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Certification for what? Practitioner perspectives on the changing landscape of adult literacy education

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Keywords: Adult literacy, professional development, policy, access

Abstract: The responses of 63 adult literacy educators to an online survey suggest that professional development and training to meet the diverse contexts and practices in the field must attend to the embedded inequalities in access to quality literacy education for low income learners, and the marginalization of adult literacy work, which persists even as successive governments hail the importance of literacy education for citizenship and employment.

Introduction

In 2009-2010, sixty-three adult literacy educators in British Columbia participated in a semi-structured questionnaire designed to gage interest and participation in a certificate in literacy education proposed by Simon Fraser University. The goals of the survey were threefold: To gage the professional development and formal qualification needs of newcomers to the adult literacy field, as well as those of more experienced educators; to inform program curricula by documenting the skills and practices relevant to carrying out adult literacy work in diverse settings; and to identify barriers or challenges to participating in university-level credit courses in adult literacy education. Although the findings of the study provide insights into content and promising delivery formats for professional development, the results tell an even stronger story about adult literacy education as a field of practice in BC; a future, respondents point out, that is intertwined with the education and economic fate of British Columbian adults with the lowest incomes and least access to resources for literacy education.

Local Contexts and Universalizing Texts

In spite of intermittent political comment on the importance of adult literacy education to the prosperity of British Columbia and Canada (Government of British Columbia, 2006), adult literacy educators in British Columbia continue to experience teaching and learning conditions characterized by deep vulnerability to funding cuts, lower than average salaries and job security (British Columbia Teachers’ Federation, 2006) and broader expectations for what literacy can accomplish with respect to employment, citizenship and other measures of accountability (Hamilton, 2009). Moreover, professional development and training in adult literacy education is often treated as a non-credit “add-on” to the more established domains of K – 12 education and adult education. Few adult literacy educators working in the field today will have had access to formal education and training leading to a degree or recognized qualification in adult literacy education. Rather, educators come to the field through diverse pathways; many through teaching degrees and Master’s programs, through TESOL certificates, Science, Linguistics or Community Development degrees, and, as in other professions, construct an “epistemology of practice” (Beckett & Hager, 2000, p. 300) in relation to their training, and the actualities of the work. The goal of the survey was to explore if a specific qualification or set of qualifications in adult literacy education was needed, and if so, what form it would take. To make sense
of the survey findings, a brief description of the policy context shaping adult literacy work in BC is warranted.

The nature of adult literacy education is by all accounts local. “Low literacy” or the status of a “Level One and Two” (OECD, 2006) learner, as it is frequently framed, plays out in vastly different ways across British Columbian geographical, cultural, social and economic contexts. An adult who experiences reading and writing difficulties as a newcomer to Vancouver and to Canada, who is not literate in her first language, or who perhaps speaks a language for which there is no writing system, faces learning challenges and instructional needs that are distinct in many ways from a middle-aged adult native speaker of English, living in rural BC, who completed Grade 10 twenty years ago, and returns to school to qualify for career and job training programs. The education opportunities available to them, the rules governing access to education while receiving social assistance or employment insurance benefits (Butterwick & White, 2006), even the extent to which they can travel to their classes using public transit, or access the Internet, will vary widely. Thus, adult literacy educators in the course of day, week or career span, find themselves teaching phonology of the Roman alphabet, or critical reading strategies for English 9; leading a youth digital story telling project, or helping parents navigate their children’s school notices and homework. Advocacy, outreach, curriculum development, assessment, coordination of programs and volunteers, maintaining community partnerships and reporting outcomes are core practices for which there is seldom formal recognition.

In contrast, institutions that govern adult literacy work tend to draw upon universalizing metaphors to describe adult literacy work, and adult learners, in ways that mask the local, contextual nature of literacy. Here, an entire province can be “the most literate jurisdiction on the continent” (Government of BC, 2006), 40% of adults are said to be unable to participate in their community effectively (OECD, 2006), in spite of their actual competencies or learning needs, and whether they struggle with literacy, or with learning English as an additional language (Jackson, 2008). All workers are said to require “essential skills” that are independent of context or content, with consequences, it is said, for the productivity levels of the entire province or country, regardless of the nature of work available or the social and economic policies that make workplace participation possible (Jackson, 2005). As a respondent suggested, universalized discourses can be more powerful in shaping literacy education than the actualities of literacy teaching and learning: “There’s a disconnect between what adult students want/need and what the Ministry ‘knows’ about these students and us, the instructors.”

Universalized discourses of literacy do intersect with local adult literacy knowledge in one key area: youth and adults with the lowest levels of education, and at the lowest income levels, remain at highest risk for sustained unemployment (Lundetræ, Gabrielsen and Mykletun, 2010). Yet, concrete action to address this is lost among the lofty goals and promises that many ascribe to literacy education. As Walker (2009) points out, an influential CD Howe report in BC circulated the claim that “a 1% rise in literacy rates would increase GDP [in Canada] by $18 billion a year!” (BC Federation of Labour, 2006, in Walker, 2009, p. 292). Here, the focus is less upon instruction, and more upon relationships and partnerships to support literacy activity.

