Coming of Age:

A REPORT ON RESEARCH-IN-PRACTICE

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Introduction

Research is what we do to better understand our situation.
(Cockley n.d. pg.1)

The idea of research-in-practice seems to be finding its place in the landscape of adult literacy in Canada. Policy makers are recognizing it as one avenue of research-based knowledge about practice. Academics are pointing to its longer-term benefits in capacity building and enhancement of dialogue between policy and practice. Practitioners involved with research-in-practice often display a glow of enthusiasm and new energy for their work. All this suggests a 'win-win-win' situation.

The concept of research-in-practice is deceptively simple. That is, in the short term, it provides empirical evidence – usually on a small scale – to illuminate either problems or solutions that already exist in the world of literacy practice. As such, it improves our collective understanding of "what is going on here"[1] on the front lines of literacy work. However, at another level, the means by which research-in-practice achieves these short terms goals is *at least* as important and has a longer term impact on the field. That is, it engages literacy practitioners themselves in systematically observing, recording, reflecting and writing "to better understand our situation" (Cockley n.d.) and to "make things better for our learners" (Jackson 2003). Thus research-in-practice is not just a source of one time answers, but an agent of ongoing transformation and a stepping stone to a culture of improvement in the literacy field. Achieving such results, of course, depends upon sustained commitment to this "simple" idea.

Contents of this report

This report will review highlights from experiences to date with research-in-practice in Ontario, identifying lessons learned and challenges identified along the way. Then it will address some broader questions of where research-in-practice fits in the landscape of educational research, and in the context of perennial debates about "what counts" as research and how research is linked to policy. Finally it will assess the challenge of sustainability in the context of the growing interest by governments in evidence-based research and policy.

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[1] This is the title of a research-in-practice report from Peterborough, ON. See Trent Valley Literacy Association (2004).

Locating myself

Both the content and style of this report reflect my own location as an academic rather than a practitioner in the field of adult literacy. In the academic world, it is increasingly expected that the writers of research reports will "situate" their interests/experience with the topic being investigated. This is said to be necessary to ensure the "transparency" and thus the "trustworthiness" of the research product (Eisenhardt and Borko 1993). That is, where did these claims to knowledge come from? Who speaks through this text, whose vision and voice? So, as a preface to the rest of this report, I would like to briefly identify my own vantage point on these issues.

I come to the literacy field with formal academic training in both social research and policy studies. I have three graduate degrees in sociology and educational policy that included two research-based theses and extensive training in research methodologies. I have more than 15 years experience teaching research methods to graduate students in education, most recently in adult education including adult literacy. Equally important to my perspective are my many years of interest and involvement in collaborative research projects bridging the university/community divide. Indeed, I have been drawn into an explicit focus on adult literacy over the past decade by getting involved in a large-scale, university-practitioner collaboration doing ethnographic research on workplace literacy (see Belfiore *et al* 2004). So I have a long interest and commitment to high quality research that is actually useful both inside and outside the university.

In the fall of 2001, I joined the faculty in Adult Education and Community Development at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto (OISE/UT). I was hired explicitly to rebuild adult literacy as a field of graduate teaching and research, and to rekindle a relationship with the adult literacy field that would contribute to the integration of theory, policy and practice. In this position, I have made it a priority to try to develop a role for OISE/UT in research capacity development, taking my lead in this from the policy priorities expressed over the past decade by both Ontario government (MTCU 2000) and the National Literacy Secretariat (2004, 1998).

Being located at OISE/UT also means my primary base of first-hand experience – and new data - for this report is Ontario. However, in preparing this report, I have been increasingly convinced of the importance of putting the Ontario experience in a broader context, both national and international. I have also participated actively now over four years in various research-in-practice activities with a national focus, including two of the three national conferences mentioned below, and several national advisory committees relating to research-in-practice.[2] Paradoxically perhaps, I feel that being located in Ontario, where research-in-practice activities are not as well established as in the West,[3]

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[2] I have been sitting on advisory committees for the new journal *Literacies: Researching Practice, Practising Research,* and for a new proposal from Literacy B.C. for a national research and development project "Developing a Framework for Research in Practice in Adult Literacy."
[3] This is despite the presence in Ontario of at least one internationally recognized leader and advocate in the research-in -practice movement, Dr. Jenny Horsman (see Horsman and Norton, 1999 and Horsman 1999) and some previous community-based efforts to stimulate practice-based research in Ontario (e.g. Literacy Field Research Group 1993, 1992).

has challenged me to pay attention to the hurdles (both internal and external to the field) as well as benefits associated with the development of practitioner-based research and a research culture that will sustain high quality research products on a reliable basis.

