

# Connecting

# Literacy



# Community

Literacy Specialists:

**Prior Knowledge  
and  
Experience**

Research Report:

*Literacy Specialists:  
Prior Knowledge and Experience*

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Developed 06 2003  
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ISBN: 1-894783-08-5

This publication was produced in a partnership between Bow Valley College and the National Literacy Secretariat, Government of Canada.

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## SUMMARY

The role of the literacy specialist was created for the Connecting Literacy to Community Project (CLC), a community development project in three Calgary communities and three rural Alberta communities to build community capacity in the area of adult literacy. Literacy specialists provided literacy awareness and assisted with improving outreach and access to learners in the six communities.

As the position of literacy specialist is without precedent, the focus of the research during phase two (September 2002 – June 2003) of the CLC project explored skills and competencies, and prior knowledge and experience utilized by the literacy specialists. This report presents prior knowledge and experience of four literacy specialists of the CLC project in phase two. This research will complement the other component which explored skills and competencies utilized in the role of literacy specialist (see *Literacy Specialists: Competencies and Practices*). The purpose of the research was to achieve one of the key project objectives: “To examine the role of the literacy specialist by conducting research with the literacy specialists about how they do their jobs.”

Inquiry into prior knowledge and experience occurred over a 10-month period, and comprised of four parts, a literature review, individual interviews, one focus group, and observations of conversations among the literacy specialists and project team members. From the many conversations among the literacy specialists, ideas were tried and tested in the six different communities. One literacy specialist who used a research-in-practice approach did the research.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Horseman, J. and Norton, M. (1999) *A Framework to Encourage and Support Practitioner Involvement in Adult Literacy Research in Practice*. Alberta. The Learning Centre Literacy Association.

The results of the research indicate that prior knowledge and experience is extremely important in doing literacy specialist work. All four literacy specialists brought substantial knowledge and experience to this role, including work experience, formal education, professional development, and volunteer experience. Furthermore, it is evident that personal values about literacy and commitment to one's community also influences how one fulfills the role of literacy specialist. This research can inform similar future projects as well the development of a training program for community development in adult literacy.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to thank Carmyn Block, Karen Appleby and Rebecca Still for their participation in this research. These three literacy specialists offered valuable time from their very busy schedules to prepare and participate in the interviews and focus group. I would also like to express appreciation to Robin Houston-Knopff for asking very helpful questions throughout the research, and for taking notes during the focus group. Finally, I would like to thank Bill Holbrow for his support and consideration of the importance of learning about the literacy specialist role.

# **1. Statement of Purpose**

## **1.1 Background**

During phase one (September 2001 – June 2002) literacy specialists were active in their communities in various capacities. This involved: conducting an assets and needs assessment; providing workshops to agencies and businesses on literacy sensitivity and plain language; providing literacy programs and activities to agency clients; assisting agencies and businesses in making changes in their services to reduce literacy barriers; and actively promoting the CLC project at interagency meetings and community events.

During this first phase of the project literacy specialists, project coordinator and researcher had a number of conversations about what was involved in fulfilling the literacy specialist's role. One of the key questions that arose from these conversations was: What prior knowledge and experience contributes to carrying out the responsibilities and duties of a literacy specialist? (See Appendix 1: Literacy Specialist Job Description and Qualifications). As this role was new and without a model to guide it, the team decided that during phase two the role of the literacy specialist would be researched.

## **1.2 Purpose of the Research**

The purpose of this research was to achieve one of the key project objectives: “ To examine the role of the literacy specialist by conducting research with the literacy specialists about how they do their jobs.” Inquiry about prior knowledge and experience will complement the other research component which explored skills and competencies utilized in the role of literacy specialist (see Literacy Specialists: Competencies and Practices).

## **2. Research Methodology**

### **2.1 Format of the Research**

The research consisted of four parts. Part one was a literature review of documents relevant to literacy specialist qualifications and responsibilities and literacy community development work. In the second part literacy specialists participated in individual phone interviews, which focused on what each one brought to the position. In the third part literacy specialists participated in a focus group where they shared what they learned while in the position. Part four involved observation notes from conversations at the three team meetings during phase two as well as other conversations via telephone and emails.

