A Voice of Connection:
The Experience of Being a Block Connector

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this research project first and foremost to the block connectors of Abundant Community Edmonton. The stories they shared, the lives they have touched and the love they have for the neighbours on their blocks have been an inspiration to me. I have been privileged through this project to hear of the joy and the struggles and the tears and the celebrations and the shared life that each block connector has experienced. The work they do on their blocks has shaped neighbourhoods to be stronger, closer and more connected.

Second, I dedicate this research project to those people around the world who work tirelessly to make a difference in their neighbourhoods. If I have learned anything from this project, it is the power that one person has to make significant change on their block in the lives of those around them. And while there are challenges, I have read, heard and seen the difference that these efforts are making – not only at the block level, but also in their neighbourhoods, their cities and their countries.

The work block connectors do often goes unrecognized, and I have seen the humility and tenacity with which they accomplish so many great things. So to each of you, I dedicate the sweat and tears that have gone into this research project. Know that the work you are doing is important, significant and world-changing.
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Third, I would like to thank my classmates. Throughout the last few years, I have learned so much about myself and the course content through both online and offline conversations with each of them. My life is richer because of these relationships, and my learning was strengthened through their challenges, questions and musings.

Fourth, I wish to thank Howard Lawrence. He has been many things to me over the last number of years: a mentor, a friend, a client, a sounding board. For all that he has shared with me and entrusted to me, I am profoundly grateful.

Fifth, I would also like to thank my three children – Eden, Aaralyn and Ephraim. Thank you for understanding when school responsibilities trumped being a mom, for encouraging me when I did not think I could go on any longer. Your laughter and positive energy through it all was truly an inspiration.

Finally, I would like to thank my husband and partner in life, Mike. While I could go on and on as to why I could not have done this project without him, suffice it to say that his love and support were foundational in making this research project come to fruition.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The City of Edmonton supports neighbourhood connections through Abundant Community Edmonton (ACE), recognizing that creating stronger neighbourhoods and a more vibrant and connected place to live is a cornerstone of neighbourhood vitality. The objective of ACE is to improve the well-being of all Edmonton neighbourhoods by implementing an asset-based community development (ABCD) an organizational framework that operates through volunteer “block connectors”. These block connectors introduce an intentional form of neighbouring on each of their blocks in three ways: first, to be the “go-to person” on the block; second, to organize block gathering events (ie: block parties, meet and greets); and third, to complete informal, guided conversations with neighbours on their block to inform a neighbourhood inventory of gifts, skills and abilities of each resident in the neighbourhood.

There is a plethora of research on the positive impact of place-based community building in developing strong community vitality, the importance of social capital within those models, and the crucial role of a grassroots leader in this context. However, there has been little formal or informal research completed on the role of the block connector, and the experience of these grassroots leaders. To that end, this report will explore individual experiences of current block connectors within the ACE to answer the primary and secondary research questions: “What is the experience of being a block connector?” and “How do these experiences inform future practices of the structure of the ACE?”.

Methods

This research project was designed primarily as a qualitative, phenomenological exploration of the experience of individuals in the role of block connector through a participatory action research lens. The methodology in this project involved three distinct phases. First, block connectors were invited to provide feedback on interview questions that would best allow their experience to be articulated. The second phase included individual and group interviews of block connectors. Finally, a summary of the findings were presented to the block connectors once the interviews were finished for feedback and discussion.
Key Findings and Analysis

The semi-structured, conversational style interviews with the block connectors provided an opportunity to explore a range of perspectives and experiences of being a block connector. Ultimately, connections made at the block level were more important for participants than completing the conversation guide to facilitate greater neighbourhood connection. Six key themes emerged from the interviews around 1) connecting with neighbours, 2) providing required support, 3) building relationships with people on the block, 4) deepening relationships built with people on the block, 5) using the conversation guide, and 6) navigating the tension between building relationships and getting the conversation guide completed.

These six themes describe the main experiences of block connectors and when analyzed together with the literature on community vitality, neighbourhood initiatives and local leadership, three main findings emerge. First, there is strong alignment of the block connector’s personal values and future vision of neighbourhood vitality to the stated goals and objectives of the ACE (Boehm & Staples, 2005). Second, individual characteristics of block connectors are evident, but finding joy and fulfillment in connecting with others and inviting others to join in social activities is a pre-existing characteristic found in all those interviewed (Greenberg, 2000). Third, the block connector experience of deepening connection with neighbours often happens through intentional neighbouring, where the interplay of social ties, a sense of community and social cohesion plays a large role (Anderson & Milligan, 2006; McKnight & Block, 2010). A significant finding, this legitimizes the block as a system in itself, whereas much of the research reviewed examines social capital and community building only at the neighbourhood level (Anderson & Milligan, 2006).

Recommendations

Drawing from these finding, three recommendations are presented:

1. Shift the emphasis from neighbourhood wide connections to block level connections. In the current structure of ACE, the neighbourhood level connection is the emphasis. A shift in emphasis of connectedness from that of neighbourhood level to that of the block level is recommended. A key finding of this research applies Anderson & Milligan’s (2006) model to a block level - a breakthrough, considering the lack of literature of block-level initiatives. The findings demonstrate that the block itself has become an association and
this warrants revising the structure of ACE to increase the importance of connections of
the block, and view deepening connections on the block as an important phase in the
structure.

2. *Introduce training opportunities.*

The role of the block connector is complex and necessitates many different skills that
volunteers may or may not have. Currently, there is little to no training for block
connectors. This lack of training was identified by a number of participants as an area
where more support would be helpful. Leadership development is identified as a key
component for neighbourhood initiatives in the research (Boehm & Staples, 2005). In the
context of ACE, leadership development is a way to improve both the experience of the
block connector, particularly when the role demands skills sets they don’t have (i.e.:
resolving conflict, helping others with grief) and to increase the quality of the
neighbourhood inventory of gifts, skills and abilities. When considering training
opportunities, three things become apparent. First, the content development of this
training should happen in consultation with current block connectors. This consultation
allows the most pertinent and pressing skills needed for block connectors to emerge, and
may provide the building blocks for the content. Second, a structured approach to the
networking should be developed. This networking is already occurring through monthly
block connector meetings but could be augmented. Third, a mentorship program between
new and more experienced block connectors should be implemented, particularly for
completing conversation guides. This mentorship would allow the more experienced block
connector to model how he/she approaches tasks and answer any immediate questions
the newer block connector may have.

3. *Make changes to the conversation guide*

The conversation guide, in its current form, is generally seen as a task to be endured,
rather than a tool to “facilitate a meaningful conversation that will create neighbourly
relationships and connections on the block and in the neighbourhood” (City of Edmonton,
2015, p. 20). Block connectors reported very different experiences of the conversation
guide’s effectiveness as a tool to increase neighbourly relationships and connections.
Some used the conversation guide as in intended, whereas others saw it as an
impediment to deeper connection. It became evident that when using the conversation
guide, which is an important consideration of this tool to discuss the gifts, skills and
abilities of the neighbours to the neighbourhood level, understanding sensitivities around
those elements is vital. It is recommended to further revise the conversation guide to
increase the completion rates, which may deepen neighbourhood-wide connections.
These changes should include proven practices in survey/interview tools.
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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Federal, provincial and municipal governments in Canada increasingly identify both the need and the opportunity to create stronger and more resilient communities (External Advisory Committee on Cities and Communities, 2006; Meagher, 2007; Torjman, 2006). Complex issues, such as climate change, poverty, unemployment, urban sprawl, increased urban population and social isolation are pressures that have created the impetus for policy makers to recommend empowering individual citizens to take a more active role in decisions that affect their everyday lives at all levels of government and society (Keefe, Andrew, Fancey, & Hall, 2006). These complex and challenging issues affect the lived experience of individuals on their street and in their neighbourhood. The issues also affect neighbourhood level capacity to deal with demands for timely and effective responses in the neighbourhoods (Freiler, 2004; Leviten-reid, 2006; Orr, 2013). Coupled with these increased pressures is a growing awareness that people are increasingly lonely and identify feelings of isolation at an increasing rate in cities (Buonfino & Hilder, 2006; Keefe et al., 2006; Vancouver Foundation, 2012). This social disconnection is associated with myriad social issues including diminished physical health, decreased psychological functioning, increased crime and reduced quality of life (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010).

Governments and social organizations have created numerous initiatives to address this disconnection. Orr (2013) outlines the framework of “place-based” programs, services and approaches that many government and funders have used. These approaches are characterized by service providers, governments, funders and sometimes the private sector who engage with residents of specific communities to coordinate programs and services (Orr, 2013). Across Canada, government and non-profit organizations have developed partnerships that specifically target neighbourhood and citizen empowerment (BC Healthy Communities Society, n.d.). One example of this type of place-based approach is the Vibrant Communities program – a multi-sectoral, collaborative initiative in at least six communities across Canada where new ideas about poverty reduction are tested (Cabaj, Makhoul, & Leviten-Reid, 2006; Torjman, 2004). Likewise, municipalities have developed a variety of strategies and programs to increase the physical and social health of neighbourhoods including tools to meet neighbours, improve street safety, protect the environment and create new innovation opportunities at a neighbourhood level (City of London, 2016; City of St. Albert, 2013; Halifax Regional Municipality, 2016).

