

## **PROJECT TITLE**

### **From the Ground Up: A Research-in-Practice Approach to Outcome-Oriented Program Evaluation**

**A project of RiPAL-BC in partnership with Literacy BC**

## **PROJECT SUMMARY**

Over the last few years, there has been an increasing emphasis on accountability and results in the public sector. The literacy field, too, is affected; literacy programs need to be able to demonstrate their success in terms of the changes they bring about. The current system of evaluation for community-based literacy programs funded by the British Columbia Adult Literacy Cost-Shared Program (ALCSP) focuses on best practices as indicators of success, but it offers relatively little information on the impact a given program has on participants' lives at home, at work and/or in the broader community. There is a need to develop a new system of evaluation that assesses the outcomes of literacy education offered through these programs.

The goal of this project is to meet this need. It seeks, through a research-in-practice approach, to produce a system of outcome-oriented evaluation of ALCSP programs that is (1) useful to practitioners and learners as well as funders and policy-makers; (2) flexible enough to accommodate the diversity among literacy programs funded by ALCSP; and (3) rigorous in its approach to outcomes assessment.

The three-year project will employ a research-in-practice approach to facilitate

- dialogue among stakeholders about definitions of literacy and desired program outcomes;
- a review of evaluation tools and processes used in the literacy field as well as other related areas;
- the development, based on this review, of an array of outcome-oriented evaluation processes and tools through pilot projects (each pilot project will develop one tool);
- broad-based testing and revision of the tools (facilitated by the practitioners from the pilot projects); and
- the production of an evaluation "toolkit" (each ALCSP-funded program chooses the tool from this "kit" that best fits its scope).

RiPAL-BC will direct the project. RiPAL-BC works in partnership with Literacy BC and various other literacy organizations across the province to support and promote research in practice in BC. Other stakeholders in the project are representatives of the Ministry of Advanced Education, practitioners (instructors, managers and administrators) working in ALCSP-funded literacy programs, and the regional literacy coordinators. Learners are also an important stakeholder group, and one of the guiding principles of the project is the inclusion of learners at the program level.

## **RATIONALE**

### The call for outcomes

The current widespread preoccupation with accountability is leading to a focus on "results" in the public sector, including the literacy field. A range of literacy stakeholders – practitioners, administrators, policy-makers, and funders, among others – want to know that literacy programs are leading to worthwhile change and that money used to fund these programs is well-spent. But how to assess this change? If we wish to gauge the changes that occur as a result of literacy programming, there are three levels at which we can measure outcomes:

**1. Assessment of individual learners is the first level. Here we can** measure academic outcomes like a learner's grade level attainment or his/her performance on standardized tests, as well as non-academic outcomes like increased community participation, for example.

**2. Evaluation of individual programs is the second level.** What gets measured here depends on the goals of the program Data can be collected through the aggregation of learner assessment data, as well as through close observation of program activities, for example.

**3. Macro analysis of program effectiveness is the third level. Here the focus is on how all programs together represent a return on investment and how the outcomes of the programs collectively might inform practice and policy.** Macro analysis also occurs at various levels and contexts, for example, by analyzing family literacy programs, or programs serving First Nations people.

Each level is an essential ingredient in a thorough and rigorous accountability system and each level informs the others. The current proposal focuses on Level 2, individual program evaluation.

In British Columbia, all groups that receive Adult Literacy Cost-Shared Program (ALCSP) funding for program delivery are expected to conduct ongoing evaluations. The current evaluation tools focus on best practices as indicators of program quality as expressed in the *Adult Literacy Volunteer Tutor Program Evaluation Kit* (Audrey Thomas, 1989) and, for family literacy programs, *The BC Framework of Statements and Standards of Best Practices in Family Literacy* (Literacy BC, 1999). These tools, while they offer rich descriptions of the programs, do not really focus on gauging change, however. At a meeting in Vancouver in February 2005, the regional literacy managers and a representative of the Ministry of Advanced Education (AVED) expressed dissatisfaction about the current evaluation system based on these tools. They identified a need to develop a new system, one that shifts the focus from best practices to program outcomes, and they agreed that the best way to develop such a system is to bring the different parties concerned into dialogue.