While this research was conducted in phase two of the CLC project, the literacy specialists spoke about the work they did in both phase one and two. Along with looking at prior knowledge and experience, literacy specialists talked at length about what they have learned while in this role.

### **2.2 Data Collection**

The literature review included reports and manuals on literacy practitioner's qualifications and responsibilities, and on literacy community development initiatives. Documents were gathered over a 10-month period and were used both as data for this research and as a reference for the CLC project in general.

Literacy specialists participated in individual phone interviews in October 2002 (see Appendix 3: Summary of Interviews). Each interview was approximately 45 minutes. The literacy specialists were given 10 questions about one week prior to the interview and encouraged to prepare by reflecting on each question (see Appendix 2: Interview Questions). As the researcher was also a literacy specialist, I answered the interview questions in writing using a self-reflection approach prior to interviewing the other three specialists.

In May 2003 the literacy specialists participated in a focus group (see Appendix 5: Summary of Focus Group). The researcher facilitated the focus group as well as contributed to the discussions in response to the six questions (see Appendix 4: Focus Group Questions). The CLC project coordinator took notes during the focus group.

Between September 2002 and June 2003 the researcher took notes on conversations between literacy specialists, including face-to-face (team meetings), phone calls, and email. In addition to these, the team worked together to develop and deliver a presentation at the provincial literacy conference, plus develop and facilitate a workshop for advanced training for literacy coordinators in Alberta. These two events provided opportunities for further conversations about the role of the literacy specialist.

### **2.3 Data Analysis**

This section is organized under the following headings:

- What you bring to the role of literacy specialist
- What you need to do literacy specialist work
- What is unique about literacy specialist work
- Some outcomes from literacy specialist work

#### **What you bring to the role of literacy specialist**

Based on the data, prior knowledge and experience is extremely important to be able to do literacy specialist work. All of the literacy specialists brought substantial experience and knowledge to this position, including:

- Post secondary education in education, social work, and community rehabilitation
- Minimum of 10 years experience in community services in the fields of literacy, social work, education, and disabilities
- Program development and coordination/management
- Rich volunteer history in a variety of community activities that related to family, career, and personal interests
- Strong professional development experience, as learner and facilitator
- Clear values about literacy, literacy work, and community
- Knowledge of the communities they worked in

Two literacy specialists were adult literacy program coordinators, the third was a social worker, and the fourth a community educator. The latter two noted that they did not have a literacy background, but did have experience in community development; while the first two had many years experience in the literacy field but felt they had little community development experience. Each specialist stated that the knowledge and skills acquired from their work experience and professional development was what they relied upon to fulfill this role.

All of the literacy specialists had extensive work experience at the community level in government services and non-profit organizations, some of which was within the literacy field and some in the broader community services field. They identified the following skills that they had transferred to the literacy specialist role: organizational, communication, interpersonal, and administrative. Along with a strong history of community based work, the literacy specialists also possessed considerable professional development experience, some of which included literacy coordinator training, volunteer management courses, partnership building workshops, research in practice projects, courses on marginalized populations, literacy, and community development. Two literacy specialists had developed and facilitated professional development workshops in their field.

In regards to the communities the literacy specialists worked in, they emphasized the importance of knowing and being committed to the community. This was identified as the most helpful attribute literacy specialists brought to the role. Implicit in this knowledge and sense of commitment was their understanding of the lack of awareness about adult literacy among community services.

Another attribute literacy specialists brought to the role were their values about literacy and literacy work. All four spoke passionately about the importance of literacy in people's lives. They stated that they believe

literacy is about empowerment, freedom, and communication. All four specialists expressed a sense of appreciation to be in a position to help individuals and organizations make positive changes. They stated that their personal values about literacy are inherent in their prior knowledge and experience.