In order to create stronger neighbourhoods and a more vibrant, connected place to live, the City of Edmonton identified neighbour connectivity and social connection as cornerstones of neighbourhood resiliency. Resilient neighbourhoods help support strong
communities, families, and individuals (City of Edmonton, 2013; MacDonald, 2015). The City of Edmonton supports neighbourhood connection and increased social capital through Abundant Community Edmonton (City of Edmonton, 2015). The objective of Abundant Community Edmonton (ACE) is to improve the well-being of all Edmonton neighbourhoods by implementing an accessible asset-based neighbourhood engagement and organizational framework that neighbourhoods can implement (Harvey, 2015). This initiative is operationalized through a network of volunteer “block connectors,” individuals who introduce a new relational trajectory with their neighbours through the creation of intentional social connections at a block level through an informal, guided conversation with the members of each household on their block (Hopes, McKnight, & Lawrence, 2015).

Recognizing the importance of the block connector role to the success of neighbourhood connectivity in this program, this research project explores the experience of people who take on the role to gain a deeper understanding of what it is like to be a block connector. This research is important as the block connector is a key role, and there is little formal research that explores this type of local leadership, particularly within the context of ACE (H. Lawrence & J. McKnight, personal community, July 10, 2014). Further, because this program has organically emerged out of the theoretical framework outlined by McKnight and Block (2010) and has only been implemented in select neighbourhoods of Edmonton, this role has not yet been explored or evaluated to a great extent in academic literature (J. McKnight, personal communication, July 10, 2014).

The purpose of this project is to research, summarize and report on the lived experiences of current block connectors within ACE. The primary research question being addressed by this project is: “What is the experience of being a block connector?” The sub-research question is: “How do these experiences inform future practices of the structure of ACE?”. There are three project objectives: 1) to gain a deeper understanding of the experience of being a block connector, 2) to identify key themes for future training approaches of block connectors, and 3) to inform the structure of the ACE program.
2.0 BACKGROUND

This chapter describes the City of Edmonton’s initiative to improve neighbourhood health and vitality, explores the specific framework of ACE and examines the role of the block connector within that framework.

Across Canada, there is growing awareness of the importance of a place-based approach to building neighbourhoods (Orr, 2013). This awareness, coupled with an increase in social isolation, or as Block (2009) states, “an absence of belonging” (pg.1), motivated Scott McKeen, a city councilor of the City of Edmonton to develop a Mental Health/Social Isolation Initiative (Council Initiatives, 2014). Within the mandate of the Council Initiative, the City of Edmonton is supporting ACE, a place-based approach to increase resident connection at the neighbourhood level (Hopes et al., 2015).

ACE is based on an asset based community development (ABCD) framework outlined in “The Abundant Community”, a book written by McKnight and Block (2010). In 2013, Howard Lawrence first launched ACE as a pilot project with his own neighbourhood in collaboration with McKnight (Hopes et al., 2015). Based on the success of the first phase of ACE, the City of Edmonton, supported by the Mental Health Council Initiative, provided staffing and administrative support to extend the initiative into other neighbourhoods. ACE is currently in over twenty neighbourhoods, with ongoing funding and support from all levels of administration and council (Harvey, 2015). The ultimate goal of ACE is to increase connections between neighbours using individuals as block connectors to have intentional and specific guided conversations with each person on their neighbourhood block (City of Edmonton, 2015). Three levels of benefits/outcomes have been identified in Table 1 below:

| Primary Benefits/Outcomes | • Single family dwellings develop neighbourly relationship building  
|                          | • Block/cul-de-sac/apartment or condo building becomes a community/group  
|                          | • Block identity, pride and shared ownership/responsibility  |
| Secondary Benefits/Outcomes | • New groups of shared interest form  
|                             | • Invitation to join existing groups of shared interest  
|                             | • Gifts to needs matching (i.e. neighbours helping neighbours)  
|                             | • Neighbours’ vision for the neighbourhood discovered and shared with leadership  |
Tertiary Benefits/Outcomes

- Increase in care of the local environment, shared parks and greenspace
- Improvement of local economy (e.g. small, local businesses)
- Improvement in neighbourhood safety
- Decrease in social isolation
- Increase in local care of children, seniors, disabled, ill, those often marginalized, etc.

| TABLE 1. IDENTIFIED BENEFITS/OUTCOMES OF ABUNDANT COMMUNITY EDMONTON (HARVEY, 2015, P. 3) |

Each neighbourhood participating in ACE identifies one “neighbourhood connector”, whose role is to find and support fifty block connectors. These block connectors engage with their neighbours by acting as the block ‘go-to person’, organizing block gathering events (i.e.: block parties, meet and greets) and performing informal, guided conversations with approximately twenty of their neighbours (Appendix A). These conversations include questions that elicit the neighbour’s vision for the neighbourhood and of the gifts, skills and interests they may be willing to share or mentor others in the neighbourhood (Appendix B). The guided conversation is meant to create a positive and active relationship between neighbours, to introduce a new dynamic of neighbourliness on the block and to create a neighbourhood inventory of gifts, skills and abilities of each resident. These outcomes are intended to facilitate the development of community associations based on the interests of residents to increase neighbourhood connections and develop local capacity to a greater degree as compared to previous connections. The ultimate outcome is to enhance the overall well-being of individuals, the block as a unit and to increase the vitality of the whole neighbourhood (McKnight, 2010; Chia, 2014).

As seen in Figure 1 below, the block connector role is imperative to the success of increased neighbourhood connectivity. This individual is the conduit for the majority of the intentional face-to-face connections with neighbours on the block, consequently increasing neighbourliness because of the high level of proximity and convenience (Harvey, 2016).
2.1 Project Client

The client that has requested this research be completed is Howard Lawrence, the ACE Consultant with the City of Edmonton. Lawrence has been working directly with John McKnight and the City of Edmonton to create an initiative based on McKnight’s work with the hope to replicate the project in neighbourhoods throughout North America. Lawrence currently oversees the initiative and is directly involved with the training and mentorship of neighbourhood connectors and block connectors of ACE.
3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review focuses on three themes: first, the history and context of community vitality; second, the role of neighbourhoods in relation to this context; and third, the significance of local leadership at a micro or block level. The exploration of these three themes will allow for a broader exploration of the importance of the block connector experience and how this role relates back to the broader themes of neighbourhood health and the impact on community vitality.

The journalist, Peter Lovenheim, wrote about his experience of living in an upscale suburb of Rochester, New York, where he had lived for most of his life, in his book *In the Neighborhood: The Search for Community on an American Street, One Sleepover at a Time* (2010). Like many North American neighbourhoods, residents passed one another in the streets, sometimes waved hello to their neighbours (but usually did not), and lived as if their homes were isolated boxes. One early morning, a husband shoots his wife and then turns the gun on himself. The neighbours were shocked and in denial that something like this could happen just meters away from their own front door. Lovenheim (2010) embarks on an inquisitive exploration of his own relationship to those who live on his block, trying to come to terms with the realization that no one really knew each other on his street. Lovenheim (2010), like authors before him (Diers, 2004; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Putnam, 2000) explores themes of isolation, crime, loneliness, community health, social capital and neighbourhoods, and how these are all interconnected with each other and the greater political, health and social contexts and implications; in short, community vitality.

*Community Vitality*

Throughout various disciplines, particularly sociology, criminology and community development, it is understood that community health impacts the wellbeing of individuals (Gerell, 2014; Onyx & Leonard, 2010; Scott, 2010). This understanding has led to significant research and numerous models of attaining community health, including “community resilience”, “collective efficacy” and “community vitality” (External Advisory Committee on Cities and Communities, 2006; Gerell, 2014; Scott, 2010; Torjman, 2006). From a sociological perspective, community resilience is defined as a community’s ability “not only to cope but also to thrive in the face of tough problems and continual change” (Torjman, 2006, p.4). Examples of community resilience can be seen in the research on communities that have experienced traumatic episodes, such as Hurricane Katrina in the United States, tsunamis in South East Asia or earthquakes in India (Aldrich, 2011; Grube &
Storr, 2014). These studies conclude that community recovery of these events are dependent on four main characteristics: 1) the capacity for community organizations and associations to coordinate the social aspect of the residents, acting as a central social hub; 2) the ability of each community member to mobilize both strong and weak relationship ties; 3) the collective understanding amongst members of their shared histories and perspectives; and 4) the stability of the social networks within the community (Grube & Storr, 2014).

