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RaPAL

Research and Practice in Adult Literacy

**This is edition
reflects upon the
work of the
National Research
and Development
Centre for literacy
and numeracy
(NRDC).**

Autumn 2008

The Research and Practice in Adult Literacy Network

Who we are

RaPAL is an independent national network of learners, teachers, managers and researchers engaged in adult literacies and numeracy. Our support is generated by membership subscription only, and we are therefore completely independent in our views. RaPAL is the only national organisation focusing on the role of literacies in adult life.

What we do

- **campaign** for the rights of adults to have access to the full range of literacies in their lives
- **critique** current policy and practice where it is based on simplistic notions of literacy as skill
- **emphasise** the importance of social context in literacy
- **encourage** collaborative and reflective research
- **believe** in democratic practices in adult literacy
- **create** networks by organising events (including an annual conference) to contribute to national debate
- **publish** a journal three times a year

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Members are involved in the compilation of the journal as reviewers/referees and editors.

We are a friendly group - open to new members and new ideas. Please contact us with any contributions (views, comments, reports and articles) and do not be put off if you are new to the field or if you have not written for a publication before. This Journal is written by and for all learners, tutors and researchers who want to ask questions about this field of work. It does not matter if the questions have been asked before. We want to reflect the many voices within adult literacy and numeracy work and to encourage debate. Why not join in?

Further information can be found at our website: www.rapal.org.uk

The RaPAL Journal expresses a variety of views which do not necessarily reflect those of the editorial group.

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Editorial

In this issue of the RaPAL journal we pause to reflect on the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC). NRDC was set up in 2002 as a consortium by the DfES as part of the Skills for Life strategy. The aim of NRDC is 'to improve teaching practice and inform government policy through the generation of knowledge, by creating a strong research culture and by developing professional practice' (<http://www.nrdc.org.uk> accessed 1.10.08). A range of writers present a range of views of NRDC – overviews, personal experiences and reviews of materials. In looking back at what has happened since the birth of NRDC in 2002, we are also looking forward to the work that still needs to be addressed.

As editors we write from the perspective of practitioners and teacher trainers working in the field of adult basic education. As such our perspective is that of outsiders, but also as one of the audiences addressed by NRDC research and publications. It is through publications and conferences that NRDC has impacted our own work as teacher trainers on specialist courses, offering materials that addressed the paucity of research that dealt specifically with adults learning literacy, language and numeracy. This has culminated in research and practitioner guides that address the key issue for so many trainers and practitioners – what constitutes effective practice in the classroom?

We all work in predominantly rural areas and NRDC has offered us materials that are easily available and often free. If all publications weren't of the same standard and if research briefings varied in quality, at least they were there. For those of us involved in the early literacy subject specialist courses NRDC has gone a long way to filling some of the gaps in the research base for our work that were noted by Moser in *A Fresh Start* in 1999.

This journal has a different structure to our normal journal, as the focus is very much on reflection. The reflections in this edition fall into two areas – an overview of NRDC and a focus on practitioner research.

We begin with a range of insider views of NRDC. We are grateful for the contribution of Ursula Howard, who was the Director from 2003 – 2008. Ursula looks at the context that the NRDC arose in, its achievements and challenges for the future. Greg Brooks gives an alternative and personal reflection. Greg was Director of the Sheffield arm of NRDC from 2002-2007. Taking a personal perspective, Greg identifies achievements and also explores some of the frustrations arising out the work of the consortium. J.D Carpentieri, who works at NRDC, attempts to answer the question posed to him by a teacher at an NRDC event – 'What's the point of all this research?' Helen Casey and John Vorhaus, current joint directors of NRDC, then look forward to the future.

One of the achievements of NRDC has been the sponsorship of practitioner-research, an area close to the heart of RaPAL. Maxine Burton explores the meaning of practitioner-research and its role in major NRDC research projects. She includes the voices of practitioner researchers in her reflection. Paul Davies looks at the process of practitioner research and some of the tensions

that arise from the different viewpoints and goals of practitioners and university researchers. Mary Hamilton takes a critical view of the tensions already identified by other writers, identifying how policy makers impact on research methodology and again highlights frustrations over publication, already noted by Paul Davies. We conclude this section with a report on a piece of practitioner research by Marcin Lewandowski that he was inspired to undertake by his involvement in the *learner persistence* project. It is interesting to note how this uses an experimental methodology, given Mary's comments in her article on practitioner-research. However, our hope as editors is that Marcin's article will inspire you to undertake some research related to your own practice.

Our reviews for this edition focus on NRDC practitioner guides. Bex Ferriday introduces reviews written by recent trainee teachers. The review section is followed by John Leavey's responses to questions that were sent to a number of people when we were developing this journal. We would like to capture more responses to these questions and you can post your thoughts on our listserv - RAPPALLIST@JISMAIL.AC.UK

Alongside our reflections on NRDC we include in this edition a celebration of the life of John Glynn, who many RaPAL members will have met over the years at RaPAL conferences. The story of John's life and his contribution to the Gatehouse Project and Pecket Well College tells another story of adult basic education that celebrates a democratic approach to learning that involves both teachers and learners. It is a story that celebrates learners' voices.

(On a very personal note, my own early experience of adult literacy included a writing weekend as mentioned by Josie Pollentine – Ellayne).

What this journal celebrates then is the work of students, practitioners and researchers. Our commemoration of John Glynn's life celebrates the ground breaking work of students and practitioners at Gatehouse and Pecket Well. It is important as we take time to reflect on NRDC achievements that we don't forget the important work that came before Skills for Life in England. The move to professionalizing the work force would certainly have made it difficult for John to work as a tutor. In reviewing the first six years of NRDC, the writers in this journal acknowledge the tensions between researchers, policy makers and practitioners and the difficulties of a national body that is a consortium. We hope this edition is a celebration of the work of the many researchers and practitioners that is now embodied in NRDC publications, an encouragement for the timely publication of research already undertaken and a view of research that challenges the positivist tradition and builds on the strong roots that already exist in practice.

*Ellayne Fowler
Bex Ferriday
Jackie Sitters*