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ABSTRACT

Poor preparation of adult literacy educators is often blamed for the failure of adult literacy students. Four critical issues related to developing the adult literacy professional work force are as follows: how literacy is learned in adulthood; how practitioners learn and improve their practice; how new knowledge is generated in and for the field; and how a professionalized work force can play a role in curriculum development. The Adult Literacy Practitioner Inquiry Project is designed to investigate inquiry-centered staff development as a promising direction for rethinking practice and research and for generating knowledge from a field-based perspective. Its core activity is an ongoing research seminar for practitioners. Participants conduct systematic, intentional inquiry into teaching, learning, and administration in their own program settings. Preliminary findings from participant interviews show that adult literacy educators have extensive prior knowledge and experience and have had a variety of experiences with research and development. Many feel they are more or less on their own or that professional supervision is unhelpful. Opportunities to learn on the job are constrained by demoralizing physical conditions and time pressures. They come to staff development with a range of concerns more complex than those typically dealt with. Effective staff development should use practitioners' prior knowledge and experience, start from practitioner questions, and generate new knowledge for the field. (Contains 28 references.) (YLB)

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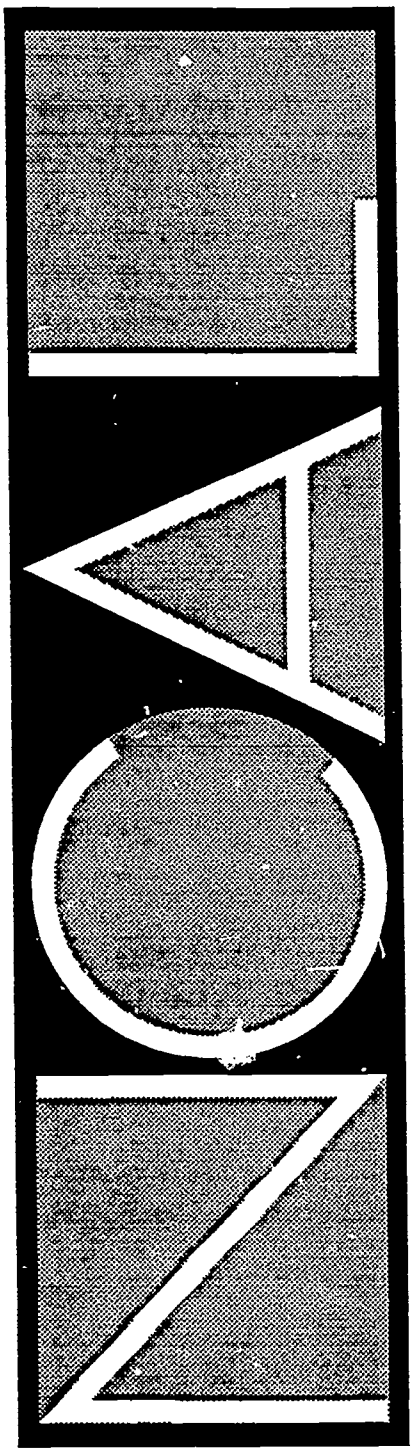

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POLICY BRIEF

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Developing the Professional Workforce for Adult Literacy Education

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A promising approach to developing the professional workforce for adult literacy education, inquiry-based staff development purposefully builds on the richness and diversity of the total experience and knowledge that teachers, tutors, and administrators bring to the field. In this approach, practitioners pose the problems to be considered and conduct field-based inquiry into daily practice. In contrast to the assumption that literacy practitioners, like their adult students, have deficiencies needing remediation, this stance on professional development explicitly positions practitioners as learners, researchers, and reformers.

INTRODUCTION

The adult literacy workforce is often portrayed as composed of part-time teachers or volunteers who have full-time jobs in other fields and little background in education.[1] Although acknowledged to be highly dedicated, both groups are presumed to have little formal preparation in literacy education for adult learners. Some make a causal link between this lack of prior training and problems of low retention and performance of adult learners and suggest that in order to improve program outcomes, teachers, volunteers, and administrators alike will need to be more qualified.[2] From this perspective, central tasks in the field are to *define the actions needed to upgrade their skills* and *to create a new profession.*

Poor preparation of adult literacy educators is often blamed for the failure of adult literacy students.

