'Communities are where it all happens': Tracing discourses of sustainability in the destatisation of adult literacy education in British Columbia, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Using tools of critical discourse analysis and the concept of 'strategic ambiguity' (Eisenburg, 1984; Leitch & Davenport, 2007), the author traces the keyword 'sustainability' across the textual landscape of a literacy policy project in British Columbia, arguing that the ambiguity of the term sustainability allowed for consensus to coalesce around a policy project oriented to the destatisation (Jessop, 2002) of adult literacy education. The case suggests implications for how policy networks are "discourse-driven" and the importance for literacy educators and those in less powerful positions in a policy network to attend carefully to how words are used to gain consensus for controversial policy projects.

Keywords: *Adult Literacy – Policy – Neoliberalism – Sustainability - Destatisation*

'Le comunità sono i luoghi in cui tutto accade': Un'analisi dei discorsi sulla sostenibilità della destatalizzazione nella Columbia Britannica dell'alfabetizzazione degli adulti

Utilizzando gli strumenti dell'analisi critica del discorso ed il concetto di 'ambiguità strategica' (Eisenburg, 1984; Leitch & Davenport, 2007) l'autrice analizza l'uso della parola chiave 'sostenibilità' nel panorama testuale di un progetto politico di alfabetizzazione, realizzato nella provincia canadese della Columbia Britannica. L'autrice sostiene che è l'ambiguità stessa del termine ad aver raccolto il consenso attorno ad un progetto politico orientato alla 'destatalizzazione' (Jessop, 2002) nel campo dell'alfabetizzazione degli adulti. Il caso preso in esame mostra sia come i network politici siano "regolati dal discorso" sia la rilevanza che riveste per gli educatori degli adulti e coloro in posizioni di potere meno privilegiate all'interno di un network politico, il modo in cui le parole sono utilizzate per ottenere il consenso in progetti politici controversi.

Parole chiave: *Letteratismo – Politiche – Neoliberismo – Sostenibilità – Destatalizzazione*

Introduction

Adult education policy in Canada, as in many jurisdictions, is undergoing rapid transformation in the context of the trans-nationalization of educational policy governance (Ball, 2012a; Fejes & Nicoll, 2008; Hamilton, 2011; 2014; Milana, 2012). In particular, the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has assumed a central role in producing standardized adult skills assessments that link adult education to policy recommendations for social development, economic productivity and competition in a globalizing economy. In its introduction to the Program of International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIACC), the OEDC argues that "[s]kills transform lives, generate prosperity and promote social inclusion. Without the right skills, people are kept at the margins of society, technological progress does not translate into economic growth, and enterprises and countries can't compete in today's globally connected and increasingly complex world" (OECD, 2013a, p. 26). As Milana (2012) has observed, such transnational policy discourses emphasize adult education's potential for social development and economic productivity, and nation-states re-contextualize these discourses according to local circumstances and political orientation. In Canada, the goals of adult education are increasingly defined in terms of skills training to help "employees excel and succeed in today's fast-paced labour market" (Government of Canada, 2013, para. 1). It is difficult to escape the message that adult skills or lack thereof are deeply implicated in individual success and global economic productivity (Government of Canada, 2014a).

Yet the Government of Canada, along with other jurisdictions affiliated with the OECD, are simultaneously staging a retreat from public spending on social services including public education, and adult literacy and skills training (Carpenter, Weber & Schugurensky, 2012; OECD 2013a; Silver, Shields & Wilson, 2005). In British Columbia, a province on the west coast of Canada, the rhetoric to "help British Columbians get the skills they need for sustainable employment in regions across the province" (Government of British Columbia, 2011, p. 5) is juxtaposed with declines in funding, program offerings and enrolment targets for adult literacy and secondary school completion programs that many require to access post-secondary education or skills training.[1] Non-profit adult literacy organizations struggle to survive in this contradictory and rapidly changing policy context by adapting and shifting their mandates, often appropriating discourses of program sustainability and economic productivity to maintain a sense of shared purpose with fickle government actors.

The supranational texts of the OECD, the national and provincial government visions for a literate workforce, and the insistent, urgent and passionate advocacy for adult literacy work in local literacy organizations are woven together in the invocation of a 'sustainability' of some kind. The phenomenon is not unique to adult education policy networks. As Leitch and Davenport (2007) found in their study of the use of 'sustainability' in the negotiation of a bio-technology policy in New Zealand, diverse actors coalesce, uneasily, around this common discourse amidst conflicting goals,

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[1] Between 2009/10 and 2012/13 there has been a 16.3% decline in enrolment in 'Development' programs (Adult Basic Education/Literacy) (BC Ministry of Advanced Education, 2013, p. 4), a 4.5% decline in trades program enrolment (2009/10 – 2012/13) (ibid, p. 4), a 5% decline in adult School Completion/Graduation (2011/12 – 2012/13 (BCTF, 2014. p. 17). These are attributed to 'unfunded' (e.g., no government funding) for adults enrolled in development programs. The 6-year secondary school graduate rate (independent and public school combined) is 83% (BC Ministry of Education, 2012/13).