Part One: Research-in-Practice in Ontario

The research-in-practice movement in Canada has been germinating for more than a decade. [4] To date, Alberta and B.C. have been the beacon in these developments with, the RiPAL Network being the only (to my knowledge) ongoing research-in-practice network in Canada.[5] There have now been three national gatherings (Edmonton in 2001[6], Vancouver in 2002[7] and St. John's in 2003[8]) devoted to capacity development in research-in-practice. Each included guests from US, UK, and/or Australia to contribute their experience, expertise and encouragement. Enough has been written elsewhere about all these developments that it would be redundant to recount the details here.[9] Instead, I will focus on recent developments specifically in Ontario.

Over the past nearly two decades in Ontario, there have been several attempts to build momentum around research-in-practice. In 1988 a Research and Practice Group was formed that later became the Program-based Special Interest Group and then the Literacy Field Research Group (1993, 1992) before dissolving in 1996. Despite its various successes in holding a conference and workshops as well as producing a research manual and various publications, observers have said it was ultimately "unable to create the conditions to support much practitioner research" (Horsman and Norton 1999).

More recent efforts have centred around the Adult Education Program at OISE/UT, beginning in 2000 with funding from MTCU to undertake a broad consultation on research capacity building with the field of practitioners in Ontario.[10] That consultation paved the way for two new OISE/UT projects in 2001. The first was in the Native Literacy Stream, entitled Best Practices: Native Literacy and Learning, under the leadership of Dr. Eileen Antone, culminating in a very successful symposium held in May 2002 and publication of symposium proceedings. The second project, entitled "Building expertise among Ontario literacy practitioners through literacy research circles" was focused on practitioners in both Anglophone and Francophone streams under

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[4] See excellent brief summaries Quigley and Norton (2002), and in Horsman and Norton (1999).

[5] For activity in other regions, see e.g. Miller (2003), Woloshyn (2003), and Campbell, Lisa et al (2001).

[6] See Norton and Woodrow, eds. (2002).

[7] See Soroke and Smythe (2002).

[8] See Brother T. I. Murphy Learning Resource Centre and RiPAL Network (2003).

[9] But I want to acknowledge the essential institutional recognition and support for research-in-practice dating back to the National Literacy Secretariat policy conversation of 1996. Almost a decade later in 2004, the National Literacy Secretariat has reaffirmed this commitment to research-in-practice as one of five priorities announced in its Research Guidelines for 2004-2009 (NLS 2004). This decision surely indicates their assessment (which I strongly share) that the past decade of investment in this mechanism for long term capacity building is beginning to show important returns. However, these gains will likely not be captured in standard approaches to outcomes measurement like IALS or ALLS.

[10] See ALWG (2002).

the leadership of Dr. Daniel Schugurensky. This project supported the creation of the Adult Literacy Research Circle amongst interested practitioners in the Greater Toronto area, as a vehicle for incubating new practitioner-based research projects. The "research circle" approach, drawing on a variety of related international models, is based in the view that practitioners already have extensive knowledge about issues based in their everyday experience that might be of interest to investigate. But they most often have limited training or experience in turning such interests into concrete, researchable questions, and insufficient knowledge about research designs that might be manageable in their circumstances. They also have very limited time to devote to research, and a research circle helps to stimulate and support them in doing so. This project continued over three years in different forms, and supported the development of several new collaborative research projects and publications.[11]

Starting in 2002, largely under my own leadership, OISE launched a somewhat broader initiative called the Festival of Literacies that continues to the present.[12] With this initiative, we committed to a somewhat more diversified and longer-range vision of research capacity building, through a variety of ways of engaging the practitioner community in discussions of research and research-based knowledge.

We began offering an afternoon speaker series for practitioners and occasional workshops for presentations and discussion of research (local, national, international). This has included opportunities to focus on a range of cultural issues, such as the links between literacy and "wellness" in the Aboriginal community. These events are structured to include discussions of existing theory and research and exchange of ideas about applying research knowledge in everyday practice. We also began inviting practitioners as community visitors into our graduate classes to share their rich resource of practice-based knowledge with graduate students who may lack such experience. We launched a website[13] and developed an extensive email list to broadcast our activities, and began publishing short articles about research in various newsletters and field based publications.[14] We initiated various in-kind supports to the new national journal: *Literacies: Researching practice: practicing research,* and supported AlphaPlus in the ongoing work in their research culture project and web portal. Last but not least, we began a mentoring service for practitioner groups who wanted to do research on a particular issue.[15] All this activity has been supported since 2002 by annual project funding from the federal-provincial program of MTCU/NLS.

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[11] See Schugurensky (2005) for details.

