

Learnings about Research in Practice

by Jenny Horsman

Focused on Practice, published in 2006, is the report of the first national study of research in practice (RiP) in Canada. The study was undertaken by two national researchers and practitioner-researchers from each province and territory, plus an Aboriginal researcher. Once each researcher collected information about their jurisdiction, the whole group analyzed the data. Together they made recommendations about the kinds of supports and structures that would make research in practice possible in this country.

The study revealed that research in practice is absolutely vital, but virtually impractical, given the current context for literacy work in Canada. The following excerpt is taken from a chapter that discusses the central findings about what makes RiP so contradictory.

Earlier chapters looked in depth at the state of the literacy field and of research. As a trilogy, these chapters provide a current picture of RiP and the context for its growth in Canada. They show that research in practice has become a valuable tool in the literacy field because it:

- makes the practitioner more confident, more effective, more skilled;
- improves practice for the learner;
- shares knowledge in ways that can be replicated;
- decreases burnout and may lessen staff turnover;
- provides opportunities for critical reflection;
- affirms literacy workers' knowledge;
- ensures knowledge is not lost, but sustained and built upon;
- increases the value of knowledge in the field;
- leads more attention to be paid to the field;
- is useful for advocacy, helps practitioners have a voice;
- influences policy-makers; and
- perhaps may lead to more money for literacy.

But the primary finding of our research is this complex and contradictory story: that the state of the literacy field makes it both impossible and essential

to do RiP. In this section, we explore the many reasons why this is the case—the impossibility of and possibilities for RiP.

We want to read research and engage in it, we just can't spare the time or find the energy

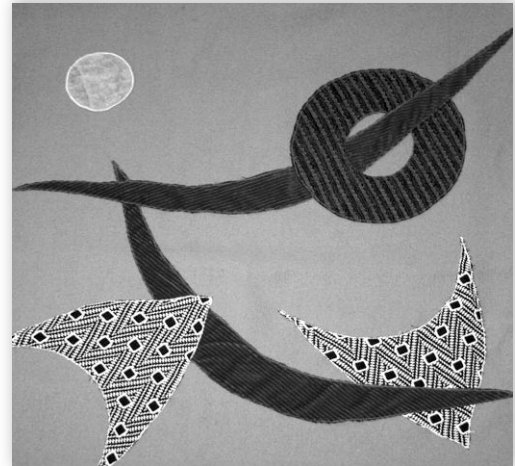
Tam Miller of the Regina Family Literacy Network Ltd. in Saskatchewan said exactly what most literacy workers might say: "I'm going to read it. I just don't know when." Lack of time is an enormous barrier to taking on RiP, from reading relevant research, to reflecting on practice in the light of that research, to carrying out research oneself.

RiP is very difficult logistically for practitioners. It's exhausting, time-consuming, and a lot of time is spent on a voluntary basis. It's very hard to do if you work part time, or if you teach five hours a day. You need paid time away from everyday programming to do it effectively: for planning and reflection time. (Ontario, Toronto Focus Group)

Unfortunately, what starts to happen is that people get tired, they get exhausted trying to find enough money just to operate, trying to keep up with all of the accountability changes, the paperwork. They become less and less energized to talk about the issues related to practice...a lot of instructors are working more than one job, trying to make a living for themselves. That sucks away people's energy. (Ontario, Ottawa Focus Group)

