Research Reporter

ISSUE 29

May 2006

celebrating scholarly research and creative activity

Editorial: Making a Difference

Recently, I have been struck by the number of requests I have had from governmental and non-governmental agencies seeking information on the research, scholarship and creative activities conducted by Brock faculty members and graduate students. What has been intriguing about many of these requests is that the discussion of impact is no longer focused solely on the economic but has increasingly sought out details of the social and health impacts of the research that we conduct.

In a recent meeting of the Association of Research Managers and Administrators in the United Kingdom, academic leaders also emphasized the importance of being able to document the ways in which academic research benefits the social as well as economic health of the communities in which we live.

In this issue of Research Reporter, we profile two research groups whose research has and promises to have a significant impact of the lives of children and youth in Niagara, Canada and internationally. These two projects represent a wide range of research in which our faculty members and graduate and undergraduate students are involved that enhances the quality of learning in our schools and improves the lives of our communities and families.

I look forward to learning about more individual and team research projects and the impact that these projects have on our intellectual, cultural, social and economic lives.

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Reading the situation: Hope for poor readers motivates research

"Children in kindergarten are interesting because they don't yet know how to read. One child will gravitate toward reading immediately, while another won't." Dr. Jan Frijters in Brock's Department of Child and Youth Studies "always loved to read," so he wondered, "Why doesn't everyone?"

For many children, reading does not come naturally and may not come at all. Developmental reading disorder (RD) affects 10-15% of the population. RD has obvious implications in childhood, but the effects can last a lifetime. By addressing RD in early childhood, the team hopes to lessen the life-long impacts including limited job opportunities, higher morbidity and poorer health outcomes.

"Our goal is to find a way to maximize the impact of our research within the schools."

Dr. Jan Frijters

Frijters hopes that new research will change the way that educators approach reading instruction. Frijters is part of a team led by Maureen W. Lovett at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto that will assess the effectiveness of fluency- and comprehension-based remedial intervention for severely RD children. The ongoing research, funded by the Institute for Educational Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, spans international borders, with collaborators from Georgia State University.

The team is currently transferring its research from the clinical setting to community classrooms. "Our goal is to find a way to maximize the impact of our research within the schools," says Frijters. In spite of an abundance of lab-based research, there is a real need for community-based programs to treat literacy learning problems. "We are trying to bridge the gap between the research and what happens in the schools."

Collaboration with several school boards affords researchers a huge amount of data and access to considerable resources. Participating teachers and RD students also benefit from their experience their experience with and instruction in the current intervention techniques.

"Mentorship is the key," says Frijters. In each target school, the research team relies on a "community roll-out intervention model" to facilitate the sharing of knowledge between teachers and, eventually, between schools. "We have trained a group of special education teachers [in RD intervention techniques], then they each train more teachers who in turn can implement reading interventions in their home schools."

Frijters is particularly interested in the relationship between motivation to read and academic achievement. While it is generally accepted that a child's motivation for reading declines between grades 1 to 8, motivation itself is open to interpretation. By taking apart the idea of motivation into three areas – interest, competence and effort – Frijters can ask, "How does each aspect relate to reading ability?"

In a classroom, or even in a small special education situation, why does one child learn to read while another child does not? With his "novel computer-based

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Brock University

measure of a child's motivation for reading," Frijters hopes to answer the question: "What predicts success or failure?" Under the recently awarded U.S. Department of Education grant, Frijters will investigate attributions of success and failure at reading along with aspects of the child/teacher relationship that may predict remedial outcomes.

Frijters describes Brock's multidisciplinary Department of Child and Youth Studies as a "conglomeration of faculty with differing interests and theoretical backgrounds." He also credits his academic home with a new and "developing research emphasis." His collaboration with Hans Skott-Myhre, a cultural theorist, "is a beautiful illustration of the combinations possible in this department." says Frijters. "We each bring unique aptitudes and strengths." The two recently analyzed the representation of children and youth in Charlie Chaplin's film Modern Times.

In a department where there are profoundly diverse views of what children and youth are, with occasional debates "on whether childhood itself is a productive category," says Frijters, "sometimes the diversity comes together and new and wonderful collaborations can emerge."

~ by Jeannie Mackintosh

published by the Office of Research Services, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada L2S 3A1

Choosing to participate: Empowering kids to make their own healthy choices

"When kids are offered more choice, they tend to be more motivated."

Dr. James Mandigo

"By the time they're six years old, two-thirds of Canadian children are not active enough." Dr. James Mandigo of Brock's Department of Physical Education and Kinesiology sees that statistic as a challenge. "I look at my boys and their friends, at how active they are, and wonder what happens. The fact is we often force that love of physical activity out of our kids."

Health and physical education specialists are considered a luxury in many schools. But Mandigo defends the importance of qualified and inspirational teachers: "Phys. Ed. class is the only place in society where kids have equal and equitable access to equipment, resources and instruction."

Mandigo acknowledges that government support of physical education is beginning to improve. Ontario's Healthy Schools Initiative mandates 20 minutes of physical activity daily. But, Mandigo cautions, the goal should not be just to get kids' heart rates up: "If you just take kids to the library for 20 minutes every day, that's no guarantee that they're going to learn to read."

Kids need to learn foundational skills whether in reading or physical activity. Just as reading is more than just phonics, "physical literacy" is more than simple mechanics. "It involves knowledge, attitude and skills – social skills, critical thinking and an understanding of fair play and procedure," says Mandigo. Ideally kids should be "intrinsically motivated" and participate for the love of participation itself.

Mandigo's research suggests the "whole-child model" of physical and health education can inspire that intrinsic motivation. Kids who are offered more choice tend to be more motivated. By teaching for understanding, this "holistic, child-centered approach" answers the fundamental question of childhood: Why?

Mandigo's ongoing research began with one-day demonstrations in several Niagara schools to introduce the concept of child-centered teaching. This year, participating schools benefited from multiple sessions with researchers and classroom teachers working together "so teachers can see what child-centered learning really looks like," says Mandigo.

Mandigo insists the program must be sustainable. "We don't just want to go in and collect data. We bring everything we need to run the program – equipment, expertise, lesson plans, even a dvd. We leave all that with the school." The research team remains available to share their skills and resources with schools or individual teachers.

Often inadvertently, schools send kids a mixed message about health: "in class, kids learn about choosing good snacks; then they get sent out to sell chocolate bars as a fundraiser." Mandigo advocates a comprehensive approach. Expanding the holistic model beyond the school walls, an Active Healthy School Community encourages not only students, but also staff, faculty and parents, as well as community leaders, local businesses and governments to model healthy lifestyle choices. Kids are immersed in an environment that motivates them to become involved in their own physical education and encourages them to make their own healthy choices.

"Ultimately, we want to move beyond our borders," says Mandigo. His international research exports the concept of child-centered learning. In the Caribbean, increased motivation toward physical activity will improve overall health. In El Salvador, individual- and community health are profoundly linked. There, healthy choices may motivate kids to avoid gangs. "Empowering kids to make the right decisions for themselves has implications all areas of their lives."

Adults understand the long-term rewards of an active lifestyle, "but children just don't think that far ahead," says Mandigo. "For kids, the benefits need to be more immediate." So when he takes his 4-yr-old son to play hockey, there are no strict rules – they make up the game as they go along. "I know it was a success when he says 'Dad, can we go play hockey again tomorrow?'"

~ by Jeannie Mackintosh