

The Minnesota Practitioner Reading Research Project Participants' Evaluation

The Minnesota Practitioner Reading Research Project, a joint project of the Minnesota Literacy Training Network and the Connecting Practice, Policy, and Research (CPPR) Initiative of the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL), grew out of Minnesota's commitment to connecting research and practice. Dr. Barry Shaffer, Adult Basic Education Supervisor for the Minnesota Department of Education, and Deborah Simmons, Literacy Training Network Staff Contact, contracted with Bella Hanson to develop a research-to-practice project. She contacted NCSALL and together with CPPR staff, Cristine Smith and Beth Bingman, designed a practitioner research project focusing on reading instruction, a state professional development priority.

Nine Minnesota adult educators took part in the initial phase of the project. They met three times in Minneapolis to learn about current reading research and about the process of developing a research question, designing a project, collecting and analyzing data, and writing a final report. In their local programs and classrooms, they carried out a research project focusing on reading and then presented the results at the Minnesota Summer Intensive Training for adult education practitioners. Six of the practitioner researchers completed a written reflection/evaluation of their practitioner research experience. Their responses are summarized in this report.

What difference did this project make?

Practitioner research may produce knowledge that is useful to particular teachers or programs or to the broader field, but the primary purpose of practitioner research is professional development. One goal of this project was for participants to learn about reading research and use this learning in their practice. The participants were asked to reflect on their learning and how it impacted their practice.

All the respondents wrote about learning more about reading and reading instruction from their participation in the project. Some excerpts from their comments:

I have learned that there are multiple and complex components to reading instruction and that paying careful attention to all of these components, in a very balanced literacy approach, can and does have a tremendous impact on learners' reading skill achievement.

I have also learned that I need to pay closer attention to the skills/experience of each learner in terms of these components of reading because learners come to us with a tremendous range of experiential and education backgrounds.

I became aware of so many resources in the field of reading.

Reading instruction has many different components and each component is a skill in itself. By working on one part, a teacher can influence comprehension, the ultimate goal.

I felt that I had a better and more thorough understanding about reading instruction and reading research after being part of this group.

They also learned about research and the research process:

I have learned the basic steps of doing good research, and that process is now not so foreign or formidable. I have gained the skills and confidence to research areas of great importance to me and my work, and I have a greater understanding and appreciation of its vital role in professional development.

I learned about the research process step by step, and as I proceeded through, I realized how my project fell short of "true research."

Doing research is more complicated than I expected.

Research is important, interesting, and frustrating all at the same time! I have great respect for researchers and hope there will be more research in the area of adult basic education (ABE). Doing research in the field brings professionalism to ABE.

Personal information, as well as testing, needs to be gathered when you start the project. The more information that one has, the better the final analysis will be.

Some other "learnings" noted in the evaluations:

I realized the value of support from our instructors and our co-learners. I depended on that support throughout the learning process.

It reinforced the importance of student evaluations as a means to show progress not only for the program but for the students. For students to be able to see or hear themselves progressing is quite important.

I've always been inquisitive—a teacher willing to try new things. But doing research of this kind caused me to reflect on my teaching more and modeled ways of experimenting that are more intensive and thorough.

Learning is one result of professional development, but change in practice is the goal. These practitioners reported changes in their own instructional practice that they attributed to their experiences in practitioner research.

I will continue to try new ideas and access tools that were presented to us in the project.

I find myself discussing reading comprehension with students much more than I ever did. I especially discuss vocabulary difficulties with students and get input from them on what will be helpful to them. In reference to classroom teaching, I find myself wanting to teach strategies more than just content. I want to find ways to be very clear about learning

goals and teaching methods. I want to decrease the amount of material covered in the classroom and make it clearer and more memorable. All these changes came from seeing the results of student learning in my intervention sessions, as well as from input from the students during and after the intervention. Changes also came from my reading about the reading process and about teaching in general.

I've encouraged the instructor [in the beginning level class] to teach phonemic awareness and include spelling and writing. By using the same phonemic pre- and post-test that I used last year, we can determine the level of each student and what areas they need help in.

This year in my English-as-a second language (ESL) intermediate class, there will be a more systematic approach to reading, fluency, vocabulary building, and comprehension. I learned last year that the class generally has a good understanding of phonics.

My own reading practice has changed due to the nature of my reading research. I now use phonics almost daily. I also have learners read for fluency. In my class, learners all read orally and re-read text many times in order to help with their fluency. My research led to this change. I didn't always do it before, only if there was time! Now, I make time for the phonics and re-reading text. I heard the improvements in the learners' fluency as well as the tremendous feedback I had from the class.