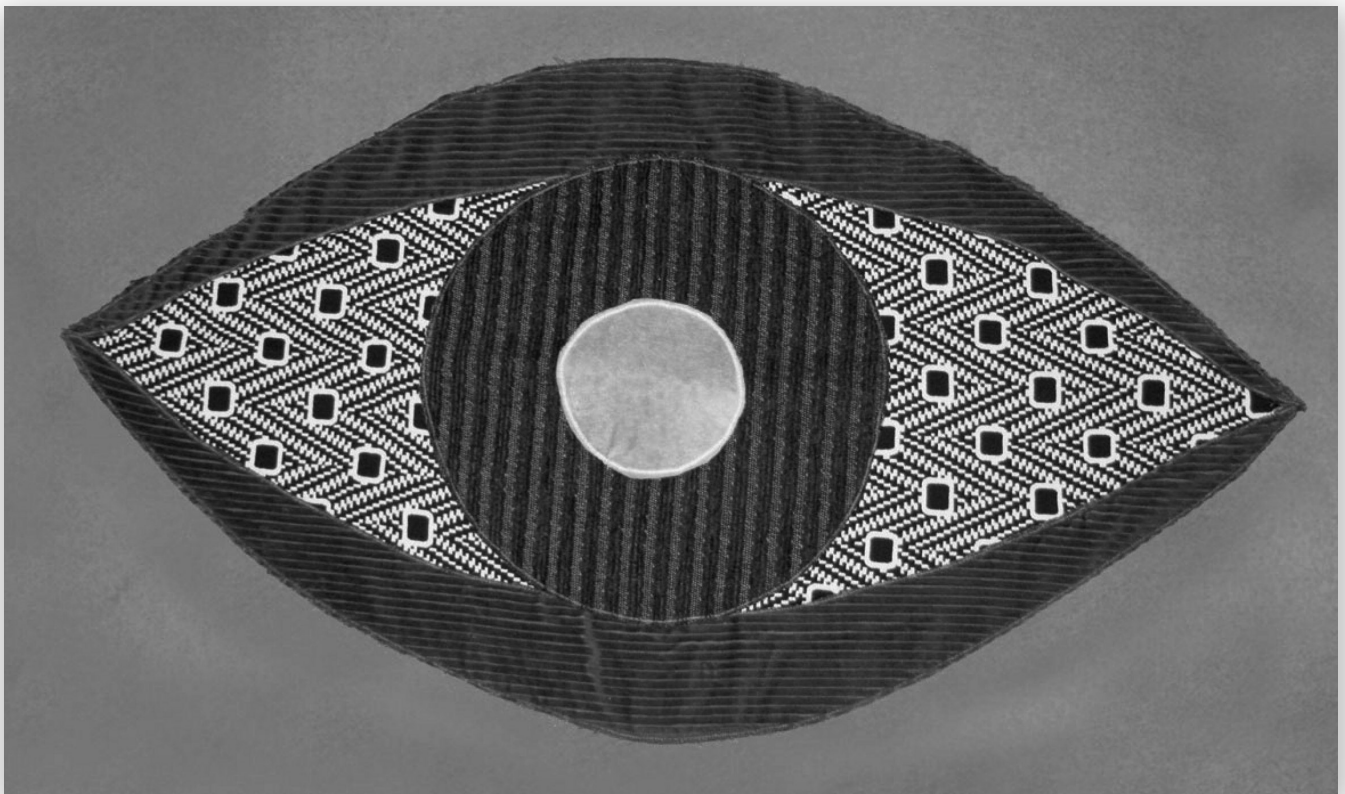
...Even so, or because of this, RiP is needed more than ever before

The above findings clearly show that those in the literacy field lack the time and energy to fully embrace RiP. But this is not the end of the story: we found an equally strong flip side. In fact, it is precisely because of their lack of time and energy that many participants believed that RiP is needed more than ever before in literacy. An adult educator in Nunavut stated:



Different ways of seeing by Lisa Erickson (Saskatchewan)

How things appear changes. The order I perceive at one moment can quickly transform into what feels like disorder. Still, there are surprising connections and beauty even in the chaos and disorder of the research process. I have much to learn about appreciating this state. I also have many persistent teachers!





What literacy means to me by Christina Arcand (Saskatchewan)

- The Eagle: my goals and my achievements**
- The Lone Wolf: what my future holds before me**
- The Gathering: the head, the feather, the paw, the staff—what I've become**
- The Mother and Cub: all of my life's lessons**
- The Small Paws: the paths of life**
- The Borders: my four fathers—my supports, protectors, teachers and loved ones**

This is my vision of learning and this is life itself.

There is tremendous information out there...but I'm teaching students for six hours a day and I'm preparing right now three separate new units, in addition to teaching people at eleven different levels and getting assignments marked, plus doing all the friggin' administration for five agencies that want your attendance. There's no time to do it [read/do research]. It's just not possible! ...and yet we need it to recharge.

As another practitioner said:

From a perspective of justice—it's not reasonable. It's not reasonable to sustain a field on people's volunteer labour. They're not

paid very well and then they're working far beyond what they're paid for. On the other hand, I think that something like research and practice can be really positive for the field in so many ways and we have to emphasize aspects that aren't part of the time and money dilemma. That for some people it is rewarding and renewing and can...move them in the profession in a way they may not have realized was possible. (Stacey Crooks, Saskatchewan Researcher, Interview)

In this study, practitioners were asked if they value RiP. Many spoke of their interest in RiP—even those who had heard so little about the approach that they were stretching to understand exactly what it might mean.

