Abstract: Qualitative Longitudinal Research (QLR) is gaining popularity as a method to chart participants’ lives over time. QLR holds promise and presents challenges for determining how careers and, to date, has been infrequently used to examine the professional trajectories of librarians. In this paper, the researcher will define and weigh QLR and provide an exemplar of the method’s application.

Résumé: La Recherche Qualitative Longitudinale (Qualitative Longitudinal Research ou QLR en anglais) gagne en popularité comme méthode pour documenter la vie des participants au fil du temps. La QLR est prometteuse et présente des défis pour déterminer la façon dont les carrières changent et, à ce jour, a été utilisée de manière sporadique pour examiner les trajectoires professionnelles des bibliothécaires. Dans cet article, le chercheur va définir et évaluer la QLR et fournir un exemple d'application de la méthode.

1. Overview
Qualitative Longitudinal Research (QLR) is emerging as a defined research method in the social sciences (Neale & Flowerdew, 2003) although a handful of this research can be found in medical, human development, and education research as well as in long form documentary film. However, QLR is rarely used in library and information science (LIS) research despite QLR’s usefulness for program evaluation and professional career development. The proposed paper abstracted here will explore QLR’s underlying concepts; compare the strengths and weaknesses of the method; compare it to similar approaches; and present exemplary results obtained with this method when it was used to document school librarians’ career development. The QLR method has helped the researcher to conclude that six years of studying four school librarians’ career development suggests that career progression is not a linear trajectory, but is an intertwined helix of personal, institutional, and societal forces along the lines of Pierre Bourdieu’s contention that education reflects socio-cultural production. The final version of this proposed paper will also include a preliminary report of data from the third phase of the ongoing longitudinal study.

2. Qualitative Longitudinal Research Design
Because QLR is used to study people over time, it is essentially an approach that is used to document change. According to Saldana (2003: 114) and interpreted by Farrall (2007: 12-15), QLR can be very useful to answer research questions such as:

• What is the difference between one time period and another?
• When do any changes occur? Which changes co-occur with or precede others?
• Are there any epiphanies, surges, or critical incidents?
• Which effects increase or decrease over time? Are participants on a trajectory?
• What are the contextual processes that condition or influence changes and the timing of changes?
• Which changes oppose or support common processes and theories of development?
• Are changes substantive or symbolic? Permanent or fleeting?

These questions help the researcher to explore what Bourdieu (1999) termed as participants’ “habitus” in the “field,” i.e., their relationship with a context. Bourdieu’s work is especially helpful when studying education as a product of culture and his concept of field enable a view of educators’ development from a gamesmanship perspective. Decisions are made on a strategic field of practice in which the players have identified preferred outcomes (Bourdieu 1971). QLR allows us to see how educators’ structured practices play out and shift over time as they respond to changes in the field. QLR subverts the notion that studies of practice can or should be objective and instead allows all research agents to recognize and value the meanings of practice (Grenfell 2007: 53-54).

To this end, researchers may employ a range of methods over the course of one study and tailor the methods to the circumstances present in various encounters (Tomanović 2003: 269). QLR is credited with being a dynamic, innovative research approach because it requires a re-examination of methods and interpretation fluidity over time and requires participants and researchers to shifting and open perspectives through reflection (Henderson et al 2012).

Most QLR studies are small and do not aim to present generalizable results. Researchers take an epistemological stance that the variation in contexts and personalities warrants a method that will achieve depth and that uses temporal length as a proxy for the breadth of generalizability (Yates 2003: 244). Conceptually, theory has a role in QLR on two levels: in research design to frame the individual encounter and to guide the overall study results, but also to explain the researcher’s relationship to the study participants as the study continues over time (McLeod 2003: 204).

3. Benefits and Challenges to Qualitative Longitudinal Research
Aside from obvious logistical challenges like sustained funding, keeping track of participants, and managing a data set that will grow and change over time (Thomson and Holland 2003: 243), QLR can be better choice than a quantitative method. As Farrall stated, “QLR scores over quantitative longitudinal research in that it allows one to explore contexts, mechanisms and outcomes at the individual level” (2006: 9). As the social researchers increasingly interweave and inject many research problems with the additional realization that an individual’s knowledge, choices, and life experiences influence a range of research contexts, quantitative measures are less suited to gathering data regarding other emotions such as embarrassment and hope (Henwood and Lang, 2003: 49). Therefore, QLR allows one to explore these sorts of emotions and how they
alter over time than quantitative data analyses based on survey data might.

QLR also offers significant advantages over qualitative research. Most qualitative studies are in-depth snapshots of participants at a moment in time. While these single encounter studies can provide a full description of a particular incident or event, QLR allows for a greater sense of the impacts of an event that may not immediately emerge; changes in participants’ lives that may alter their experiences; and the ascending and descending role of multiple causal factors over time (Farrall 2006: 11). Although QLR study findings are drawn from the entire time of engagement with participants, each encounter presents snapshots into lives that occur at the intersection of personal, societal, and institutional forces. The complexity of this multi-layered dynamic context raises problems of interpretation (Tomanović 2003: 271); misunderstandings from one encounter can snowball into misinterpretations of participants’ entire experiences. This micro level and intimate, sustained contact with the researcher also allow participants to reflect on their states of mind and decisions over time, adding further richness to the data and meaning-making as the study progresses.