Another term used in the criminology field, which differs slightly from community resilience, is that of “collective efficacy”. Two definitions emerge from the literature. In the first, collective efficacy is defined as “the combination of mutual trust and willingness to act for the common good” (Gerell, 2014, p.385). In the second, collective efficacy is the “residents’ perceived collective capacity to take coordinated and interdependent action on issues that affect their lives” (Collins, Neal, & Neal, 2014, p.328). Collective efficacy is meant to change social behaviour, and is often used in terms of violent crime reduction. Further to these definitions, a positive link between civic engagement and the concept of social capital is identified along with the significance these two factors have on the collective efficacy of communities (Collins et al., 2014; Gerell, 2014). Collective efficacy is also used in more general community change efforts (Buonfino & Hilder, 2006; Greenberg, 2000).

An additional term used in the literature is “community capacity”, which is defined as a construct for guiding and understanding community social change effort (Chaskin, 2001). Through an analysis of the literature, interviews and case studies of various Community Change Initiatives (CCI), Chaskin (2001) identifies a key characteristic of community capacity as the relational links between individuals and formal organizations that are leveraged formally or informally within a given community to “solve collective problems and improve or maintain the well-being of a given community” (p. 295). Emery and Flora (2006) build on this definition and add that it is important to build this linking capacity to individuals and communities to exact positive community change.

Scott (2010) posits ‘community vitality’ as a term that allows for the complexity of community challenges to be understood. This theory of community vitality includes four core themes: change, agency, inclusion and relationships. It can be thought of as “active engagement towards the betterment of the community” (Scott, 2010, p. 19). In practice, vital communities are engaged not only in getting by (i.e.: solving problems that may impact them today), but also in getting ahead (i.e.: notions of sustainability for future generations) (Scott, 2010).
The ultimate goal of this community building agenda is to create stronger and more vibrant communities (External Advisory Committee on Cities and Communities, 2006; Grube & Storr, 2014; Scott, 2010; Torjman, 2006). The term “community vitality” will be used in this report to encompass this ultimate goal.

**Social Capital and Community Vitality**

An exploration of community vitality cannot be undertaken without understanding the concept of social capital as much of the literature identifies that community vitality is tied up intrinsically with this concept (Aldrich, 2011; Anderson & Milligan, 2006; Chaskin, 2001; Collins et al., 2014; Gerell, 2014; Grube & Storr, 2014; Scott, 2010). Putnam (2000) brings the notion of social capital into mainstream vocabulary in his book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, where he explores the increasing disconnectedness and loss of civic engagement as it relates to social capital. The literature on social capital is considerable and complex, and it contains a variety of definitions on the term (Freiler, 2004; Fulkerson & Thompson, 2008; Kitchen, Williams, & Simone, 2012; Leviten-reid, 2006). However, a common element in most definitions are networks that share norms, values and understandings that facilitate cooperation within or among groups for mutual benefit (Anderson & Milligan, 2006; Freiler, 2004; Keeley, 2007). For the purposes of this study, the one that is most useful refers to the interactions between people who work collaboratively in an atmosphere of trust with a goal of mutual social benefit as the outcome (Anderson & Milligan, 2006, p. 22).

Included in the discussion around social capital are the different kinds of social capital: bonding, bridging and linking. First, bonding social capital are considered primary relationship that help people meet basic needs by bringing people together who are similar at some level and includes family, close friends and similar ethnic or religious groups (Anderson & Milligan, 2006; Freiler, 2004; Kitchen et al., 2012; Putnam, 2000). Second, bridging social capital are weak links that can be characterized as those between people that are less similar or don’t share the same values but work to help people get ahead and reach higher goals (Anderson & Milligan, 2006; Freiler, 2004; Kitchen et al., 2012; Putnam, 2000). Third, linking social capital, or as Freiler (2004) calls it, “scaling up” (p.12) is characterized by connections between different social classes, or a vertical movement to organizations that enact social change and policy development. Bonding social capital can be seen as more homogenous, or inward looking, whereas bridging and linking capital require broader connections and networks (Freiler, 2004). All these types of social capital are important for building strong neighbourhoods, but bridging capital -
those networks with weak ties - is most effective in developing community vitality (Anderson & Milligan, 2006; Buonfino & Hilder, 2006; Freiler, 2004; Fulkerson & Thompson, 2008; Kitchen et al., 2012; Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002). Social capital is based on the complexity and breadth of individual and organizational networks and these three types of social capital directly impact the ability for a community to organize itself and exact change. In that sense, social capital can also be seen as a building block for social cohesion and sense of community (Anderson & Milligan, 2006; Freiler, 2004).

Freiler (2004) argues an approach to community and neighbourhood development that used existing social capital to build deeper, stronger and more resilient neighbourhoods. Kretzmann & McKnight’s (1993) asset-based community development (ABCD) uses this strength based approach. In this ABCD framework, assets (the gifts, skills and abilities found in each individual) are capitalized upon to build community vitality. Four key principles found in ABCD include 1) change must come from the community itself (i.e. not from an outside service provider); 2) development is built on the assets and capacities that already exist within the community (often not initially evident or obvious); 3) relationship is key to positive change; and 4) sustainable community growth (Ennis & West, 2010, p. 405). This ABCD framework has come under some criticism for two main reasons: first, strength-based community organizing tends to underplay the level of influence outside factors have on the community (i.e. capitalism, globalism) and second, there is a lack of conclusive evidence in academic literature of the efficacy of an ABCD approach (Healy, 2005). However, there is current research that offers promising outcomes of the effectiveness of an ABCD approach (Blackman, Buick, & O’Flynn, 2016; Duncan, 2015; Shitu & Muhammad, 2015; Yeneabat & Butterfield, 2012).

**Social Isolation**

Social capital can be a powerful tool for increasing individual and community vitality. Conversely, a lack of social capital is a factor in the experience of social isolation (Putnam, 2000). Parigi & Henson (2014) describes two perspectives of social isolation. First, isolation has been characterized as a by-product of the weakening of the “traditional bonds that used to connect people to their communities and extended kinship groups” (Parigi & Henson, 2014, p.156). Parigi & Henson (2014) refer to the “lost community hypothesis”, constructed by Wellman in 1979, as the notion where modern life – inclusive of population density, specialization, cultural heterogeneity and urban life— contribute to social isolation in a negative way (p.156). Putnam (2000) bolstered this position with his argument that Americans are participating less in organized group activities than 50 years
ago, and consequently the social ties binding community and social interactions are weakened. Second, Parigi & Henson (2014) draw attention to the link between urban life, with its apparent decline of relationships and connection through house structures (i.e.: front car garages, air conditioning) and urban sprawl, and that of social isolation. The importance of increased neighbourliness and the development of bridging social capital with those in close proximity to one another to combat social isolation cannot be understated. (McKnight, 2013; Pilch, 2006, Freiler, 2004). When people know their neighbours and are known by them, they are less likely to experience health and safety concerns, stress, depression and loneliness (Block, Brueggemann, & McKnight, 2016; Diers, 2010; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; McKnight & Block, 2010).

Municipalities across Canada, particularly larger centers, are discovering that many of their residents are finding it difficult to make friends, meet neighbours and become part of the larger community (Hays, 2015; United Way of Greater Toronto & City of Toronto, 2005; Vancouver Foundation, 2012). The Vancouver Foundation (2012) recently conducted a number of surveys, which included questions about feeling alone, the number of close friends in one’s neighbourhood, getting together with neighbours, and the degree of neighbourhood ties (BC Healthy Communities Society, n.d.). Vancouverites are the most connected through social media and internet groups, but the research also points to the fact that people in Vancouver self-identify as being the loneliest in the country with one in four people saying “they are alone more often than they like” (Vancouver Foundation, 2012, p.9).

Further, due to the increase of online communities and social media, a new formula or definition is necessary for social isolation (Parigi & Henson, 2014). The relationship between the quantity of social relationships and the time it takes to keep those relationships going redefines social isolation as “a ratio of non-overlapping contexts to the average time spent per relationship” (Parigi & Henson, 2014, p. 163). Fifty years ago, people’s circles of networks overlapped: people went to church with their neighbours, people met co-workers at the grocery store or children played with other children in their neighbourhood spontaneously. In short, historically people lived, worked and played more locally and in closer proximity to one another. Today, people’s experience is qualitatively different because their social circles are largely detached from one another: people from work are only seen at work; if people go to church, attendance is only on Sunday with no other interactions; online communities exist with little to no face to face interaction; children play on sports teams, but little interaction occurs with other parents or children outside of that context. This type of disconnection or lack of overlap between people’s associations creates unease or anxiety for the individual (Parigi & Henson, 2014). Turkle &
Sreenivasan (2014) capture this contemporary paradox by contrasting the increasing number and types of online and digital social connection with the identified feelings of detachment between individuals. The more connected we become digitally it seems, the lonelier we are, a contradiction that has significant impact on the individuals and communities. This problem of disconnection and social isolation is a problem that can only be solved by people turning to one another (Wheatley, 2009).