Across the country, it seemed that the recognition that RiP makes the work more satisfying and effective has encouraged some practitioners to believe RiP is an important way to improve the field:

RiP has the potential, at least, to document what is happening in communities in terms of literacy. The kind of work we do is very difficult to evaluate on a spreadsheet....It helps to prioritize what people want in terms of learning opportunities. It can lead to a better knowledge of where we want to go and how to evaluate what we are doing. (Barbara Marshall, Labrador)

I still feel it's an emerging art—or that's what it is for me. It's becoming clearer, I'm seeing more. I know it's important and I think for funding in literacy to increase...we have to have research. (Jan Sawyer, British Columbia Researcher, Interview)

We must do RiP because we are so isolated, yet our isolation makes it impossible to do RiP!

Across the country, researchers heard about the isolation many, if not most, literacy workers experience. In small community programs practitioners often work alone and have too many program demands to connect with other colleagues. Practitioners in northern and rural centres have limited opportunities for professional development because of long distances. They are left to work alone with their own challenges. Educators in Nunavut, amongst others, spoke about the need to share ideas and the difficulties of doing so. In many locations the internet and email are not easily accessible. Furthermore, face-to-face connection is still the way that is most often preferred. And for college and school board instructors, paid only for contact hours, there are few opportunities to reflect on their practice, individually or with others, even if colleagues work down the hall.

The isolation of literacy workers and the fragmentation of the field limit access to research. Yet one of the reasons practitioners appreciated the RiP experience was that it provided an opportunity to become part of a community of researchers and it led them to feel less isolated. However, Kate Nonesuch, a British Columbia literacy practitioner and researcher believes that research is not the only way to reduce isolation and improve practice.

Several practitioners agreed. They spoke about the need for regular get-togethers and for more professional development. They also spoke of the use of technology as a way to link, energize and provide opportunities for exchanging ideas and sharing innovative solutions. Equally valuable might be internships in different organizations and creating videos to provide new ideas and support—all of which would help practitioners to view themselves as part of a vibrant community of educators. In contrast to this unrealized vision is the current picture of isolated and beleaguered practitioners with access to few resources to support their efforts.

Given the state of the field, RiP is essential, but the state of the field limits the value of RiP!

In most provinces and territories, researchers heard from practitioners who knew little about RiP and previous undertakings in Canada. Yet those who participated in this study were more likely to be relatively well-connected and active in their region. Given this, it seems reasonable to assume that most literacy workers know even less about RiP, in spite of many excellent practitioner-led research studies and a number of earlier attempts to support reflective practice and engagement with research.

In many jurisdictions, practitioners reported that they didn't know what research (RiP or otherwise) in their own province or territory might be relevant to their experience. Even those "most in the know," didn't know, primarily, they said, because research rarely reaches front-line educators—it usually stops at an administrator's desk. At every stage there are difficulties that make it unlikely that RiP will be fully utilized.

We are wary of research, yet we use research skills all the time

Literacy practitioners were generally wary about research. Many practitioners expressed concern about the particular forms of research that are valued, the ways research data is collected and the fact that practitioners are not involved in the conclusions drawn from the data they themselves provided to government. In spite of the mistrust of research, many practitioners believed they use research skills "on the fly" (Aboriginal practitioner, Interview) all the time in order to be effective



Piecing together by Kim Baxter (Alberta)

To me these images all look the same: the forest clouded in fog, the flock of birds flying close together, and the desert. To show that they are bits and pieces of a whole, I cut each one into pieces.