[12] The name "Festival" was originally intended to mark a 15 month period of celebration of the re-entry of /UT into a more active role in adult literacy teaching and research. But it has been so popular that we are still using it as our 'branding' device for the foreseeable future. The word "Literacies" signals the multiple dimensions of literacy practice that are the focus of much contemporary literacy theory. It also resonates strongly with practitioners because it reflects the diversity and complexity they face every day. Thus the Festival of Literacies continues at OISE/UT as an ongoing dialogue between theory and practice.

[13] See www.literaciesOISE.ca

[14] See Festival of Literacies website for reproductions of most of these articles, and Grieve (2004) for list.

[15] See Trent Valley Literacy Association (2004) as an example.

All these activities have both short term and longer term outcomes. In the present, they serve as professional development opportunities for practitioners aimed at increasing their understanding of the links among theory, policy, research and practice. Each year, our ongoing investment in these activities results in immediate outcomes for a small number of projects that reach the stage of having complete proposals or research products. In the longer term, these same activities have development outcomes such as improving the skills, the vision and sense of purpose, and thus often the morale of practitioners. They increase the likelihood that practitioners will read and discuss literacy research in the future, will be more interested and open to dialogue with policy, and may take the developmental steps needed to be ready to conduct their own research in future. In other words, the sum of these activities is investment in a "research culture" that is more than the sum of its parts. In the words of one practitioner, a research culture is "… like a vine that grows around the support beams of a structure and becomes part of the form and function of the structure, while subtly changing it."[16] This approach has brought Ontario more into line with the lessons learned in Alberta and B.C.[17]

According to the recent external evaluation report (Grieve 2004), these initiatives seem to have been well received by those who have been able to participate. At the same time, they have also generated a pretty clear agenda for ways to be more inclusive and effective in future, particularly by making similar activities available to practitioners outside the Toronto. The Evaluation Report (Grieve, 2004) discusses these issues at some length, and as a result of those recommendations, we expect to make this issue the centre of our federal-provincial funding proposal for 2005-06.

Lessons from the Field

> *… It's been a painful … stretching, growth-producing process, difficult and valuable*. (Horsman and Norton 1999:17)

Like those who have gone before us elsewhere in Canada, we have learned a lot in Ontario over the past few years about both the excitement and the challenges of promoting and supporting practitioner based research. A comprehensive discussion of all these issues is available in the Grieve report (2004). Here I have drawn selectively from that report to present some highlights – both of the enthusiasm of practitioners who have been introduced to research-in-practice through the Festival activities, and also some of the conclusions from the evaluator about areas for improvement. [18]

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[16] Personal email communication, 2005, quoted with permission.

[17] See Grieve (2004) for an external evaluation report covering 2002-2004. See RiPAL website.

[18] The material in this section is almost entirely quoted, abbreviated, or paraphrased from the external evaluation report by Katrina Grieve (2004) covering the Festival of Literacies activities during 2002-2004.

We are delighted of course to see that involvement in research-in-practice activities is reported as a very hopeful experience for many practitioners in Ontario, as elsewhere. It seems to deliver on its promise of building "… an increase in morale, excitement and renewed energy." Importantly, it also seems to "open doors" to greater understanding about literacy practice:

> *As a group doing [this research] gave us an appreciation of how complex literacy tutoring process is and how exciting...* (Grieve 2004:24)

> *The [research] journaling provided a rich source of information, capturing valuable aspects of literacy practice.* (Grieve 2004:23)

For these reasons, Ontario practitioners reported, like others before them in Canada and elsewhere, that involvement in research-in-practice " … simply makes us better…" as practitioners (Quigley and Norton 2002:4).

> *It takes us to another level in our literacy work and learning.* (Grieve 2004:16)

> ….it *provided an opportunity to look past the day-to-day and connect what I do with learners to current research...* (Grieve 2004:17)

We are also encouraged to see that the experience of learning about research seems to have a qualitatively different impact on practitioners than participation in more traditional approaches to professional development.. One person referred to this experience as "... a revelation":

> *I also learned other ideas about research. This was a revelation to me. This type of project opens doors for understanding. I would do it again for sure. We really grew from it – and this says something about our process.* (Grieve 2004:24)

I want to suggest that the enthusiasm in these voices is an important development that has broad implications for a range of stakeholders in adult literacy field in Ontario. It matters to practitioners themselves, whose quality daily of working life stands to benefit greatly from being better informed, more engaged, and more empowered in their work. It also matters of course to learners who stand to benefit from having more engaged, informed and creative tutors and program staff. There is also much to be gained by policy makers and others interested in building a research culture that is also a culture of improvement that enables better dialogue between policy and practice. The incremental path toward such a climate is nicely captured in the comments of one Toronto based practitioner who is now involved in a multi-agency, practitioner-based funded research project that was supported by OISE/UT during its inception.