However, there is evidence that the relationship between staff preparation and program effectiveness is more complex than some of the current rhetoric would suggest. It is difficult to assess the role that literacy staffs play in learner retention without more systematic and sophisticated approaches to program evaluation, especially studies of teaching styles and practices, learning, and administering from the perspectives of participants.[3] In addition, many believe that impoverished learner attainments on standardized measures reflect not only problems with teaching and curriculum but also the limitations of current assessment instruments and strategies themselves.[4] As a consequence, not enough is

The reasons for poor performance are complex and to understand them we need to improve the way we evaluate both the adult literacy programs and the students who participate in them.

known about the prior knowledge, skills, experience, and interests adults bring to literacy programs or what participation enables them to learn. Furthermore, the scant base of empirical research on staff development in adult literacy education makes it difficult to establish relationships among entry qualifications, on-the-job staff development opportunities, and program processes and impacts.

Inquiry-based staff development views adult literacy educators as learners, researchers, and reformers.

This brief synthesis identifies policy issues in adult education staff development and introduces inquiry-based staff development as a promising approach for developing the professional workforce and rethinking both practice and research on practice in adult literacy education.

ISSUES IN STAFF/PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN ADULT LITERACY

In the following sections, four critical issues related to developing the adult literacy professional workforce are briefly described: how literacy is learned in adulthood; how adult literacy practitioners learn and improve their practice; how new knowledge is generated in and for the field; and how a professionalized workforce can play a role in the development of curriculum.

Adult Learners as Active Participants

The view of adult learners as active participants in diverse social and cultural contexts involving a range of literacy practices provides an alternative to the current public image of adult learners as incompetent individuals needing remediation in a set of predetermined technical skills. This alternative perspective, in turn, suggests a need for assessing literacy growth differently.[5] It also raises questions about learners' roles in shaping the curriculum.

Adult literacy students can be viewed as adults who are actively engaged in a range of literacy practices in diverse social and cultural contexts rather than as incompetents who need remediation.

The educator's role is to enhance learners' awareness of their underlying assumptions about literacy learning in relation to the social and cultural construction of their lives. Learners can assume more control over goal setting and identify meaningful criteria for evaluating their learning. This view is congruent with a movement currently referred to as *participatory literacy education*[6] which is centered in the characteristics, aspirations, backgrounds, and needs of learners and in the collaboration of learners and program staff. While in traditional programs learners are conceived as recipients of services, in participatory education they *define, create, and maintain* the program.

Adult Literacy Practitioners as Learners

A second issue concerns the ways practitioners in a field are positioned as learners once on the job. In the 1990s, the literature of K-12 staff development is calling for *interactive staff development*, i.e., staff development based on research on the relationships between teacher culture and program improvement.[7] From this perspective, staff development is a program improvement strategy rather than a *teacher* improvement strategy, and its nature and content are determined by research on how programs improve rather than by research on training teachers to implement a set of effective teaching practices. From this perspective, *staff* refers to the core of professionals who work together in a program site; *development* assumes people with diverse expertise moving forward together by "linking activities and events in coherent ways" and working toward a particular end.

Adult literacy educators can be viewed as professionals who can generate new knowledge and improve practice as members of educational communities rather than as individuals who need to alter their practices, beliefs, and understandings.

Thus, rather than *altering* participants' practices, beliefs and understandings or *training* them in predetermined skills and knowledge, the staff development participants are *active constructors* of their own professional practice who acquire and generate knowledge as members of educational communities rather than as individuals. Instead of beginning with

specific practices, staff development programs can begin with teachers' thinking about their own work and can aim to reshape work environments to enable reflective and collaborative dialogue and to give teachers power to act on their conclusions.

Staff development programs need to take into account the special circumstances and conditions in which adult literacy educators work.

