the risk of creating more constraints for immigrants including trying to receive recognition for knowledge that is not even being counted.

Before any meaningful and substantive structural change can occur in the post-secondary institutions where PLAR is primarily located, epistemological bias within these institutions needs to be called into question. This may be the belief that learning can only take place in a seat within the institution or that immigrants are generally low-skilled or that English proficiency equals intellectual acumen, and so on. Chapter 4 briefly discussed the epistemology of ignorance and presumed stance of objectivity in educational assessment practices that expose ongoing systemic oppression in education spaces (Brady, 2017). Brady (2017) and Alcoff (2007) both assert there is inherent bias in PLAR and other educational settings in that “the reproduction of objectivity is presented in educational curricula as students strive to follow a scientific model in

order to seek a supposed truth, but this misses the significant situatedness of knowers, group identities, and an analysis of systemic foundations of oppression” (Alcoff, 2007, p. 40). Brady (2017) is clear in her stance that “the epistemological ignorance of objectivity is rarely raised in education, thus reproducing systems of oppression which become ontological reality” (p. 118). This continual and unquestioned reproduction of the status quo makes PLAR and, in particular the assessing the validity of knowledge that sits outside these Western norms a difficult, if not impossible, task. In challenging individualistic views of learning and knowledge rooted in Enlightenment epistemologies, Michelson (1996) offers a possible solution. She claims that “the key to defining the validity of knowledge is its very self-evident status, that is, intersubjectivity” (p.187). By this she means a shared understanding of what counts as knowledge. Both Brady (2017) and Michelson (1996; 2015) call for a debunking of universal ways of knowing and instead suggest reinscribing knowledge, and the assessment of the validity of that knowledge, within alternative epistemologies that move beyond individual knowing. These alternative epistemologies appreciate intersubjectivity and “create *multicentric* ways of knowing” (Brady, 2017, p. 118). This is an essential point within PLAR as it is critical that equity deserving voices are included in the reimagination of educational systems and its proposed assessment practices. Otherwise, there can be no intersubjectivity, the shared understanding that comes from dialogue, mutual agreement, and personal understandings. Because of the power dynamics rooted in Western views of assessment, which are not shared but given by one to another, equity cannot be realized. If we do not acknowledge the history of education as it has become reified in a dominant Western form and how its roots are entangled in Enlightenment epistemologies, we miss out on valuable forms of knowledge traditions. A revised and improved form of PLAR must consider values, experiences, and lived realities of racialized minorities, that rightfully include

Indigenous peoples, otherwise these traditions will continue to be “labelled as subjective and henceforth weak, non-encompassing ways of knowing” (Brady, 2017, p. 118). Making invisible voices visible is critical to imagining future possibilities, and, one might argue, global survival.

If we are to realize what is a substantial mental mindshift, we need to explore the roles and responsibilities of those who may be able to re-imagine and mobilize PLAR in an equitable and ethical way. From a Saskatchewan context, the possibilities below are not meant to replace recommendations such as workplace strategies, leveraging technology tools, increased PLAR awareness, networking, capacity building and so on outlined in the two reports prepared for the Recognizing Prior Learning Coordinating Group (RCG) published in 2007 and 2008 or the Kikulwe et al. (2017) report. Rather, the goal is to build on these recommendations and to imagine how what was made obvious through the stories of my participants as possible revisions to PLAR might be accomplished in practice. These are contextually based and temporally situated in current needs and immediate action while looking ahead to possibilities. Given the limitations of my study and its smaller sample size, these findings are presented as a starting point for consideration in what will undoubtedly be a much larger undertaking. An equitable reframing of PLAR in Saskatchewan will require a thoughtful review of what has already been accomplished, a looking across to other jurisdictions and institutions across Canada and globally to learn from exemplars, and, most importantly, an honest and thorough scan of our own institutional practices to ensure PLAR is moving towards more inclusive and equitable practices.

Recognizing the Value of Recognition

There have been longstanding calls to democratize in terms of institutional change. Caine et al. (2020), inspired by Arendt (1958) and Dewey (1938), call for “a more participatory democracy and understanding of inclusion, one who recognizes and is accountable to everyday

experiences” (p. 665). As a relational methodology, narrative inquiry may be able to answer that call and play a role in this democratization. Caine et al. (2020) asserts that “narrative inquiry is a methodology that allows researchers to study, not ‘the other,’ but our experience as inquirers in relation to participants’ experiences” (p. 663). These experiences that lie outside our own realms of lived experience and understanding represent complex and multifaceted lives.

Intersectionality, as the chosen framework for this study, provides a pathway of deliberate inclusion of immigrant voices to improve PLAR processes, prioritize *recognition* and work towards cognitive justice. As Liu and Guo (2022) assert, “transnational lifelong learning for cognitive justice and inclusive citizenship needs to ensure individual participation of members of socially and culturally differentiated groups in educational institutions” (p. 738). This participation needs to be included at every level and at every stage of learning, including in assessment and evaluation in higher education and in pathways to employment, to ensure all learning is visible.

Meaningful collaboration between Governments (federal and provincial), post-secondary institutions, immigrant settlement and integration agencies, and employers/regulatory bodies is required to realize the possibilities of PLAR. At the national level, we can look to other global jurisdictions like the European Union, Australia, Kenya, and Scotland and their work on National Qualifications Frameworks and recognition of prior learning, while provinces can undertake to improve recognition practices locally. Below I have outlined some recommendations based on participant narratives and PLAR literature; however, it would be the collaborations and partnerships between the provincial government, post-secondary institutions, immigrant agencies and integration services, regulatory bodies, and employers that would ensure PLAR could reach

its full potential to mobilize recognition across Saskatchewan while advocating for federal support.