### **What you need to do literacy specialist work**

This section presents data from questions and comments about literacy specialist training, qualifications and responsibilities, and support. The literacy specialists spoke more about qualifications, training, and support. Comments about literacy specialist responsibilities focused more on how to do the work rather than the tasks of the work. To carry out the responsibilities of the literacy specialists, all four stated the importance of flexibility and a willingness to try new things.

Regarding qualifications, the specialists identified the following skills as necessary:

- Organizational: the ability to prioritize, time manage, and work independently
- Communication: the ability to listen and respond, and to present/share relevant information
- Interpersonal: the ability to develop and attend to relationships, to build, maintain and end partnerships, and to plan and support sustainability efforts
- Administrative: the ability to create and manage written records and reports
- Analytical: the ability to problem solve, to respond to community literacy needs in a holistic way, and to link larger literacy issues and information with local and immediate literacy needs
- Facilitation: the ability to assist organizations, individuals and groups to make positive literacy changes in their lives and/or work

The specialists strongly felt that a number of years experience in literacy work and knowledge of literacy issues and barriers people face everyday was very important. They emphasized that community development experience and partnership work with community-based organizations in the non-profit sector was essential, along with a commitment to the community

and knowledge of its characteristics. All agreed that relevant post-secondary education was also a requirement.

All four literacy specialists noted that training in the above skills and competencies would be crucial for similar projects in the future. As the CLC project was a demonstration project and without precedent, each specialist identified things they could have improved upon with training at the outset of the project.

At the focus group near the end of the project, the literacy specialists shared their thoughts about the significance of support to do this type of literacy work. Comments were made about how each one had learned from the others, which in turn helped them try new things in their own community. Peer support helps with knowing that others may be questioning how they are doing their work. Peer support encourages people to try things and talk about challenges of doing this work. All four spoke about the importance of learning to trust the process. They stated that it is vital to be able to connect with others and/or to have a mentor who is doing the same work. They also stated that it is important to acknowledge that this work is experimental.

### **What is unique about literacy specialist work**

Distinct to the literacy specialist role is the community development approach to every aspect of literacy specialist work for the purpose of community capacity building. The specialists worked with a wide variety of community services such as community associations, youth outreach programs, women's shelters, employment services, government benefits programs, homeless shelters and services, addictions programs, private businesses – large and small, aboriginal programs, recreational programs, housing services, seniors services, health services, plus inter-agency committees and groups. Specialists worked with executive directors, managers, business owners, front line staff, volunteers, and clients. They responded to requests and initiated activities that ranged from conducting

audits with large organizations to facilitating weekly study circles for aboriginal youth with limited literacy who wanted to get their driver's license. The unique community development approach used by the specialists positioned them as a free resource for individuals, groups, organizations, and businesses. This included specialist's services such as learner referral, facilitation of learner activities and initiatives, and education/professional development for agency staff, volunteers, and businesses. They linked people with agencies as well as agencies with each other for the purpose of improving accessibility to all community services people use everyday.

The literacy specialists identified that their contribution to community capacity building was premised on the idea that literacy should not be a barrier when people try to access information and services that will help them with their everyday lives. One specialist said, "I think beyond the literacy coordinator (adult tutoring) program and ask myself how can I help my community be more literate?"

### **Some outcomes from doing literacy specialist work**

At the beginning of the CLC project all four literacy specialists felt that they were lacking some skills and knowledge. At the end of the project all four expressed that they have learned a remarkable amount about literacy, community development, partnerships, community capacity building, and their own skills and abilities. Each stated how this learning has changed the way they work:

"It has increased my confidence in how to do this work and expanded my comfort zone"

"I value partnerships more, good working relationships are very important"

"I can identify many more opportunities to promote literacy"

"It has strengthened my commitment to the community as a whole"

The literacy specialists also identified skills that they developed and strengthened in this role, some of which were: how to develop and maintain relationships, from cold calls to partnerships; organizational skills and being flexible; ability to adapt to different agencies; and presentation skills.