Most participants in the project reported sharing their learning with colleagues in their own programs and in some instances with other programs. Several wrote of changes in reading instruction that went beyond their own classes:

We will test all our level 2 students for fluency and then encourage them to use Read Naturally with the help of volunteers in our computer lab. In addition we will be adding some explicit instruction in reading comprehension.

I will be reporting on our results at my program's start-up inservice next week and will be discussing the reports, teaching of reading, and research with everyone on our staff.

Our English Language Learning (ELL) Department has incorporated a Phonics/Fluency Class to our set of offerings in order to meet the needs of learners who are struggling with reading. The success of the learners in the research pilot project has shown that many of our struggling readers can and do learn once they're given the proper intervention and tools for future learning and success.

Based on my project addressing sustained silent reading and reading comprehension, other teachers in our program are trying reading labs in their classrooms.

How could the project be improved?

Project participants were in general quite positive about the materials, training, and support they received. They also valued working as a group.

I thought the worksheets used in our session were exceptional. I like how they broke the process of research down into manageable pieces.

I liked the process. It was important for us to be together to study the current research and to come up with our own question for research.

The training and preparation was very well-planned, and we participants were given a great deal of information and support to get us started. We also had easy access to the facilitators once the meetings had concluded and we were working on our projects.

It was also very, very helpful and important to work as a cohort to discuss issues, concerns, and planning related to the project. These meetings helped guide me along the path, which often involved concerns and uncertainties.

Everyone was patient, encouraging, and willing to work together. Working with a small group allows for more cooperation; you don't get lost in the crowd.

While their evaluations indicated that the project design was effective, they also had specific suggestions for improvement. These included:

- providing more information about specific reading assessment instruments
- giving more support to individual data analysis
- a debriefing session after the final presentations
- additional focus on reading instruction.

And even though the practitioner researchers estimated they spent from 50 to 100 hours on this project, many asked for more time – or for the project to take place over a longer period of time. This initial project began in January and final presentations were in August. Many found this schedule to be too rushed. Some wanted more time to read the reading research. Most would have liked to carry out their reading instruction research for a longer period of time.

The training provided us with the basic tools, but left us with a short time period to actually do the work. I think that people would have learned more if they had been given a longer timeline to work with.

I feel I rushed into the project because of limited time to do it.

The time element, by the way, would be something that future participants in such a project ought to be very aware of: to be sure to plan and organize their projects carefully in order to allow themselves and their learners enough time to allow the intervening efforts to have a result. I, perhaps, did too much planning and pre-class assessing, thereby not allowing myself and my learners enough time in the actual intervention stage.

What are possible next steps for practitioner research in Minnesota?

The participants were asked to reflect on possible next steps for their practitioner research group and to state their recommendations for practitioner research in Minnesota. They would like to have the opportunity to meet again. Some are willing to share what they learned in publications

and workshops. And, they were united in recommending that Minnesota continue to support practitioner research.

I hope that the Minnesota ABE will fund more practitioner research. Personally, I believe too much research is done by professionals in higher education who do not spend a lot of time in the ABE classroom. It is important to have research done by those in the classrooms on a daily basis. It is also important for our field to have ABE practitioners do research and have it published.

I think it is an excellent way to learn more about more effective teaching as well as student learning, needs, and struggles. The colleague interaction is so rich and helpful. It is such a worthwhile effort at professional development and improvement in service in ABE. It should be supported and encouraged.

Adult Basic Education trainers in every area of the state need to understand that only giving out materials on reading will not train teachers working in the classroom. I would like to see a series of trainings, with hands-on activities, presented to small groups. We now have some knowledge that could help them [teachers]. I'd also like to see a series of workshops set up in the areas using the same format as we had, small groups and several hours of training.

I think the state should support this kind of research as much as possible. The “bang for the buck” resulting from this kind of activity is well worth the investment. As a result of this research, programs and teaching staff get direct feedback on the success of their educational activities—the kind of feedback that can carry over from program to program and raise the level of effectiveness for programs across the state. The Minnesota state staff can ask programs to do better, but without this kind of specific information it's hard to for programs to respond to that request. At a certain point, student achievement gains documented by better record keeping and added testing will reach their maximum. After that, the only way for the programs to be more successful will be by including research proven educational methods.

*I firmly believe this has been an invaluable experience – it has (and will continue to) change the way I teach **and** coordinate/organize the ELL department for which I am responsible. I have read a lot about reading research and have taken reading classes, but it is this experience of systematically applying what I have read to my practice and carefully studying the data which resulted that has truly changed how I approach my work. I would like the state ABE staff at the Department of Education to carefully read this group's research project reports. I would also like them to meet with at least one of the facilitators of this project and review the evaluation reports from all those involved. Then, I would like them to carefully consider the outcomes that were gained from this experience. I think they would clearly see that this was a very worthwhile investment, and this process represents a very innovative, exciting, and, most importantly, effective approach to staff development.*