PLAR: Bringing the National to International Levels

While the focus of this study is on understanding immigrant experiences of immigrating to Saskatchewan and considering PLAR, recommendations at the provincial level need to consider the international and especially the national landscape regarding recognition. Participant narrative accounts all indicated difficulty in navigating systems and unnecessary misalignment between national and provincial expectations exacerbated their efforts. As discussed in the literature review, there is a significant amount of work being done in the field of international credential recognition, student mobility, recognition of prior learning, transfer credit, and work-based learning, alongside numerous organizations who are actively participating in this work. The common thread between these organizations is the recognition of learning, in its broadest sense, to promote and support mobility of global citizens. It is important that initiatives proposed by the province of Saskatchewan acknowledge these broader efforts.

Institutional or provincial initiatives also need to consider the diverse scope of national work and how these systems can work together (if possible) so they do not add to the already confusing set of standards and practices. For example, in some contract work I completed this year on a competency framework for BCcampus, two things became apparent: first, there are many ways to do a competency framework with no consensus on how this can/should be done; second, while context is important, awareness of national and/or global initiatives matter—this is especially the case when considering the context of immigrants. That is, there is a national effort by the government of Canada through the ESDC branch to facilitate a pan-Canadian dialogue on competencies. This skills and competencies taxonomy acts as the framework for the

Occupational and Skills Information System (OaSIS) which attaches skills, competencies, abilities, and personal attributes relevant to all occupations in Canada through the National Occupational Classification (NOC) system. The goal is to use common vocabulary to describe the competencies, skills, and personal attributes required for every job for every occupation in Canada. This common vocabulary will make the overlap in skills, competencies, abilities, and personal attributes more obvious and will improve mobility across occupations.

As I learned through the experience of undertaking this contract work, those working on competency frameworks for specific occupations need an awareness of the national work to facilitate a pan-Canadian dialogue on competencies. The goal of competency frameworks is to create consistent standards across a specific occupation. However, if the vocabulary used to create the competency framework is different from the vocabulary used nationally, the outcome will be inconsistent; in fact, the result will be two (or more) different terms being used to describe the same competency. This confusion is further exacerbated when employers creating job ads do not use the national terminology in the Occupational and Skills Information System (OaSIS) developed by ESDC. Concerns have been raised by some sectors that OaSIS is outdated; however, there is ongoing work to update the system currently underway and discussions of collaborating with sector partners who are developing national occupational standards of their own. I am hopeful that there will be improved synergies between sector-specific National Occupational Standards and the federal government's National Occupational Classifications (NOC), so updates reflect standardized vocabulary at the national level that considers contextually specific sector terminology. Improved collaboration in terms of the vocabulary used to describe skills, competencies, abilities, and personal attributes improves learner recognition and, in turn, mobility. Provinces need to at least be aware of this national and

international work so that they can make informed decisions around creating competency frameworks, creating job ads, and drafting curriculum and assessments.

Considering the experiences of immigrants in this study, their pathways began with information from IRCC which meant that they needed to consult the NOCs to see if their skills, competencies, abilities, and personal attributes matched those of the in-demand occupations. They then consulted province specific information from regulatory boards or job sites. If the vocabulary used federally does not match the vocabulary used provincially by regulatory bodies and employers, it proves much more difficult for immigrants to self-assess and verify their professional skills. Moreover, if post-secondary programs are not aware of and do not make use of these national resources when creating programs, then programs and their assessments do not align with employable skills. Job ads, educational programs and training, and recognition practices should all align so that navigation of these often complex systems can be facilitated. It is the responsibility of provinces to keep up with the developments in national endeavors as this will result in more seamless processes for those new to Canada and greater overall success with the recognition of immigrant work experience and mobility.

PLAR Policy: Need for Co-Development of Standards

The introduction of provincial nominee programs (PNP) has given provincial governments an increased role in the selection of immigrants (Kelly, 2024). The same is true in Saskatchewan. In addition to the Saskatchewan Immigrant Nominee Program (SINP), the Government of Saskatchewan's *Labour Mobility and Fair Registration Practices* (2022) gave the provincial government the ability to create plans to address credential recognition issues for new Canadians, and require transparent, timely, procedurally fair registration practices so that internationally trained workers can get licensed in Canada without unnecessary requirements by

Canadian regulators. This increased role provides the province of Saskatchewan with the possibility and opportunity to lead initiatives which could help immigrants obtain credit for learning so they can obtain commensurate employment.

Government Led: Develop a Provincial PLAR Framework for Recognition

If the need is seen and appreciated, RPL/PLAR practices could be standardized and streamlined across sectors by the co-development of standards and a provincial framework. This framework could be funded by the provincial government and co-developed with post-secondary institutions, RPL/PLAR experts throughout Saskatchewan, including employers, regulatory bodies and immigrant agencies and integration services. In participant narrative accounts, it was consistently indicated that lack of PLAR information was a problem. Part of this problem is that it is not widely promoted by immigrant service organizations throughout Saskatchewan. Currently, the processes that do exist vary widely by post-secondary institution and there is a lack of collaboration with employers, and sector partners which is creating confusion and inconsistency. In addition, immigration agencies and integration services do not promote PLAR as part of their services despite having collaborated on published research briefs calling for more research to be done on PLAR.