> *It strikes me that [our project was] able to take advantage of a community of practice that had already developed at OISE among practitioners who had discussed this topic. The community of practice was expanded when we joined the conversation, and continued to flourish through arranged and spontaneous meetings and discussions.*

It is always hard to pin down how culture is created. It is always a synergistic process that relies on complex relationships between different variables.... OISE/UT has been an important part of creating ... a research/inquiry culture. [It's] a community of practice that is informal, vibrant, creative, continually changing....I [see] the whole thing as being very synchronistic and organic .... [Our project] will not end with the final report...[19]

All this paints a pretty optimistic picture about the power and impact of these activities. But indeed, not all of the news was rosy all the time. We have also learned a lot about the hurdles and challenges of this process, both short term and long term. It is to these issues I will now turn, drawing heavily again on issues discussed at more length in our external evaluator's report (Grieve 2004).

Perils and Pitfalls

Most of the "lessons learned" reported below are based on our involvement with practitioners actually *doing* research, rather than learning about research through other Festival of Literacies activities. This includes both the research circles, per se, and the research projects with which we have been involved as mentors. In both cases, we have seen that there are indeed pitfalls along the road from conception to execution of a research idea, and discouragement can easily set in.

For instance, it seems to be common for practitioner groups to stumble quite early in the process of defining their idea or research question as part of designing their research. This can occur for many reasons:

-   lack of awareness of how carefully a question or an idea must be specified in order to make a good basis for research;
-   lack of common understanding within the group about research principles appropriate to different kinds of questions;
-   tensions in attempting something new in a group of individuals with different backgrounds, experience and perspectives, and assumptions;
-   tensions related to internal group leadership.

For all these reasons, we have come to see that early investment of time in the conceptual and methodological 'incubation' of a research idea and the research design is important to even getting a project out of the starting gate. This early incubation period for a practitioner-based research project probably needs to be from 6-12 months, depending on how often the group is able to meet. This allows a nascent research idea to emerge from dialogue, to be defined, challenged, re-defined, and for ideas about research methods to be explored and elaborated into a preliminary proposal, hopefully by a group of

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[19] Personal email communication, 2005, quoted with permission.

practitioners working with some mentoring support from a more experienced researcher (from the university or otherwise).

While the provision of support from experienced researchers is no guarantee or panacea for the trouble that will inevitably arise, it may be able to provide:

- critical support, encouragement, and problem solving as differing assumptions lead to conceptual confusion over "what we are talking about;"
- advice about differences in methodologies and strategies of research design;
- explicit training in chosen research techniques, as the need arises;
- an external point of view when group tensions arise;

We also learned survival strategies for a common crisis/turning point in the life of practitioner research groups. If they manage to persist despite their early discovery of differences, likely departure of a member or two, and loss of certainty about what they "are doing," those who remain will most certainly begin to consolidate their vision and confidence in their own ability to achieve their goals. A skilled research facilitator is the single biggest asset such a group can have in making it through this obstacle course.

We also learned that an important part of the process of developing and implementing a high quality research-in-practice project is assisting participants to think more broadly, to situate their research interest in a broader context before they begin. What does the research literature have to say about our issues or questions? Who else has studies what kinds of questions, in what kinds of settings, and what have they learned? Can we learn anything from these other researchers about how to refine our own question or own methods?

Inevitably, we also learned first hand how much practitioner participation in research activities, even discussions *about* research like those at OISE/UT, is seriously limited by lack of time and financial resources. This is completely consistent with the arguments made repeatedly by others before us (see Horsman and Norton 1999), in Canada and elsewhere. According to the Grieve (2004) report, some practitioners indicate that they want to participate in research but are unable to because of lack of time and resources. Others start and then drop out. Some have the flexibility to participate on paid work time, and others participate only when there is money for an honorarium for their time. Still other individuals participate entirely on their own, unpaid time. These differences have the potential for creating tensions within a research group.

Summing up - and looking beyond

In general, our experience with the both the successes and pitfalls described above has convinced us of the importance of broadening our own perspective as well. We increasingly see the merit of taking a more incremental and developmental process rather than encouraging practitioners to "leap" into conducting research when they may be half prepared. We see how a small amount of change has the potential to snowball over the

medium and longer term. So if a lively culture of inquiry can be stimulated in even a small portion of individuals or agencies in Ontario, it has the potential nevertheless to leverage a significant impact – more "organically" - on the culture of the field at large.

