

Practitioners Making Time to Read and Write

by **Sheila Stewart**

When I worked at Parkdale Project Read we occasionally got calls from researchers, usually graduate students, at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). They seemed to be calling from another world. They wanted to visit the program, observe a group, interview learners. We would ward them off. I remember asking one such caller, "What would Project Read and the learners involved get back from your visits?" The distrust of researchers can be even more profound in the Deaf and Aboriginal communities where, in many ways, research has often been a tool used to categorize and control.

Now, here I am working at OISE/UT as a proponent of research, particularly research in practice. How do I justify it? I believe that research in practice can be a way for us to turn around the problem of research being "done to" us. It can provide us the opportunity to stop and reflect on what we are doing and to ask and answer our own questions about our practice. Doing it ourselves is a way to feel that we can become better at what we do, and speak for ourselves. Research in practice can keep people in the field. The university, for all its limitations, can help give us space and tools to examine our practice and better understand and value what we do.

Research sits in a particular place between the field and the policy-makers. For one thing, it can be a way to help make our voices louder. Working with people who are poor and marginalized means we don't have many powerful allies. Our work in classrooms and communities is largely invisible. Adult literacy hasn't had much attention since International Literacy Year in 1990. The media's current focus in Ontario is on how many high school students are failing the grade 10 literacy test. This kind of "failure" does not result in smaller class sizes and more money for special education and English as a second language. Rather it just seems to be part of an endless circle of assessment and standardized testing.

Front-line literacy practitioners are expected to do more with less. We spend increasing amounts of

time on administration to answer demands for accountability. As outcomes are measured, it is easy to feel that our programs and our work are being measured. Who has time to read in a literacy program? Not the literacy workers. Who has time to write? Again, not the staff, unless it is writing grant proposals. What an irony that as literacy practitioners we can become alienated from the power of our own reading and writing.

Research can help us tell our side of the story. It can help us move learning and teaching back into the centre of literacy practice. We can become the ones asking the questions and defining what is important to literacy programs. We need to express our hard-earned understandings so that we can dialogue with policy-makers and theorists, build community and thrive.

Like other teachers and front-line workers, we deserve time to reflect. We need time to read at work – in between the demands of intakes, groups, tutor trainings, board meetings, and so on.

Research can only help the field if we find time to read it, discuss it, talk about it, argue with it and think through how it might change the way we do things. I'm sure I'm not the only literacy practitioner to have shelved a few research

reports and never found a moment to pick them up again.

During my time at Project Read one of the few pieces of research I managed to read was Jenny Horsman's *Too Scared to Learn*. This book describes how difficult

it is for learners who have experienced violence to bring attention, focus and presence to their learning. That really helped me. I could feel a shift in my approach with learners. I blamed myself as a facilitator less, and developed a better sense of how to work with what was going on. All of us can have greater insight during our next encounters with learners once we read good quality research.

Recently, I read the Ontario Literacy Coalition's report, *Supporting Learning, Supporting Change*. The author, Katrina Grieve, built on other researchers' work to create a new model for working with learners. This report draws on international research and insights from other disciplines. It presents findings in the clear, accessible voice of someone from the field. As I read, I felt I was in the midst of a rich dialogue between research and the field.

A new kind of research is emerging which is close to the ground and speaks directly to practitioners. It is worth reading, critiquing and applying to our practice. As well as reading, we need to write about our work. We can better support our learners and ourselves if we use our own literacy abilities to shape this work that we love. ■

For an excellent article on research in practice, see *A Framework to Encourage and Support Practitioner Involvement in Adult Literacy Research in Practice in Canada* by Jenny Horsman and Mary Norton (Ottawa: National Literacy Secretariat, 1999).

For a thorough discussion of research in practice networks on a national and international scale, see *"It simply makes us better" Learning from Literacy Research in Practice Networks* by Allan Quigley and Mary Norton (Edmonton: Learning at the Centre Press, 2002).

SOURCES:

Horsman, Jenny (1999). *Too Scared to Learn*. Toronto: McGilligan Books.

Grieve, Katrina (2003). *Supporting Learning, Supporting Change: A research project on self-management and self-direction*. Toronto: Ontario Literacy Coalition.