The literacy specialist stated they learned a lot about community development, particularly partnerships and sustainability. They agreed that community development involves an awareness of the community and how it works, and with a sense of responsibility it is important to actively participate in initiatives that are for the good of the community. They stated that partnerships are about forming defined relationships to do specific work where all partners benefit and the outcome is positive for the community. Partnerships exist within the context of community development. Sustainability of literacy specialist work was noted as challenging, as it involved a giving away of information and resources, a letting go, to some degree, of our specialty. As one specialist stated, “It is important to know that you don’t own this work, it is crucial to give away a lot of our stuff (resources, information, how-to things) for sustainability to occur.” Finally, the literacy specialists stated that they gained a deeper understanding of how literacy exists in people’s everyday lives, and how the community as a whole has a responsibility to participate in reducing literacy barriers.

The literacy specialists shared some achievements of their work, which met one of the key outcomes of the CLC project, “to improve client services”. Each specialist offered an example of success:

- A government employment service communicated more clearly with their clients after learning about literacy issues
- A service for individuals with mental health issues presented their brochure that they revised in plain language at an interagency meeting
- A business development organization received feedback from clients that their forms, which were revised in plain language, were easier to read

- A subsidized housing organization changed their complaints/grievance policy from having to be submitted in writing to being accepted verbally

### **3. Discussions and Recommendations**

The majority of the data came from the voices of the literacy specialists. There is little documentation or research on this particular way of doing literacy community development work. The answer to the question, what prior knowledge and experience helps with doing this multitude of work is not a simple one. What is clear from the data is that having sound knowledge and experience in community services and adult literacy, and a life long learning approach is essential to successfully fulfill the role of literacy specialist. It is also clear that knowing one's values and how they connect to the work is important. In addition to prior knowledge and experience the literacy specialists regularly spoke about four key competencies that are necessary to be able to do this work:

- Flexibility and willingness to learn and try new things
- Knowledge of and commitment to community as a whole
- Ability to develop and effectively participate in relationships within a community development and community capacity building framework (informal or formal partnerships, involvement in interagency work, supporting sustainability)
- Ability to work independently

The CLC project successfully demonstrated that the role of the literacy specialist offers another way for community based literacy work to occur. This role is that of a catalyst, with a spirit of positive change the literacy specialist brings together workers, agencies, and clients/learners to improve accessibility to services for adults with limited literacy. It is evident from the success of this demonstration project that learning while doing the work, in the context of one's community, is vital to its effectiveness.

Based on analysis of the data the following is recommended to further develop the literacy specialist role:

1. Develop a training program for this type of literacy work that is applicable to a variety of community workers, including but not exclusive to literacy practitioners, social workers, community development workers, health care workers, and librarians.
2. Secure funding to support literacy practitioners and other community workers to be able to access such a training program.
3. Design the training program to be based on experiential learning, using research-in-practice approach and linking theory to practice from the ground up.
4. In the training program incorporate activities that link prior experience and knowledge with literacy specialist competencies.
5. Strengthen the support system for literacy specialists; consider using a peer-based model.
6. Initiate dialogues in the literacy field that explore the relationship between adult literacy and concepts of healthy communities.
7. Encourage inquiry into aspects of life long learning, particularly as it relates to literacy in everyday life.
8. Engage literacy specialists from the CLC project to follow up with communities to identify longer-term outcomes and indicators of change.
9. Further research is needed on community development adult literacy work in Canada and internationally.

### **Literacy Specialist**

#### **Job Qualifications:**

- Education and training in Adult Literacy.
- Strong background in community work with a proven ability to work with individuals, community groups, and businesses.
- Creative approach to resource utilization within community.
- Organized and systematic re: records, able to be self-directed, able to report work in an organized systematic fashion.
- Word processing and basic computer skills

#### **Job Description:**

- Assess the community's literacy needs by contacting groups, services, agencies, and businesses.
- Develop and carry out a workplan for the period November 2001 – May 2002.
- Develop and carry out a workplan for the period September 2002 – May 2003
- Participate in team meetings and professional development.
- Report results to project coordinator and research/writer.