The survey findings suggest that the same conditions that narrow access to literacy learning for adults, also constrain employment opportunities for adult literacy educators, with significant implications for the content, form and goals of professional development initiatives. The following sections elaborate upon this contention, drawing upon written survey responses.

Research design and rationale

A semi-structured, anonymous questionnaire (Cohen & Manion, 1994) was sent by the author, to online adult literacy networks, professional associations and school districts. Fifty-
three completed questionnaires n = 53 were received and a further ten print-version surveys were complete, (n = 10) for a total of 63 completed surveys (n = 63). Given the relatively small survey sample, the nature of the data is best interpreted as descriptive and preliminary, suggesting trends and issues in adult literacy education that could be explored more widely and deeply in future studies.

A total of 14 questions were asked. The data reported here attends to responses for Question #3, “Please describe your roles and responsibilities in your current position”; Question 4, “What education qualifications do you have, and in what subject areas?”; Question #5, “Have your formal education qualifications prepared you for your current literacy work?”; Question #9, “What courses or training is needed to attract newcomers to the literacy field?” and Question 14, “Any other thoughts or comments in relation to professional development for adult literacy educators?”

The respondents took advantage of the “comment” section for each question, and in particular, Question #14, to elaborate their perspectives. The data was pre-coded for closed-ended questions. Open-ended questions such as those listed above were post-coded, using a “frequency tally” (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p. 102) of the range of responses. Constant comparison and cross-cutting thematic analyses were employed across these codes to generate more descriptive themes.

**Findings**

The results of the survey present a limited, but intriguing portrait of a dynamic field of practice in the midst of rapid change. There is much data to inform responsive professional development and training content and strategies for adult literacy educators. However, in their rather expansive responses, survey participants suggest policy tensions that shape and contextualize this more pragmatic concern for “training” or professional development. These “backstage” stories rise to the forefront in the data across two themes: the narrowing opportunities for literacy learning, and for literacy work, at the “foundational levels”, and the mismatch between the relatively high level of qualifications among adult literacy educators, and the value accorded these qualifications in relation to the work they actually do.

**Expanding views of literacy and narrowing opportunities for learning**

A theme throughout the responses is the narrowing of learning opportunities for those adults with the lowest levels of literacy and formal education. This is taking place in a variety of seemingly uncoordinated ways. For example, several respondents drew attention to the effects on literacy provision of the community planning approach, spearheaded by the Ministry of Education and Literacy Now under the aegis of the 2010 Winter Olympics Legacies Now initiative (Legacies Now, 2008). Here, community groups and school districts develop priorities for literacy programming that are tied to a variety of needs and interests such as food security, computer literacy, school readiness, and so on. As important as these embedded literacy projects are to respond to local issues and reach new people, the focus of literacy projects depends upon community leaders, with the risk that the instructional needs of adults with very low literacy skills can become invisible. One respondent noted, “I believe when we began funding these [community literacy] programs, we all thought the target to be adults who are not able to read […] but this is not always so.”

Secondly, respondents suggest that the needs of adult literacy learners at very beginning levels are not adequately met because so few educators have the skills to teach reading and
writing at this level. Lack of skills in teaching low literate adults means few can or want to work in this area and a “two-tier” system emerges:

There are two streams of literacy in adult learning: the ABE model wherein native speakers or higher level ESL learners are honing reading and writing skills, then there are new immigrants and low wage workers who come with little or no education history and they need settlement, classroom readiness and support packaged into one program. For the latter there is very little out there in terms of training.

Many called for an updating of literacy and language acquisition pedagogies to integrate ESL and literacy as distinct fields of professional training that are in practice, closely connected: “ESL educators need literacy teaching skills, and literacy educators need ESL strategies.”

Thirdly, college/universities and school districts are limiting their provision of literacy education, particularly at the beginning levels. The higher the formal qualifications of adult literacy educators, the less likely they are to be employed because they are “too expensive.” Similarly, educators working in colleges that have converted to universities find themselves over-qualified to work with “literacy level” students, but under-qualified to work as university instructors, who now require doctorate degrees. As one respondent explained, “With the movement away from colleges to universities in BC, plus the push toward higher degrees in order to hired into universities, literacy level instructors are becoming marginalized, and those positions, when available, are not always being filled with the right “type” of instructor.”

As some school boards and college/universities withdraw support for adult literacy and other communities use short-term funding to address a range of literacy interests across the life span, it remains for a few, community-based programs to fill the gap. But as one respondent concluded, “these are short-lived and ever-changing in format. This does not tend to attract well qualified people and certainly does not support professional development”. The outcome of these processes is what researchers and practitioners (Walker, 2008; Butterwick & White, 2006, Jackson, 2008) predicted: British Columbians with low levels of formal education and income have the least access to instruction from the most experienced literacy educators.

Qualifications, Career paths, and “useful” knowledge for adult literacy educators

The relatively high levels of post-secondary education qualifications among respondents co-exist with low remuneration; lack of value accorded their qualifications in school district settings, and “foggy” career paths.

