Literacy Work in Alberta – Then and Now

by **Deborah Morgan**

When I saw that the theme for this issue of *Literacies* was about what constitutes literacy work, I was intrigued because I have been thinking a lot lately about what literacy work looks like now compared to 15 years ago.

In the early 1990s, as an International Literacy Year project, I wrote a book called *Opening Doors*—a documentation and celebration of the lived experiences of community literacy workers in Alberta. One of the foremost issues raised by literacy coordinators I interviewed throughout Alberta for *Opening Doors* was the unrealistic expectations put on literacy workers to "do it all." In a chapter called "Burnout and Balance" I wrote:

> There is no question that literacy work is demanding. I have listened to people describe all that they do in their literacy work and am amazed by the resourcefulness required to be able to meet all the expectations of the job. Classroom instructors are expected to teach literacy to students whose personal problems continually overwhelm their ability and desire to learn; volunteer tutors with little or no teaching backgrounds are expected to work with students after only nine hours of training; and coordinators are expected to be able to speak to the Rotary Club, balance a financial statement for their Advisory Committee, interview a new student, find information on spelling for a tutor and write a press release—all on the same day, sometimes all at the same time (p. 69).

Now, 15 years later, I've been wondering: are literacy workers still being asked or expected to do and know it all? I decided to check in with community-based literacy coordinators working in Alberta today by posting some questions on two provincial online discussion forums. I received lively and perceptive responses from 23 practitioners in rural and urban settings in all three regions: the south, centre and north. Many more practitioners listened in on the discussions.

To start the dialogue, I posted the following conversation I had had 15 years ago with Meredith, a woman who had just been hired as a literacy coordinator:

> During my interview, I was shown the job description for the position. It was pretty lengthy—17 points in all. I recall looking up at the interview panel and thinking 'Get real—surely you can't possibly want all these skills in one body and expect to pay them only $9 an hour!' Well, I guess my interest in literacy was greater than my concern about the job description because I accepted the position!
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> Now, after being in the job for six months, there are days when I have to shake my head and remind myself that I agreed to work for $9 an hour, knowing that I had 17 points on my job description and only 17 hours a week in which to accomplish everything. The people in management who hired me seemed to think the expectations were reasonable, but they just aren't (*Opening Doors* p. 70).

I then asked the questions: Are the expectations placed on literacy workers still unrealistic? What are the kinds of skills needed to do the job that aren't necessarily on a job description?

It was obvious from people's reaction to Meredith's story that literacy workers continue to work hard to meet the "needs of individuals who place an enormous amount of trust and confidence in our abilities." One of the first emails I received sounded almost identical to Meredith's situation:

> I want to do my job well. I want to be able to recruit volunteers, train them so they feel they have the skills to help someone, welcome students, help them set goals, continue to provide ongoing support to tutors, cover all administrative duties of keeping my office organized, write reports for Council, attend meetings, keep our presence in the community visible, look at

other funding possibilities—need I continue the list? Some days it just isn't possible to get it all done! (Marilyn)

As more people responded to my questions (and to each other), it became obvious that the realities facing literacy practitioners today are dramatically more complex than they were 15 years ago:

> We are often exposed to situations that we are not fully prepared for, such as offering help to those who have experienced violence in their lives. And not just the type of violence that we may be somewhat aware of—we also work with families who come to Canada who have experienced war first-hand. (Shawna)

Family violence, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, youth at risk, Attention Deficit Disorder and mental illness were not words or topics that were talked about when I was a literacy coordinator in the late '80s. (In fact, when I started the Opening Doors project, family literacy was just being introduced as a "possible" preventative measure and numeracy wasn't in our collective vocabularies yet!)

Those working in the field today recognize the importance of specific and specialized training to effectively address the difficulties and demands of literacy work:

> For me, the issue isn't so much the job description as much as it is the fact that we are expected to do big things without proper training. Most do not have the qualifications to do the job, even though they are willing to give it a try. As a typical example, it is common to have a person who has attended school from kindergarten to grade 12 (and has received instruction from degreed professionals) to come to my office needing to improve their literacy skills. My response (as mandated by the job description) is to set them up with a tutor, someone who has no formal training (just a little tutor training) and receives no pay, and suggest that they work one to two hours a week (when 12 years in school didn't do it). I have a number of tutors who have good intentions and really want to help, but they don't really have the specialized training to assist someone who likely has a learning disability and a variety of negative learning experiences to deal with—and neither do I! (Lynn)