The role of Neighbourhood in Place-Based Community Building

Municipalities across Canada have increasingly more and greater responsibility for the complex problems found in cities, such as poverty, crime, social exclusion, high rates of unemployment and poor health outcomes. The loss of social capital exacerbates this complexity (Freiler, 2004; Orr, 2013; Torjman, 2004). Municipalities also report that issues like poverty and homelessness are more difficult to tackle when people are disconnected and isolated (Vancouver Foundation, 2012; Weaver, 2015). The health sector focusses on the physical and mental health impacts of isolation, specifically for the impoverished and seniors. Difficulties increase when individuals are not able to age in place due to a lack of social support at a neighbourhood level (Freiler, 2004; United Way of Greater Toronto & City of Toronto, 2005). Moreover, community social workers struggle to find individuals to care about community issues when people are not connected to those around them and only worry about what is going on behind their front door (MacDonnell et al., 2004).

Social connection within the context of the neighbourhood can be a powerful buffer for many of these challenges. With a renewed focus on neighbourhoods, municipalities can combat not only social isolation, but also increase safety and create cultures of inclusivity and vibrancy (Anderson & Milligan, 2006; Diers, 2010; Freiler, 2004; Leviten-reid, 2006; Pilch, 2006). Pilch (2006) posits, “active involvement of citizens within neighbourhoods...can help to achieve civil renewal, promote social inclusion, reduce crime and build social capital” (p.9). Diers (2015) argues the necessity for moving from a top-down, service delivery model of care by agencies outside of the community to one of neighbourhood empowerment, where citizens from all demographics, ethnicities and backgrounds work together. This community empowerment can only be accomplished when a shift of focus takes place from the needs of the community to that of its individual and collective strengths (Block, 2008; Diers, 2010). Neighbourhoods and connected neighbours play an important role in the social well-being of individuals and remains an important dimension of the health, safety and care of individuals (Forrest & Kears, 2001). Anderson & Milligan (2006) argue that “tapping into the social life of the community is a
key step in catalyzing collective action, building collaborative relationships among key community members, and building community capacity” (p. 21).

The role of neighbourhoods for both individual health and quality of life is significant in both positive and negative ways (Buonfino & Hilder, 2006; Freiler, 2004; Henriksen & Tjora, 2013). Buonfino & Hilder (2006), researchers from Britain, have found that where people live plays an important role in their lives. Their choice of location and their satisfaction levels with their local neighbourhood is positively correlated with increased interactions with other neighbours. However, neighbourhoods can also impact individual lives negatively. The Unity Way of Greater Toronto has studied neighbourhood effects on poverty in the Greater Toronto area since the early 2000s, and has concluded that while poverty can be seen as an individual household problem, an increase in concentrated areas of poverty points to the fact that neighbourhoods do matter, thus the title of the report “Poverty by Postal Code” (2004). Cities in the United States and Britain have discovered the impacts of ignoring the importance of neighbourhoods, and have also seen how quickly neighbourhoods “turn around” with place-based investments (Freiler, 2004; MacDonnell et al., 2004).

A place-based approach to tackling these complex issues is a promising practice particularly in nurturing and promoting involvement to empower civic engagement (Freiler, 2004; Orr, 2013). Orr (2013) states that “place, particularly the smaller local space we call our home, our community, our neighbourhood, holds the promise of being an antidote to the institutional juggernauts around us. It is here that we make connections and can find in each other the resources to effect meaningful change in our day-to-day world” (para. h). The model that has been utilized by Orr (2013) is based on the ABCD model and demonstrates the importance of social capital, and specifically building neighbourhood capacity of bridging social capital, in order to exact positive community change and sustainable growth. Further to this, the ability for a community to expand the social capital of its members to that of bridging social capital, where people connect and network with those unlike themselves within proximity is seen as extremely important (Freiler, 2004). Orr (2013) argues the importance of place-based models, and specifically neighbourhood initiatives, because the neighbourhood is where bridging social capital can be fundamentally expressed, and then subsequently lost or built. Similarly, Anderson & Milligan (2006) present a theory of change that demonstrates how social capital develops within a neighbourhood, and how it ultimately facilitates the improvement of local conditions (Figure 2).
Finally, when considering the term “neighbourhood”, Freiler (2004) suggest four ways to determine a neighbourhood: by its functions (where people live and shop, where children go to school); by fixed boundaries (geographically); by degree of homogeneity (people choosing to live in areas where similar values or cultural backgrounds exist or by necessity, in the case of social housing); and by people’s lived experience (individuals’ perceptions of their own neighbourhood). In the case of Edmonton, neighbourhood is primarily defined by its geography. In 1912, the first “city club” was formed, which had the mandate to provide civic advocacy on behalf of a predetermined geographical area and to provide social and recreational opportunities (EFCL, 2015). Fast forward over 100 years, and there are now more than 150 community leagues in Edmonton providing the same advocacy, social and recreational opportunities. These geographically boundaries provide the ACE with a distinct advantage in that it allows a human scale neighbourhood ‘definition’ that is entrenched in the culture of the city (personal communication, H. Lawrence, 2015).

**Local Leadership**

Strong neighbourhoods are build on strong leadership. Vibrant and healthy communities are a result of one or more people embedded in those places giving of their time and energy for the benefit of all (Zummach, 2002). Policy makers and community organizers emphasize the importance of local leadership in the neighbourhood context to create stronger local connections and community vitality (Diers, 2010; Gerell, 2014; Kusenbach, 2006; McKnight & Block, 2010; Onyx & Leonard, 2010; Pilch, 2006; Simpson, Miller, &
Amant, 2010; Vancouver Foundation, 2012). Frieiler (2004) states that individual citizens are central to any neighbourhood initiative. Boehm & Staples (2005) see local leadership as the “key component for promoting participation, democracy, and community empowerment, as well as for developing social change campaigns, projects, and services in non-profit community [neighbourhood] groups” (p.78). Diers (2004) tells stories of how the City of Seattle empowers individual citizens, and what he calls “grassroots leaders” (p.35) through policies, grants, training and a culture within the administration that values a diversity of voices in municipal decision-making. Finally, in order to build capacity in neighbourhoods to facilitate addressing complex issues within the community, local leadership needs to be not only identified, but also developed (Simpson et al., 2010; W.K. Kellog Foundation, 2003). Clearly, local leadership is important to community development, empowerment, health and ultimately, the vitality of the local neighbourhood.

However, there is a shortage in the academic literature researching and describing who this neighbourhood leader might be (Boehm & Staples, 2005). Who is this person? What can we call them? How is this individual identified? What is the experience of these individuals? What is the size or scale around which they lead? Terms such as “grassroots leader” (Diers, 2004, Boehm & Staples, 2005), “emergent leader” (Simpson et al., 2010) and “organic leader” (Onyx & Leonard, 2010) have been coined as possible terminology that could be used. While varying in nuance, the basic premise is that of a local leader being defined as “an unpaid volunteer who emerges from within the community and provide direction and guidance in specific or varied areas of a community’s life” (Boehm & Staples, 2005, p.78). And while there is some literature that defines local leadership as an overarching concept, there is very little that directly studies the experience of the individual in this role of “local leader” even though these individuals are a requirement for mobilizing social capital across a community (Diers, 2010; Boehm, Enoshm, & Michal, 2010; Onyx & LEonard, 2010). Much can be found on the positive impact of place-based or neighbourhood level initiatives, and the importance of individuals from “within” taking a lead role, but little research has been done on local leaders and their experience exacting that leadership at the neighbourhood and even more specifically, the block level.

One study explores the gap in the research between the stated importance of grassroots leaders and the lack of rigour around the experience these leaders (Greenberg, 2000, p. 22). Although the study has limited generalizability due to the convenience sample methods utilized and the small sample size, it is worth noting. The study asked three questions in a particular geographical area of the US: 1) Are residents able to identify their neighbourhood grassroots leaders?, 2) Are neighbourhood leaders different that
other residents?, and 3) Are neighbourhood leaders more attuned to specific types of
neighbourhood characteristics? (Greenberg, 2000, p. 22). Surveyors were asked to
nominate a neighbourhood grassroots leader, and the leader who was most nominated
was interviewed based on the three questions outlined. Greenberg (2000) found a
noticeable difference in those identified, particularly in personality attributes:
neighbourhood grassroots leaders are more optimistic, have a strong sense of ability to
make positive changes and more typically will reach out to local officials and neighbours,
and use a wide variety of sources to keep informed about the neighbourhood. When
answering the second question, very few demographical differences (such as home
ownership and long-term residence) were found between the neighbourhood grassroots
leaders and other residents. Third, neighbourhood grassroots leaders were more aware of
neighbourhood problems, but when rating their neighbourhood, the quality was almost
identical to other residents, attributed most likely to their optimism. Greenberg’s (2000)
study demonstrates that neighbourhood grassroots leaders are known in their community
and have optimistic qualities; a small step to better understanding this cohort of
individuals.