Of course, a vibrant research culture will not be built overnight, in Ontario or anywhere else. Change is likely to occur only in these incremental steps, by supporting an inquiring stance whenever and wherever possible - in community-based delivery agencies, school boards, colleges, and other related professional settings. Larger-scale change is most likely to grow indirectly, as the immediate enthusiasm and sense of engagement of some individuals move like ripples[20] outward from the centre. But these incremental changes, and their value, are easy to miss if we don't recognise them:

- Practitioners get involved in conversations with other practitioners who are excited and enthusiastic about new ideas. Their enthusiasm is contagious.
- Practitioners get drawn in to involvement in discussions about research and start to think, "Maybe I could do this …"
- Practitioners get involved in actually conducting research, and though it is hard, even painful, it is also exciting, even a "revelation."
- Individuals begin to feel a sense of immediate accomplishment, validation of their knowledge, and recognition of their contribution, not only to learner success, but also to knowledge in their field.
- By successfully planning and executing a small scale, manageable research project of their own, the sense of accomplishment and empowerment of these individual practitioners is enhanced, leading to a greater satisfaction, motivation and commitment to their work and to the field.
- Once the research is complete, practitioners present their experiences and their findings at professional gatherings, thus expanding their individual and collective capacities as leaders in their field.
- By getting involved with other experienced researchers, practitioners are exposed to a larger range of ideas relevant to their own interests, including theory, policy, and other research. Their interest in further professional development is stimulated.
- An expanding awareness of links between theory, policy and research enhances the capacity of individuals and agencies to contribute knowledgeably to policy discussions in the adult literacy field.
- The culture of the field is changing - becoming more dynamic, engaged and oriented to ongoing innovation and improvement.

So far, at OISE/UT, our research capacity building activities have been focused in our own back yard, that is, within driving distance of downtown Toronto. But we are reminded regularly that a vibrant research culture in Ontario cannot be built on activities based solely in Toronto.   There is a strong sentiment in the field at large that opportunities available to Toronto-based practitioners, including involvement in research-

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[20] See Soroke and Smyth (2002)

in-practice, must be also accessible to agencies and networks in the rest of the province. Beginning in 2004-05 we have initiated more outreach, including a more formal research training program designed to involve both face-to-face and on-line instruction, a first step toward accessibility of research-in-practice to a broader geographic audience. The final report on the first year of this project will be forthcoming at the end of the summer 2005, and our new proposal for 2005-2006 will be focused on making this program available province wide basis.

But there are also several larger issues at play in the complex environmental of both research and policy that are relevant to assessing the potential of research-in-practice in a broader context. These include ongoing debates amongst policy makers and academics about how and whether research does or should contribute to policy, and what kind of research counts as legitimate and useful in the policy process. These debates also offer both opportunities and challenges to the nascent research-in-practice movement in Canada. The remainder of this report will focus on these broader issues.

Part Two: Building on Rich Research Traditions - and Debates

In taking up a practice-based approach to research, the Canadian adult literacy field is far from alone. We are building on a long and vibrant history that stretches across multiple disciplines, continents, and decades. Without this awareness it is difficult to assess either where we are "coming from" in attempts to develop a stronger research base, and what underpins the legitimacy of various options, or where a given path might carry us.

International and interdisciplinary perspectives

Public discussion of practitioner research in adult literacy field seems to date from the mid-1980s in the UK, with the academic-practitioner dialogue around Lancaster University that became the Research and Practice in Adult Literacy (RaPAL) Network and *Bulletin* (see Quigley and Norton 2002; Herrington 2003). It began and has remained an independent voluntary organization, large self-funded through an annual conference, memberships and subscriptions.

Almost a decade later in 1993, a quite different kind of network was formed in Australia, the Adult Literacy Research Network (ALRN), followed in 1999 by the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Research Consortium (ALNARC). ALNARC is nationally funded, hosted and staffed by universities in each state, mandated to carry out research projects commissioned by the government and to develop a research culture through publishing and supporting practitioners to do research.

In the USA, no such national network exists formally, but in various states adult literacy practitioner research projects or initiatives have come and sometimes gone (see Quigley,

1997). The earliest state network I have seen reference to is the Virginia Adult Education Research Network (VAERN) starting in 1991 with the aim of supporting and promoting individual and collaborative practitioner research as part of professional development (Quigley and Norton 2002).