**Research on the Role of the Literacy Specialist**  
**Perceptions and Background Knowledge**

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**Interview Questions**

**October, 2002**

1. What do you value about literacy?
2. What do you value about literacy work?
3. What experience do you bring to the role of Literacy Specialist (please include professional and personal)?
4. From your experience as a Literacy Specialist during this past year, what do you feel are the responsibilities and qualifications for this position?
5. What is your understanding about community development and partnership work?
6. From your perspective, what are the differences and similarities between a Literacy Coordinator and a Literacy Specialist?
7. What formal education do you have, and what (if any) areas of your formal education is applicable to your role as a Literacy Specialist?
8. What type of volunteer work (if any) have you done that you have found to be helpful to your work as a Literacy Specialist? Please explain.
9. Please list any professional development and/or training that has helped you as a Literacy Specialist, please explain how it is helpful.
10. What type of training do you think a Literacy Specialist should have?

## Summary of Interviews – October 2002

### Role of the Literacy Specialist Research Project

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#### **Prior experience and education** (including volunteer and PD)

- 12 years of experience in literacy field
- 10 years experience in community services
- 16 years experience in rehabilitation field
- Post secondary education in social work, education and rehabilitation
- Community development knowledge and experience
- Strong people skills: with barriered individuals/learners, individually and groups; working with the public and presentations
- Strong organizational skills, can work independently
- Developed community based programs
- Knowledge of community services
- Strong volunteer history: church events, children's recreation/interests, Special Olympics, women's issues events, youth conferences, and tutoring
- Ongoing professional development: LCA training, partnership training, research in practice, train the trainer, coursework on barriered clients, volunteer management, and reading on community development

#### **Values about literacy and literacy work**

- Literacy is empowering; offers opportunities in every part of your life
- Literacy is very important, it relates to everything we do
- Joyful to experience and share the skill of reading
- Relationships: helping people and organizations make positive changes
- Being part of change

#### **Differences and similarities between Literacy Coordinator and Literacy Specialist**

- Both work independently, take initiative and try new things
- Both require strong people skills
- Similar types of assessment: don't know what agency or student needs are until you talk with them, and then be flexible enough to respond to those needs
- Both build partnerships
- Literacy coordinators primarily focus on the individual, and the literacy specialist primarily focuses on the community as a whole.
- Literacy coordinators develop and manage programs; they need to know about resources to help tutors and students.

- Literacy specialists assist organizations/services to reduce literacy barriers and they need to know a wide range of resources to help organizations do this.

### **Community Development and Partnerships**

- CD involves an awareness of the community and how it works; having a sense of responsibility for the good of the community; community based, grass roots.
- Partnership is forming relationships to do specific work where all partners benefit and the outcome is positive for the community; partnerships work well when they are well defined and need to occur within the context of CD.

### **Training, qualifications, and responsibilities of Literacy Specialist**

- A number of years experience in literacy work
- Knowledge of literacy issues and those barriers people face everyday
- Experience with community development and partnership work; knowing how to build, maintain, and evaluate partnerships
- Have a commitment to the community
- Able to work independently, be flexible, and creative
- Ability to research and share current and relevant resources/information with the community
- Communication, presentation, facilitation, organizational, and administrative skills
- Relevant post-secondary education

## The Role of the Literacy Specialist - Research

### Focus Group Questions

May 2003

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#### Learning from the Literacy Specialist role

1. How has this role changed the way you work (in general)?
2. After looking at the competencies that we identified as the ones we use most frequently as literacy specialists, which ones do you feel most skilled in? Why?
3. As a literacy specialist what have you learned about:
  - a. Community development
  - b. Partnerships
  - c. Literacy programs/work
4. One important outcome of the CLCP is to improve client services, where people with limited literacy skills will be better able to access information and services, and agencies will be better able to serve clients with limited literacy skills. Please share two examples of how your role as literacy specialist has achieved this? (Year one and two).

#### Prior knowledge and experience

1. What prior (to the project) experience and/or knowledge has been the **most helpful** to you in fulfilling the role of literacy specialist? Why?
2. From your experience as a literacy specialist, and the identified competencies, are there any additional responsibilities and qualifications for this position?