Although this shift in the field is generally applicable to adult literacy education, designing staff development for adult literacy educators requires attention as well to the special circumstances and conditions that make professional development in this field distinctive. One obvious factor is the lack of an extensive and rich research base on teaching and learning in adult literacy. In addition, the contexts for teaching in adult literacy and the routes into the field are vastly different. There is also a dearth of rich empirical studies of staff development programs in action, especially information about local site-based efforts or about efforts to develop coherent conceptual frameworks.

Knowledge Generation and Use

Rethinking staff development requires a re-examination of the relationship of practitioners to knowledge in the field of adult literacy. There are at least two interrelated issues here: *the concept of a knowledge base* that provides state-of-the-art direction for practice and the *role of practitioners* in the generation and use of new knowledge.

Adult literacy educators should have a role in defining what they need to know.

The concept of a knowledge base in the literature of teacher education refers to something mutable, drawn from many disciplines and taking a variety of forms, which when mastered provides teachers with a fund of principled knowledge—a set of constructs—on which to make reflective decisions and judgments. Although there is clearly a rich body of research information that teachers can appraise and adapt for use, this construction does not enfranchise teachers (or tutors and administrators) as knowledge generators themselves.

When adult literacy educators do research, they build on their own professional and intellectual experience.

The question of what practitioners need to know, however, may be unanswerable unless they are given a more formal and legitimate role.[8] An important modification of the knowledge base view posits inquiry by teachers and other practitioners as another important way to know about teaching and learning. Teacher researchers are uniquely positioned to make visible the ways students and teachers together construct knowledge and curriculum. When teachers do research, they draw on interpretive frameworks built from their histories and intellectual interests, and because the research process is embedded in their practice, this obviates the necessity of "translating findings" in the conventional sense.[9] This process moves teacher researchers toward critical reflection[10] and because they often inquire with their students, the students themselves are also empowered.[11] Thus, practitioners currently marginalized in the field would play a significant role in generating knowledge.

Professionalization and the Curriculum

There is little agreement regarding the qualifications for adult literacy educators.

There is little agreement among the diverse literacy programs regarding professional qualifications.[12] Many use certification in elementary or secondary education or a college degree as criteria for teachers, although few teachers or college graduates have training in adult education. Elementary or secondary teaching experience may provide a false security for those who rely too heavily on techniques and strategies appropriate to a different age level and contexts.

To establish entry qualifications for staff and professionals in the field is to make assumptions about the knowledge needed by practitioners to teach or administer particular curricula or programs and the role adult learners play in identifying their own educational needs and interests. The complex decisions about who teaches, what is taught, and what role learners play in determining the curriculum suggest that the concept of professionalization itself be made problematic in ways particular to this field. Deciding on the appropriate qualifications for teachers, for example, depends on the program's concepts of curriculum and instruction—the what and how of teaching in that particular context. If a program defines

literacy as the acquisition of a set of technical skills, it may seek instructors qualified to follow published programs and materials. If it defines literacy as social practice and critical reflection, however, the curriculum would need to constructed by teachers and learners together, the content would evolve from individual and collective interests, and thus administrators, teachers, and tutors need to be oriented to participatory teaching and learning modes. To date, there has been little effort to investigate systematically relationships between types and goals of programs and staffing qualifications and needs.

There has been little study of the staff qualifications and needs required for specific adult literacy programs.

Implications for Rethinking Staff/Professional Development

There is little disagreement that practitioners want and need ongoing opportunities to learn. Improving practice and professionalizing the field depend on understanding practitioners' prior experiences with staff development and their perceptions of the adult literacy workplace as a context for collaborative learning. Staff development would thus involve a recursive process of articulating questions, interacting with the literature and with professional colleagues, and reassessing one's own knowledge. In adult literacy education, teachers, tutors, and administrators would form researching communities to interrogate current practice and generate new knowledge from a field-based perspective. In many cases, these processes would also mean inviting co-investigative relationships with learners. The study reported here is based on these fundamental assumptions about relationships among literacy education, staff development, and the reform of practice and research.