But it is also important to note that the recognition of the value of research-in-practice as a tool for "capacity building" was also not invented by the adult literacy field. It builds on long and deep traditions of reflective, participatory and action research in many other familiar fields: teacher education for schools; professional education in medicine, nursing, and allied health professions; professional education in business and human resources management; adult education and community development; and international development, amongst others. There are extensive bodies of literature [21] about action, participatory and reflective research in these and other fields, and reviewing them is well beyond the scope of this paper.   But I want to point out in particular that "teacher reflective research" or "reflective inquiry" has become one of the foundational tools of teacher preparation in university based faculties of education.[22] The reason for this is reflected in the titles of many volumes on the subject, such as *Teacher research for better schools* (Mohr 2004) or *The reflective educator's guide to classroom research: learning to teach and teaching to learn through practitioner inquiry* (Dana 2003). In other words, practitioner research has demonstrated that it has the effect of developing the capacities of individuals to be engaged and creative teachers as well as to contribute to making schools better places for learning. The same argument, and investment in practitioner research, is made in other fields. So, from a policy perspective it has long been seen as a good investment across many jurisdictions.

In the children's literacy field, school-based research on elementary children's literacy development has in fact been engaged with these traditions of practitioner research for quite a long time.[23] But the field of adult literacy has tended to remained somewhat isolated from these developments. This isolation reflects the obvious fact that adult literacy practitioners are trained mostly outside of schools of teacher education or faculties of education, where such advances in research-based educational knowledge are produced, disseminated and translated into practice.   In this respect, the adult literacy field has perhaps missed out on an important resource for its own development and ongoing growth as a field.

So, the key message here is that the idea of practitioner research as a tool of professional development and capacity building has a long and rich history in education and other fields. This means there is a wealth of past experience that can guide us in using these tools in the field of adult literacy. But that past experience also includes some familiar areas of controversy, and it is to those issues that I now want to turn.

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[21] This list covers a broad range of literature over several decades. For an introduction to common concepts see Jarvis (1999), Quigley, and Kuhne (1997), Argyris and Schon (1996, 1977), Colquhoun and Kellehear (1993); Schon (1991, 1987, 1983) and Cervero (1988),
[22] For a sampling of recent literature on teacher reflective research see Ballenger (2004); Mohr (2004); Stringer (2004); Mills (2003); Dana (2003).
[23] See Ballenger (2004).

What counts as research? A new/old question

Involvement in practitioner-based research is drawing the adult literacy field -
rather belatedly - into debates over issues that could be called "the classics" of this
century in social science and educational research. By this I mean intensive debates about
the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of different research methodologies,
commonly misnamed as the "quantitative vs. qualitative" debates (Maykut and
Morehouse 1994). This includes disagreements about the meanings and merits of
objectivity and subjectivity in research (Eisner 1993; about issues of validity and
generalisability in various research traditions (Maykut and Morehouse 1994; Eisenhart
and Borko 1993), and even about the capacity of research to influence policy (Levin,
2003; Finch 1987). Despite several decades of well-informed debate, there is still no
agreement amongst experts on these issues, nor does any agreement seem likely in near
future. On the contrary, the gulf between philosophical camps seems to be widening, and
academic research continues – however precariously - to reflect a rich mix of competing
schools of thought. In my own view, this is the best we can hope for in a democratic
world.

The debates to which I refer are the subjects of whole libraries.[24] But I think it is useful
to try here to produce a sketch of some key points in this literature, in the hope of
shedding some light on recent debates affecting the literacy field. The core of these
debates is about what counts as valid research knowledge, and the issues might be
summarized as follows.

Educational research is conducted broadly in the traditions of social science, where the
subject matter of investigation is human beings and their actions (as opposed to the
scientific study of rocks and oceans, for example). The modes of investigation suitable to
"human subjects" has been a topic of intense debate in North America since about the
mid 1960s. The research traditions often loosely called "qualitative research" (e.g.
ethnography, practitioner reflective research, narrative inquiry, case studies, etc.) mostly
follow rules for validity and legitimacy that come from interpretive philosophical
traditions (non-positivism), the most influential of which is undoubtedly phenomenology.
These schools of thought adopt the view that the subjectivity of the researcher is the
primary tool and resource for discovery or for making sense in any form of research.
Thus they don't try to eliminate subjectivity, but to employ it fully and make transparent
how this is done.

By contrast research traditions identified broadly as "quantitative" (e.g. large scale
statistical surveys, and most experimental and clinical designs) follow rules for validity
and legitimacy derived from the natural sciences (positivism). At the core of these rules
is the concept of objectivity, in which subjectivity of researchers is treated as a
contaminant rather than a resource. So, in this tradition, the rules of scientific method
aim to eliminate, or at least minimize, the role of subjectivity in data collection and
analysis. In over 20 years of teaching, I have discovered that this idea of "objectivity" is

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[24] For an excellent philosophical introduction to these issues, see Maykut and Morehouse (1994).

seen as practically synonymous with the idea of "research." This is a popular misconception, even of how science itself is conducted, but that too is a subject matter much beyond the scope of this paper.