## The Role of the Literacy Specialist - Research

### Focus Group Summary

May 22, 2003

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#### Learning from the Literacy Specialist role

##### Changes the way you work (in general)?

- Increased confidence in how to do this work, expanded comfort zone.
- Increased awareness of the importance of partnerships and sustainability.
- Increased recognition of literacy work and request for assistance by others.
- Able to identify opportunities to promote literacy; learned that literacy really does spread across everything.
- Able to transfer learning to other work.
- Strengthened commitment to my community as a whole.
- Increasingly I find people are coming and asking me more about literacy and how I can help.

##### Competencies you feel most skilled in

- How to develop and maintain relationships: from cold calls to partnerships
- Organizational skills
- Flexible, able to adapt
- Analytical skills – link between local literacy needs and global literacy issues – key to community development
- Presentation skills

##### Learned about community development

- Communicate understanding about CD so you can be on the same page...or at least read each other's pages.
- Important to be committed to the community.
- Stronger sense of what CD is: awareness of the community and how it works, and working for the good of the community.
- Know now how to spark interest in literacy, know how to show linkages between literacy and community services.
- Seeing the community more as a whole, people have a right to live well in their community.

### **Learned about partnerships**

- Flexible, all are different they can be informal, loose and casual.
- Be aware of what they want, involves a lot of listening.
- Know how to form good partnerships; with those that want to participate, timelines are important.
- Partnerships in this project are easier than some of the others I have had, they are not driven by an agenda of a funder, or agency where the self-interest can override the partnerships.

### **Learned about literacy programs/work**

- Literacy is very broad, and it is ongoing. Have a broader idea of who the literacy learners are. It makes me think that literacy is the last 'closeted social issue'. I think it is a huge social/classist issue.
- Surprised at how low it is on some people's agenda. Surprised that people didn't think there was a need for literacy in everyday life. I am sometimes frustrated that other literacy coordinators don't want to take this work on, it is a natural extension of work in the community. Practitioners may not value their work enough to expand it into the community. Literacy may have been boxed in by literacy policies by Alberta Learning.
- The project has expanded who I could provide service to, I know there is a need for this work to bring literacy to the community (wide) level. Literacy Alberta has a big role in advocating for literacy at the community level. We have learned something from this project that we can take back to literacy programs. I think beyond the LC program and ask myself how can I help my community be more literate?

### **Examples of literacy specialist work that helped organizations to improve client services**

- I spent an afternoon making an impact with the staff in a government employment service. They hadn't considered literacy in their work, now they tell me that they are treating their clients in a more 'literacy friendly way'.
- Plain Language workshop with an agency that works with people with mental health needs, the person changed the print material and showed the results at an interagency.
- The business development organization has made big changes in forms –plain language and the clients really benefit.
- An urban subsidized housing organization changed their complaints/grievance policy from written to verbal.

## **Prior knowledge and experience**

### **Most helpful prior experience and/or knowledge in fulfilling the role of literacy specialist.**

- Knowledge of literacy (x2) and being identified with literacy by other service providers (x2)
- Knowledge of the community
- Knowledge of the depth of the assumption that literacy is not an issue – and this knowledge can help with the ‘literacy key’

### **Additional responsibilities and qualifications**

- Willingness to be a risk-taker, go beyond your comfort zone, and confidence in our own abilities.
- Peer support for this concept of LS, exchanging ideas, and how to use them in other communities. Every time we have a team meeting I go away thinking how I can use all the great ideas and things you are doing in the other communities. Need mentor, a place to share and exchange ideas. Connect with others who are doing the same work, sharing ideas.
- Important to acknowledge that this work is experimental, it is new, and that the peer support helps with knowing that others may be questioning how they are doing their work as well, sharing this willingness to try things, talk about the difficulties, and trust the process.
- Creative – in how we apply things to fit our own communities. The process doesn’t look the same in each community.
- Parallel with literacy learners - Initiate change because you don’t fear.
- Knowing that you don’t own this work, actually crucial to this work is giving away a lot for sustainability, it is hard for this process to end.

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