Boehm & Staples (2005) build on Greenberg’s (2000) work and utilize a qualitative
approach, examining the experience of 23 positional leaders from social action and
community development organizations on “becoming, developing and functioning as
effective leaders” (p.81). Three themes were explored: becoming leaders, development of
leadership and leadership style. Much of the findings from this study conclude that these
grassroots leaders do not fit a single profile – rather, each journey was different. A
number of common patterns emerged, however. First, most participants engaged in a
learning process that allowed for practical experience, feedback, reflection, discussion and
analysis. Second, these grassroots leaders had a clear vision and guiding principles for the
long term and were able to articulate that vision to their team. Third, all the leaders
worked collaboratively with small groups when making decisions and completing tasks,
rather than working alone (Boehm & Staples, 2005). McKnight & Block (2010) also outline
common characteristics of this neighbourhood grassroots leader: first, individuals in the
neighbourhood who are turned to when something needs to be done; second, people
with a vision for creating a stronger and better neighbourhood; and third, someone who is
always creating new relationships.

In summary, a strong link between community vitality, social capital and the importance
of place-based initiatives has been demonstrated. Further to this, the literature review
outlines not only the importance of place-based or neighbourhood initiatives, but also
how reliant these initiatives are on local leaders, who are almost always volunteers.
(Buonfino & Hilder, 2006; Freiler, 2004; Leviten-reid, 2006; McKnight & Block, 2010; Orr, 2013). However, in the case of these same neighbourhood initiatives, and specifically in ACE, there has been no rigorous research as to the experience of the block connector – the volunteer who is the key to ultimately bringing the vision of the initiative to fruition. To that end, this study will explore individual experiences of current block connectors of ACE, including motives, attitudes, roles and actions to answer the research question “What is the experience of being a block connector?”.
4.0 METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

This qualitative research project utilizes a phenomenological framework and participatory action research design to examine emerging patterns that are part of the experience of being a block connector in the ACE (Boehm & Staples, 2005; Groenewald, 2013; Patton, 2015). Methods include research advisory focus groups, one-on-one and group interviews to allow for a deeper understanding of the lived experience of each individual in their role as block connector (Patton, 2015). This section also provides more details on the analytical framework utilized.

4.1 Methodology

This research project is designed primarily as a phenomenological exploration of the experience of individuals in the role of block connector with an emphasis on the participants themselves shaping the interview questions and the analysis of the data (Patton, 2015). The qualitative data collected is analyzed to discover patterns that emerge from individual experiences and informs future developments in the ACE framework. The data will also inform recommendations for future research.

4.2 Method

Before embarking on the data collection, an invitation was sent out through email to all block connectors in the neighbourhoods participating in ACE through the neighbourhood connectors. This invitation letter included a description of the project objectives, an outline of the project phases and the importance of the research. Selection criteria, also included in the letter, was designed to choose participants who had some experience with all aspects of the block connector role in their neighbourhood: 1) participants must be over the age of 18; 2) participants must be a block connector in their neighbourhood with at least 3 months of experience; and 3) participants must be a resident of the community they represent in the research. Block connectors were asked to contact the researcher directly and state if they were interested in either the first, second or third phase, or any combination thereof. The goal was to have twelve block connectors in total: six of whom would participate in the initial phase of creating questions for the interviews and all twelve (inclusive of the initial six) participating in the second interview stage and the final focus group stage.
Phase One

From this e-mail invitation, five block connectors agreed to participate in the first phase. Mr. Lawrence and the researcher met previous to this focus group and brainstormed fifteen questions that might help to guide the interview to discover the block connectors’ experience, based on the finding from the literature review and Mr. Lawrence’s professional expertise in line with a participatory action research methodology (Sandfort & Bloomberg, 2012). The block connectors and the researcher then met in a local coffee shop where these questions were presented to the group with the intention of receiving feedback regarding the content of the questions, the length of the interview, the prioritization of subject matter, the possible areas of oversight and other comments they might have with the potential list of questions. Through this process, significant changes were made to both the content of the questions and the length of the interview based on the feedback given by the block connectors (Appendix C). The questions were then brought back to the client, and approved before beginning any data collection.

Phase 2

Nine block connectors from five different neighbourhoods participated in semi-structured one-on-one in-depth interviews as the primary means of data collection, based on the questions from the first phase over a period of 6 weeks. A purposeful random sampling strategy to increase the credibility and decrease the perception of sampling bias was utilized and during the interview, notes were taken to serve four purposes: first, to formulate new questions; second, to discover emerging themes to be explored in subsequent interviews; third, to facilitate analysis of the recordings; and finally, to act as a backup to possible equipment malfunction or error (Patton, 2015). Interviews took place in people’s homes and coffee shops, based on the preference of the participants. The interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder, and then transcribed. In each of the interviews, as the conversations developed, many of the questions didn’t need to be asked as they had already been answered in the conversation. The interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes.

When the interviews were completed, the researcher was invited by two groups of block connectors to participate in one of their monthly meetings, where a shorter interview took place that included five of the ten questions (Appendix C). These interviews were also recorded and transcribed. All the qualitative data, including both the one-on-one interviews and group interviews were then thematically analyzed and key themes were identified by the extent to which recurring ideas, perspectives and practise were noted from the participants in the identified areas (Patton, 2015).
Phase 3
All participants from Phase 1 and 2 were invited to reflect on the draft findings. Two participants gathered and shared their thoughts and reflections on the findings as presented. The findings as presented confirmed the block connector experience, and the participants reported that they appreciated having their voices heard in the findings. While their own experiences varied a great deal, both participants felt the findings accurately represented their experience of being a block connector and reflected the interviews in which they participated.

4.3 Analytical or Conceptual Framework
The analysis employed a framework based on a combination of phenomenological and participatory action research principles, described by Patton (2015) as a way to “grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon for a person or group of people” (p. 573). This framework allowed a deeper understanding of the experience of block connectors through reflections of the thoughts, feelings and actions of the block connector and an exploration of their intellectual, emotional and lived experience. This framework for qualitative analysis required the researcher to bracket assumption of findings from the research (Patton, 2015). To that end, major themes were not outlined in advance, but were allowed to emerge as the data was analyzed.

4.4. Data Analysis
Utilizing a content analysis approach, where “core meanings are found in patterns and themes” (Patton, 2015, p.541), the data collected was analyzed initially for similar patterns that emerged from each of the interviews through coding and classification. These documented patterns then allowed themes to emerge, consistent with the goals of the study (Boehm & Staples, 2005). Finally, using a qualitative inductive analysis, conclusions for the client from the data was collected (Patton, 2015).
5.0 FINDINGS

This section provides a summary of the views and perspectives shared by participants during the interviews on their experience of being a block connector. A total of eleven interviews were completed: nine one-on-one interviews and two group interviews, consisting of approximately six block connectors per group interview. Of the one-on-one interviews, four were men and five were women. The group interviews consisted of both men and women. All participants currently have the role of block connector in their neighbourhood.

All participants had rich experiences to share, and because of the semi-structured, conversational style of interview, the set questions started the interview, but also allowed room for participants to discuss topics that held particular interest to them. The findings from the interviews are presented below in a thematic structure, to ensure the confidentiality of participants and allow for key themes and perspectives to be identified under each topic area.

Theme 1: “I love the idea of connecting with neighbours”

For most participants, the block connector role was nothing new. The majority of them identified that they had been engaged in this type of connecting work well before the ACE had been adopted as a neighbourhood wide initiative, albeit in a much less formalized way. Most participants stated that they valued connecting with neighbours, and that when approached to become a block connector, saw it as an easy role to step into because they had already been doing it. While some participants felt the block connector role was a bit uncomfortable, most participants stated that connecting came natural to them. All the participants acknowledged that the values outlined by the ACE aligned very strongly with their own personal values and most saw this role as a way to do three things: first, to combat increasing fear and isolation of society; second, to facilitate and strengthen a sense of community through more and deeper connections with neighbours; and third, to contribute to improving the overall neighbourhood in which they live.

Theme 2: “I feel supported in the sense that it’s a valid role”

All participants spoke of the importance of support for this role. One way that participants feel supported in the role was by the Neighbourhood Connector keeping the greater vision of the initiative alive and continually bringing the conversation back to the bigger picture. For most participants, these conversations happened in the context of regular
meetings organized by the Neighbourhood Connector, where block connectors from around the neighbourhood gathered to share stories and brainstorm ideas on overcoming barriers that are encountered, another significant form of support. The majority of participants stated that being given the title of “block connector” and having that role attached to a larger initiative sponsored by the community league, supported them in that it gave them the authority to be the person on the block to initiate social gatherings and have the guided conversations with neighbours.