There is a credential recognition unit branch within the provincial government which provides immigrants with credential recognition assistance and grants to pay for Educational Credential Assessment. However, PLAR is not currently being promoted as part of credential recognition by those who work in government. There is institutional pathway exploration by the STCLPC. However the credit recognition unit and the STCLPC are housed in different ministries, and it is unclear if there is collaboration or if PLAR is a priority. It is important to note that there was significant province-wide work accomplished between 2002 and 2008 to

advance inter-institutional initiatives including RPL and labour mobility through the establishment of Campus Saskatchewan, SaskCAT, and RPL working groups, but it is unclear why these no longer exist. Membership included representative groups from all post-secondary institutions, regional colleges and private vocational schools, independent Bible colleges, government representatives from K-12 education and advanced education, and the Saskatchewan Apprenticeship and Trade Certification Commission (SATCC). I recommend re-establishing Campus Saskatchewan and SaskCAT to further the vital work that was started but to also increase membership to include immigrant agencies and integration services. The collaborative work could begin with sectors/programs connected to in-demand occupations outlined by the SINP. The long-term goal would be to support institution-wide PLAR at every post-secondary institution across the province and to expand PLAR in industries and with employers where this makes sense. This overhaul would require meaningful and deliberate co-construction of assessments with industry and regulatory/licensing bodies. In addition, institutional quality assurance processes would include PLAR when considering new program implementation and outcomes/standards/assessments would be reviewed within program review cycles.

As part of this collaboration and in conjunction with the Saskatchewan Higher Education Quality Assurance Board (SHEQAB), the provincial government could require that PLAR assessments be included for all newly proposed program submissions from post-secondary institutions as part of quality assurance. This added criterion would need to be included in SHEQAB's *Program Review Standards and Criteria*¹⁴ both in the program design, content and delivery section and in the credential recognition and nomenclature section and would have

¹⁴ [Program Review Standards and Criteria](#)

several benefits. By creating/considering PLAR at the proposal stage, programs are then ensuring that the assessments are authentic and closely aligned with industry and regulatory standards/competencies required for any future jobs. Also, PLAR makes programs more attractive to adult learners who may have obtained some of the knowledge, skills, abilities, personal attributes, and competencies required to complete the program. From an institutional perspective, PLAR could serve as a recruitment tool by providing credit for learning acquired through informal, non-formal, or experiential learning while also providing information on learning gaps. If gaps are identified, potential learners could fill those gaps with coursework. Some of the challenges here might include gaps identified based on bias or perceptions of those doing the assessment. One way to mitigate this would be to develop and deploy assessor training, which is already happening in some parts of the world like Ireland and Australia. There has already been some work done to ascertain what training exists in Canada for assessors who possess the subject matter expertise but perhaps do not have competencies related to PLAR.

In addition, this co-constructed PLAR policy work could work towards changing how PLAR affects study/enrolment status. Sometimes processes or policies are in place simply because they have always been this way or because silos within the institution exist and therefore there is a lack of understanding about how a change would impact other siloed areas of the institution. For example, when I looked closely at PLAR processes from my role as PLAR facilitator, it was claimed that we could not ever ensure that curriculum was up to date within the PLAR candidate guides. Through much investigation and collaboration, we found a point in the process that could trigger an update to the guide, developed a workflow for our team to address the update, and crafted policy to reflect institutional timelines. There were several groups affected by these changes so buy-in was critical. I suspect study/enrolment status has similar,

multi-team implications to a change, however, co-constructed PLAR would provide the opportunity for multiple perspective/concerns to be shared and could foster innovation on how to solve these problems. This change to enrolment status would require collaboration with the federal government. Currently if a learner enrolls in PLAR to receive credit for a course, student status may be reduced. PLAR is often treated like transfer credit where a course is dropped if equivalency has been determined; however, PLAR processes take significantly more time than transfer credit. Undertaking a PLAR process takes considerable time to complete (in some cases obtaining letters of reference, writing reflections, providing transcripts, doing a demonstration, creating portfolios, and so on) and in many respects could be considered equivalent to taking a formal post-secondary course. Learning has taken place; it just did not take place in the academy so equating PLAR to purely a measure of course time is illogical. If PLAR counted towards student status, enrolling in PLAR would not reduce students' status from full-time to part-time. This could ensure students maintain access to financial aid, and it could ensure that study visas and immigration status are not negatively affected.

As it stands now, there are various views on PLAR and how it can be meaningfully, sustainably, and equitably established. The creation of a provincial framework derived from critical engagement with various participating groups, notably by immigrants as PLAR candidates, would ensure greater consistency across Saskatchewan and challenge current systems that appear to value immigrants solely for their economic contributions.

Post-Secondary Institution Led: Develop PLAR that Honours the Learner

Equitable PLAR will require honouring the learner over honouring the curriculum and revisiting principles of adult learning (Kawalilak & Wihak, 2013). We have learned that PLAR has roots in the theory of experiential learning (Groen & Kawalilak, 2014; Harris, 1999; 2018;

Lange, 2021) and some studies highlighted how this can be problematic given PLAR's historical connection to Western or Eurocentric views of assessment (Guo, 2009; Michelson, 1996; 2015; Pokorny, 2012). This solely Western view of assessment practices eclipses and ignores the plurality of knowledges that exist on a global scale. Even mapping assessment to learning outcomes has been criticized for favouring the academy over the learner as some argue, it does not appreciate the diversity of experiences (Pokorny, 2012; Colley, 2003). These assessment practices are problematic given the growing diversity of our population in Saskatchewan, Canada, and around the world. Moreover, the lack of coordination between assessment practices in post-secondary institutions and assessment practices in the workforce or by regulatory/licensing bodies highlights tensions among standards and various ways of knowing. That is, in many cases assessments delivered at post-secondary institutions do not resemble the knowledge, skills, abilities, personal attributes, and competencies required on the job. So, while students may do well on course assessments, employers feel students are not ready for work. If PLAR is solely based on course assessments and not on the knowledge, skills, abilities, personal attributes, and competencies that are required on the job, PLAR will honour the curriculum over honouring the learner. As Pokorny (2024) notes in her article which aims to further problematize the assessment of RPL, "it is suggested that RPL assessment processes themselves may constitute a barrier to take-up and there has been a move to reconceptualise RPL as a distinctive specialised pedagogy for mediating knowledge sharing across boundaries" (p. 13). As a method which appreciates the locatedness and situatedness of knowledge creation, specialised pedagogy must include the voices of equity-deserving groups at the centre of PLAR assessment and the structures facilitating this process need to be flexible (Harris 1999; 2018). PLAR innovation needs to return to adult learning principles that include all learners.