Adult literacy educators are in a unique position to conduct inquiries on current practice and to generate new knowledge from their perspective of the field.

THE ADULT LITERACY PRACTITIONER INQUIRY PROJECT: AN OVERVIEW

The Adult Literacy Practitioner Inquiry Project (ALPIP) is designed to investigate *inquiry-centered staff development* as a promising direction for rethinking practice and research and for generating knowledge from a field-based perspective. It starts from two key assumptions: that research by adult literacy practitioners can contribute both to individual professional development and immediate program effectiveness and that these inquiries have the potential to enhance and alter, not just add to, the wider knowledge base of the field.

The ALPIP project is designed to show that adult literacy educators can contribute to professional development and program improvement and enhance the knowledge base of the field.

The project explores three areas:

(1) The prior experience, knowledge, and interests of adult literacy teachers, tutors, and administrators;

(2) The culture of the adult literacy workplace and the nature of teaching, tutoring, and learning in diverse literacy programs; and

(3) The processes and outcomes of sustained, research-based, and participatory in-service staff and professional development.

ALPIP's core activity is an ongoing research seminar (currently in its second year) that involves practitioners from diverse Philadelphia area adult literacy agencies representing a range of programs. A few agencies are independent, but most are affiliated with other organizations. The participants, primarily teachers and tutors but including program administrators, plan the seminar in collaboration with university-based adult literacy educators and researchers who serve as facilitators.

Participants conduct systematic, intentional inquiry into teaching, learning, and administration in their own program settings; organize inquiry as a social and collaborative process;

critically analyze current theory and research from a field-based perspective; and make problematic the social, political, and cultural arrangements that structure literacy learning and teaching in particular contexts. Documentation of the seminar—as a model for staff development based on practitioner research and as a source of knowledge about adult literacy learning—is the collective responsibility of both university and field participants.

Toward Inquiry-Centered Staff Development: Preliminary Findings

In-depth exploratory interviews, using a protocol developed from participants' ideas about what information would be most useful in the design of the seminar and in the research, were conducted with the first cohort of 21 ALPIP participants in spring/summer 1991. Preliminary findings from a subset of the data are presented here, organized under: practitioner prior knowledge and experience, opportunities for learning on the job, barriers to learning on the job, and practitioners' questions and interests.

Practitioners' Prior Knowledge and Experience: Practitioners bring extensive prior knowledge to the teaching of adults and to the administration of adult literacy programs, although many enter the field serendipitously with little or no formal training in adult literacy instruction.

Though they may enter the field serendipitously and with little formal training, adult literacy educators have extensive prior knowledge and experience.

Entry to the Field. The 21 ALPIP participants entered the field through a number of routes. One-third said they entered by chance, and chance could be inferred from the comments of another third. Some were "drafted" when their agencies started an adult literacy program, and others began as volunteers. Of the 21 participants, 8 had no formal training in education, 2 sought training before they started, and 11 had teaching credentials, most in elementary or secondary education.

Prior Non-Academic Experiences. Participants revealed an array of prior non-academic experiences they considered relevant to their work, including:

(1) *exploration of cultures*—through travel, childhood experiences, work in a variety of settings, and volunteer activities;
(2) *work on issues* related to racism and women;
(3) *work with groups*—as founders, facilitators, and/or members;
(4) *work in related fields*, including publishing, social services, and business; and
(5) *establishing and running organizations and businesses.*

Adult literacy educators have a wide variety of personal and professional experiences.

In addition, participants pursued a wide range interests, including the arts, literature and culture, sociology, social services, health education, and linguistics.

Experience in Research and Curriculum Development outside the Job. Over half the participants had been involved in research outside of their literacy jobs, both academic research (e. g., literature) and non-academic research (e.g., child care, sex equity). Previous curriculum development work addressed a variety of content areas and audiences.

In general, adult literacy educators have had a variety of experiences with research and development, both on the job and in their personal lives.