A related concern stems from the researchers’ subjectivity, negotiating between their own habitus, the participants’ habitus, and the field as the length of the study extends in a ‘distant-formal’ relationship (McLeod and Yates 1997: 26). Staying in contact with participants over time may mean establishing a more intimate relationship than researchers and participants causing their habitus to overlap and compromising objectivity (McCleod 2003: 205). For this reason, QLR researchers must always consider their roles in influencing the participants beyond data collection and use a variety of data collection methods to check any undue influence.

One of the grandest examples of longitudinal research in Michael Apted’s documentary film series, the Up Series, in which he features seven people he had been following for 49 years, engaging with them every seven years. Prior to the release of 56 Up, the seventh film in the series, in an interview, one participant remarked, “It's always very disturbing…You feel like you're just a specimen pinned on the board.” (Manning 2012: 9). Another participant concurred stating that her involvement in the Up Series had been, “‘very painful…Every seven years it throws up issues that I guess we all learn to put into compartments between the seven years and then it all gets opened up again’” (Rogow 2007: 14). These participants point to ethical issues that can arise through QLR’s sustained engagement. Because the level of engagement between the interviewer and the respondent is extensive, the risk that a participant will disclose personal information in QLR is real. Researchers must be particularly attuned to issues of confidentiality such as mentioning one participant’s past experiences to another participant, and of intrusion given that data collection may last for years.

4. Qualitative Longitudinal Research in Action: Librarians’ Career Development
In this section, I will summarize my longitudinal research that has been active since 2005 and has thus far produced two research reports (Mardis 2007; Mardis 2013). The intent of the initial study was to determine the effectiveness of students’ practicum experiences. Although quantitative data or a large number of cases would have allowed me to get
more of an overall picture of how well practicums prepared school library preparation students for their professional roles, QLR allowed me to reduce the unit of analysis to the individual level and determine which practicum aspects worked for whom. This micro level also allowed me to get to know more about the participants’ personal and professional aspirations, prior experiences, and workplace contexts.

The participants were all classroom teachers who pursued their Master’s degree in Library and Information Studies to become school librarians. Because professional guidelines suggested that school librarians’ roles as teachers and instructional partners were particularly important to student learning and that indeed, these roles were often the most difficult for school librarians to assume, I sought to see how well participants’ librarian education, particularly their internship component, prepared them. I asked participants to keep autoethnographic journals in which they reflected on their current roles as classroom teachers and their potential new duties as school librarians. At three intervals during the 15 weeks of data collection, I asked participants to complete simple “Stages of Concern” questionnaires to record their feelings and changing concerns. In addition, I interviewed participants in depth about what they felt were the strengths and challenges of their internship experience. I asked all participants the same questions, including a question in which I asked them to describe a critical incident, positive or negative, that shaped their thinking. While I learned a lot about their internship experiences that informed the practicum process (e.g., detailed guidelines for mentors, encouraging interns to have more contact with teachers and students), I became far more attuned to the influence that participants’ prior experiences and work environments had on the practicum’s success. I also observed a trajectory of activity in their practicums along that appeared to mimic the experiences of new classroom teachers as suggested in the Concerns Based Adoption Model (CBAM) (Hall & Hord, 2006). The CBAM trajectory of educator career development flows outward from an initial self-conscious focus to a focus on practice to a focus on instructional impact. I planned to investigate any furthering of the trajectory in the second study.

Because the student participants had graduated and moved into their careers, for the second phase of the study three years later, I concentrated my data collection on in-depth interviewing. I was fortunate enough to have each of the four participants return. In the interviews, I quickly learned that my sense that I would hear about further development of their career trajectories along the lines of those that teachers experience was soon erased; each person’s journey was almost exclusively guided by unique personal and situational factors. The interviews gave me insight into the extent to which economic factors and national education policy seemed to be affecting the local conduct of public schools more immediately and forcing educators to make tough decisions about their professional paths. Some participants chose to stay in the classroom out of a sense that it was safer; some chose to become school administrators to be able to influence their local culture more directly, and some did become school librarians, but with very different work situations (e.g., working in several schools) than the ones they had been trained for in their preservice preparation. Their choices to transfer their training (see Russ-Eft 2002) to school library work or transfer their skills to other education-related roles cued conceptual frameworks; other than CBAM. In short, the professional experience and
challenges of a school librarian (or prospective school librarian) had changed dramatically in just three years.

The third phase of this study is currently underway. In the ensuing three years, it is likely that participants faced even more serious changes to their state’s economy and public education. Additionally, the participants will also likely have faced personal decisions that will have impacted their career choices. These changes undoubtedly influenced the ways in which the participants have chosen to conduct their careers and will provide an interesting look into librarians’ work lives in a time of serious professional, social, and organizational disruption.

5. Conclusion
The paper will review the potential of QLR to address career development and demonstrated the application of this method to a longitudinal study of school librarians as they moved from preservice preparation to professional practice. The study of a librarian’s career is essentially a study of personal change within a changing profession and workplace; indeed, career values shift as the values of educational fields shift (Grenfell and James 1998: 25). While a longitudinal approach is valuable for capturing individual transitions as well as larger currents in society, it can also show the complex interplay between individual, social, and institutional dynamics (Tomanović 2003: 270). By its definition, qualitative methodology is more flexible (Daly 1992: 4, Huberman and Miles 1998: 185) than a quantitative approach when a research context demands a study design that changes over time in ways that are driven by the participants themselves.

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