

Exposing rifts, celebrating shifts

A few months ago I heard that a trainer, hired to inform practitioners about new reporting requirements in Ontario, said that if accountability was starting to take over the practitioners' work they should hand all of the instruction in their program to volunteers. A few weeks ago I learned that there are no more basic level adult literacy classes in the NWT.

To me, these two realities are connected to a major barrier we face: that policy responses to adult literacy are too often based on shaky foundations. Policies in Canada tend to give priority to learners who can most quickly be pushed through the system rather than supporting students with the greatest needs or programming, such as aboriginal language programs and ESL literacy, that is culturally relevant and responsive. Policies ignore what literacy students need in favour of what can be counted in relation to IALSS. Governments continue to seek quantitative data about the work rather than balancing numbers with attention to the human dimensions of this work and the extensive information and expertise programs and practitioners have amassed.

Barriers seem to be inherent to this work, on every level. But what happens in the face of these barriers? Some programs simply end. Some people leave the field. Attrition in adult literacy work has always been high: this work places high demands on people, the hours are long, people are given little initial training and very little ongoing professional development, and in most parts of the country the pay does not reflect the level of responsibility and the range of demands literacy practitioners must respond to.

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Literacy practitioners know that adult literacy students face a multitude of barriers. Many of these barriers make it difficult for students to come through the door of the program, let alone to keep coming week after week to learn. Their courage and persistence in the face of those barriers remind us why we do the work. For other students, the barriers are too great. Their needs are the reasons we speak back to policies that don't make sense. Their absence

reminds us of what more needs to be done.

This issue is devoted to exposing some of the barriers in adult literacy programs. It is not an exhaustive exploration, by any means. But these articles remind us of the specific needs of adults with disabilities, of adults who live in poverty or of those who struggle with isolation, illness or mental health issues. This issue also illuminates some of the openings that literacy practitioners find, day in and day out, which allow them to continue this work. These pages include articles that document how practitioners have dealt with dilemmas such as conflicts in the classroom and discords between policy and reality. The authors share vital learnings about how programs can respond to students with specific needs as well as pieces that explore bigger questions such as what kinds of openings we should look for and how to express what we know to be true.

We invite you to continue to notice and name the barriers that exist in this work. We also encourage you to articulate those many occasions when adult literacy students, practitioners and programs find ways to overcome the daunting odds we face. Let us celebrate our survival and creativity!

Tannis Atkinson
Editor, *Literacies*

RESEARCHING PRACTICE PRACTISING RESEARCH **Literacies**

Literacies: Researching practice, practising research is a journal about adult literacy research and practice in Canada. It is a forum for people to share ideas and experiences about how research and practice connect, and how each can inform the other.

Our intention is to respect and nurture diversity. We only publish materials that use non-discriminatory language and avoid stereotypes.

The views expressed in the articles and advertisements do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the editorial committee or the publisher.

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