Experience with Research and Curriculum Development on the Job. About half of the group had also been involved in research projects on the job, undertaken through state or foundation funding, agency support, or out of personal interest. Issues investigated included program effectiveness, understanding learners, and improvement of teaching through systematic documentation of practice. Since neither teachers nor funders typically view this latter practice as research, it is likely there are more cases than the documentation suggested.

Two-thirds of the participants reported involvement in developing curriculum—for themselves, their students, or other teachers—at least once. Purposes, audiences, and development activities varied—some collected materials, others addressed specific content areas; some were aimed at specific learners, and several focused on staff development. However, no practitioner was working with a mandated curriculum, and thus it is likely that everyone was involved in some form of curriculum development on an ongoing basis.

Adult literacy educators have had a variety of staff development experiences, but virtually no opportunity to work collaboratively with peers within or across adult literacy programs.

Opportunities for Learning On the Job: While both teachers and administrators in adult literacy education have had a wide range of prior experiences with staff development, they have had virtually no opportunities to improve their practice through ongoing, collaborative learning within or across programs.

For the preliminary analysis, the data from the in-depth interviews were analyzed against a staff development framework.[13]

Individually-Guided (informal to formal processes). None of the adult literacy programs had formal, structured, individually-guided staff development, but several participants reported learning by doing, self-education and reflection, or making development opportunities by working on projects with others.

Many adult literacy educators feel they are more or less on their own or that the professional supervision they receive is unhelpful.

Observation-Assessment (peer coaching, clinical supervision, and evaluation). Most of the programs did not have regular or formal staff supervision, much less structured observations by supervisors. Some participants described themselves as being more or less on their own; others regarded supervision as unhelpful because of its infrequency or because of the discrepancy between their knowledge and that of their supervisors. Although several programs had tried to institute observation or cross-visitation, they had funding, staffing, and scheduling difficulties.

Development-Improvement (developing curriculum, designing programs, participating in program improvement processes). About a third of the participants had developed curriculum materials for use by other teachers. Only three reported on-going curriculum development, but virtually all participants worked in programs without pre-packaged curriculum and made decisions about content, materials, and teaching strategies in an ongoing way. For some, curriculum development reflected a commitment to learner-centered or empowerment approaches; for others, appropriate adult literacy curricula were unavailable.

Many report that training workshops typically follow the expert model.

Training (expert workshop model). Many participants reported periodic workshops, conducted by staff or outsiders, where the expert presenter came with objectives and established the content and flow of the activities. (One participant observed that typical expert workshop pedagogy was a "contradiction" to what teaching should be.) Some training fit less easily into the expert model, e.g., workshops in which topics were generated by staff who ran them as inquiry sessions, ACBE trainers who worked with program staff to include learners in program processes. Larger programs trained new and/or returning teachers at the beginning of the year, though some regarded the training as "socialization."

Adult literacy educators think the opportunity to reflect on their interactions with students could improve their professional practice, but most are consumed by the need to deal with pressing, immediate problems.

Inquiry (identifying a problem, collecting data, inventing a learning activity to address it). Though participants did not use the term, some programs were clearly involved in inquiry-based staff development, e.g., groups within programs that shared common readings as a way to identify problems and discuss concerns, groups that met to explore ways of reshaping the curriculum or program. Participants also referred to reflection on student-teacher interactions as a powerful way to learn about practice. Staff/teacher meetings were also regarded as good opportunities for inquiry, i.e., sharing knowledge, questions, and concerns and planning curriculum.

In general, however, literacy program staffs tended to problem-solve by dealing with the most immediate and pressing concerns rather than raising topics requiring sustained discussion and systematic reflection and inquiry.

Off-Site Staff Development: Participants also reported off-site learning experiences that may be broadly defined as staff development, e.g., university courses, informal teachers' groups, visits to (and sometimes workshops at) local materials/resource centers, program visitations (local, regional, national, and international), and participation in collaborative research. In addition, participants attended a wide variety of conferences, and although some commented positively, concerns were raised about contradictions between presenters' methods and content (e.g., collaborative learning presented in an uncollaborative way), feelings of alienation (presentations of orthodoxies of the field without a context for examining or critiquing assumptions), and the appropriateness for adults in general or particular groups of adults.