Although post-secondary institutions could lead this work, government, post-secondary institutions, immigrant-serving organizations, employers, and candidates must collaborate across multiple intersections to assess prior learning. There would also need to be a shift towards a competency-based system and what this would mean for post-secondary institutions who are traditionally the bearers of credit (Griffiths, 2023). This shift does not mean we need to focus on skills at the expense of human development. Many of the competencies and personal attributes highlighted in the Government of Canada's OaSIS, such as critical thinking, problem solving, social perceptiveness, are essential across professions, yet they are often developed through programs not explicitly designed to build skills. I recommend joint initiatives that include training for advisors and assessors, employers, and regulatory bodies in co-creating learner-centred, culturally responsive PLAR that map to the competencies required in the workforce. There are tools to do this work such as eCampus Ontario's Competency Framework Toolkit and open access examples of competency frameworks readily available online.

Given that English is often a barrier to appropriate employment, it would be interesting and useful to create assessment practices that empower candidates such as a more dialogical approach to assessment. This approach values negotiated meaning-making and appreciates the influences and broader cultural context of candidates (Pokorny, 2012). This approach would include the voices of immigrants as candidates and challenge discrimination and power differentials (Guo, 2015). With rising immigration, assessment practices can be adapted to better reflect the diversity of the workforce. Therefore, PLAR assessment would need to include language, and literacy supports throughout the various stages, as well as shared and co-constructed resources that could support different knowledge systems. Immigrant service

organizations could help facilitate the collection of documentation and provide direct advice on PLAR processes available to immigrants.

All Potential Beneficiaries: Develop a Collaborative Approach to Learning, Credential Recognition, and Pathways

To avoid complicating a fast moving and already complex system, a collaborative approach is critical. Arguably, the system is already too complex for learners to navigate. With assessment of any kind, including PLAR, validating learning comes in the form of a credential that verifies that the learning took place. Currently, there is a lot of work being done to streamline this process which is arguably complicating the landscape. For example, digital credentialing strategies have significantly increased over the last decade providing learners with the ability to track and make all forms of learning visible. This means that there are many options available to institutions looking to invest in things like wallets for these digital credentials.

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) and learning management systems (LMS) has further complicated the landscape and again highlights the need for a collaborative approach to PLAR. Arguably, the shift towards digitization has led to innovation and people claiming that the use of AI or more open LMS could offload some of the more self-directed or labour-intensive elements of PLAR such as self-assessment. However, there are many different platforms and tools being developed and piloted, and this makes it difficult to determine if/how they should be used and, if so, which one(s). There are many opportunities and risks associated with the use of these tools and platforms (Lantero et al., 2023).

The open recognition movement may serve to sort through some of this complexity and remove barriers to recognition. As Guo (2015) acknowledged, barriers to international credential recognition have been identified as a significant problem. However, the open recognition

movement is gaining traction as evidenced by the Open Recognition Alliance¹⁵, the Gronigen Declaration Network¹⁶, the Credential As You Go incremental credentialing initiative¹⁷ and conferences such as the International Conference on Open Education, Open Recognition Technologies and Practice (ePIC)¹⁸ that occur yearly. There are even initiatives put forth by the ILO outlining guidelines on costing and financing RPL/PLAR¹⁹. Thanks to ongoing efforts such as these, there has been a shift away from recognizing credentials to recognizing learning and the skills and abilities that people bring with them. More importantly, these efforts to open recognition are advancing conversations around equity, diversity, and inclusion in that they challenge traditional understandings of what counts as knowledge.

This movement opens up possibilities in partnerships. It reaffirms the need for an integrated and learner-centred approach to PLAR. I recommend that this approach could be one where immigrant-serving organizations could guide clients to educational and career pathways that include PLAR. Additionally, post-secondary institutions could ensure that PLAR pathways are created for all programs, that bridging and micro-credential programs are designed with PLAR diversity and industry standards in mind. Most importantly, governments could ensure that funding streams are made available for this collaboration. An investment in these initial stages could yield multiple returns for our shared national future in a world of global labour mobility.

¹⁵ [Open Recognition Alliance](#)

¹⁶ [Gronigen Declaration Network](#)

¹⁷ [Credential As You Go](#)

¹⁸ [ePIC 2025](#)

¹⁹ [ILO Guidelines for Costing and Financing RPL](#)

All Potential Beneficiaries: Increase Promotion and Awareness

It has been widely acknowledged across the globe that PLAR has been underutilized as a form of recognition. Still, PLAR has been successful and well-utilized in nations like the EU and Australia who have implemented a national qualifications framework along with a more general awareness in educational settings of how PLAR can be useful to an overall national vision (Bohlinger, 2017; Klages & Mustafa, 2022; Kleins-Collins, 2020). In the context of Saskatchewan, I recommend a similarly unified approach to the promotion and awareness of PLAR across post-secondary institutions, immigrant-serving organizations, government ministries, licensing bodies, and employers. The inclusion of employers, multiple branches of government actors, all levels within PSIs, representatives from immigrant serving organizations, and, notably, PLAR practitioners and potential users of PLAR would ensure a shared understanding of PLAR so that it is widely used.

