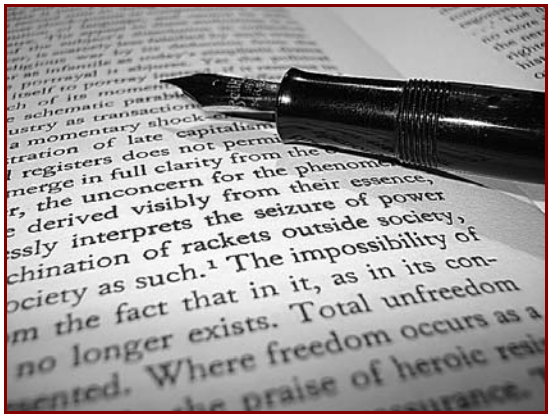
The dilemmas of accountability

Exploring the issues of accountability in adult literacy through three case studies



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The Dilemmas of Accountability: Executive Summary

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This project was conducted in the Fall of 2008 and Spring of 2009, supported by a Knowledge Mobilization grant from the Adult Learning and Knowledge Network. The aim of this project was to compile what has been learned about building accountability systems in adult literacy in British Columbia, Ontario and Scotland. The findings are presented in three sections, dealing with systemic issues, how accountability mechanisms should be designed, and working with data. Wherever possible the findings reflect all three jurisdictions and focus on common concerns.

Systemic issues

The expected outcomes for adult literacy programs need to be laid out clearly.

Adult literacy education often has a huge number of expectations attached to it, such as engaging marginalized groups in education, providing language instruction to people who have moved beyond English as a Second Language, finding work for participants, or community development. While adult literacy programs may well be a gateway to many of these outcomes, they should not be held solely responsible for them.

Lack of a systematic approach to accountability leaves adult literacy exposed.

Since the development of outcomes based management in the public sector, any program that lacks a clear rationale and a well developed logic model is in a vulnerable position. There is need for an accountability framework for literacy programs that represents the contributions of the field without setting up unrealistic expectations. Setting out an achievable set of goals and how programs can demonstrate that those goals have been achieved is essential.

The wisdom, experience and values of the field cannot be overlooked.

Adult literacy educators tend to be committed people with strong values, and a profoundly optimistic sense of human potential. Any accountability system has to acknowledge the wisdom, experience and values which have built up within the field of adult literacy. At the early stages of creating accountability approaches it means involving practitioners and learners in the design process; as they evolve it means ensuring that trust is maintained.

Any effective accountability mechanism has resource costs.

Any effective accountability system needs to have resources invested in it. In very broad terms, more detailed approaches tend to be more expensive, so collecting data that is not going to feed directly into decision making can be a costly diversion for program activities. Taking accountability seriously means recognizing it as worthy of dedicated support.

The design of accountability

The IALS(S) constructs need to be approached with care.

Over the last 15 years the approach to measuring literacy originally developed for the International Adult Literacy Survey of the mid-1990s has grown into a system. It has been refined and developed in a responsible and interesting way by those involved in the various projects over the intervening years. However, IALS approaches literacy in a very specific way, and it is important to be aware of what this approach can be used for, and where it is more problematic.

There is a need to differentiate outputs and outcomes.

A key principle of assessment is not holding people accountable for things they have no power to change. In the case of adult literacy programs, this could include employment of participants, or whether they continue their education. Things that programs can be responsible for include a welcoming and effective induction process, and demonstrated achievement of learning objectives. The first examples are program outcomes, the second group of examples are program outputs.

Accountability and assessment systems need both "looseness" and "tightness."

Some parts of an accountability system need to be tightly defined and laid out. An example is standardized data intended for comparison across a number of programs, or across sectors. Here it is worthwhile to ensure that there is a high level of consistency across the information. Other parts may be less important to frame tightly. An example is the order in which topics are covered, which can vary depending on the issues of the day in a given context.

The nature of data

Data used for accountability is not the same as data for learning.

This point is intended to underline the different uses of data, and the different forms data must take. Data collected for accountability reasons is unlikely to be much use for educational decisions, and vice versa. Among other factors, accountability data must, by definition, be summative, whereas data used to plan learning and teaching is formative. In addition, it is desirable that accountability data is quantifiable to some extent to make it easier to examine "the big picture," whereas assessment of learners' progress and direction-setting is often better if it is individualized and authentic.

The necessary tools are not yet developed.

While there have been remarkable strides in assessment and accountability tools in recent years, the tools needed to understand the learning processes in adult literacy have not yet been created. There are some key ideas pointing the way. Benchmarks, demonstrations, and individual learning plans are important components, but they have not yet been built into an inclusive and reliable systematic approach.

Demonstrations of competency are a priority.

One key development in each jurisdiction would be a means to demonstrate competence in relation to self-defined goals. If the idea of learner-centeredness is taken seriously then the goals of learning will vary substantially, and this creates a significant challenge for consistent recording of progress. A well designed framework for demonstrations can accommodate individual learning goals while still providing consistent information.