Demoralizing physical conditions of the workplace constrain the opportunities for adult literacy educators to improve their practice.

Barriers to Learning on the Job: Practitioners' opportunities to learn on the job are constrained by demoralizing problems with space and other physical conditions of their workplaces as well as pressures of time, job fragmentation, and other factors that contribute to an atmosphere of instability. In many programs, teachers, tutors, and administrators feel profoundly isolated in their workplaces and lack a community to support their professional development, both within and across programs.

Space and Physical Conditions. More than half participants reported poor physical conditions on the job—inadequate space and overcrowding, odors and filth, and even vermin—and expressed concern about the disrespect for learners such conditions may convey. Such physical conditions contribute to an unstable atmosphere and a perception that participants are marginal workers in a marginal field.

Adult literacy educators feel overworked and unable to find time to improve their practice.

Professional Lifestyles. Participants consistently reported feeling overworked and unable to devote time to becoming better teachers. A fifth were part time in the field and several full-time workers had many different responsibilities within their agencies. Low salaries encouraged practitioners to take on additional jobs and signaled to some the lack of importance attached to the field. Most felt extremely isolated, lacking supportive and helpful relations with co-workers, and staff turnover was high.

Many adult literacy educators feel their autonomy is a mixed blessing.

Structural and Programmatic Barriers. Isolation functioned as a structural barrier to learning on the job. Although many teachers reported considerable autonomy, they regarded this as a mixed blessing. They wasted time reinventing the wheel, created curriculum without benefit of dialogue with colleagues, and assessed materials without knowing how others had used them. Participants identified the exploratory interview as a unique opportunity for interaction and reflection. The lack of community among practitioners reflected a workplace culture often characterized by exhaustion, multiple demands, and limited resources.

Though some participants did report positive, supportive relations with other staff, their dominant concern was the obstacles to collegiality and to productive coalitions with other services providers. Tensions within and across programs were attributed to competing beliefs about literacy, teaching, and learning; cultural and educational differences; and competition for money, students, tutors, and recognition. Agencies expended more effort on expanding services as a means of obtaining additional funding than on in-depth program evaluations or processes to improve program quality. However, there was general agreement that none of these problems would be insurmountable if systems were established for practitioners to confront them and learn from them.

Collegial relationships among professionals within and across adult literacy programs are often constrained by cultural differences; competing beliefs about literacy, teaching, and learning; and competition for scarce resources.

Practitioners' Questions and Interests: Practitioners come to staff development with a range of complex questions that reflect the local culture of their classrooms and programs as well

as their commitment to larger issues in the field. Rather than simply posing narrow or technical questions, practitioners are seeking opportunities to establish communities of learners within and across programs. These communities can provide a context for deliberating about practice, for questioning underlying assumptions and beliefs, for sharing ideas and problems, and for the processes and impacts of their professional work.

Adult literacy educators come to staff development with a range of complex questions which relfect their own experiences, their commitment to important issues in the field, and their desire to establish professional communities within and across programs.

Practitioners' questions about teaching and learning represented a range of concerns more complex than those typically dealt with in staff development.

How to teach. Not surprisingly, this was the largest category and included questions regarding how to work with adult learners in reading and writing, how to work with heterogeneous groups, how to assess learning.

Self-evaluation of a current practice or role. Questions in this category explicitly addressed processes of reflection and critique of existing practice. Included were questions about the gap between what a teacher wants to happen and what actually does, the role of white teachers in the African-American community, what constitutes adequate practice, and who establishes standards.

Programs and program administration. Questions in this category addressed opportunities to compare program models and philosophies, systems for evaluating instructors and instruction, strategies to evaluate programs, and approaches to program-based staff development.