shifting roles and ideological differences. Similarly, Davison (2008) notes that the very ambivalence of the term 'sustainability' makes it "prey to co-optation by entrenched ideological and economic interests, dominant discourses and empowered institutions" (p. 191), making it important that less powerful groups within policy networks in which 'sustainability' is mobilized be alive to the potential to be lead 'in the wrong direction'. Indeed, in her critical essay, '*sustainability this, sustainability that*' Alaimo (2012, p. 562) asks: "[W]hat it is that sustainability seeks to sustain and for whom?"

The study reported in this article takes up this question, adopting Leitch and Davenports' (2007) insight that it is the very 'multiple meanings' attributed to the term, and its emergence and ubiquity in policy texts oriented to policy change, that suggests the status of sustainability as a 'keyword' (Williams, 1983) that merits closer analysis. In this study, I trace the keyword sustainability in the context of *Literacy Now*, an eight-year initiative in British Columbia, Canada to create a legacy of "sustainable lifelong learning opportunities" (Legacies Now, 2006, p. 4), following the 2010 Vancouver/Whistler Olympic Games. I first describe the history and implementation of *Literacy Now*, and then elaborate the conceptual frames, questions and methodologies through which an analysis of this policy initiative is presented.

Literacy Now

The *Literacy Now* initiative of the Government of British Columbia purported to bring sustainability to the literacy field by way of a legacy of the Vancouver/Whistler Winter Olympics. When Vancouver/Whistler was awarded the 2010 Winter Olympics in 2003, the bid was met with considerable opposition from groups who wondered how the expense could be justified in an era of budget restraint, and indeed just how communities outside Vancouver and Whistler were to benefit. The response of Gordon Campbell, British Columbia's premier at the time, was to establish 2010 Legacies Now, a unit within the Premiers' Office to 'create a legacy' for British Columbians in five areas of civil life (in keeping with the 5 Olympic rings): sport, arts, volunteerism, community and literacy.

As Walker (2008) observed, this was seen as a strategy to gain social license, or broad-based social acceptance, for the Vancouver-Whistler Olympics in the face of political opposition to the games. *Literacy Now* began as a small group of private consultants hired by the British Columbia's Ministry of Education to plan a strategy to involve communities in creating the 'legacy' of literate communities in the wake of the Winter Olympics. These communities would "identify local literacy needs and increase participation, sustainability and performance through partnerships, mentoring and communities" (Literacy Now, 2005 in Walker, 2008, p. 464).

Communities were asked to form committees of stakeholders thought to have an interest in promoting literacy in the community, including libraries, adult learning centers, local businesses, early learning organizations, law enforcement and so on. The committees were given $10 000 to hire a coordinator to carry out a literacy needs assessment in the community and to identify priorities in from of an action plan. Once approved by the newly created *Literacy Now* organization, committees received an additional $30 000 to implement the plan over three years. The process was outlined in an eight-step *Literacy Now Planning Guide* (Legacies Now, 2006). In this, *Literacy Now* borrowed from the planning process initiated by communities in the west and east Kootenays of British Columbia (in and near the Rocky Mountains in the southeast of the Province) who had engaged in this collaborative

community planning approach for some years, benefiting from financial support of the Columbia Basin Trust.[2]

By 2010, the year of the Winter Olympics, 102 communities were at various stages of the planning and implementation process (Glickman, Anderson, Smythe, Hawkey & Anderson, 2012). At the time, most people assumed that these literacy projects would supplement and enhance existing adult basic education programs in school districts and colleges and that there would be democratic and educational benefits to decentralizing decision-making responsibility to local centers of control. According to Easton (2007, p. 174), it is a principle of policy administration "that responsibility for governance and organizational functions should be situated at the lowest level where the necessary skills and authority can be secured." The promise was that communities could do better than government in designing and delivering relevant literacy programs to their constituents, because "all participate and contribute to sustain and enhance the benefits of citizenship in a free and democratic society" (Legacies Now, 2006, p. 72).

Conceptual frames: Strategic ambiguity and destatisation

According to Leitch and Davenport (2007), the various uses of 'sustainability' in policy texts in a bio-technology policy project in New Zealand, reflected the discourse practice of strategic ambiguity (Eisenburg, 1984; Leitch & Davenport, 2007), wherein the definitions and understandings that policy actors attributed to sustainability were intentionally ambiguous. It was not that sustainability was poorly defined, but rather, policy actors "used the same word, but differently" (Fairclough, 1992, in Leitch & Davenport, 2007) as a strategic goal to mobilize consent and participation around a project otherwise wrought with ideological conflict.