#### Bringing together different views on what and how to evaluate

The various stakeholders all have a legitimate interest in the outcomes of literacy education, but their views on what needs to be evaluated in terms of outcomes and how may differ.

Policy-makers want to see literacy rates among populations shift. They often require large-scale quantitative data across programs that allow them to set broad public policy. Without such data it can be difficult to determine what types of educational programs are needed and where funding should be channeled. The tools used to generate this data usually lend themselves to a view of literacy as a discrete set of skills or competencies that can be measured by performance on standardized tests for reading, writing and math.

Policy-makers' view of literacy may conflict with qualitative (especially ethnographic) research produced over the last twenty years that suggests literacy can be understood as a set of social practices embedded in specific contexts. Practitioners, working at the local level, may be more comfortable with this understanding. Their closer association with learners tends to mean they are attuned to the ways in which

literacy learning is interwoven with learners' lives. For them, it is important also to account for the influences of personal circumstances on learners' interest and ability to participate in literacy programs and to acknowledge that programs benefit learners in ways that are rarely measured through quantitative means. Two excellent examples of research-in-practice studies that reflect these concerns are *Literacy for Women on the Streets* (Alderson and Twiss, 2003) and *Naming the Magic: Non-Academic Outcomes in Basic Literacy* (Battell, 2001).

The apparent gap between the needs of broad-based policy and local practice needs to be addressed. In a recent article, Brian Street, one of the first researchers to articulate a theory of literacy-as-social-practice, is sympathetic to "the needs of scale" faced by policy-makers.

The more ... ethnographers explain the "complexity" of literacy practices, the more policy makers find it impossible to design programs that can take account of all that complexity. ... The more ethnographers focus on specific local contexts, the harder does it seem to "upscale" their projects to take account of the large numbers of people seen to be in need. (2003, p. 8)

Clearly, the "ethnographic" data yielded by close observation of the complex connections between literacy and learners' lives provides practitioners with important insights into their work and a way of documenting the changes it brings about. But such data are not always compatible with the needs of policy-makers. So how might the apparently conflicting requirements of policy-makers and practitioners around outcome-based evaluation be reconciled? And how might the requirements of other stakeholders be taken into account—for we need to remember that there are others (most importantly, learners) who are concerned with the outcomes of literacy programming.

For an evaluation to be effective, stakeholders must agree on what is being evaluated and value the achievement of a diversity of program outcomes. The current proposal seeks to answer these needs by bringing various stakeholders together and using a research-in-practice approach to the development of a new evaluation process for ALCSP-funded literacy programs.

#### A research-in-practice approach to outcome-oriented evaluation

The research-in-practice movement encourages practitioners to engage with research in a variety of ways (Horsman and Norton, 1999). It opens opportunities for them to critically reflect on existing research and apply findings to practice. It also supports them in conducting research themselves, in systematically creating and sharing knowledge that is anchored in practice. In these ways, research in practice can promote improvements in practice, informs policy, and contributes to learner success.

The research-in-practice approach to the evaluation of program outcomes that is embedded in the current proposal will facilitate, from the ground up, the construction of a new accountability system. The project will take a participatory approach to the development of evaluation processes and tools by

- facilitating dialogue among stakeholders about definitions of literacy and desired program outcomes;
- familiarizing stakeholders, and especially participating practitioners, with current thinking about evaluation and existing tools for gauging program outcomes;

- training and supporting practitioners in the pilot projects to develop their own outcome-oriented evaluation processes and tools in consultation with AVED (each pilot project will develop one tool);
- training and supporting practitioners in the pilot projects to facilitate widespread testing of the processes and tools among ALCSP-funded programs in the second year (practitioners from each pilot site will work with programs in their region); and
- producing a revised toolkit at the end of the second year (each ALCSP-funded program chooses the tool from this “kit” that best fits its scope).