As a learning designer, one of the first things I would recommend in such a provincial undertaking is that each group participate in learning activities related to PLAR, for instance participating in CAPLA's monthly communities of learning, so that the conversations can more quickly turn into action. CAPLA has been advancing recognition of prior learning for decades and is currently growing and planning for the future. Some organizational changes and the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown slowed down initiatives temporarily and currently board members are more eager than ever to advance PLAR. While it is possible for each group to join a variety of organizations related to RPL/PLAR, joining CAPLA would be an excellent first step as it. Joining CAPLA would provide the Canadian context needed to focus PLAR work. As a current board member, I am excited about the momentum I am seeing and the talent in this group. There are plans to revamp the website in a user-centred way, update the RPL quality

assurance manual, facilitate pan-Canadian initiatives and collaborations, all the while with the vision of becoming the national group advancing work and learning recognition in Canada. The current board is diverse with representation from people within various post-secondaries across several provinces, RPL experts and practitioners, work-based learning experts, and digital credential and open recognition experts. CAPLA also provides information on and access to other provincial RPL groups across Canada. They facilitate resource sharing connected to international RPL initiatives such as the International Labour Organizations (ILOs) recent publication of guidelines on costing and financing RPL. By all groups joining the national organization, there would be immediate knowledge sharing and increased collaboration among groups in Saskatchewan resulting in a shared understanding of the RPL landscape. This shared understanding is quite likely to lead to inclusive policy and actions that would better serve immigrants in Canada.

All Potential Beneficiaries: Implement, Monitor and Evaluate PLAR

Klages and Mustafa (2022) and Pokorny (2012; 2018) stress the importance of ethical and inclusive tracking, monitoring and collecting longitudinal data for evaluation of PLAR. This could be completed as a partnership between immigrants, immigrant integration service organizations, and post-secondary institutions to help inform government policy that seeks to improve immigration practices in Saskatchewan. The data gathered could be a mix of qualitative and quantitative data with a deliberate inclusion of narrative accounts from PLAR candidates, employers, regulatory bodies, post-secondary institutions and government. The inclusion of multiple perspectives can ensure that assessments reflect both personal, professional, and social realities.

What Brings Me to This Work: Revisiting Justifications

My novice researcher aims were tempered by Clandinin (2023) who reminded me that research texts “are intended to engage audiences to rethink and reimagine the ways in which they practice and the ways in which they relate to others” (p. 31). As I began this research as a novice researcher, I was made aware that my hopes for this study might change and that I would change too. As I revisited my personal, practical, and social justifications for the study I thought back to who I was before meeting Omabee, Mike, Syeda, Anne, Lydia, Fergeri, and Smi. My study justifications were based on my personal experiences of non-recognition and recognition and to being attuned to how this process made me feel. As an educator, I saw the positive effects of recognition on countless occasions, and I wanted others to experience its benefits too. More than this, I hoped that PLAR, or an improved PLAR process, could be a tool to help make social justice aims more of a reality. After learning from participants in this study, my hopes have increased. As I think about how my participants and I have changed through dialogue with one another, I am more motivated to take this knowledge forward to action. It will be the participant stories that will continue to motivate me in this work.

My practical and social justifications are also connected to my personal justifications. In this study, the practical and social justifications are intimately connected as I look ahead to further participatory projects and how this work might be shared going forward. Clandinin (2023) suggests that “listening deeply and inquiring into our changed lived and told stories calls forth the possibility of attending differently, or shifting practices, and of creating possible sociopolitical or theoretical places where our work and our lives can make a difference” (p. 32). There are practical justifications present in the background and context that consider the sociopolitical and theoretical places of our work and lives and highlight the benefits of PLAR

throughout institutions globally. There also exists the practical justification where PLAR might be an alternative to foreign credential recognition processes. Given the inevitable backlog and delays of foreign credential recognition, PLAR could streamline this process by providing immigrants with Canadian/Saskatchewan post-secondary credit for learning in a much more expedient way than the current process of credential recognition. At a national and institutional level PLAR has the potential to solve practical problems of recognizing student prior learning and experience, improving retention and recruitment rates, addressing labour shortages, and meeting skills gaps. My social justifications are connected to sociopolitical and theoretical implications where this work might make a difference. The inquiry highlighted discrimination and racism throughout the immigration experience, and the difficulty immigrants face in getting recognition for the knowledge, skills, abilities, personal attributes, and competencies acquired from their country of origin. My study also touched on the negative effects of non-recognition and offered recognition of learning as an alternative.

By revisiting these justifications and by reflecting on the findings of this inquiry I am left with more wonderings and imaginings of different possibilities for PLAR as a tool for social justice. My initial justifications for this study began with wanting to understand lived experiences, specifically those of immigrants navigating the work and educational landscapes in Saskatchewan but have since shifted towards looking ahead to action. In my closing, I outline recommendations for future research stemming from these wonderings and imaginings where a plan for action is in place.

Recommendations for Future Research

I have always been interested in, and in some cases attuned to, systemic limitations or discriminatory practices that are mostly invisible within systems—at least this is the case for

those of us who do not have to consider these things on a daily, even hourly, basis. I am heartened by the fact that there is a great deal of work underway to advance social justice and the recognition of all types of learning. As someone who has worked in the post-secondary space for many years, it is important to me that the systems that claim to support social justice reflect processes that align with this aim. When there is obvious misalignment, it is quite likely that systemic limitations or discriminatory practices are present. These limitations may be human-centred, or they may be structural, or they may be both; regardless of which limitation(s) is present, they need to be interrogated. The diverse perspectives gathered by deliberating and engaging in meaningful conversations with those who have less visibility or outside our regular social networks can challenge these limitations and practices and ultimately lead to improvement. My interest in this study is connected to advancing social justice aims where these limitations or discriminatory practices within systems are made visible and then solutions applied. My primary interest is in supporting the success of students/learners/candidates and helping to transform the system to meet their needs and interests, and to realize their full potential. The recommendations for future research align with this ethos I carry in my professional and everyday life.