I argue that the ambiguity in the uses of the term 'sustainability' in the policy network of *Literacy Now* not only mobilized the participation of diverse actors in this project, but also accomplished the neo-liberal governance strategy of 'destatisation' (Jessop, 2002). Destatisation involves "redrawing the public-private divide, reallocating tasks, and rearticulating the relationship between organizations and tasks across the divide" (Ball, 2010, p. 155). This is a process of 'policy transfer', wherein government activities and functions are transferred to un-elected stakeholder groups. This may take place through a collection of practices including contracting out, privatization, the cultivation of public-private sponsorships and the encouragement of community partnerships to 'build capacity' in places where the state is withdrawing services.

In the example of *Literacy Now* in British Columbia, destatisation included a range of these practices. The tools of short-term contracts, partnerships, one-time grants and new regulatory regimes were used to accomplish a shift in responsibilities for literacy education to a new set of policy actors; community agencies, school districts, volunteers, private think tanks, philanthropy groups, charities, mining companies and media groups. It is just as Ball (2010) describes in his illustration of destatisation: "…tasks and services previously undertaken by the state are now being done by various 'others'" (p. 155). Yet such de-concentration of government functions carries potential dangers for the

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[2] The Columbia Basin Trust was established in the 1995s to support social and economic development of communities affected by the damming of the Columbia River.

state. Sommerville (2004) argues that as neo-liberal states cultivate global free market participation in their traditional realms of government they place their own stability and capacity to govern at risk:

> [*F]urther* neo-liberalisation (particularly in the form of destatisation) is seen as the way forward in tackling these problems. Neo-liberals attempt to resolve this paradox in two ways: first, their agenda involves making individuals, groups, organisations, etc., 'responsible' for their activities (i.e. market-active) as well as, or in return for, state withdrawal from direct control over those activities; and, secondly, the latter process is accompanied by the introduction of new quasi-autonomous apparatuses for performance management, audit and regulation, which are themselves new institutions of network governance. (Somerville, 2004, p. 144)

We will trace this paradox in the case illustration of *Literacy Now* that follows.

Study goals and questions

The present study aims to understand how destatisation is accomplished in the context of a bounded system (Stake, 2000, p. 436) of the *Literacy Now* policy network and to foreground the role of sustainability as a policy discourse flowing through (Ball, 2010b, p. 157) this system. Specifically, how might *Literacy Now* be understood as a project of destatisation? In what ways is the discourse of sustainability used to enroll and mobilize diverse actors in this policy process? What have been the effects of *Literacy Now* on the accomplishment of sustainable adult literacy education provision in British Columbia? How might this study of sustainability as a discourse in destatisation contribute to a broader understanding of adult education policy change?

Methodology

Following Yin (2012). *Literacy Now* may be defined as an illustrative case study, unfolding as a policy network within the particular geographical and historical context of British Columbia at the time leading up to and following the 2010 Vancouver-Whistler Winter Olympics. However, this British Columbian policy network stretches across local, regional, national and supranational literacy texts and discourses. As Fairclough (2001, p. 233) has noted, social change and educational policy change is increasingly "discourse-driven". Of interest is how sustainability is implicated as a keyword in driving educational policy change. The analytic strategies I adopt are informed by Leitch and Davenport's (2007) inter-textual tracing of the 'keyword' (Williams, 1983) sustainable/sustainability. As these authors note, Williams' concept of keyword denotes words that are strongly attached to issues "central to that discourse" (Leitch & Davenport, 2007, p. 144) such as educational policy change, and are "also words for which there are multiple meanings which may be traced to the different ideological positions and/or sets of interests associated with the various discourse participants " (Ibid., p. 144).

Central to Leitch and Davenport's approach and to traditions of critical discourse analysis more generally, is to connect the uses of language in texts to broader social and political relations. Critical Discourse Analysis is oriented not only to analyzing the meanings of specific words, but rather how words are used, regularized and mobilized in the context of other texts and social practices (Fairclough, 2013), to accomplish particular discursive and material effects. Fairclough maintains that critical discourse analysis offers conceptual tools to understand the workings of neo-liberalism in particular

settings, with the goal to make visible and interrogate the effects of "restructuring and rescaling of the state" (Fairclough, 2013, p. 12), in other words, the effects of destatisation.

With similar aims, my approach is to compare and contrast how actors use 'sustainability' (and its related grammatical iterations including 'sustaining' and 'sustainable') across the textual landscape of the Literacy Now project. This landscape stretches to global configurations of sustainable/sustainability, and I begin this analysis by tracing the discourses of sustainable/sustainability in transnational adult literacy policy. I then offer a more explicit account of the analytic strategies and sample texts used in the *Literacy Now* case study, before proceeding with the analysis of that case and a discussion of the findings.