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The author and ABC-CANADA would like to thank the Adult Learning Knowledge Centre for their support of this knowledge mobilization project. In addition, nothing could have been done without the assistance and insights of the people interviewed in each jurisdiction. The author would especially like to thank the people who kindly reviewed the case studies and pointed out errors of fact or intent. Any remaining inaccuracies are entirely generated by the author, who will be happy to correct them upon being informed of them.

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Introduction

This project was funded by the Adult Learning Knowledge Centre of the Canadian Council for Learning. As a knowledge mobilization project, the aim was not necessarily to generate new knowledge in the same way that a piece of research might, but rather to collate experiences and perspectives on the issue of accountability in adult literacy education (including numeracy education). The approach chosen was to conduct case studies of three jurisdictions, selected for their different history of adult literacy programming. We selected Ontario, British Columbia and Scotland expecting a wide range of experience, though in practice the pressing concerns turned out to be quite similar.

In each of the case studies there is brief information on assessment methods in each jurisdiction. This information is not meant to be inclusive, but simply to review the forms of assessment most closely linked into the assessment system. In each case, educators were using other tools for other purposes, but only those that feed into accountability are specifically mentioned.

Before moving into a discussion of accountability, it may be useful to add a few comments on literacy. Contemporary theories do not see literacy as a single set of abilities that can be placed on one scale like how far an individual can throw a frisbee. Ursula Howard, formerly of the UK National Research and Development Centre in adult literacy uses the term "spiky profiles" to describe the patterns of abilities possessed by adults. The individual may be extremely strong in some areas but far less strong in others, and this should be seen as normal. Of course, these spiky profiles creates enormous problems for both assessing a learner's strengths and measuring progress. It is not yet clear how best to address this issue without batteries of tests covering every possible area.

The author hopes this portrait of works in progress will be helpful for those interested in literacy and other forms of education equally complex and challenging to grasp. It is not intended to be the final word, but to pull together some critical ideas and experiences and to see what can be learned at this relatively early point in the development of the field.

Assessment and Accountability

Over the last two decades governments and other funders of educational programs have become increasingly interested in accountability. There has been a real concern that programs are able to show that they are achieving what they have been asked to do. This is not limited to education, but has been part of a movement across public services.

At the same time, those involved in education have become more concerned with finding out more about the value of their practices. This can help with program improvement and design, but also with the pragmatic choices made by instructors in their day to day work. Perhaps the most striking example of this interest is the evidence-based schooling movement, which has argued very strongly that the professional decisions of educators should be informed by research-based proof of effectiveness.

Both of these developments have the potential for enormous positive impact upon the educational field throughout the world, but there are a number of very important problems to which we do not yet have answers. For example, it is far from clear what we actually expect programs to do. In the case of adult literacy, programs can be intended to increase workplace skills, to enhance general literacy, to act as a gateway to further education and training, or enhance community involvement. Each of these can be legitimate expectations, even within the same program, but they have very different outcomes requiring different measures of success.

It is also difficult to link the *quality of a program* directly to the *outcomes of the program.* To take a crude example, there may be adult literacy programs set up in two areas of Winnipeg. They share the aim of providing participants with a GED. One is in a relatively comfortable suburban location, and the other in the urban North End. It would not be surprising that the first program would have a higher completion rate than the second, but this tells us nothing about the work the program is doing. If the suburban program has 70% completion, perhaps they would have 80% if it was a an average quality program. If the urban program shows 30% completion, perhaps it would be 17% if the program was not so well designed and the staff were less committed. It is extremely complicated to try and develop a form of accountability that includes all the relevant factors in a meaningful way.

The cost of accountability systems is important to recognize. It is not desirable or sensible for programs to use a high proportion of their resources proving that they are using resources well. Nonetheless, however well the accountability system is designed, it will have an associated cost in time and resources. This allocation of resources can be viewed as a "cost of doing business," but as with any such cost, it must be carefully

balanced with the benefits.

There are different perspectives on accountability held by different stakeholders. Instructors—whether teachers, adult educators, or academics—may not want to be involved with accountability mechanisms that are not directly tied to learning. They often feel that they take attention away from the real business of education, and may not do a very good job of representing what is important. Educators often argue that the effects of programs can only be understood by looking at individuals' stories, and that numbers are not helpful. At the same time, policymakers and program managers need to know about how an entire program is getting on, and often the most effective way to pull that information together is through numbers. Reconciling these perspectives is a key challenge.

Different stakeholders in any form of educational program have different information needs. Instructors need to know how learners are responding to the program. Policymakers need to know if the program is meeting broad goals. Program managers need to know if the program is working well. Learners need to know that they are progressing and learning what they are motivated to learn. The irreconcilability of different informational needs is an issue that will be returned to several times throughout this paper.