My recommendations seek to fill the gaps still present due to the limitations of this study. First, I would recommend future research to explore those immigrants who have used PLAR in Saskatchewan. This would include instances where immigrants used PLAR from post-secondary institutions and those awarded by regulatory/licensing bodies or national professional associations. There are multiple projects underway under the broad umbrella of credential recognition or pathways funded by the federal government's Foreign Credential Recognition Grant and research led by Saskatchewan is missing from the list of awards. This research might

involve international students taking up PLAR-focused research as they would be able to identify specific opportunities and barriers in post-secondary institutional processes from their unique perspectives. Secondly, future research might follow immigrants who undertake PLAR and examine their success in obtaining commensurate employment. This might also include a study of how PLAR inspires users to gain employment in a different field. There has been movement recently to bridge the gap between what some would perceive to be academic PLAR and workplace or work-based PLAR. Research in these two areas and exploring their intersections would be valuable especially in the context of immigration in Saskatchewan. I am also inspired by a framework put forward by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) for recognizing, validating, and credentialing learning in all its forms. For me, there needs to be both a robust system that recognizes and validates credentials and all forms of learning, and a system that directly ties the credentials to the diverse labour market. The CICan PLAR framework (2023) called for the same system overhaul and therefore RPL/PLAR needs to be part of the system when considering any new credential at all, and this framework needs to inform future research. Third, I would like to see Saskatchewan-based research on PLAR and micro-credentials. The type of short training offered by micro-credentials makes them excellent tools to assess for PLAR. This research would include the incorporation of Learning Management Systems (LMS) to facilitate this process including awarding digital badges. Finally, I would like to see research that takes a participatory approach with candidates navigating a system that uses these frameworks so that their perspectives are visible and incorporated into future projects.

Final Reflections: “In the Midst” of a Movement

Writing this final reflection proved difficult with the awareness that learning occurs daily and with the knowledge that what I learn tomorrow will not be included in this study. Clandinin (2023) explains that “narrative inquiry always begins and ends in the midst of ongoing experience” (p. 27). There were many times throughout the writing of these final chapters where I wanted time to stop. Throughout this research study, I participated in various forms of learning, and I had a distinct sense that the RPL/PLAR space was moving too fast for me to keep up with all of the developments. I was worried that I would not be able to accurately capture the story of the PLAR landscape in Saskatchewan while it kept moving and while I kept learning. However, Clandinin (2023) reminds the narrative inquirer that “for narrative inquirers, the exit is never final” (p. 27). The learning I experienced throughout the research study could be envisioned as a PLAR landscape—one that includes formal learning, informal, and experiential learning engaging in these various forms of learning as a doctoral student/candidate, participating in monthly communities of learning, engaging in conversations with colleagues and friends, attending conferences and so on. This learning occurred in the midst; that is, in the midst of life and messiness, of children leaving home and the province for post-secondary, of emergency room visits and aging parents with health concerns, of new jobs and precarious employment, of holidays and time at the lake; I could go on. I mention the context of learning in the midst because it highlights the “need to think about the ongoingness of institutional, social, cultural, familial, and linguistic narratives in which each of our lives is lived and is being lived” (Clandinin, 2023, p. 27). This “ongoingness” is critical when we consider the even more complex lives of immigrant adult learners and how to think about their learning and recognition within the PLAR process. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to PLAR; however, the more

experiences of immigration and non-recognition/recognition are made visible, the more likely it is that an equitable and pragmatic process for PLAR becomes a possibility.

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Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Letter

Are you an immigrant and are you considering Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition or have you taken part in PLAR? I would like to hear from you.

(PLAR) is a process of earning post-secondary credit for prior learning that includes formal, informal, non-formal, and experiential learning. PLAR can be used when credit cannot be awarded for formal learning through Foreign Credential Recognition processes or transfer credit processes.

I am a University of Calgary doctoral student who is wanting to better understand the experiences of immigrants who undertook PLAR at a Saskatchewan post-secondary institution or who are considering PLAR as part of my doctoral journey. Your input can help inform how PLAR processes might better serve immigrants in Saskatchewan and help others to understand how PLAR can earn them credit for learning.

This study is open to anyone who:

1. Is an immigrant and lives in Saskatchewan.
2. Considered engaging in or engaged in prior learning assessment and recognition processes at any Saskatchewan post-secondary institution. **Note:** consideration for the study is not dependent on successful completion of a PLAR course or program. If you attempted to receive credit for formal, informal, non-formal, or experiential learning but did not receive credit, you are eligible to participate. If you considered or are considering PLAR, you are eligible to participate.
3. Is not currently enrolled in PLAR.

If this sounds like something you may be interested in, please fill out the preliminary survey link below:

Survey: [Survey Link]

Questions/Concerns

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

Tenielle McLeod
EdD Candidate, Werklund School of Education, tenielle.mcleod@ucalgary.ca

Dr. Yvonne Poitras Pratt
Principal Investigator, Werklund School of Education, ypratt@ucalgary.ca

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this study (REB23-1562)

Appendix B: Recruitment Survey

Name of Researcher, Faculty, Department, Telephone & Email:

Tenielle McLeod, EdD Candidate, Werklund School of Education, tenielle.mcleod@ucalgary.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Yvonne Poitras Pratt, Werklund School of Education, yppratt@ucalgary.ca

Title of Project: Honouring the Adult Learner Through Recognition: Critically Exploring Immigrant Experience Using PLAR at Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Institutions

This consent form is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information. Participation is completely voluntary, and confidential.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to explore experiences of immigrants who undertook prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) at a Saskatchewan post-secondary institution. This research is being done as part of the researcher's doctoral dissertation.

