

Practitioner Research in BC

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In this article we describe the support and enthusiasm that have moved research in practice forward in this province during the past five years. We also look at how changing social policy in BC is affecting learning, teaching and capacity for research. Since 1998, practitioners in BC have been able to take advantage of several initiatives to encourage and support practitioner research. Audrey Thomas of the BC Ministry of Advanced Education took a leadership role in this endeavour. The BC Adult Literacy Cost-Shared Program funds positions for "research friends" who provide one-to-one assistance to practitioners developing and undertaking research projects and connecting with research literature. Research friends also give presentations at meetings and conferences to spread the word about research in practice opportunities in BC. Biannual group training workshops in Vancouver provide practitioners with opportunities to learn about research methodologies and share and interact with peers. These two-day workshops, attended by 12 to 15 practitioners, have been enthusiastically received. A new option being developed is to take the workshop to different communities. The Hub, BC's electronic literacy

network, includes a "Research" conference. The Hub is a partnership of Literacy BC and Capilano College, funded by the BC Adult Literacy Cost-Shared Program. It provides an on-line forum to discuss various topics and exchange information about resources and events. These initiatives have helped to support a diversity of research in BC, including several collaborative projects among groups of literacy practitioners and learners from different parts of the province.

In 2002 a group of literacy researchers planned and facilitated the Adult Literacy Research in Practice Pre-Conference held at the University of British Columbia. The pre-conference supported literacy practitioners bringing their unique perspectives to a mainstream academic conference Portraits of Literacy: Critical Issues in Family, School and Community Literacy. Over 50 literacy practitioners from Canada, the USA and Great Britain participated in the pre-conference. Following this event, the planning group and others explored interest in a research in practice network in BC. The group received strong encouragement from literacy practitioners, who wanted to participate and be informed of new research events and opportunities.

Recently, a new network was formed: RiPAL-BC (Research in Practice in Adult Literacy). The network will encourage and support research in practice within the BC adult literacy field and connect with networks and initiatives across the country. For example, RiPAL-BC is currently collaborating with colleagues in other provinces to develop a national research in practice web site (www.nald.ca/ripal/).

One of the goals of RiPAL-BC is to inform adult literacy policy development by documenting issues that arise in literacy practice. Policy issues are on the minds of many people in BC these days because social policy in this province is changing. Government cutbacks and policy changes are having a profound effect on literacy and Adult Basic Education program delivery, access and participation. Changes to legislation are affecting the educational opportunities of people on social assistance. For example, single parents are now considered employable when the youngest child turns three (the age used to be seven). Institutional Based Training, which provided colleges and institutes with funds to support students on social assistance, has been eliminated. A five-year policy of tuition-free Adult Basic Education is now being reviewed. These are just a few of the policy adjustments affecting access to education and training, especially for people on low incomes.

Describing the current environment, practitioners talk about students coming to school hungry and missing classes or showing up late because they need to find work, don't have childcare, and are spending time negotiating an overwhelmed bureaucracy. In one practitioner's words:

You have to see your social worker to get anything. One student had to deal with three: "children and families", a welfare worker, and an educational worker. The worker from "children and families" told him to stay home with his kids, the welfare worker to get a job, and the educational worker to stay at school.

The impact of this changing social landscape on students' lives, on their opportunities for learning, and their ability to learn, is being tracked. For example, the Friends of Women & Children in BC, a group of feminist scholars from post-secondary institutions across the province, is tracking the effects of cuts to social programs on women and children. (See their "report cards" at <http://www.wmst.ubc.ca/>.) What of the impact on practitioners and their

teaching? And what do these changes mean for further development of research in practice in BC? Will it move to the back burner because more urgent and compelling needs demand attention and drain time, energy and the capacity for research?

One of the principles of research in practice is that practitioner researchers need the support of time and money to do research. Quigley and Norton (2001) identify time as the most commonly named challenge for researchers in practice. They point to underlying issues in the field which affect practitioners' time, such as employment instability and women's responsibilities for children and families in addition to paid work, since most literacy practitioners are women. A recent report of a collaborative research project in BC, *Dancing in the Dark*, also identified time as a significant challenge in research (Niks et al 2003). It may be that the uncertainty, stress and confusion of the current social environment are additional factors affecting not only the time, but the energy needed for practitioner research.

A group of literacy practitioners who are currently studying what makes an effective literacy instructor are finding that the environment in their programs has an impact on their research. The new demands on their time and energy mean they are not always able to meet their own high standards of effective instruction and this in turn affects their ability to focus on research.

In times like these, inevitable questions arise about the importance and the capacity for research: Is there any value to doing research when literacy is so underfunded? Is research in practice a frill? One answer comes from the voices of practitioners who describe their frustration with the system and the challenges of program funding, but who also reflect on how their participation in research energizes them and gives them a space to talk to others about the issues they and their students face. In the words of one longtime literacy practitioner in BC: "We have a story to tell ... In some ways, research is even more important now." ■

SOURCES:

Niks, Marina, Darcy Allen, Paula Davies, Dee McRae, and Kate Nonesuch (2003). *Dancing in the Dark: How Do Adults with Little Formal Education Learn? How Do Literacy Practitioners Do Collaborative Research?* Victoria: Province of British Columbia, Ministry of Advanced Education.

Quigley, Allan and Mary Norton (2001). *It Simply Makes Us Better: Learning from Literacy Research in Practice Networks: A Resource for Literacy Research in Practice in Canada*. Edmonton: The Learning Centre.