Shannon made a similar point and raised more difficult questions:

> Why is it okay to expect underpaid literacy practitioners (and volunteer tutors) to do what well-paid educators have already failed to do? How screwed up is this system?! So much rests on our volunteers and I worry constantly that we ask too much. I struggle with this daily. I don't feel adequately trained to assess [students] properly, or to provide student-tutor pairs with the appropriate materials. When I started my job, I kept asking the previous coordinator: 'How do you match up pairs? How do you know who to put with whom?' And she would just reply, 'Trust your instinct and follow your gut reaction.' What?!! I didn't have any instinct yet! That is definitely not on any job description I've seen.
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> I'm not a teacher; I have no background in education at all. (I thank my lucky stars daily that I was able to get this job despite my lack of qualifications.) While I have received incredible professional development and feel somewhat prepared most of the time, I still feel like I need more. And the more I learn, the more I know I need to learn—and the cycle continues. (Shannon)

Some people felt strongly that literacy programs need to be more focused on hiring people with the

In 2002-2003 Literacy Alberta spoke with 73 coordinators of community adult literacy programs in the first phase of their Professional Development Project. Here are some of the findings:

- **Most respondents (87%) coordinated all aspects of their program.**
- **68% of respondents were the only employee in their program.**
- **A majority of coordinators (62%) were employed for 10 months each year.**

SOURCES:

Jackson, Candice (2003). *Highlights from the Professional Development Project.* Calgary: Literacy Alberta.

necessary credentials to do the job, not just people who are willing to work part time for low wages:

> I think the lack of demand for previous training and job qualifications is not only unrealistic, but just plain wrong. I have never known a nicer bunch of people than literacy coordinators. They/we are very nice. But being nice and wanting to help does not mean you can do an efficient job—proper training/ qualifications does. (Margot)

It appears that literacy workers today are willing to be more proactive in demanding appropriate training, as well as wages that reflect the important work they do.

> Our present literacy model suggests that you take people with limited skills, pay them little or nothing (in the case of our volunteers) and hope for some results. It is inexpensive, but as the recent International Adult Literacy and Life Skills (IALLS) survey results showed, this approach is not very effective. The responses from coordinators that there are personal (rather than monetary) rewards just reiterates the fact that we are a group of often undertrained but 'very nice' people. No one would ask a doctor, nurse, teacher or pharmacist to just do their best and try hard. We demand that they have skills and are well trained, and in response we pay them well. I think in order for us to be seen as 'professional' we need to have professional skills and be paid as professionals. (Lynn)
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> Due to uncertain and limited funding, literacy workers are not paid what they are worth or for all the hours they work. Donating time should not be an expectation of the job. I choose a job that rewards me personally, but I am also entitled to be paid for my work and my credentials. (Kim)

Even though people talked openly about making do with limited resources, taking on more than one part-time literacy job just to keep working in the literacy field or continuing to work on projects when "there are no dollars left for salaries," they also spoke warmly about their work:

There are many downsides to this literacy work, but in our hearts and souls we believe in it and that's why we are still here. (Louella)

I love my work. It's the most creative, demanding, engaging, stimulating work I've ever done. I especially value the camaraderie, the sense of shared community, in the literacy field. (Fay)

I love working in adult literacy—especially coordinating my own program. It is meaningful, rewarding work, and I'm thankful that I've found it (or it has found me). (Belle)

TRACEY MOLLINS

Those working in the field have often been criticized for being too willing to go above and beyond the expectations of their job descriptions:

> We're doing the best we can with the time and resources we have. Most of us go far beyond the call of duty in this program. A lot further than unionized government workers will go in theirs. It's because we care about our communities and we're often the last resort for people. (Sue)

Sue's comments build on what Meredith said 15 years ago: "My interest in literacy was greater than my concern about the job description." I wonder what would have sustained literacy programs if people like Sue and Meredith, and so many others, hadn't put their concern for others before their need for personal gain or consideration. Would the literacy community in Alberta be as strong and vital as it is today? Maureen really put this question into perspective:

> I believe that in jobs where people feel it is more of a vocation than a job (as many of us do), a lot of unpaid overtime is worked because that is the only way to really move the work forward. I have put in countless unpaid hours myself because I wanted to and I don't regret having done so. It is often unpaid overtime hours that have made a significant difference to the field. And I think this is true of any fledgling field of endeavour—it takes a hell of a lot of extra effort to get things off the ground and to convince others of its value. This is not to dismiss the very real concerns of workers who are paid minimally to work 10 hours a week to do the impossible. (Maureen)

As someone who has worked in literacy in Alberta for more than two decades, I have watched the field develop and grow, but I've also witnessed the price literacy workers have had to pay to "move the work forward." As I monitored the online discussions, I was reminded over and over again that while the expectations of literacy work have increased, professional training, compensation, recognition for the work being done and appropriate funding have not. Reading between the lines, I had the feeling that many literacy workers were coming dangerously close to the end of their ropes with frustration about the current situation.