However, a handful of participants explicitly stated that they didn’t feel the need for support from either the Neighbourhood Connector, other block connectors or both. Having an understanding of ACE, or similar community building initiatives in their own personal experience, was all the support that they felt they needed to help mobilize the program on their block. A few participants also shared that they would have felt more supported in their role had they had an opportunity to finding out how ACE was progressing in their neighbourhood and in other neighbourhoods – particularly with the data already collected.

**Theme 3: “We went from being neighbourly to being neighbours”**

All the participants recognized the importance of connecting neighbours to neighbours. Most block connectors have done so using local social events such as block parties, progressive dinners or casual gatherings in their own home. A number of block connectors also found that once the social events were initiated; there were a few neighbours on the block that would help out with organizing and running the party.

Overall, the participants reported an increased awareness of each other on the block. For some block connectors, this has led to a role where they are acting as mediators on the block. For others, understanding the story of the people behind the front door led to deeper mutual compassion and tolerance for people on the block, where neighbours became people with stories, rather than a sum of the issues that may have developed for one reason or another. One final observation by most participants was that they had experiences where superficial connections led to deeper connection, which then created more connections and that this deepening didn’t seem to stop. Most participants reported that these connections then led to a strong emphasis of care for each other on the block. The close proximity and the small scale of the block allowed neighbours to engage in a more casual and spontaneous way and also made caring for one another that much easier. Stories of neighbours shoveling each other’s walks in the winter, taking care of
each other’s children, teaching cooking and baking in each other’s homes and of bringing food to neighbours when they are shut-in were plentiful from each participant.

Theme 4: “The first thing I did was meet all my neighbours”

All the participants recognized that building relationships with neighbours was a key part of their role. When it came to describing how the initial relationship building happened on the block, there was no ‘one size fits all’ with the participants. Some used the introduction letter to go around to the neighbours. Some started with organizing a block party to gather all the neighbours together. A few participants started with interviewing their neighbours with the conversation guide. Most participants acknowledged that building trust with neighbours, particularly by being present in the neighbourhood, is the most important aspect to developing relationships on the block.

Many of the participants gave examples of slowly connecting through more frequent casual conversations on the front sidewalk, at the playground and at block social gatherings. These types of casual conversation were seen by the majority of participants to be significant when building connections.

Many of the participants also spoke to the importance of being sensitive to boundaries, particularly around people’s time, privacy and persistence. Making room and recognizing that neighbours need to have some degree of decision making power over how, when and how often they are invited to participate in social gatherings, block events and the guided conversation was articulated as an important part of relationship building by many participants. A challenge around these boundaries that emerged from many of the participants was the tension between interrupting people’s lives, assuming their neighbours would rather be doing something else and knowing through previous experience that the neighbours were actually more than willing to have a conversation.

Theme 5: “I think {the conversation guide} is helpful, but it’s very awkward.”

When exploring the way the conversation guide was used by participants, the results were varied. Some participants appreciated the insight and thought that had gone into developing the conversation guide. Others spoke of the structure the conversation guide gives to the interviews with neighbours. At the other end of the spectrum, some participants stated that the conversation guide was difficult to use and didn’t feel comfortable with it.
About half of the participants were using the conversation guide to complete the interviews. The other participants had reported that they weren’t filling out the conversation guides or interested in using them at all. Of those that were using the conversation guide, some had memorized the questions in order to facilitate a more natural conversation. Some sat down right away with their neighbours, began the conversation with small talk about the neighbourhood and filled out the paper form with them. Others left the form with the neighbours and collected it at a later date. Almost all participants (even those who weren’t using them) shared that they see the conversation guide as a tool for deeper connection.

However, about half of the participants shared some confusion around the goal or reason for the conversation guide, which created anxiety when approaching neighbours about completing the interview. Concerns from some participants were raised regarding how neighbours perceive the interview, creating mistrust and undermining the relationship building that had already occurred. Related to this confusion was the language and structure of the conversation guide itself. Most participants described the interview guide as too formal and unnatural. Most participants reported that they changed the language they used when doing the interview with neighbours in order to make it more user-friendly and usable. Many of the participants also reported finding the conversation guide very repetitive and some of the questions felt redundant. Some participants also felt the important nuances that they know were there, were lost on most of the people they interviewed. Finally, some of the participants shared that they felt that they would have benefited from more training around how to use the conversation guide specifically. It was acknowledged that there is a skill set in actually doing the interviews and often participants found themselves muddling through it.

Almost all of the participants shared that one of the biggest challenges to the role of block connector was completing the interviews. A second challenge regarding the conversation guide that was raised was knowing what to do when interviews draw out emotions that is uncomfortable to either the block connector or the neighbour.

Theme 6: “So am I trying to get the interview done or have a chat?”

A tension between the relationships building aspect and the data collection expectations of the role (through the conversation guide) was articulated by most participants. Some participants shared about their initial impressions of the ACE, where the emphasis was placed on completing the interviews, and as they entered into the role, became aware
that the relationship building was much more meaningful for them, and the more important aspect to the program from their perspective.

Further to this, a few participants were unclear as to what they should be doing once the initial relationship building had taken place and/or the interviews were completed. These participants were looking for more structure, but less intensity at the beginning of the program, with more phases of connection to facilitate more frequent interactions with their neighbours.

**Summary: “Connections come first and build everything”**

In summary, the motivation of each participant to become a block connector was a strong alignment of personal values to those of the ACE, particularly when it came to deepening relationships with neighbours in close proximity. The experiences of each participant in their role were different due to their own personality, their context and the way they approached and viewed their role as block connector. Overall, the connections made at the block level – both between the block connectors and neighbours and neighbour to neighbour - were ultimately more important for the participants than completing the conversation guide to facilitate greater neighbourhood connection.
6.0 DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The purpose of this chapter is to relate the findings in Chapter 5 to the literature reviewed in Chapter 3 through the lens of the primary and sub-research questions. The primary research question is “What is the experience of a being a block connector?”. The sub research question furthers this exploration by asking “How do these experiences impact and/or inform future practices and the structure of ACE?”

This chapter is organized into three sections based on themes identified from the findings. The first section explores the individual motivation in becoming a block connector as compared to the stated values of ACE and the literature reviewed around neighbourhood initiatives. The second section will consider the extent to which the individual context and the way they approached and viewed their role as block connector shaped their experience. The third section contrasts the stated goals of ACE at the neighbourhood level and the findings regarding the development of relationships at the block level.

Motivation for being a block connector

The findings suggest a strong alignment of personal values to those of ACE. There was a strong alignment between social capital and the need for a more intentional way of neighbouring. When asked to explore the factors that motivated the participants to take on the block connector role with ACE, the major theme that emerged from almost every interview was a desire to change the culture of the block, in line with the tertiary outcomes of ACE identified in Chapter 1. Most saw this role as a way to do three things: first, to combat fear and isolation of society; second, to facilitate and strengthen a sense of community through more and deeper connections with neighbours; and third, to contribute to improving the overall health of individuals, the block and the neighbourhood in which they live. These three main values coincide with the literature review of community vitality, social capital and social isolation, and the importance of the neighbourhood context (Anderson & Milligan, 2006; Freiler, 2004; Pilch, 2006).

The importance of grassroots leaders having a strong vision was also evident. Boehm and Staples (2005) argues that one of the most important qualities for grassroots leaders is their vision for long term collective action, a sentiment that clearly emerged from the participants in this study. Also, a reimagining of the future for their own block and neighbourhood (and even more broadly in some cases) was clearly articulated by the participants, in line with Onyx and Leonard’s (2011) findings that successful community development is dependent on transformational leaders who are able to articulate a vision
and a path to attain the future goal. The participants were able to see a different future, and saw the role of block connector as a path to attain that vision.

**Characteristics of block connectors**

Greenberg (2000) suggests that neighbourhood grassroots leaders are identified mostly by personality indicators, specifically optimism and a strong sense of having the ability to influence activities in their neighbourhood (p.27). The findings suggest that those who have taken on the role of block connector generally have these qualities. Most block connectors were able to see the gifts, skills and abilities in their neighbours (even when they were more difficult to see), participated in making their neighbourhood a more vibrant community and adopted an attitude of hope and positivity. People in this role are often creating new relationships and are trusted in the community (McKnight & Block, 2010, p. 133). The findings of this study demonstrate that while all the individual block connectors are uniquely different, finding joy in connecting with others and inviting others to join in social activities on their block was a pre-existing characteristic.