### **WHO IS INVOLVED IN THIS PROJECT?**

**RiPAL-BC** will direct the project. RiPAL-BC began as a grassroots organization of people working in literacy organizations as well as in the university who were committed to the development of research in practice in the BC adult literacy field. It is now a formal organization working in partnership with Literacy BC and various other literacy organizations across the province (see [www.nald.ca/ripal](http://www.nald.ca/ripal) for more information). With our experience and connections with the field, we are well positioned to use a research-in-practice approach to work with practitioners and policy-makers to develop and implement a new system of outcome-oriented program evaluation for community-based literacy organizations. RiPAL-BC will form a steering committee that hires and supervises project staff, and oversees the project to ensure the project goals are achieved. Project staff include a **project manager, evaluation specialist(s), and web developer.**

**Literacy BC** will administer the project. Literacy BC has a history of successfully administering large and complex projects, and of working in collaboration with RiPAL-BC. The role of Literacy BC is to sponsor the grant application, receive and disburse the project funds, prepare financial reports, and provide other administrative services as documented in the partnership agreement.

In order to reflect the diversity among the programs that ALCSP funds, the project will seek the participation of a mix of programs as **five pilot projects** in year one. The pilot projects will include a range of delivery types and one pilot project will be selected in each of five regions (tentatively: Vancouver Island; Lower Mainland/Fraser Valley; Cariboo/Okanagan; East and West Kootenays; North and Northwest). Practitioners from the pilot projects will develop the evaluation tools in year one. In year two, on a regional basis, they will facilitate testing of these tools among all ALCSP-funded programs.

Representatives of the **Ministry of Advanced Education (AVED)** will actively participate in the project in order to ensure that the project develops tools which are useful from the Ministry’s perspective. The Ministry is contributing \$40,000 to the project, reflected as revenue in the budget. A letter of support from Paul Goyan, Director, Private Institutions Branch, is attached.

Practitioners (instructors, managers and administrators) working in **ALCSP-funded literacy programs** will, in year two, each test one of the five draft tools. In order to provide adequate resources for this testing, the Ministry of Advanced Education has agreed that each ALCSP-funded program in 2006-07 insert a line item in their budget in the amount of \$2,000.

The **regional literacy coordinators** will be kept informed about the project and asked to distribute information about the project within their regions. The regional

literacy coordinators will be consulted about the selection of the pilot projects, and the content of the draft and revised toolkits.

**Learners** are also an important stakeholder group and one of the guiding principles of the project is the inclusion of learners at the program level.

### **NEEDS**

This project answers four important needs:

1. The need to achieve consensus about desired outcomes for ALCSP-funded programs.
2. The need for ALCSP-funded literacy programs and AVED to collaborate in the design of new outcome-oriented evaluation tools.
3. The need to provide training and support to programs in developing, testing, and refining such tools.
4. The need to follow up by using the information about outcomes gained from program evaluations so that it will inform future practice and policy.

### **WHO BENEFITS?**

A wide range of stakeholders benefits from the development of a new accountability system for ALCSP-funded literacy programs:

1. Policy-makers and funders receive data that they can use to make effective policy decisions.
2. Practitioners in the five pilot projects gain the capacity to take on a leadership role within their regions regarding the issue of program evaluation for ALCSP-funded programs.
3. All ALCSP-funded programs gain a deeper understanding of the impact of their work; the means to document and communicate that impact; and information that will inform their practice.
4. Policy-makers, funders, and practitioners in ALCSP-funded programs benefit from improved communication and greater collaboration with each other.
5. Practitioners in ALCSP-funded programs gain skills and knowledge in the development and use of program evaluation tools.
6. Other literacy programs in the province, and potentially in the country, gain access to a set of tools which could potentially be adapted to their specific contexts.

Finally, the most important impact of the project is the benefit to learners as a result of long-term improvements to the provision of literacy education in the province of BC.