But I also heard people starting to talk about the need for change:

> Only in a profession dominated by women is it possible to do 'peace work'—work that makes a difference in the world, which is also typically underpaid—because let's face it, that's what it is. We do this work because we see the value of it and know how very important it is in the grand scheme of things. This is not to say that it shouldn't change; there are a million reasons why it should and I'm sure you'll be hearing from my colleagues about those. (Allie)

It has been promising to hear literacy workers becoming more confident and forthcoming about the changes they believe need to happen:

> I am vocal about insisting we are paid higher wages because this will encourage workers to stay in a field that appears to me to have an incredible turnover, as well as encourage people to honour and value themselves as literacy practitioners. I love what I do, but I want people to take me seriously as a professional in the community. My point is that for this to happen, we must take ourselves seriously as professionals first. (Shawna)

As I listened to this coming together of literacy workers discussing these difficult topics online, I was reminded of the grassroots energy that I valued so much when I was a new and untrained coordinator trying to get a program off the ground in the late '80s. I remember the frustration of the setbacks, and the exhilaration of each step forward. What I recall most, however, is the fortitude, ingenuity and creativity of the people who were pioneers bravely breaking new ground, people who openly shared their experiences and expertise, strengthening the literacy community as it grew. Our greatest resource to help us accomplish what we were trying to do was each other.

However, as a witness to the evolution of the literacy field in Alberta, I'm not sure that this camaraderie is as strong today as it was then. Maybe it's because there are more people, more programs and more specialized interest groups in literacy now. Or maybe it's because, as literacy workers (and especially as women), we've allowed ourselves to be seen as nice people who are hard done by for too long. Have we become part of the problem rather than the solution? It is my belief that all the very valid arguments made for change won't happen unless we take the time to strengthen our ties and commitment to each other, as well as to our work.

> As I look back over the last ten years, I see that as literacy practitioners we are now more fragmented than cohesive, more separated instead of more together. I believe much of this relates to limited resources and competition for funding. And we need to name this and talk about it, so that we can change it. Unless we can pull together as a sector, we have little hope of convincing government and other funders that literacy merits a much greater societal commitment. We need, as Paulo Freire said, to be able to "read the world" as well as read the word, so that we can respond collectively, as well as individually, to an issue about which so many of us feel passionately and care deeply. (Maureen)

What does the future hold?

Opening Doors was about the work and energy that went into establishing the literacy field in Alberta. As I have been rereading the book, I've been thinking: what would a book about literacy work in Alberta 15 years from now look like? What will job descriptions for literacy workers look like then?

When I'm feeling hopeful, I imagine a book full of stories about how literacy practitioners went back to the roots of literacy work to find ways to strengthen their resolve to effect change—accounts about cooperation and collaboration between practitioners, programs, communities and government, and stories and celebrations about the people who found ways to make it possible to support each other while supporting the cause.

Is my vision realistic? Will things ever change? Will the literacy community be alive and thriving 15 years from now? I have to believe that, in the near future, I will be able to read about substantial improvements made to literacy work in Alberta and across the country—that I will be able to write about the people and the changes that helped to create a more productive and sustaining environment for those who choose to learn and work in the literacy field tomorrow.

> I hope someday I can leave my program knowing that it will have more benefits for the next person. This would include salary with benefits, appropriate paid time and all the basic resources needed to do the job. It is my wish that, before I leave, funders and communities will value literacy programs more than they do now. (Pat) ■

Deborah Morgan recently received the Literacy Alberta Lifetime Achievement Award for her work over the past 20 years as a literacy program coordinator, tutor, instructor, researcher, writer, program developer and project manager. Deborah's first book, *Opening Doors*, documented the lived experiences of literacy workers in Alberta. It is now out of print but will be available on NALD (www.nald.ca). Her books about encouraging writing, *Writing Out Loud* and *More Writing Out Loud*, have gained an enthusiastic following in Canada and around the world. For more information, go to www.writingoutloud.ca.