"Sustainable this, sustainable that": The uses of 'sustainable/sustainability' in transnational adult literacy policy

A touchstone definition of 'sustainable' in the context of social, economic and environment development can be found in the United Nations' Report '*Our Common Future*' as "the ability to meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs" (United Nations, 1987, Section 4, Article 27). This understanding is purposefully broad, intended to include as many stakeholders as possible in a common purpose to adopt long-term perspectives in decision-making about the uses of resources, including those of human resources. The Oxford Dictionary definition of sustainability is similarly broad and inclusive, offering three examples in current use: "Able to be maintained at a certain rate or level"; "Conserving an ecological balance by avoiding depletion of natural resources" and, "Able to be upheld or defended" as in, "sustainable definitions of good educational practice" (Oxford Dictionary, 2014).

A dominant trend in the scholarship connecting literacy and sustainability considers literacy as a tool for environmental sustainability, in that adults who are fluent in the practices and knowledge domain of sustainable development are more able to effect social and environmental change in their communities (UNESCO, 2009a). This strand is closely linked to the Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) movement, founded in global sustainable development forums such as the Millennium Development Goals (United Nations, 2010), the Rio +20 Summit (United Nations, 2012) and various reports and studies emerging from CONFINTEA-VI which draws direct connections between adult learning and economic, cultural and social sustainability (Ahmed, 2010, p. 237, UNESCO, 2013). As Ahmed (2010) argues, from an ESD perspective, income, education, health, employment and the environment are integrated in people's lives and mutually constitutive, capturing an understanding of sustainability as systemic, synergistic and requiring close contextual understanding of community life. The role of adult learning in ESD is illustrated in the following:

> Adult learning and education (ALE) is seen as a way of developing the capabilities of individuals to overcome poverty and prevailing gross inequalities in economic terms and, more broadly, in terms of health, access to knowledge and information, and opportunities in life. This, in turn, would allow people to exercise and claim their democratic rights, and fulfil their obligations as citizens by helping to build democratic culture and institutions and by making government and the state responsive to the needs of its citizens. (Ahmed, 2010, p. 248)

In this sense, sustainability has environmental, economic and social dimensions (Gough & Scott, 2006) that are said to be integral to learning, since societies must engage in constant innovation, adaptation and creativity to balance human basic needs with the imperative to conserve and protect resources and ecosystems (Archer, 2013; Easton, 2007). According to Easton, this requires that educational decision-makers value informal and non-formal learning beyond traditional K-12 or higher education settings; sustainability is a context for many kinds of learning including those of critical engagement with new information technologies, multilingual and multicultural competence in a global world, new work forms and processes, and practices of conflict resolution and problem solving (Easton, 2007).

However, sustainability is also evoked in these global conversations to legitimize neoliberal and austerity economic policies oriented toward fiscal consolidation (OECD, 2013b) (a feature of destatisation), whereby global economic sustainability (in the sense of economies being 'maintained at a certain level') is said to depend upon the 'fiscal cure' of spending cuts and tax increases (OECD, 2013b, p. 8). Here, sustainability acquires a new meaning, the capacity of austerity governments to *remain in power*. The OECD demonstrated a preoccupation in 2013 with the fallout of austerity in the street protests of member countries. In the first of many budget review reports that year, it argued, "[t]he sustainability of national economies will ultimately require a balance between near-term growth and long-term fiscal consolidation. The question that is now being asked is whether such actions are politically sustainable" (OECD, 2013b, p. 4). This illustrates the neo-liberal paradox described by Sommerville (2004) above; as states fragment their own powers of government (including the power to raise funds for social spending) to serve the interests of global capital accumulation, they jeopardize their own 'sustainability'.

Among the many consequences of the 'fiscal cure' underway in OECD countries since the 2008-2009 financial crisis, is the prioritization of K-12 education over early learning, community learning and adult basic education programs (Archer, 2013). The rationale is that adult education is a luxury in the current climate of "hard choices" (OECD, 2013b, p. 1). In this configuration, adult literacy is increasingly constrained to employment-related skills and tasks without necessarily offering access to employment opportunities. Archer (2013) argues that if adult education is to occupy its place in the sustainability principles for the 2015 Millennium Development Goals, adult educators must be willing to resist this neoliberal logic of financial scarcity and call for action on macroeconomic policies and tax reform (so that major corporations no longer evade taxes or enjoy subsidies that drain government coffers). Here, a sustainable economy is one that distributes corporate profit to civil society and aspires to "sustainable literacies" (Hamilton, 2000), re-asserting rights to local languages, literacies, critical pedagogies and collaborative ways of knowing and doing.

We may note three (if not more) competing and intersecting discourses of sustainability in global and national policy networks. Social development discourses view adult literacy programs as sustainable when they leverage public funds to respond to the ever-changing education, environment and economic needs of local communities. Transformational discourses of sustainability view literacy programs as sustainable when literacies are leveraged to effect social change, including changes in relationships between humans and nature, in the exploration of new technologies, and the re-assertion of local rights and cultural knowledge. Technocratic discourses regard literacy initiatives as sustainable when they do not incur financial costs to the state and are directed to enhancing economic growth and global competiveness. We may also join to the technocratic discourse the concern of neo-liberal

governments to sustain their political power in the context of austerity policies. These global discourses of sustainability are traced in the particular textual landscape of *Literacy Now* and contexts for governance in British Columbia (Milana, 2012).