Concepts, ideas, or issues. In this category, questions were framed as investigations, e.g., current research in writing or learning disabilities, debates around phonics instruction in reading, the various meanings of learner-centeredness, and the conflicting or contradictory priorities of various funding streams.

Goals, policies, and politics. In this category, participants framed broad questions regarding the fundamental assumptions that underlie teaching and learning in the field. These included a range of questions about inter-program politics; race, class, and gender issues; purposes and conflicting beliefs about literacy teaching and learning; and relationships between classwork and the community.

Adult literacy educators are asking for opportunities to examine their current practices, to question the underlying assumptions and beliefs of the field, and to facilitate their own professional growth.

Practitioners appeared to be asking for opportunities to deliberate about practice, to question underlying assumptions and beliefs, and to examine processes as well as products. They also had ideas about themselves as learners and the circumstances that would facilitate their own professional growth. Time and again, they reiterated the need for support, to share ideas and doubts, to learn what others are doing.

INQUIRY-BASED STAFF DEVELOPMENT IN ADULT LITERACY: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND POLICYMAKERS

Inquiry-based staff development does not imply one best way, nor does it obviate the need in specific situations for methods that may be oriented more to training or to knowledge transmission. Within the range of approaches to staff or professional development that we may identify as inquiry-based, furthermore, there will undoubtedly be considerable variation. Practitioners in this project, for example, represent diverse efforts to meet the needs of adult learners in programs of different scale and in different communities (ESL, workplace, family, GED, women, deaf adults, homeless individuals, or people coping with substance abuse problems.) Each of these programs has distinctive features. What different approaches to inquiry-based staff development have in common, however, is that they build on what people in the local setting want to know and take into account the material conditions of their practice.

Inquiry-based staff development can build on what adult literacy educators want to know and take into account the conditions under which they work.

Using Prior Knowledge and Experience

A considerable number of literacy practitioners currently enter the field with little or no formal training. This situation may not be "fixed" through graduate programs, credentialing or certification, and/or by standardization and packaging of the curriculum. There is always a cost/benefit issue related to credentialing in a field with such low salaries, as well as liabilities associated with restricting entry to a field where people can become qualified in such diverse ways.

Credentialing of adult literacy educators may be a mistake when the field has such low salaries and people can become qualified in such diverse ways.

That people get into the field by different routes could instead be regarded as an asset, on the premise that this diversity mirrors the diversity of adults as learners and the diversity of contexts in which they seek to learn. Just as effective programs attempt to create meaningful environments for learning by building on the cultural, linguistic, and intellectual resources of learners, we need to utilize more fully and appropriately the range of abilities, skills, interests, and prior knowledge diverse groups of literacy practitioners currently bring to their work. An important by-product of this direction is to enrich the curriculum of adult literacy programs, too often so heavily focused on skills that they lack meaningful content.

The diversity of adult literacy educators can be viewed as an asset which can be used to enrich the curriculum of adult literacy programs meet the needs of the diverse populations the programs seek to serve.

This argument does not preclude the development of excellent graduate programs to prepare practitioners, nor does it assume that practitioners themselves are typically satisfied with what they do and know. Instead, information about degrees and certifications needs to be supplemented by richer data about entry qualifications related to prior knowledge, interests, and experience, and from these data new ways identified and sanctioned for practitioners to use their skills and abilities in the practice of teaching, tutoring, and administering. In other words, the task, in part, becomes to try to understand how practitioners as literacy professionals already use what they know, and how particular patterns or complexes of qualifications, prior knowledge, and interests respond to particular needs in the field. The world knowledge of teachers, tutors, and administrators, for example, can be considered part of an expanded knowledge base for the field that, in turn, enhances the content of the curriculum.

The knowledge and experience of adult literacy educators can be used to enhance the curriculum of programs that prepare other adult literacy practitioners.

Exploring the interaction of these competencies and interests with styles of instruction in reading and writing and the development of literacy curriculum provides an alternative, and perhaps complementary, approach to understanding the qualifications, attitudes, and skills needed for work with adult learners.