Sometimes in your classroom, things are missing or you have questions. When you research you put people together and you can make things seem exciting. To succeed at research you can morph into whatever you need to. That's what the chameleon represents.

teachers. As Esther Nordin, a literacy practitioner based in Ontario stated, this everyday research opens possibilities for RiP:

In a sense, a great deal of learning that occurs in community-based programs can be reframed as a form of research. We research our various childhoods, we research our cultural traditions, we research our goals and experience with work, and we research our understanding of a novel or even a word. Once we reframe our everyday learning and insights as a form of research, we can become conscious researchers of our own experience, histories, situations and communities; a new world of content and form opens up to us. We can explore topics that are critical to us, in new and novel ways, not only through academic language but also through poetry and the arts, social activism and advocacy. (Wild Card)

As Nayda Veeman, a Saskatchewan-based researcher and practitioner, explained:

A good instructor always is interested in doing things in the best way possible and so, in some sense, that's not labelled research but it probably is. And going to in-service sessions and talking to other people and sharing information, those are all ways of improving practice. What I see

the research-in-practice initiative doing is formalizing that in a way and encouraging people to be more systematic about the way they gather information and share it. (Interview)

RiP might lead to change, but would we like all the changes?

Many practitioners were clear that carrying out research has enormous value. It can support personal and professional change and has the potential to enable practitioners to be more able and willing to read research. It could lead to broad changes in the field if the climate were right.

The research that impacted my practice the most...was the research I actually did...you understand what you did much better and you actually understand research when you read it. (Fay Holt Begg, Alberta Focus Group)

In the research-in-practice workshops that we developed last year at the Festival of Literacies we talked about 'ongoing knowledge creation' in literacy work, 'literacy worker knowledge' and how it can become 'research knowledge.' But as I continue to discuss these workshops with my colleagues, I am becoming increasingly uncomfortable using the words 'know,'

'knowing,' and 'knowledge.' Perhaps literacy work and research in practice are about continuous discovery, not 'creating knowledge.' 'Knowledge' is a noun representing a state. If there were such a state, it would entail a kind of forgetting of what we actually experience in literacy work, the dynamism of each moment of discovery. For those moments to happen, we have to not know, not expect, be open to what we might see, hear, feel. And if this is true of literacy work, it should also be true of research in practice. If knowledge is a state, it couldn't keep bleeding out of experience. It would be blood collected in vials and labelled. We need research in practice that doesn't bleed anything, lets the blood keep flowing in our whole selves, describes, speculates, doesn't pretend to know. (Guy Ewing, Wild Card)

And for research in practice to maintain such fluidity, it is crucial that frameworks to support RiP also be flexible and fluid. As Cheryl Brown observes:

[T]he framework needs to be flexible enough so you can do capital R research, if you get to, or you can reflect on your practice if that's as far as you can go....My concern about the framework is that it'll tell people how to do research in practice...as opposed to leaving it open and...valuing whatever people do and supporting them to do that, and a little bit more, if they can. (New Brunswick, Interview)

Conclusion

Overall, the picture of literacy across most of the country was disturbing and led to many questions about the role of RiP in a field that is so overburdened and precarious. Yet in spite of this bleak picture, or possibly because of it, there was substantial interest in developing RiP. Practitioner-researchers spoke about the difference RiP had made to their own confidence and their own practice even when it did not appear to have as much influence on the field as they had hoped. They spoke of their renewed energy as practitioners, of the changes they made and of their increased interest in reading research. Once they felt, heard and experienced respect for their field knowledge,

they were more open to listening to others. They were also more open to benefiting from research and finding the value in another insider's insights. Perhaps if there were more spaces where literacy workers' knowledge was recognized and valued, more practitioners might be inspired to reflect on practice, to explore innovative practice and to carry out research to find answers to particularly

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challenging questions that many others share.

Many suggested that the greatest need is for a range of "spaces" for reflection—opportunities for practitioners to plan and evaluate their practice, to meet face-to-face, and to have paid time within the workday to connect online, exchange ideas and discuss strategies to address the complex problems they face. Some suggested that such reflective practice might eventually lead to increased numbers of practitioners being ready to take on research. Others suggested various professional development possibilities such as mentors, exchanges and outside researchers documenting exemplary practice.

In spite of the conditions in the field and concerns about research, there was an enormous interest in RiP among those who participated in this study. Researchers in each province and territory had ideas about how RiP could be developed in their jurisdiction and most seemed to believe that it was important to do so....Even where researchers had found it difficult to get practitioners to participate in their jurisdiction, they saw RiP as a valuable way to address some of the problems of the field. ■

JENNY HORSMAN coordinated the national framework project with Helen Woodrow. The complete findings of the research were published in *Focused on Practice: A framework for adult literacy research in Canada*, which is available online at www2.literacy.bc.ca/focused_on_practice/focused_on_practice.pdf.