What Will I Be Asked To Do? The following survey will determine your eligibility as a study participant and will take less than 10 minutes to complete. Data collected will be utilized to determine eligibility for participation in the study, and all data collected will be stored in a password-protected server and deleted within two weeks of participant selection. Information collected will not be shared for purposes other than participant recruitment and selection. As a participant, you can withdraw from the survey at any time by closing the internet window.

By choosing YES, you indicate that you:

1) understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and

2) agree to proceed

- Yes - No

Questions/Concerns: If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

Tenielle McLeod EdD Candidate, Werklund School of Education, tenielle.mcleod@ucalgary.ca

Dr. Yvonne Poitras Pratt Principal Investigator, Werklund School of Education, yppratt@ucalgary.ca

[The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this study (REB23-1562)]

Thank you for completing this survey to determine your eligibility for participating in this research study.

Survey Questions (MS Forms)

1. Are you an immigrant to Canada?
 - Yes
 - No
2. What is your country of origin?
3. What is your gender?
4. What is the type of visa you acquired to immigrate to Canada?
5. What was the level of education obtained outside of Canada (ie., certificate, diploma, degree, etc.)?
6. What is your present profession?
7. How long have you lived in (indicate number of years and/or months):
 - Canada?
 - Saskatchewan?
8. What type of community do you reside in Saskatchewan?
 - Village
 - Hamlet
 - Town
 - City
 - Acreage
 - Farm
9. Name of institution where you undertook PLAR?
10. Please describe the course or program you were enrolled in, or seeking to enroll in, when you undertook/considered PLAR.
11. Are you aware whether your profession is regulated or unregulated?
12. If yes can you identify the regulatory body?
13. Approximate date of course/program start.
14. Approximate date of course/program end (if applicable).
15. Did you complete PLAR and receive academic credit?
 - Yes
 - No

If you are willing to be interviewed about your experience via Zoom© at a mutually determined time, please fill in the following:

- Name [Fill In]
- Gender/Preferred Pronouns [Fill In]
- I prefer to be contacted by:
Telephone [Fill In]
- The best time to call [Fill In]
- Email [Fill In]

The researcher will follow up with eligible and chosen participants via phone or email. The researcher will also invite a phone call to discuss the informed consent form before signing and clarify any questions participants may have. Thank you for your interest in this research study!

Tenielle McLeod

Appendix C: Social Identity Mapping Exercise Instructions and Examples

Overview: Social identity maps are commonly used to reflect on one's positionality in any given context. The social identity map, outlined by Jacobson and Mustafa (2019), is intended to be used as a reflexivity tool. It will be used in this study for the primary purpose of reflecting on the researcher's own and participants' positionality. By using this tool, the researcher hopes to be able to foster a dynamic between researcher and participant that is sensitive and respectful to participants being interviewed. Also, the tool will make explicit the researcher's motivations for conducting this study and how researcher background and experiences impact this motivation. Finally, it will inform how the researcher analyses and interprets the data by highlighting researcher bias and assumptions. In order to accomplish these goals, the researcher will complete a social identity map prior to the study's commencement and at various stages throughout the research study. The social identity map is meant to be fluid and flexible as our identities change over time. In addition, the researcher would like to request that participants complete the exercise. Participant completion of this exercise will ensure that the researcher can also reflect on potential overlapping aspects which may impact the research interaction.

Instructions:

Complete the social identity mapping exercise prior to your interview. We will use time at the beginning of the interview to discuss and reflect on each other's map.

The social identity map can be completed in any number of ways. The blank tree diagram below can be printed off and filled in by hand or you can email it to the researcher prior to your interview time. I have used the diagram below to complete my social identity map.

Please consult the examples below.

Note: the tiers below may be interpreted in a variety of ways. There is no right or wrong answer. This simply acts as a reflective tool to consider your identity.

Tier 1: The identification of social identities

- a. Add a grouping or remove a grouping from the map if you feel it does not apply. For example, you may want to add immigration status, religion, relationship status, political affiliation (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019).
- b. Identify the broader facets of social identity such as class, citizenship, ability, age, race, sexual orientation, cis/trans status, gender, etc. Consider the following question: How do these facets of my identity impact the way I interact with others?

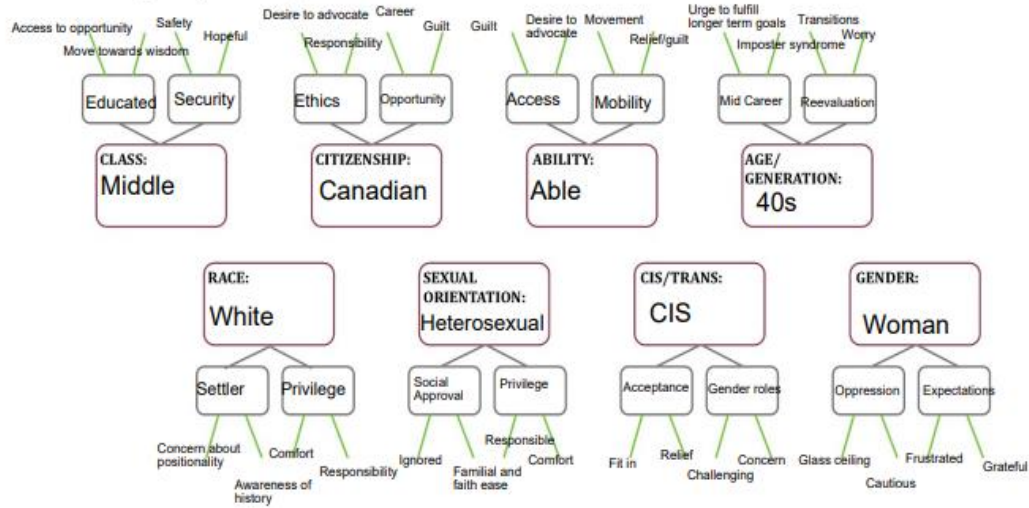
Tier 2: How these positions impact our life