Strategic Ambiguity: Sustainability discourses in the '2010 Legacies Now' and Literacy Now

The sample of texts included in this analysis are policy documents that introduce and rationalize *Literacy Now*, enroll participants in the activities of the project, legitimize the goals of the project, and trace the perspectives of community members and literacy educators through their required annual community literacy plans and reports. These literacy plans also present an opportunity to compare and contrast shifts in the use of the keyword 'sustainability' over time by including in the analysis District Literacy plans filed annually from 2008 to 2013 from two geographically and economically diverse communities, Saanich on Vancouver Island, and the Nicola Valley in British Columbia's interior. Saanich is a coastal island community spanning the urbanized culturally and linguistically diverse provincial capital of Victoria, surrounding forestry and fishing towns and the traditional territories of indigenous peoples. The Nicola Valley is a four-hour drive east from Vancouver in the interior of British Columbia, previously forested by Jack pines in a semi-desert climate. The literacy plans in the Nicola Valley include those from Princeton, a town experiencing an economic boost with the resumption of mining activities in the region, and Merritt, a traditional forestry town 40 kilometers south of Princeton struggling with the decline of the forestry industry wrought by a pine beetle infestation caused by warming winters.

The sample also includes responses from surveys, interviews and focus groups with adult literacy educators collected in two related investigations of adult literacy policy and practice in British Columbia in 2010 and 2012. The first project, in which the author was a co-researcher, evaluated for the Ministry of Advanced Education in British Columbia the Literacy Now Project (Glickman, et al., 2012). This involved collecting and studying community literacy plans and annual progress reports, and interviewing community members in 4 jurisdictions in British Columbia about their experiences of community literacy planning and implementation. The second was a project of the author to explore professional learning needs of adult literacy educators working in both college-based Adult Basic Education and community-based literacy programs. This included a semi-structured, anonymous online questionnaire (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007) distributed to adult literacy education networks in British Columbia. Sixty-three surveys were received, many of which included lengthy commentary on educators' perceptions of the skills and strategies they need to support adults in a new precarious economy, telling a story of policy shifts in the field that suggested new and contested meanings of 'sustainability' as a literacy policy goal. The following are three casts of 'sustainability' in these documents.

'Communities are where it all happens'

The Literacy Now organization was formalized and in 2006 it published *Literacy Now: A Planning Guide*, invoking social development and even transformational discourses of sustainability that were appealing to community-based literacy educators: "The twin goals of sustainable economic development and social inclusion cannot be achieved without a fully literate society, nor can democratic processes and institutions flourish without a people skilled in sustaining robust democratic government and vibrant voluntary sectors" (Legacies Now, 2006, p. 74). Correspondingly, the seven planning principles included "*Sustainability*: Communities respect, build on, and enhance past and

current practices." Other signifiers, such as strength-building and capacity building were wrapped into sustainability, as in the fourth principle: "*Capacity Building:* Initiatives promote and sustain lifelong learning for all participants and focus on improving the life changes of children and adults. People feel empowered to act" and "*Strength Building*: Success grows from long-term, sustained commitment to literacy learning" (Legacies Now, 2006, p. 14).

These discourses of sustainability are broad, diverse and inclusive, indeed ambiguous, in their evocation of long-standing desires in the adult literacy field for continuity and commitment to funding, governance and professional development. The idea was that after three years of seed funding, community literacy plans would have attracted sustainable funding from corporate and/or not-for-profit stakeholders. Indeed, this policy goal to shift literacy provision off of government ledgers can be read through a case study of *2010 Legacies Now* commissioned by the International Olympic Committee:

> Sustainability is an important aspect of the outcome 2010LN [*2010 Legacies Now*, n/a] wants to achieve. Communities and NGOs need to build their own capabilities for providing sport & recreation, arts, literacy, and volunteer opportunities for British Columbians. Communities can do this through building networks with other communities and organizations, leveraging existing resources, and sharing information and technology infrastructure. (Weiler & Mohan, 2009, p. 6)

This suggests a technocratic discourse of sustainability in encouraging communities to "build their own capacities"; a common refrain is that communities are wealthy in human resources, they just do not use these resources efficiently. Nevertheless, communities were considered 'best in position' to implement equitable access to literacy and learning. In 2007, new legislation brought K-12 schools into alignment with community organizations in the coordination of literacy services, requiring each school district to file a District Literacy Plan. School district leaders were promised that in working with community groups to plan for literacy, "Over time, self-sustaining, literate, numerate and technologically competent communities will develop" (ReadNow, 2007, p. 4). On its website, ReadNow BC, the arms-length agency within the Ministry of Education created to oversee these District Literacy Plans, stated:

> Community is where it all happens. When it comes to improving literacy levels, government cannot act alone. That's because people live, work, volunteer and raise families in their communities. When people need help improving their reading and literacy skills, and their lives, they're going to go to a college, their employer, a library, local literacy organization, or school. Communities are also in the best position to recognize and reach out to those less likely to ask for help. (ReadNow, 2010, p. 4)

It was never very clear who the 'community' was. Because the planning process was left to the guidance and governance of community stakeholders (and already over-stretched and under-funded school district employees), the committees could be swayed by dominant voices that preferred to focus on literacy programs for young children and families rather than adults, or to focus on those in the community who they felt were easiest to include in literacy programs, and so demonstrate more readily

the all-important attendance rates and increases in literacy levels. As one respondent in the online survey noted, "I believe when we began funding these [community literacy] programs, we all thought the target to be adults who are not able to read […] but this is not always so" (JL, May 20, 2012).

However, literacy reports have been filed annually for five years by over 100 communities and tell a compelling story of the socio-economic lives of communities, particularly in the wake of the 2008 recession. This is captured in an interview from an educator in Northern British Columbia involved in community literacy planning:

> Due to the seriousness of the latest economic downturn to the resource industries, many families are suffering from poverty – affecting housing, transportation, utilities, mental health (depression); ability to access services is impacted; motivation to attend literacy services is not seen as a priority when people have personal barriers that are a higher priority. (JM, March 26, 2013, The Cariboo)

In the 2008 Saanich Peninsula literacy task force report, the term sustainability was not used at all, but in 2009, School District Literacy Plan made this point:

> Although any community development initiative is, by definition, largely dependent on volunteers, a certain level of sustainable resources is needed to ensure ongoing success, and the literacy project is no different. Despite a high level of commitment expressed at all community tables, concerns about funding are raised frequently. (Saanich School District, 2009, p. 24)

In Saanich's updated literacy plan, filed later in 2009 by the Saanich Literacy Task Force, the authors describe their struggle to gain participation of community groups in the literacy planning process. They explained that many people did not agree that literacy was the main concern of the community. "Questions about how existing services can be adequately funded, not to mention trying to increase programs and improve access, were raised repeatedly. These questions were also often accompanied by expressions of skepticism, even cynicism, about the sustainability of the literacy plan project" (Saanich Peninsula Literacy Task Force, 2009, p. 32).

By 2012/2013, communities began to run out of their three-year start-up funds and the corporate donors that were meant to step in to fund community literacy programs failed to materialize. Communities became reliant upon funds from the "Raise a Reader" annual fundraiser sponsored by the main provincial newspaper, the Vancouver Sun. Each September, volunteers and celebrities (though less of these of late), sell copies of the newspaper at transit points and intersections in larger municipalities. The proceeds of this sale are disbursed among the 102 participating communities in the province but by 2014, the proceeds of these 'Raise-a-Reader' sales had diminished considerably. This scenario of unreliable funding dispersed by a corporate fundraiser (the newspaper) contrasts to the visions of "long-term, sustained commitment to literacy learning" (Legacies Now, 2006, p. 24). It is thus not surprising that in the District Literacy Reports filed in 2013 by Saanich and the Nicola Valley, sustainability became synonymous with finding funding to keep literacy

programs going. For example, the 2013 District Literacy Report from the Nicola Valley, listed a range of challenges they experienced in spite of their "best efforts".

> Challenges: a) Funding continues to be a challenge, along with volunteerism. While we have been successful with our programming, we need to still fill the gap of adult literacy services for adults who cannot read and write at any level. b) New funding and sustainability funding is key for our community. We are focusing on this, but resources, partnerships and support will help. We are campaigning for more volunteers. c) 2011 marked the end of our startup funding. The focus is now on sustainability of all programs and sustainable funding. Literacy Merritt requires support in accessing sustainable funding. (Literacy Merritt & Nicola Valley Society, 2013, p. 8)

In contrast, the town of Princeton experienced an economic resurgence with the re-opening of mines that had declined their activities in the wake of the 2008 recession. There was hope that the mines would enhance local economic activity and perhaps offer support for the activities of the literacy committee. However, as the report authors describe, the increased economic activity had unintended consequences:

> A shortage of infrastructure has kept many workers and their families from relocating here. Many mine employees are working long shifts with no days off for long periods of time in order to go home to their hometown on their extended days off. This transient work force has failed to boost the local economy as quickly as was first anticipated. (Literacy Merritt & Nicola Valley Society, 2013, p. 3)

As in the Saanich District Literacy Report, the authors of the Princeton report take advantage of the "challenges" section in the report template to discuss sustainability:

> The biggest challenge for PLFL (Princeton Leaders for Literacy) right now is by far the lack of funding [ ]. The new LOC (Literacy Outreach Coordinator) is working hard to secure monies to ensure the continuation of programs. Grants are already in the works to address the lack of funding. The announcement by the provincial government in early 2013 of no funding for Princeton's LOC really caused a setback. Instead of mostly encouraging and facilitating ongoing programs and searching out funding, the LOC's time was spent fighting for a restoration of funding. (Princeton Leaders for Literacy, 2013, p. 8).

