

# Where have we come from?

## Recent developments in literacy research in practice in Canada

An excerpt adapted from *"It simply makes us better": Learning from Literacy Research in Practice Networks in the UK, Australia and the United States, A Resource for Literacy Research in Practice in Canada*. **Allan Quigley** and **Mary Norton**, The Learning Centre, Edmonton, 2002.

### **In February 1996, the National Literacy Secretariat, Ottawa, hosted a policy conversation on literacy research.**

The participants identified a need to recognize, link, support and advance literacy research and practice in Canada. Following the policy conversation, Mary Norton and Yvon Laberge, who had participated in it, surveyed six consultants about practitioner research in Canada. The consultation identified both an interest in research in practice and a number of potential challenges to practitioners engaging in research, including practitioners' need for support and resources to do research.

Potential challenges include practitioners' need for support and resources to do research.

The survey led to an October 1997 research in practice seminar in Edmonton. Eighteen literacy researchers, practitioners and consultants met to discuss the potential and possible future applications of literacy research in practice in Canada. Literacy practitioner research networks and projects that had been discussed or attempted in parts of Canada were reviewed, as were some of the established networks in Australia, the UK and the USA. The seminar heightened interest in developing organized approaches to supporting or sustaining research in practice initiatives.

In February 1998, the National Literacy Secretariat produced *Enhancing literacy research in Canada*, which highlighted the need for research capacity building in Canada. This report outlined a framework for

supporting research in literacy and included practitioner research as one important direction for literacy research in Canada. By this time, organized literacy research in practice efforts had been introduced in Alberta and British Columbia.

In 1997, The Learning Centre, Edmonton, in partnership with the University of Alberta Faculty of Education, initiated an NLS-funded practitioner research project that explored participatory approaches in literacy education. Building on this project, a Research in Practice in Adult Literacy (RiPAL) Network was initiated in 2000 by the Literacy Coordinators of Alberta, the Learning Centre, and the University of Alberta Centre for Research on Literacy. Both of these projects used web-based and internet communication to help practitioners read, apply and conduct research about practice. The later project incorporated approaches described in a framework developed by Jenny Horsman and Mary Norton (1999).

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In 1998, a course on adult research was offered as part of Literacy BC's summer institute. Twenty-seven practitioners attended from BC, Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario and the Territories. This was followed in the fall by a workshop on practitioner research, sponsored by the BC Ministry of Advanced Education. An on-line research conference is now accessible to conference subscribers in BC and the western provinces and territories.



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In 2000 a Research Circles project was initiated at Simon Fraser University with Literacy BC involvement. Its aim was to support and build the capacity for literacy practitioner research. This project was discontinued in 2001. A collaborative research in practice project, initiated in 2001, involved five practitioners who are researching how adults with little formal education learn. A university-based consultant is providing research workshops and support for the research team.

Elsewhere in Canada, the Ontario Field Research Group of literacy practitioners and researchers, although disbanded on a formal level, continued to function in an informal manner. The Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education Regional Conference held in Halifax in March 1998 was dedicated to practitioners action research. A national project, based at the University of Ottawa, involved 10 practitioners in action research about workplace literacy. Reports about each project are included in the project report (Taylor 2002) which also includes a guide to doing action research. Meanwhile, the Centre for Education and Work in Winnipeg held consultations across Manitoba in 2002 about the feasibility of conducting research within community-based programs.

In the summer of 2001, a gathering in Edmonton about adult literacy research in practice attracted sixty people from various contexts across Canada, along with some participants from the UK, Australia and the USA. Researchers in practice facilitated workshops and inquiry groups about their research and engaged in discussions about research in practice. Another gathering was held in the summer of 2002 in conjunction with a literacy conference in Vancouver, and the 2003 research and practice institute will be held in St. John's. ■

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