Further to this, ACE outlines three main roles for the block connector: 1) acting as a ‘go-to person, 2) organizing block gathering events (ie: block parties, meet and greets) and 3) completing the conversation guide with each neighbour (Appendix A). When considering the individual experiences of these three roles, as can be expected, each participant approached their role in ways that were most comfortable to them, in line with much of the literature around grassroots leadership (Boehm & Staples, 2005; Greenberg, 2000). The first and second roles, acting as a go-to person and organizing block gathering events, was unique to each individual and was viewed and acted on differently depending on the context of the individuals. McKnight & Block (2010) speak to this natural characteristic as being key in the selection of block connectors. Onyx & Leonard (2011) state the importance of the person in this role as being embedded in the identified community (in this case, the block) and not being in a position of formal authority. The participants displayed both a sense of humility at being in the role and a sense of responsibility partly because of the vulnerability demonstrated by many of the neighbour as connections deepened. The findings suggest that there are times when they become more than a ‘go-to person’, and can act as mediators, social workers and therapists, helping neighbours work through conflict, grief and life transitions. This aspect of the block connector role was uncomfortable to some of the participants as they didn’t feel there was sufficient training for managing that level of emotional vulnerability and/or conflict. These feelings of discomfort points to the importance of grassroots leadership training and ongoing networking in developing the confidence and skills necessary to know how to manage
these types of situations (Boehm & Staples, 2005; Simpson et al., 2010; W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004).

Relationship Development

The third role - that of completing the conversation guide with each neighbour - is where the findings are the most surprising. It is clear in the ACE Resource Guide (2015) that the conversation guide is meant to facilitate both block and neighbourhood connections. However, the findings suggest that block connectors’ experience of deepening connection with neighbours on the block happens without using the conversation guide and that sometimes the guide can be an impediment to that connection. When considering Anderson & Milligan’s (2006) model of community change identified in Chapter 3, the same principles outlined for a neighbourhood (as is the context of the model’s development) can be applied to a block. This implies that for a block connector, their goal for participation in ACE of deeper connection and increased vitality can be fulfilled by the first two identified roles – that of being the ‘go-to person’ and by organizing gathering events for the block. The third role of completing the conversation guide was not necessary to feel a greater sense of belonging, participation and empowerment. And while the conversation guide may help deepen those relationships even further (as noted by a few block connectors), it was deemed unnecessary to the vitality of the block. These findings suggest that the participants felt both an increase of positive neighbour to neighbour relationships and a deeper sense of care of one another on the block without using the conversation guide. In fact, half of the participants didn’t use or see the need for the conversation guide at all to achieve these things. Moreover, the conversation guide was seen as a barrier in many cases to the fragility of the emerging relationship between the block connector and the neighbours. Ultimately, the connections made at the block level were more important to the block connector than completing the conversation guide to facilitate broader neighbourhood connection.

Another issue identified by those who used the conversation guide is around the data collected for the conversation guide and getting that information into the hands of the people on the immediate block, another form of bridging capital, particularly when neighbours are just getting to know one another. Currently, block connectors collect the information, pass it off to the neighbourhood connector, and report not seeing it again. It was stated by a number of block connectors that there was some frustration with this process, as they then didn’t have the information necessary to share the identified gifts, skills and abilities with neighbours on their block. This indicates, referring back to the
Anderson & Milligan (2006) model, that block connectors see their role as building bridging capital on the block first, and the neighbourhood second.

This research project has determined that there is a gap in the structure of ACE. Block connectors identify that the goals of ACE and their own personal goals align at a high level, and are willing and able to volunteer for this role. They love the idea of connecting and are eager to plan gathering events and act as a block leader to initiate conversation and deeper connection. These actions are all positively reinforced by deeper connection and a greater sense of empowerment on the block itself. Overall, the experience of the block connector is very positive. The breakdown and greatest challenge identified by block connectors is in completing the conversation guides to inform the neighbourhood asset map for two reasons: first, because block connectors’ motivation to exact change at a local level is satiated by the block association itself and second, barriers exist for the participants, such as time constraints and lack of confidence.

These findings have significant implications for the ACE’s stated goals of increased neighbourhood vitality through a neighbourhood-wide sharing of residents’ vision and gifts, skills and abilities. Populating a neighbourhood database to develop this inventory without the completion of the conversation guides would require significant program adjustment, so “scaling up” the abundance of connection from a block level to the neighbourhood level is presented here as a challenge.
7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter offers general recommendations flowing from the literature review and participant interviews. They are presented to assist the client in consideration of next steps and while each can be implemented on its own, it is recommended that they are implemented simultaneously for greatest impact.

1. Shift to emphasizing the block level connections

In the current structure of ACE, the neighbourhood level connection is the emphasis. It is recommended that at a philosophical level, a shift in emphasis of connectedness from that of neighbourhood level to that of the block level occur. A key finding of this research was the application of the Anderson & Milligan (2006) model at a block level - a breakthrough, considering the lack of literature of block-level initiatives. Through this lens, the block itself has become an “association” (McKnight & Block, 2010, pp. 136–137) and this research warrants looking at the structure of ACE to increase the importance of connections of the block, and see it as an important phase in the structure.

This shift can happen in a number of ways. First, the celebration of deep connections on the block and the diversity of ways that these connections happen is largely missing from the structure of ACE. Implementing a ‘Great Block Award’ or some sort of block recognition program that celebrates the caring and increasing connection that is found on the block could be built into the program. Second, de-emphasizing the completion of the conversation guide at the beginning of the process would acknowledge that the connections happening on the block are more important than neighbourhood-wide associations. Third, implementing more phases of connection to allow for a slow and gradual transformation of linking social capital to bridging social capital is recommended, by emphasizing the relational side of the block connector role (i.e.: starting with less personal interactions to increasingly more personal interaction).

One other consideration is to have this change of emphasis reflected in the Resource Guide, used as a reference tool for all those involved in ACE (Figure 1). Currently, the focus is very heavy on the completion of the conversation guide, and in order for a systemic change to occur, a change in emphasis will have to be reflected in the reference material provided.
2. Introduce training opportunities

The role of the block connector is complex and can necessitate many different skills that these volunteers may or may not have. Currently, there is little to no training for block connectors. This was identified by a number of participants an area where more support would be helpful. Likewise, a number of authors and organizations outline the importance of leadership development as a key component to any neighbourhood development initiative, such as ACE. (Orr, 2013; Simpson, Miller, & Amant, 2010; W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2003). The W.K. Kellogg Foundation (2003) state that grassroots leadership development has come to be viewed quite widely as the “most effective mechanism to address the outcomes of healthy communities” (p. 6). Leadership development is a way to improve both the experience of the block connector and to increase the quality of the neighbourhood asset map.

Simpson, Miller and Amant (2010) suggest skills training, networking and mentoring as key components of any effective leadership development program (p. 15). First, when considering determining what skills training is necessary, it is recommended to develop the content in consultation with current block connectors to allow the most pertinent and pressing skills needed to emerge, and give the building blocks for the content. Second, networking occurs through monthly block connector meetings, and were been reported as being a supportive tool for most block connectors. However a more structured approach to what is covered in the block connector meetings might be considered to support increased training. Third, a mentorship program between new and more experienced block connectors should be considered, particularly when completing the conversation guide. This mentoring would allow the more experienced block connector to model how he/she approaches the task and to act as a sounding board to immediate questions the newer block connector may have.

3. Make changes to the conversation guide

The conversation guide, in its current form, is generally seen as a task to be endured, rather than a tool to “facilitate a meaningful conversation that will create neighbourly relationships and connections on the block and in the neighbourhood” (City of Edmonton, 2015, p. 20). The experiences of the block connector were mixed when using the conversation guide, an important consideration of this tool when scaling up the gifts, skills and abilities of the neighbours to the neighbourhood level. It is recommended to carry out further revision of the conversation guide in order to increase the completion rates to
further neighbourhood wide connections, including proven practices in survey/interview tools.
8.0 CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research project was to better understand the lived experience of the block connector in ACE, to identify key themes for future training approaches for block connectors and to inform the structure of ACE. The literature review outlined the important link between community vitality and social capital along with the iterative relationship between the two and how these two concepts and practices combat a rise in social isolation. Further, an exploration of the emerging field of neighbourhood and place-based community building within an asset based framework, determined that while leadership at this level is imperative to the success of these initiatives, there is a shortage of material on understanding who these grassroots leaders are and their experience is on the ground.

The findings from the interviews and focus groups led to a richer and deeper understanding of the role of the block connector within ACE. Even though each block connector had varying contexts and backgrounds, six key themes emerged from the interviews that helped to create a stronger understanding of their experiences, particularly how the connections on the block that were made were ultimately the most important part of the role. The discussion of these findings built on the literature to outline the importance of how integral social capital is to community vitality. This research built on Anderson & Milligan's (2006) neighbourhood level community theory of change, and argues that this theory of change can be applied to the block level, through intentional and active neighbouring by the block connector. This addition to the research is significant, outlining the important assumptions, characteristics and values of those grassroots leaders involved in block level initiatives. This research brings a new lens to place-based initiatives, allowing for a micro-local perspective, bringing the current understanding of community vitality to the block level.