Sustainability is on government funding

One of the prevalent discourses attached to sustainability in *Literacy Now* is the contention that ambitious goals such as increased literacy levels and economic growth and productivity can be achieved with little financial investment, providing people use resources efficiently. This translated into reliance upon volunteers to deliver education programs previously the responsibility of provincial and federal government programs, an issue raised by adult literacy educators who responded to the online survey:

> We need NOT to be relying on the generosity of volunteers to work with this group of people for whom learning is a challenge. It seems absurd to me that we do not utilize the expertise of trained professionals rather we recruit volunteers and expect the result to be a literate population. (LM, May 21, 2012)

Glickman et al. (2012), in their evaluation of the Literacy Now project, noted the conflict between the literacy outcomes expected by the Ministry of Education through volunteer tutoring (usually two hours a week at most), and the time and effort involved in learning new literacy practices in a rapidly changing social and economic context:

> Many of the goals and strategies [communities] have adopted will take time, even years, to impact on the community in terms of increased literacy, school leaving rates, employment and so on. They are proud that they have put these processes into motion with mechanisms for sustainability via the formation of the Society. They also note that the region is changing all the time, as are funding and programs, so the plan is also always changing, as are the needs and issues facing the community. (Glickman, et al., 2012, p. 154)

The contradiction between Literacy Now's goals of sustainability, and the constant policy and funding changes in the years following the Olympics, made it increasingly difficult to implement the Literacy plans. For example, in 2011, with the Winter Olympics over, a number of changes took place in Literacy Now that resulted in more intensified processes of destatisation with respect to adult literacy governance. ReadNow BC was closed down and responsibility for coordinating the District Literacy Plans was shifted to a new corporate not-for-profit called "Decoda Literacy Solutions." This represented a merger of Literacy Now and Literacy BC, the publically funded, provincial literacy association that had been responsible for public awareness, professional development, research and coordination of literacy services in the Province. Decoda's board was reconstituted to include corporate groups (profit and non-profit), with no representation from adult literacy educators. Its primary mandate in addition to overseeing community literacy plans was to solicit funds from private donors to fund community literacy plans and activities. In addition, 2010 Legacies Now was replaced by LIFT Philanthropy Partners, another corporate not-for-profit entity. According to its Mission Statement, LIFT is a 'social innovation' enterprise "setting a new standard in philanthropic investment by introducing an innovative approach that values accountability, measurement, optimal performance and certainty" (LIFT Philanthropy Partners, 2014, para. 1).

LIFT argues that by applying 'a business mindset to the social sector', "private donors can be more certain that their investments produce the desired results in terms of measurable social impact" (2014, para 3). Community literacy groups, working as they do with the uncertainties of people's lives and the challenges of measuring their literacy outcomes, are unlikely to qualify.

Sustainable literacy programs adhere to standardized accountability regimes

There is great pre-occupation among these new corporate state actors for 'measurable social impact'. Even as government policy states that communities 'know best', adult education programs are audited

using standardized metrics of literacy achievement and number of adults served.[3] While educators and funders alike envision sustainable literacy programs as those that endure in their communities over time, educators argue that successful literacy programs are those that respond to and change in response to the ever-shifting ecologies of learning, work and everyday life in their communities. In a focus group interview, one educator offered an example of how accountability requirements in adult literacy programs in school districts were intensified and standardized in the time of *Literacy Now*, making it more difficult to respond to local needs:

> There is just so much energy spent in our school pleasing the auditors. The auditors audit us retroactively, they say, "here are the rules" and we follow them and they say, "those aren't the rules, the rules changed" so they claw back what they funded before the rules changed. And how dare they take money that was allocated to hot lunches or vital learning support to vulnerable people because THEY changed the rules. Look around our schools, there is nothing left. (FG 1, January 18, 2013)

Of interest are the "new quasi-autonomous apparatuses for performance management, audit and regulation" (Sommerville, 2004, p. 144) operating in Literacy Now. School districts were under new legislation to file District Literacy Reports, and communities were only eligible for a relatively small amount of funds to pay for someone to coordinate and report on these activities. Indeed, the Ministry was able to claim 'hundreds of literacy programs underway in the province' while taking little role in ensuring the quality and accessibility of such programs.

The uses of accountability and reporting tools also suggest that while the Ministry may have de-concentrated labor and costs of literacy education and delivery, it did not relinquish (and in fact intensified) its regulatory powers.