### **PLAN OF ACTION**

#### **YEAR ONE: SEPTEMBER 2005 TO AUGUST 2006**

#### **TOOLS ADAPTED OR CREATED; DRAFT TOOLKIT PRODUCED**

##### **❖ September 2005**

- disseminate information about the project (manager)
- consult with stakeholders about the selection of the pilot sites (manager)
- develop list of evaluation specialists (manager)

##### ***Outputs***

- *awareness of the project among all ALCSP-funded programs*

- *effective and transparent decisions*
- *consensus among stakeholders regarding the selection criteria for the pilot sites*
- *contract with evaluation specialist(s)*

❖ **October 2005**

- *conduct review of existing evaluation tools (evaluation specialist)*
- *host online forum for all ALCSP-funded programs to obtain their input (thoughts/questions) about evaluation tools/processes (manager/evaluation specialist)*
- *recruit five diverse pilot sites in consultation with stakeholders (manager)*
- *plan and organize consultation/training event for pilot sites and AVED representatives (manager/evaluation specialist).*

***Outputs***

- *inventory of existing evaluation tools and methods*
- *feedback about evaluation tools and processes from ALCSP-funded programs*
- *a well-chosen cohort of practitioners from five programs as pilot projects*
- *purpose and rationale of consultation/training event clarified; agenda agreed upon; important issues identified; preferred formats, venues and dates documented; event logistics, agenda and activities meet participants' expectations*

❖ **November 2005**

- *Conduct consultation/training event (manager/evaluation specialist)*

***Outputs***

- *consensus among stakeholders about definitions of literacy and desired program outcomes*
- *practitioners in pilot projects are trained and equipped to undertake roles now required of them*
- *each practitioner in the pilot projects has a well thought out plan for the development of a unique evaluation tool*

❖ **November 2005 to April 2006**

- *coordinate and support pilot projects electronically and via telephone to develop tools (set up electronic conference on The Hub) (manager/evaluation specialist)*
- *provide necessary support and training to the participants (manager/evaluation specialist)*

***Outputs***

- *forum for problem posing and information sharing among pilot projects, AVED representative(s), manager and evaluation specialist*
- *each pilot project has a tool ready for testing by April 2006*

❖ **December 2005 to February 2006**

- *develop web page for project on RiPAL-BC web site (manager/web page designer)*

***Outputs***

- *focal point for dissemination of information about the project*

❖ **April 2006 to August 2006**

- prepare the tools for testing and create draft toolkit in consultation with AVED (manager/pilot projects/evaluation specialist)
- develop systematic process for testing of toolkit in year 2 in consultation with AVED (manager/pilot projects/evaluation specialist)
- update the web page (manager/web developer)

***Outputs***

- *draft toolkit ready for testing in Year 2*
- *coordinated system of testing ensures all five tools are tested by a variety of programs*
- *key aspects of the testing process in year 2 are identified*
- *updated forum for dissemination of information about the project*

**YEAR TWO ACTIVITIES: SEPTEMBER 2006 TO AUGUST 2007**  
**TOOLS TESTED AND REFINED BY ALL ALCSP-FUNDED PROGRAMS; FINAL TOOLKIT PRODUCED**

❖ **September 2006**

- launch Year Two of project through a variety of dissemination methods including direct contact with all ALCSP-funded programs (pilot projects/manager)
- prepare paper on evaluation principles for discussion on web-based forum (evaluation specialist)
- initiate short web-based conference for ALCSP-funded programs in conjunction with web page (manager)

***Outputs***

- *centralized forum for information and discussion about the project is available to all ALCSP-funded programs*
- *all ALCSP-funded programs ready and able to test one of the five tools in the 2006-07 project year*

❖ **October 2006**

- introduce toolkit and testing process to all ALCSP-funded programs on regional basis (pilot projects/manager)
- provide training workshops on the use and testing of the tools (pilot projects/manager)
- identify method and format for feedback from the testing process (manager)

***Outputs***

- *practitioners in 50 ALCSP-funded programs ready and equipped to each test one tool for a period of six months*
- *feedback process identified*

❖ **October 2006 – April 2007**

- provide ongoing consultation and support to the practitioners in the pilot projects (manager)
- provide ongoing consultation and support to the practitioners in the ALCSP-funded programs in their region (pilot projects)
- update web page (manager/web developer)

***Outputs***

- *stakeholders supported in the process*
- *current information about the project disseminated*

#### ❖ May – August 2007

- compile and report on the feedback about the tools in each region (pilot projects)
- coordinate the feedback for each tool and revise the draft toolkit accordingly (manager/evaluation specialist)
- produce final toolkit in consultation with pilot projects and AVED (manager)

#### **Outputs**

- *a toolkit containing five unique tools that serve a variety of programs, and developed through consensus among project stakeholders, is ready and available for widespread use by ALCSP-funded programs*

### **EVALUATION**

Ongoing evaluation is central to the project. The project manager will regularly document, analyze and share with the Steering Committee the successes and challenges experienced in the project. Information will be gathered by reviewing and analyzing the content of electronic forums, phone calls, and meetings. The Steering Committee will communicate regularly to evaluate the project by comparing activities and accomplishments to plans and objectives and, on that basis, will make decisions to institute changes to procedures where necessary.