There are some limitation surrounding this research. First, as ACE is a fairly new initiative, and all the participants are from one city, it is difficult to know how well the findings would generalize to other municipalities. Second, representativeness was not emphasized in the selection criteria, and it should be noted that ethnic and economic diversity was underrepresented. Because ACE is an emerging framework for developing block and neighbourhood vitality, there is a limited number of neighbourhoods participating in the initiative, limiting the available diversity of population. It is recommended that further research be conducted to verify the findings of this research, and to better understand the experience of block connecting in more diverse and often underrepresented populations throughout different blocks, neighbourhoods and municipalities.
The increasing pressures of issues such as social isolation, poverty, unemployment and urban sprawl, and the need and opportunity to create stronger and more vibrant communities through place-based initiatives is recognized by both policy makers and citizens. Grassroots leaders are often the ones who step up to become block connectors to enact change at the block level, with the vision of combatting this increased social isolation and fear of others through greater connection with those on their block. The recommendations that flow from the literature review and the findings of this research fulfilled the three objectives of the research project and are a solid first step in strengthening the stated outcomes of ACE that will ultimately contribute to greater neighbour connectivity, social connection and resiliency of individuals block and neighbourhoods within the City of Edmonton and beyond.
REFERENCES


External Advisory Committee on Cities and Communities. (2006). *From restless communities to resilient places: Building a stronger future for all Canadians*. Ottawa, ON.


Kretzmann, J. P., & McKnight, J. L. (1993). *Introduction to building communities from the inside out: A path toward finding and mobilizing a community’s assets*. Evanston, IL.


APPENDICES

Appendix A: Block Connector Introduction Letter

Sample Letter

You can download a Word template to print off at edmonton.ca/AbundantCommunity. Don’t forget to fill out your personal information, as noted in the sample below.

Hi neighbour,

My name is Sally Johnson; I live down the block at 13456.

The Laurier Heights Community League has asked if I would be a “Block Connector” for our block as part of the city-wide Abundant Community Edmonton program. I am very glad to connect and participate in this way.

They are requesting that I:

1. Be a point person for the block so that we can be in touch about block-related matters (e.g. garbage days, open and neighbourhood watch) and so that we can share info (e.g. events and news) back and forth with the community league, other neighbourhood associations and one another.

2. Initiate the organization of social events such as a block party, BBQs, Halloween hot chocolate, wine and cheese walks for our block several times a year. We are planning an event for a kick-off block party in July.

3. Discover your vision for our neighbourhood, the activities and interests (e.g. soccer, photography) that you might want to share in with Laurier Heights neighbours and what skills, abilities and experiences (e.g. senior care, handy-man/woman) you would be willing to share with a neighbour or the neighbourhood. We have a Neighbourhood Conversation Guide to facilitate this information gathering.

I am happy to just drop by or if you would like to set up a time for us to meet, please be in touch with me at sallyj123@gmail.com or by phone at (780) 123-4567.

Kindest regards,

Sally Johnson
Your neighbour
Appendix B: Conversation Guide

Neighbourhood Conversation Guide

The purpose of this conversation is to make our blocks and our neighbourhood an even better place to live. We are doing this by finding out and sharing amongst us each neighbour’s vision for our neighbourhood; the activities and interests which occupy us; and the skills, abilities and experiences we possess and may want to share.

This form is intended to be a helpful guide to a brief conversation which will hopefully be a part of an enduring conversation and the building of a stronger culture of connection in our neighbourhood.

This is NOT a confidential conversation or document! Our Community League/Group's hope is that the information from this conversation will be shared and used to build the fabric of our neighbourhood through local groups and connections.

House Address: ___________________________ Block: ___________________________

Block Connector: ___________________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household</th>
<th>Member 1*</th>
<th>Member 2</th>
<th>Member 3</th>
<th>Member 4+</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age Group*</td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>Adult</td>
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<td>Phone</td>
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<tr>
<td>E-Mail</td>
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* Member 1 may answer on behalf of the household

** Baby (0-1 years), Toddler (2-3 years), Preschool (4-5 years), Young Child (6-12 years), Youth (13-17 years), Young Adult (18-25 years), Adult (26-69), Middle Adult (40-65 years), Older Adult (66-79 years), Oldest Adult (80+ years)

Personal Information and Privacy Protection Statement:

__________________________________________.

Community League/Group is committed to safeguarding the information entrusted to us by our neighbours. We make every reasonable effort to ensure that the personal information collected is accurate and complete. We protect personal information in a manner appropriate for the sensitivity of the information. We make every reasonable effort to prevent any loss, misuse, disclosure or modification of personal information, as well as any access to personal information beyond the specific purpose of the community league initiative. We use appropriate security measures when destroying personal information, including shredding paper and the complete deleting of electronic information. Abundant Community Edmonton Privacy Policy can be viewed upon request by contacting a member of the Community League/Group. In the event you would like to speak with someone, you may call ____________________________ (member of the Community League/Group) at ____________________________.

PART ONE: Vision for the neighbourhood

1. What makes a great neighbourhood?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Member 1*</th>
<th>Member 2</th>
<th>Member 3</th>
<th>Member 4</th>
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</table>

2. What else can we do to make our neighbourhood a great neighbourhood?

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<tr>
<th>Member 1*</th>
<th>Member 2</th>
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<th>Member 4</th>
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</table>
PART TWO: Participating Together in Activities and Interests

3. What activities would you like to engage in with neighbours? (E.g. oil painting, block party, hockey, biking, gardening, baseball, jazz guitar, dog walking, gourmet cooking, book club, knitting... these are some examples, add whatever you wish)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Member 1*</th>
<th>Member 2</th>
<th>Member 3</th>
<th>Member 4</th>
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</table>

4. Do you have interests that you would value meeting with neighbours to talk about? (E.g. refugee support, urban design, homelessness and poverty, social justice, philosophy, politics, nutrition, art, sports, music, travel... these are some examples, add whatever you wish).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Member 1*</th>
<th>Member 2</th>
<th>Member 3</th>
<th>Member 4</th>
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5. Are there activities or interests that you are familiar enough with to lead in or teach a group of neighbours?

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<th>Member 1*</th>
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<th>Member 4</th>
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</table>

PART THREE: Skills, Abilities and Experiences to Share

6. Do you have a skill or ability that you would be comfortable using to help neighbours or the neighbourhood?

   Provide a brief description for an anonymous newsletter posting (e.g. willing to donate time to set up computers for seniors, willing to shovel snow for those with mobility challenges, etc.)

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<tr>
<th>Member 1*</th>
<th>Member 2</th>
<th>Member 3</th>
<th>Member 4</th>
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</table>

7. Are there some life experiences that you would consider sharing for the benefit of neighbours?

   Provide a brief description for an anonymous newsletter posting (e.g. meet one on one to talk about grief, form a group to talk about a certain social issue like homelessness, teach a session, etc.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Member 1*</th>
<th>Member 2</th>
<th>Member 3</th>
<th>Member 4</th>
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</table>
## Appendix C: Changes in interview questions

*star denotes questions asked in group interviews*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial Interview Questions (Mr. Lawrence and researcher)</th>
<th>Actual Interview Questions (block connectors)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are your dominant thoughts about the role of block connecting?</td>
<td>Tell me what it is like to be a block connector.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you like about your role as block connector?</td>
<td>What do you like about your role as block connector?*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you find challenging about the role?</td>
<td>What do you find challenging about the role?*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me about a time that you had a conversation where a strong connection with a neighbour was made. (who, what, when, where, how – describe the interaction in detail)</td>
<td>Tell me about a time that you had a conversation where a significant connection with a neighbour was made. What made this a significant connection?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me about a time that an attempt was made to make a strong connection, but was unsuccessful (who, what, when, where, how – describe the interaction in detail)</td>
<td>Tell me about a time that an attempt was made to make a connection, but was unsuccessful. What made this an unsuccessful connection?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What factors did you consider in your decision to become a block connector?</td>
<td>How did you become a block connector? What motivated you to become a block connector?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did you hope to gain from becoming a block connector? Describe how those expectations have or have not been fulfilled?</td>
<td>What keeps you going as a block connector? Describe how your expectations of the block connector role has or hasn’t been fulfilled.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you feel the role of block connector is unique or similar to other volunteer roles</td>
<td>What do you understand your role as block connector to be in relation to your block and the greater neighbourhood?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>that you have been involved in or that you know about on the community league?</td>
<td>Has it changed since you first started this role?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you describe your relationship with the interview?</td>
<td>Describe your experience with using the conversation guide.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What emotions do you feel as they relate to the conversation (fear, awkward, organic)?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were you more or less competent at the interview process than you expected?</td>
<td>How have you felt supported in your role as block connector?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me one of your favourite stories about your role as block connector.</td>
<td>Tell me one (or two) of your favourite stories about your role as block connector (if not shared already).*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe your feelings and emotions as a block connector as you anticipated conversations, after conversations and in the non-conversation or “normal time”? What is your perception of your neighbours’ view of the role of block connector? Describe the change in relationship between you and a neighbour after the conversation. Were your neighbours more or less receptive to you than you expected? What kind of personal characteristics make this role easier, and which make it more difficult?</td>
<td>This questions were not included in the final list at the request of the focus group.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>