The goals of literacy education expressed in *Literacy Now* shifted again in 2012-2013 toward a more direct technocratic discourse. This is linked to the 'skills agenda' of the Federal Government, which had narrowed its adult education policy from broad-based (if under-funded) goals to increase literacy rates and promote social development, to policy of short-term skills training to "meet the business of all sizes, in all regions" (Government of Canada, 2014b, para. 1). This policy is replicated in British Columbia, which has oriented its adult education policies to meet in particular the labor needs of resource extraction industries such as mining, liquid latural gas and oil pipelines. Indeed, the government of British Columbia declared in its 2014 "Blueprint for Education": "[E]very person in British Columbia should be equipped so they can realize career opportunities most in demand by industry" (Government of British Columbia, 2014, p. 4). Sustainability was evoked by Decoda Literacy Solutions to support this new skills agenda, marking a departure from the social development and transformational goals of sustainability that had once been used to legitimize funding for adult literacy in *Literacy Now* in the years before the Olympics.

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[3] See the Community Literacy Benchmarks rubric here
http://blogs.bowvalleycollegeweb.com/writeforward/2013/01/04/community-literacy-benchmarks-bc-ministry-of-advanced-education/.

> BC needs skilled workers. It is vital for BC's prosperity now and into the future that adults continue to learn and upgrade their skills, young people receive valuable training, and children develop a solid foundation of literacy skills to carry them forward into their careers […] Canada's mining sector will require more than 100,000 mostly skilled hires in the next decade to sustain moderate growth. (Decoda Literacy Solutions, 2014, para 1)

Another consequence of this push to train skilled workers is that the celebrated diversity of each community in terms of literacy, language and job training needs has been supplanted by the expectation that people will leave their communities if necessary to take jobs where 'industry' is located.

Discussion and Conclusion

The tracing of the keyword of 'sustainability' across the inter-textual landscape of *Literacy Now* suggests the ways in which the term was strategically used to legitimize destatisation; for example, by making the case that sustainability is achieved when literacy education is the responsibility of 'communities'; that sustainable literacy projects are those that do not rely upon state resources; and that sustainable programs are successful when they adhere to standardized regimes of accountability and are replicable across diverse settings.

The outcome of *Literacy Now* was not devolution of power to communities to support their social development and transformation, nor to celebrate their unique capacity to make choices in their own best interests. Rather, *Literacy Now* has resulted in a transfer of state responsibility for adult literacy education to charitable organizations and volunteers, and a 'great many others' (Ball, 2010): consultants, coordinators, social enterprise agencies, media personalities. At the same time, regulatory control over literacy program activity was maintained through legislation, reporting requirements and the possibility of funding upon compliance with the practices of technocratic sustainability.

This returns us to the origins of sustainability in policy discourse in the United Nation's (1987) "Our Common Future", embedded as it is/was in an emerging reality of climate change and ecological collapse. In British Columbia today, sustainability, when deployed by government at all, refers to a technocratic strategy to both shift responsibility and funding for literacy education to communities, and to meet the labour and regulatory needs of an aspiring petro-state (Nikiforuk, 2010). British Columbia's adult education goals (and indeed those of the secondary and post-secondary education systems) are being "re-engineered" (Government of British Columbia, 2014) as skill training for jobs ostensibly in demand in by industry, including those involved in the extraction and export of liquid natural gas and bitumen (also known as the "tar sands" or "oil sands").

Community literacy groups that participated in the *Literacy Now* project hoped for elusive sustainable funding for education in their communities, sustainable work as educators, and sustainable economies. It is unlikely that literacy alone could deliver such a vision. As Easton (2007) notes:

> Literacy initiatives have sometimes been proposed, as a form of compensation, for areas where no other type of development assistance was being offered - a sure formula for failure and in fact for widespread if seldom avowed discouragement with the relevance of adult learning and literacy. (Easton, 2007, p. 183)

Perhaps it is no wonder people became skeptical as they were asked to create 'more literacy' through their unpaid labor, with no sign of improvements to transit, childcare, employment generation or even equitable access to literacy education. It seems it is as Alaimo asserted: "'sustainability' was and is a powerful signifier to mobilize support for dubious social projects that "entrench inequalities in a time of economic instability" (Alaimo, 2012, 559).

However, community members and literacy educators used the District Literacy Report to assert their perspectives of sustainability, to make themselves heard about the promises and failures of the *Literacy Now* initiative, and the social solidarity they were building in the face of the growing precariousness of community life in British Columbia. The reports, interviews and focus groups are accounts of invisible women's work, making sense of the messy connections between literacies, adult learning and social, economic and environmental sustainability in the ever-changing ecologies of community life. Perhaps these forms of solidarity and resistance are, in Foucault's terms "a starting point for an opposing strategy". After all, "[d]iscourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart" (Foucault, 1998, p. 100-101).

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