The majority of respondents reported between 5-6 years of post-graduate study. 61 respondents (n = 61) held a BA, a B. Ed and/or teaching certificate; of these 17 (n = 17), or 27 %, also had a TESOL certificate. A further 16 respondents, n = 16, (25%), held an MA or M.Ed. 3 respondents had Doctorate degrees, or were completing them. Thus, almost 53% of respondents had at least 5 years post-secondary education. Among these, 34 respondents (54%) stated that very little of what they learned in their degree programs was relevant or useful to teaching adults to read and write in community settings. An exception is the TESOL certificate; most respondents with this qualification stated their training was useful and directly relevant to their work, with the exception of knowledge to teach literacy to a growing number of non-literate adults. Some questioned the need for more professional qualifications for adult literacy educators when the trend was for funders to ask programs to use volunteers to teach:

We need NOT to be relying on the generosity of volunteers to work with this group of people for whom learning is a challenge. It seems absurd to me that we do not utilize the
expertise of trained professionals, rather we recruit volunteers and expect the result to be a literate population.

This situation prompted one respondent, a volunteer with a MA in Adult Education, to wonder where the “entry” point into a career in adult literacy lies:

As a young woman who is keen to become an adult educator, I feel frustrated by the lack of a clear path into this field. I have spoken to many, many literacy practitioners and heads of ABE departments and each one seems to have different advice for me about how to enter this field. I am still paying back my first two degrees and I need to be sure that if I invest in further study, it will be worthwhile in terms of teaching me what I need to know (i.e. how to become a teacher) and in securing me employment.

Several shared a similar perspective from within the field. For example, the following was offered in response to the question: “What courses or training is needed to attract newcomers to the literacy field?”

There are no new jobs in literacy; community literacy workers are so poorly paid nothing attracts people to them; colleges have been closing down or at least not expanding their programs for the past 10 years. Why would anyone train for these non-existent posts?

As difficult as the field is to navigate for newcomers, and as unstable as it feels in the present, many respondents articulate a vision of adult literacy rooted in community-based, responsive and integrated pedagogies. “We need people who are good with adult learners and sensitive to the challenges that low-income, disadvantaged and/or learning challenged individuals might have. We need teachers who can teach reading, writing and numeracy to adults […] it is not easy to find such people”.

A consensus is that the range of skills and knowledge required for adult literacy work is both foundational, and context-dependent, suggesting that a promising professional development focus is upon learning-to-learn new skills embedded in practice, through relationships of mentorship, rather than teaching a generic “adult learner”. One respondent asked a rhetorical question:

“Which learner do we learn to teach?” Currently a literacy educator needs to be all things to all people, particularly if they work in small, remote communities where services are missing. The longer I am in this field, the more I realize that one can never know enough. In short, I think that what an educator needs depends on their demographics. The credentials and skills one needs to work in an aboriginal community are different than the credentials and skills that will be needed in a big city.

Overwhelmingly, respondents felt that new educators to the field, as well as practicing educators, needed more training to teach youth and adults to read “from the very beginning”. Related skills and qualities include the capacity to recognize, support and accommodate adults with learning difficulties, including addictions, post-traumatic stress and mental illness; technological knowledge and creativity to incorporate digital literacies into learning, as well as the ability to navigate literacy and EAL (English as an Additional Language) approaches. One of the most important skills and a demanding aspect of the work is to adapt, rewrite, and most commonly, develop new learning resources to reflect the context-sensitive nature of adult literacy settings. Several respondents also note the need for “hands on” skills and knowledge that respond to
social shifts and changing learning paradigms, including those related to harm reduction
(Alkenbrack, 2010) and universal design. “This is what is needed”, noted one instructor, “but is
nowhere available [formally]. We are learning on the fly.”

Discussion and Concluding Comments

The nature of adult learning is that adults may have some skills “in place” but not others;
thus, learning is most effectively mediated not as sets of progressively difficult skills and content,
but as areas of “just in time” inquiry, branching into content, critical problem-solving and
learning-to-learn strategies rooted in specific work and family contexts. In contrast, the gold
standard to which adult literacy educators are currently held is the K-12 formal school
certification, required in school districts to teach courses leading to Grade 12 Graduation. Here,
prized skills centre around developing and implementing lesson plans, classroom management
and assessment strategies tailored to (ostensibly) more predictable and uniform learners and
learning settings.

If professional development is to meet the needs of adult learners and literacy educators,
the long-standing marginality of adult literacy education within government education policy,
and post-secondary institutions, must be addressed. Rather than treating adult literacy education
as a fringe offering in a “core” adult education or K-12 teacher education program, post-
secondary institutions could respond to the fluidity in literacies across community and school
contexts. As one respondent suggests, literacy education can be placed at the centre of
educational program offerings across the learning spectrum: “Literacy instruction needs to be
considered a specialty or in need of extra or additional training. You need the basic teacher
training but additional training for the very different needs of all kinds of literacy students.”

Perhaps most fundamentally, British Columbians, and Canadians, require a cohesive,
sustained and supported adult learning policy framework; one that is rooted in tangible and
contextualized goals, rather than fuzzy and ever-shifting visions and unrealistic promises.

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