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From the Bottom Up: Developing a Literacy Practitioner Research Network in British Columbia

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Abstract: *This roundtable will address the developments and challenges involved in building research capacity among literacy practitioners in the province of British Columbia through collaborative partnerships between various agencies. Case examples of different approaches will be presented with opportunities for questions and discussion.*

Introduction

Until recent years, much of adult literacy practice in Canada has relied on research from other jurisdictions – mainly the UK and the USA. There have been only a few adult literacy researchers in Canada. Most literacy practitioners are busy people dealing with their programs and learners on a daily basis. There is little time, and resources are limited for reflection on practice, documentation of activity and distribution of results. Collaborative partnerships are a key component in the development of an emergent literacy practitioner research network in British Columbia (BC). Practitioner is defined broadly to include those variously working in the literacy field and includes literacy learners.

Canadian literacy research events in 1996 and 1997 led, in 1998, to two separate research days hosted by the BC government in cooperation with the Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology (C2T2) and to a project that provides ongoing training support for adult literacy practitioners. In addition, a literacy action research course was part of a

1998 literacy summer institute organized by Literacy BC, the provincial literacy coalition.

The partnerships that have developed between government, two provincial non-profit educational organizations and local universities provide awareness about research questions and opportunities for training. Presenters will each address their roles in this initiative and focus on case examples drawn from their experience.

Learners Educational Action Research Network (LEARN)

One such case example is the LEARN project. The main goal of this research project is to explore and learn how to build and sustain connections among literacy learners in BC by developing a “learner network.” The project is managed by Literacy BC, through a project coordinator. The research team is composed of six adult learners who have a wealth of experience as literacy advocates but are new to research. The principal objectives of this one-year project are to: a) design and implement a collaborative action research project that builds on existing

connections and relationships among literacy learners in BC, b) contribute to the learning and skill development of the research team through training and practice in research and project planning, and c) document and report on the process and the results of the research.

In a unique partnership, the University of British Columbia supports and mentors the project through the services of a research “friend” who: offers consultation to the project coordinator around a variety of research and team issues; provides training in research skills to the research team through face-to-face meetings, as well as electronically; and guides the direction of the project to ensure it meets the standards of credible research. The roundtable will offer observations and perceptions about the challenges and rewards this distinctive project presents.

Electronic Research Conference

A unique aspect of the emergent literacy research network in BC is the use of electronic conferencing to build research links, share knowledge, and offer literacy practitioners professional development and training. The research conference on the BC literacy electronic network offers these opportunities in a supportive, collaborative environment to literacy practitioners around the province. Electronic conferencing activities include on-line consultation from a university-based research “friend” about the development of new and ongoing research projects, and a bulletin board of information about research materials, resources, and events. The roundtable will offer some insights into the strengths and limitations of electronic conferencing in facilitating community and building knowledge within a research-in-practice network.

Literacy Research Circles

Simon Fraser University and Literacy BC are partners in an innovative two-year project helping literacy practitioners learn how to research family, workplace, and adult literacy education in BC. The project is organised through “research circles,” a practitioner based design specifically intended to foster co-operative “learning by doing” (Holmstrand, 1993). The circle begins with a collective review of the whole idea of research, emphasising the practical aspects of the process and the concrete benefits for researchers and others. During this time, circle participants identify particular topics they would like to explore, and are then able to develop, conduct, and disseminate the results of small-scale research projects addressing the identified concerns. These projects can be individual or conducted by several circle participants working together. Research circles offer a more open environment than conventional research, with each participant able to develop their own knowledge, skills, and confidence with the support of their peers and experienced researchers. The resulting projects will vary in their intention and design, adding to the diversity of research on literacy in BC and helping to build a network of inquiry among the province’s literacy practitioners. Included among the benefits of the process are the new knowledge created by the participants’ projects, leading to better informed literacy practice, and the increased awareness of, and support for, literacy programming and research in Canada.

Reference

Holmstrand, L. (1993). The research circle: A way of cooperating. In K. Forrester & C. Thorne (Eds.), *Trade unions and social research* (pp. 106-114). Aldershot, England: Avebury Press.