Evaluation will include feedback from all stakeholders. In year two interviews will be conducted with the practitioners from the pilot projects and the Ministry of Advanced Education, and a survey will be distributed to all ALCSP-funded programs.

Using information from all these sources, the final report of the project will identify the project objectives, describe activities related to those objectives, and indicate the progress made in the achievement of those objectives.

### **ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

#### **RiPAL-BC Steering Committee**

The RiPAL-BC steering committee directs the project and ensures the project goals are achieved. The responsibility of the steering committee is to:

- select the project manager and direct, oversee, and evaluate the work of the project manager;
- approve the hiring of the evaluation specialist and web page developer;
- select the pilot projects based on recommendations from the project manager and project stakeholders;
- provide consultation and support to the project;
- approve the draft and final evaluation toolkits; and
- approve the final and financial reports.

The Steering Committee meets regularly online, via telephone and in person as required to oversee the project.

#### **Project Manager**

The project manager reports to the steering committee. The role of the project manager is to:

- coordinate project activities;
- ensure the participation of the project stakeholders and facilitate communication and consensus building; and
- provide ongoing support and assistance to the pilot projects.

- direct the work of the evaluation specialist and web page developer;
- prepare the draft and final toolkits in consultation with project stakeholders; and
- disseminate information about the project and the project results and products.

### **Evaluation Specialist**

The evaluation specialist reports to the project manager. The role of the evaluation specialist is to:

- conduct a review of existing evaluation tools, to include an evaluation of these tools and recommendations;
- provide training and consultation to the pilot projects in the development of evaluation tools;
- facilitate communication and consensus building among project stakeholders; and
- provide consultation about key project activities including the design and content of the toolkits.

### **Web Developer**

The web developer will work with the project manager to:

- create a web page for the project that is a focal point for information and discussion
- keep the web page updated throughout the project
- design and format the toolkit for inclusion on the web page and distribution by pdf

### **Literacy BC**

Literacy BC is the administrative agency in the project. Literacy BC will receive an administration fee of 10% of the project funds, for a total of \$23,572 for the following services:

#### **Financial services**

- monthly financial tracking
- preparation of monthly operating statements
- accounts receivable
- accounts payable
- preparation of cash flow projections
- preparation of interim and final financial reports

#### **Administrative services**

- liaison and consultation with the steering committee
- liaison and consultation with the project manager
- preparation and administration of contracts with project staff
- dissemination of information about the project and the findings
- provision of office space, equipment, and resources

### **Pilot Projects**

#### **Year One, September 2005 to May 2006**

The role of each pilot project in year one is to create a unique program evaluation tool, either by adapting an existing tool or creating a new one. To achieve this goal, practitioners in the pilot projects are expected to:

- participate in training about program evaluation

- participate in dialogue with other project stakeholders about definitions of literacy and desired program outcomes
- participate in an online conference with other pilot projects and share ideas and information
- write a description of the tool they produce for inclusion in the toolkit
- contribute to the design and content of the draft toolkit
- participate in decision-making about the process for testing of the tools in year two
- become knowledgeable about all five tools in the toolkit

### **Year Two, September 2006 to May 2007**

The role of each pilot project in year two is to facilitate the testing of the five tools within their region. Practitioners from the pilot projects will be expected to:

- prepare and facilitate workshops to train practitioners in ALCSP-funded programs in their region to use the toolkit
- be available to practitioners in their regions for ongoing consultation and assistance
- compile feedback about the tools in their region and prepare a report for the project manager
- contribute to the design and content of the final toolkit