So, what is most important about this picture for my purposes here is that *each camp accuses the other* of producing inferior research products, that is, research-based knowledge that is not a valid, reliable guide to action, and thus not useful for policy. According to the interpretive camp, scientific knowledge is said to be inferior because it is abstract and reductionist and thus fails to grasp the relationships and meanings of objects and events in the lives of real people. When such abstract knowledge is used as the basis for policy formulation and implementation, the results are often unintended and contradictory. Conversely, according to the scientific camp, interpretive knowledge is seen as inferior because it is said to be biased by the subjectivity of the researcher(s). It is also usually based on a limited a number of cases and is therefore not statistically generalisable to large populations. Thus, it too is said to be an unreliable guide to policy and practice.

So we have a stand-off, or, at least a very dynamic field of play. The pendulum tends to swing back and forth over time in an ongoing debate about what kind of knowledge "counts" as useful or trustworthy as a guide to action. This debate continues not only in the field of literacy, but in many (if not most) fields or disciplines over the past 50 years. Take the example of the field of nursing. The 1980s saw a massive cultural sea change in nursing, from a strict adherence to a belief in science (i.e. medical knowledge) as the basis of nursing research and practice, to a sweeping endorsement of phenomenology (i.e.. the ability to observe a patient and make interpretations/judgments about needed care). Then, over the decade of the 1990s roughly, nursing research and practice shifted yet again to embrace a more organizational and economic model, placing the "management of health care resources" at the centre of nursing knowledge. In each case a different kind of knowledge, and model of knowledge production, came to be seen as the core business of nursing. We can see in this example that "what counts" as useful knowledge changes over time, and depends partly on the ideas that are circulating in the broader social and policy environment.

In the field of education, similar swings in thought about what counts as important knowledge have also taken place over this century, right across the English language world.   Rather abstract structural theory and statistical research mostly held sway in the field of education until about the early 1970s, when sociologists of education began to argue that policy makers needed a more close-up understanding of what went on "inside the black box" of schooling. Ethnographic and other forms of observational and interpretive research designs rapidly emerged (echoing similar developments in other fields at the time), and the field of educational research (except educational psychology) largely swung into the "qualitative camp" and mostly stayed there for the following 25 years. In this context, practitioner reflective research or action research came to be widely seen as a key resource for understanding what actually goes on in classrooms. [25]

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[25] See Larabee (2003).

Recently, however, the U.S. department of education has taken significant steps to try to reverse this long historical march toward qualitative research as the primary knowledge base for education. Arguing that the reason for poor school performance in the United States is an insufficient scientific basis for educational practice, they have introduced a range of legislation and regulations calling for "evidence-based" research and policy.[26]

Evidence-Based Policy Movement in Education

The idea that policy and practice should be informed by the best-available evidence is far from new. It is central to the rational, scientific model of progress that dominates the western, industrialised world. For over a century, researchers and analysts in many fields have worked in and with government to provide information and advice on the best research available. According to some scholars, the 1960s represented a previous high point in this relationship between researchers and policy makers a trend that most observers agree fell off to some degree during the 1980s and early 1990s.[27]

The mid-1990s however, brought a surge of renewed interest in "evidence based" policy on the part of many governments, led in particular by the USA. The Bush administration began calling for "science-based" knowledge, with an emphasis on using randomised controlled trials as the preferred vehicle in research.[28] The Office for Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) was renamed the Institute for Educational Science, and revisions were proposed to the ERIC data base of educational research including the removal of non science-based studies and journals from the index on grounds of "low quality." The Education Sciences Reform Act was passed in 2002, enshrining these changes in legislation.[29] All this has been has been highly controversial within the United States [30] and has stirred related developments and debates internationally.

In the United Kingdom, similar events have unfolded, beginning with the landslide election of the Labour government in 1997 in a climate of growing fiscal crisis and thus attention to "accountability" for public spending. The Blair government promised "…we will be forward-looking in developing policies to deliver outcomes that matter, not simply reacting to short-term pressures" (Nutley et al, 2003:2) and argued that being "evidence- based" was one of several core features of effective policy making. The British academic community, generally more influential than in North America, has responded with much scepticism and robust debate.[31]

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[26] See Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy (2002); Comings, John P. (2003a, 2003b).
[27] See Nutley *et al* (2003); Finch (1986).
[28] Levin (2003); Coalition (2002).
[29] See Whitehurst (2001).
[30] A good case study of the debates in the U.S. is the so-called "reading debates." For an overview see Feuer et al (2002); For positions intensely positions see Coles (2003); Krashen (2001); Yatvin (2001).
[31] For an overview, see Parsons (2002); Weiss (2001); Hargreaves (1999). For related developments and debates in Australia see DETYA (2000) and in South Africa, see Kell (2003).