Starting from Practitioner Questions

The complex nature of practitioners' interests and their rootedness in daily practice suggest that effective staff development can begin with the questions of practitioners who identify their needs given their local contexts, their prior experiences, and their goals for teaching and learning. In research on practice such as that described here, questions emerge from day-to-day practice, and data are gathered in an ongoing way. Their work embedded in the culture of their programs, teachers and administrators conduct systematic, intentional inquiries into problems of practice in their own settings, using others in the cross-program researching community as resources for the analysis and interpretation of their data.

Staff development can begin with research on the questions which are rooted in the everyday practice of adult literacy educators.

In staff development structured in this way, specific classrooms and programs serve as "critical sites of inquiry" to advance practitioners' own learning and to enable them to articulate and examine assumptions and concerns. In the context of these local studies in which practitioners investigate their own and each other's practice, the opportunity to read the current literature—both field and university generated—becomes both more meaningful and more critical.

Building Community

Although some have questioned whether adult literacy educators are interested in staff development,[14] the data show that practitioners' reluctance may be more related to the culture of the adult literacy workplace and to negative or limited prior experiences with staff development than to a rejection per se of opportunities to learn.

We need to reshape the work environment to provide opportunities for ongoing collaboration among adult literacy educators and to provide a broader context for the generation and dissemination of new knowledge.

To reshape the work environment so that it provides support for ongoing collaboration, more networks are needed for practitioners to meet regularly as collectives or communities to understand their own situations and to provide a broader context for the generation and dissemination of new knowledge. Support for on-site staff development should be supplemented with stronger cross-program and agency networks that invite practitioners to come together over time. Such collaborative networks may be critical for the building of a professional culture in the field of adult literacy education.

Because of its close links to daily practice and its collaborative structures, inquiry-based staff development has considerable potential to inform and enhance overall curriculum and program development as well. As agencies and programs become centers of inquiry[15] for example, they can also become settings for participatory program evaluation.[16] Rethinking staff development as a program improvement process rather than primarily as a means of individual professional growth means enhancing the capacity of the system as a whole to respond to adult learner needs.

Generating New Knowledge for the Field

Viewing staff development as a program improvement process, rather than a means for individual professional growth, will enhance our ability to respond to the needs of adult learners.

Rethinking staff development in the ways described here would stimulate a deeper and more widespread dialogue between and among practitioners, researchers, and policymakers in the field about the construction and use of a knowledge base for the field of adult literacy. More systematic data needs to be collected about what different practitioner constituencies feel they know and need to know. Rather than "infuse" practitioners with current theory and research, contexts need to be created for practitioners to read critically the research of university and center-based researchers as well as the emerging body of literature documenting research conducted by field-based practitioners.[17] These bring practitioners centrally into the conversation about what counts as knowledge for the field.

Practitioners' strong commitment to learning from practice can be coupled with the field's need to know more about the literacy needs and practices of adult learners through practitioner documentation and dissemination of knowledge about teaching and learning.

Researching the Practice of Inquiry-Based Staff Development

Inquiry-based staff development has the potential to reinvent the relationship between research and practice and to engage adult literacy educators, researchers, and policymakers in a common dialogue.

Inquiry-based staff development has the potential to further our understanding of critical relationships between staff development processes and impacts as well as between program-based inquiry and program improvement. Practitioner research, moreover, has the potential to contribute significantly to public knowledge,[18] i.e., to become a way of knowing for the wider community of adult literacy practitioners as well as university-based researchers and administrators of large scale literacy efforts.

In adult literacy education, there have been to date almost no forums for conducting, presenting, and publishing such research. In addition, support for the design, implementation, and documentation of diverse approaches to inquiry-based staff development has the potential to contribute to reinvented relationships between research and practice and to engage the disparate constituencies of practitioners, researchers, and policymakers in a common dialogue.

Endnotes

[1] Tibbetts, Kutner, Hemphill, & Jones, 1991
[2] Foster, 1988
[3] Fingeret & Danin, 1991
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