

Title: unclear (report of research project 1991, 1992 on "What happens when some women in a literacy program decide to do something they consider woman-positive?")

Organization: Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CLOW)
Publication information: and funded by the National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources Development

This entry is a description of the research project and its findings.

Do you want to know what happens when some women from 12 very different literacy programs decide to do something woman-positive?

Women across Canada participated in an unprecedented research project during 1991 and 1992. Two women from each of twelve adult literacy and basic education programs asked themselves, "What happens when some women in a literacy program decide to do something they consider woman-positive?" The results were surprising and often far-reaching.

The research--sponsored by the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CLOW) and funded by the National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources Development - - started from women's everyday experience in adult literacy programs. From the exploratory research for this project, we already knew that women face barriers when they attempt to participate in literacy education. Most programs do not meet the needs of women; particularly women marginalized by poverty, race, rural location, relationship to children, disabilities, immigration status, sexual orientation, and source of income. Different women in different programs at different times have tried to do literacy work in ways that are positive for women. Sometimes these attempts have worked and sometimes they haven't, but nowhere was there a description or analysis of why things happened the way they did. We also knew that women face resistance when they engage in woman-positive activities, activities designed specifically for women.

This research project started from the insights gained in the exploratory phase and built on the knowledge brought by the thirty-two women who became involved. With the support and resources of a national research project and other women from across the country, they planned and implemented woman-positive activities in their programs. Over a twelve-month period they observed, discussed, and interpreted the personal, professional, political, and structural consequences of these activities. They reflected on individual and group dynamics within their own lives, their workplaces, and their communities. They interpreted both the different forms of resistance they encountered and the positive changes in program policies they facilitated. They developed a collaborative analysis and series of recommendations based on these observations, discussions, reflections, and interpretations. And they documented every step of the way.

This research project did not set out to increase students' reading or writing levels or to improve their grade standings--although those things happened. It did not set out to empower women in literacy--although that happened. It did not set out to encourage feminist analysis-- although that happened. It did not even set out to help programs become more woman-positive--although that also happened.

Instead, this research focused on what actually happened when a group of women looked at how adult literacy and basic education programs across Canada fail to pay

attention to the realities of women's lives. In the process they engaged in effective literacy work, empowered many women (including themselves), challenged and affirmed feminist analyses, and helped a wide variety of programs become more woman-positive. Together, this group of women have documented their work so that those involved in adult literacy, non-profit agencies, education institutions, coalitions, and policy development can pay attention to the lives of women and other marginalized groups.

There is a distinct and different context for each of the twelve programs in this research. They provide services in large urban centres and in the urban/rural mix of prairie and northern towns and cities. They are on the east and west coasts, on the Hudson Bay, and Lake Ontario. Four programs are located in community colleges, a fifth is based in a federation of labour, a sixth in a prison. The remaining six community-based programs operate in a range of locations; on the street, in storefronts, in public housing, in a Native friendship centre, and in a community centre.

These programs have a variety of mandates and organizational structures. Some of the programs included women-only groups. Others had never before considered working with women as a particular student group. The students in these programs ranged from those involved in basic literacy to those preparing to write their high school equivalency exams. Their involvement in the decision-making processes of their programs varied widely.

The women who acted as researchers also varied. With two early exceptions, they all worked as staff or volunteers in their programs. Several had been learners in those or other programs before becoming staff. They ranged in age from 23 to 56, in academic background from less than grade 12 to postgraduate degrees, and in experience from one to twenty years.

The research process

In November of 1991 women from each of the twelve adult literacy and basic education programs met at a retreat centre north of Winnipeg to learn about research and begin planning their involvement in this research project. Over the eighteen months of this phase of the research thirty-two women participated in some way. In most cases, two women became the on-site researchers for their program. They shared responsibility for planning and reflecting on a woman-positive activity for their program. In several programs, one woman took primary responsibility for implementing and documenting the activity and its effects on the program. The other woman acted as a support for her co-worker, attending the three national workshops and participating in two interviews. Francis Ennis joined Betty-Ann as a coordinating researcher after the first national workshop.

CLOW paid the two contact women from each program a total of one-half day a week to "research" their woman-positive activity and its consequences for staff, students, and the program as a whole. They spent that time reflecting alone and with others, writing journals they sent to the coordinating researchers, and developing documentation of their work. The personal, professional, political, and structural changes that happened over this year demonstrate the positive effects of providing adult literacy workers--perhaps any frontline workers--with time, support and resources to reflect critically and creatively on their practice and the practice of others on their field.

These women spent twelve months initiating, observing, and documenting the impact of the woman-positive activity chosen for their program. During that year, they were visited twice by Betty-Ann or Frances. During these visits, they took part in two in-depth interviews designed to encourage interpretation and analysis of what was happening with themselves, with other staff, and with students.

The contact women from each program also attended two additional workshops. At the second workshop, held in Mississauga in April 1992, the women raised many of the issues that had arisen in their programs over the last six months and discussed different ways of documenting their activity. The final workshop took place in November 1992 in Ottawa. At this workshop women developed a collaborative analysis of their experiences and put together recommendations for programs, policy-makers, and funders. The recommendations form a vision of a woman-positive future in adult literacy.

This research was ground-breaking in a variety of ways

This research did not set out to prove any hypothesis. The women involved did not initiate their activities to prove a particular point. They simply wanted to do something that they thought would be positive for some of the women in their programs. They wanted to use this research opportunity to improve the programs in which they worked. They also wanted to share their experience with others by analyzing what happened on several levels. They explored the personal, professional, political, and structural consequences of their activities. They participated in research that was ground-breaking in a variety of ways.

- * The research made visible women's experiences in a variety of literacy programs in different parts of Canada. It raised questions about how women's lives and needs are or are not taken into account in these programs. It demonstrated how funding policies contribute to the ways in which programs ignore the reality of women's lives.

- * The research emphasized the difficulties faced by those who ask for attention to be paid to members of marginalized groups. Several women confronted personal and professional risks in starting their woman-positive activities. Others had to deal with ignorance, ongoing passive resistance, and persistent apathy. The research gave women the support to continue despite these obstacles.
- * The research allowed some literacy workers time to reflect on their work, to find support from others, and to analyze their common and diverse experiences. It provided extraordinary professional development.
- * The research highlighted the lack of information about literacy workers in Canada. Although we know that most adult literacy workers are women, we became increasingly curious about how that fact related to the lack of funding and status for literacy. The research helped the women involved become more aware of their need to take care of themselves.
- * The research design and methodology provides a model for program-based action research that begins with frontline workers' living experiences, involves them in collecting data, analyzing information, and developing solutions to identified problems.

(Lloyd with Ennis & Atkinson (Eds.), 1994, pp. XX-XX; Lloyd with Ennis Atkinson, 1994, pp. XX-XX)

[BACK](#)