In Canada, various levels of government have been responding to this climate change around accountability in policy making, including endorsing the idea that good policy should be based on good evidence. For example, the federal government has initiated a project called Canada Performance 2002, which has been described as aiming to create "… an evidentiary base for the country's performance as a whole, and making that evidence public." [32] A search of websites would show that the language of "evidence" and "empirical research" is appearing in public documents of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, and the Ontario Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities. I take all this as a sign that the "discourse" of evidence-based policy and research is gradually taking hold in the Canadian policy culture.

The very best commentary on these developments in Canada that I have seen is a paper commissioned by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Written by Benjamin Levin, a leading Canadian scholar[33] in educational policy, it reviews and analyses the growing interest, in Canada as elsewhere, in strengthening the links amongst educational research, policy and practice (2003). Levin offers a broad and balanced perspective on the growing interest in evidence-based policy, arguing that only "from time to time" in history has research in education and the social sciences actually had a clear impact on policy through "direct use" (i.e. used by policy makers to directly inform rational decision making). In his view, those who hold or advocate for such a "direct impact model as their predominant view of research use are likely to be disappointed often" (Levin 2003:8).

By contrast, Levin argues that research more often has its impact by more broadly affecting people's thinking and subtly shaping their choices related to the problems they need to solve. This kind of impact may be direct or indirect, and may occur over either long or short periods of time. But according to Levin, this view of research impact is more realistic – and indeed more supported by the evidence - than the image of direct use that is nevertheless gaining in popularity in the international discourse. Importantly in this view, indirect or delayed impact should not be mistaken for *no* impact.

Levin also offers some practical observations and advice about alternative and more effective ways of increasing the utility and relevance of research, by putting the emphasis not on scientific evidence but on building "relationships."   He says that where research is successful in influencing behaviour – of policy makers or others - it most often involves sustained efforts to develop a strong relationship between the contexts of research production and the contexts of its use. To achieve such relationships, Levin (2003) recommends measures such as the following (my paraphrasing here):

- encourage the building of partnerships and networks among researchers and users, locally and internationally;
- funding processes and criteria that foster impact strategies and inclusion of end-users in research development;
- increase the connection between research and professional development in user organizations.

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[32] See Zussman (2003).

[33] Appointed at OISE/UT in 2004 and immediately seconded for a year to the Ontario Government.

In addition, he recommends putting a greater emphasis on making better use of date already collected, including engaging writers who are skilled at "translating" research products and processes into a language that is accessible to non-specialists. He also advocates more exchange through face-to-face contact, encouraging research components in existing activities, and sponsoring opportunities for researchers to participate in user events and vice versa.

I present these recommendations in detail here because I want to argue that the research-in-practice movement internationally is already taking many steps in the direction of the research relationships that Levin calls for here. That is, it actively builds relationships between literacy practitioners and experienced researchers. It encourages partnerships, collaborations, and network amongst researchers. It fosters research about issues that make sense to practitioners as "end users" because they are involved in defining it, developing it, conducting it, and making sense of its "findings." Thus, the results of research-in-practice are commonly already "in-use" amongst researcher-practitioners, even before the research report is even written. If so, it amounts to a very organic "connection between research and professional development" of the kind Levin seeks.

If all this is true, then the research-in-practice movement may indeed, and perhaps ironically, stand a much better chance than the scientific community, of doing research that actually makes a difference, has a lasting impact, in the worlds of both policy and practice.

Conclusions: "It simply makes us better"

I am trying to argue, in both halves of this paper, that research-in-practice has an enormous potential to contribute to the project of "building a research culture" as the basis for good policy the field of adult literacy. But it may involve reversing some of the assumptions underlying the current discourse of evidence-based research and policy. That is, practitioner research stands to make a contribution to policy by building a dynamic and responsive culture of inquiry, based on relationship-building between policy and practice. This is the opposite of a research culture based on science, one that treats practitioner knowledge as a "contaminant" rather than a "resource" in the production of legitimate knowledge that is useful as a guide to policy. By insisting on this separation, the scientific approach to research turns practitioners into outsiders, who must then be made into consumers or "end-users" in order for research to "have an impact." By contrast, the research-in-practice approach refuses this separation, and unifies the process of making practice "better" and research "matter," in the same moment.

Of course, this potential for research-in-practice to "matter" in the field of adult literacy will not happen automatically, just as it will not happen overnight. If it happens at all, it will be the result of a medium- to long-term investment, involving leadership, resources and vision. Sustaining such a vision requires an ongoing conversation amongst many stakeholders. I hope this paper will make a small contribute to such a conversation.

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