- a. Identify how these positions impact your life. For example, consider the following questions: What opportunities or positions does it enable? What are the values attached to the identity? How might you interpret events or interactions through the lens of the identity?

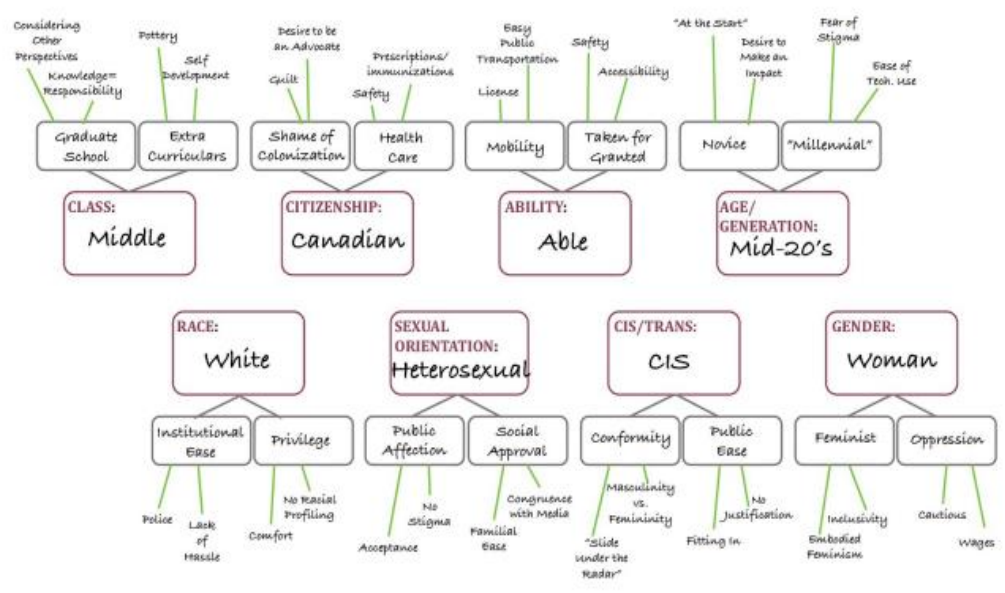
Tier 3: Details that may be tied to the particularities

- a. Identify emotions that may be tied to the details of your social identity. For example, Jacobson and Mustafa (2019) reflect on the fact that they approach the world in a more cautious way because of the oppression they feel as women. They explained that growing up they were warned not to walk at nighttime alone on campus for fear of being assaulted.

Example 1 (Tenielle)



Example 2 (Jacobson)



Appendix D: Interview Reference Guide

Primary Question

What are the experiences of immigrant adult learners when they engage in or consider engaging in PLAR processes at a post-secondary institution in Saskatchewan?

Secondary Question

The following secondary question was added to support my initial/primary research question:
How did using an integrated intersectional framework reveal how PLAR promotes inclusion or compounds disadvantage?

Proposed Semi-structured Interview Questions

1. I'm interested to hear what brought you to Canada? You mentioned (identity or issue-related) when we discussed your social identity maps. Can you say a little more about this?

For participants who engaged in PLAR:

2. About your engagement with PLAR and the processes involved—
 - Can you begin your story by explaining how you would describe PLAR to someone unfamiliar with it?
 - Please tell me about the factors which contributed to you choosing to undertake PLAR?
 - What did you hope would happen by undertaking PLAR?
3. Can you tell me what happened in undertaking PLAR?
 - What aspects of PLAR did you find most helpful? (*Can you elaborate?*)
 - What aspects of PLAR did you find the most challenging? Can you tell me more about these challenges and how they impacted you?
 - What tips might you give someone to help them navigate the PLAR process?
4. What was the outcome?
 - How would you compare your education/career opportunities now, to those before you engaged with PLAR?
 - If PLAR had not been an option for you, how might this have impacted/affected you?
5. People experience PLAR differently. Some share positive experiences, while others share less than positive stories regarding PLAR. I'm interested to know what your experience has been? And your perspective having engaged with PLAR?

For participants who considered or are considering PLAR

1. Can you describe how you understand PLAR?
2. I'm curious about why you are considering or have considered PLAR. Can you tell me about this?

For all participants

3. Are there other things I haven't asked you about that you would like to share, regarding your experience with PLAR?
4. Do you have any insights or recommendations you'd like to share about how PLAR is administered at this institution (*what you experienced as strengths of the PLAR process and also challenges?*) Feedback/recommendations regarding the PLAR process

Additional Prompts

I will also draw from the prompts that follow, to get richer descriptions and to gain a deeper understanding:

- Tell me more about when...
- I'm curious about what you meant when you...
- What's that been like for you...
- Can you offer an example...
- How might this ...
- I wonder, how you ...
- What else might ...
- What challenges did you ...
- Can you describe ...
- What are your thoughts and feelings about ...

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this study (REB23-1562)