A closer look at accountability

It is helpful to look a little more closely at accountability in order to understand what we are talking about and what effects it has on programs. Accountability is a specialized form of program evaluation that sets out to demonstrate that a program is meeting its aims effectively and efficiently. Programs can be seen as accountable to a wide range of constituencies, not least learners, but this discussion focuses on accountability to funders and similar groups with power over the program.

There are many different forms of accountability, but generally there are common characteristics:

External reporting	Accountability is a reporting mechanism running between the program and some external body
Measures	Accountability has formal measures built into it, often in the form of numerical indicators
Alignment	Accountability of different programs is usually aligned to some degree, to allow comparison and summarization across programs

Accountability is an extremely powerful force in program design and delivery. It is a powerful "steering system" in that small moves on the steering wheel produce large changes in direction. Programs tend to organize themselves to maximize returns on the accountability measures, so it is important to be extremely careful when putting accountability into place[i]. All too often there have been examples of programs ending up "teaching to the test" when accountability structures only look at test results. As much as possible, accountability should adopt a light touch, focusing on the key measures reflecting program quality and nothing else. In many cases, the quality of accountability data can be improved by removing requirements rather than by adding them. Small amounts of more focused data are more useful than large amounts of irrelevant data.

A closer look at assessment

Assessment is another form of evaluation, though this time instead of looking at program level indicators the questions are focused on individual learners. Assessment tries to capture what people actually learn in a given situation. For many people, the first example that springs to mind is formal exams. However, there are quite a number of other ways to record what people know. For example, people could be asked to write essays, or perform a simulated (or real-life) task. Probably the most important factor in high quality forms of assessment is not the means that is chosen, but that it is collected and collated in a systematic way. Assessment must be carefully tailored to the expected learning and the context in which it will be used.

There are a number of different ways to use assessment. At the time of intake, an initial assessment could be used as a diagnostic tool, to help the learner and educator get some sense of where to start. Formative assessments can help to check that learning is on track, or to find out if some instructional approaches are more effective than others for that learner. Summative assessment tries to capture the entire span of learning. Assessments can also be paired, as in pre-assessment and post-assessment, to provide evidence of learning over time. In this discussion the main concern is the form of assessment used to record learner progress in each of the three case study jurisdictions rather than diagnostic and other formative measures.

There has been a great deal of interest recently in standardized assessment, where every learner takes the same test, but it is important to be careful about this type of assessment. It might be useful in a classroom of schoolchildren where all have started at the same point and received the same instruction for a given period, but it tells us a great deal less about the knowledge an adult possesses. We know that adult education is strongly influenced by people's previous schooling, their life experiences, and their current circumstances, so there will inevitably be differences in what they learn over a given period of time and standardized tests do not always capture this well. For example, two new Canadians may well score at the same level on a standardized test of

French language ability, but one is a trained physician and the other has very little formal education. In this case, the score has quite different implications for the instructional program provided to each individual.

Adults are also voluntary learners, attending a program because they find it useful. Adult learning theory tells us that adults get involved in education to learn specific knowledge and abilities, suggesting that learning towards those goals is what should be measured. This cannot be done using standardized tests.

Standardized tests can provide useful information on population measures of a certain characteristic, in much the same way that a census does, but they are less useful as a way to support instruction. The exception would be if there were a detailed linear curriculum to which the tests would link, but this is not the case in adult literacy and it is not clear that this would be an effective way to strengthen the field. Standardized tests should be approached with some caution and a full understanding of what they can and cannot do—just as with any assessment.

The recent development of skills-based assessment in adult literacy and essential skills provision is extremely interesting. While at first glance it may appear to be a standardized framework, it allows for a huge degree of flexibility and diversity of learning to be recognized. In this sort of system, the learner demonstrates mastery in an "authentic" way, by performing a real-life task that shows them successfully completing the key skill.

The characteristics of a well-designed assessment approach include:

Focus	The approach should be tightly focused on the specific skills or knowledge that are being assessed
Flexibility	Ideally there should be more than one way to demonstrate mastery of the knowledge or skill to recognize individual and contextual diversity
Developmental	It is highly desirable that the assessment provides some insight into the next stage of learning for the individual; what comes next?
Authentic	Adult learning theory suggests that the more closely assessment is tied to real life, the more useful learners will find it, and the more accurate it will be
Sensitivity	Assessment tools should be sensitive enough to capture small gains in ability.

It should be obvious from this list that assessment data is already performing a number of critical functions within teaching and learning. It requires great skill and insight to design effective assessment approaches that can inform instruction. It is helpful to think about how it can feed into accountability as well.

The relationship between accountability and assessment

The last sections have made it clear that both assessment and accountability are highly specialized activities. In this section, we look at how the two can work together. To help illustrate this discussion, Figure 1 lays out the key elements.

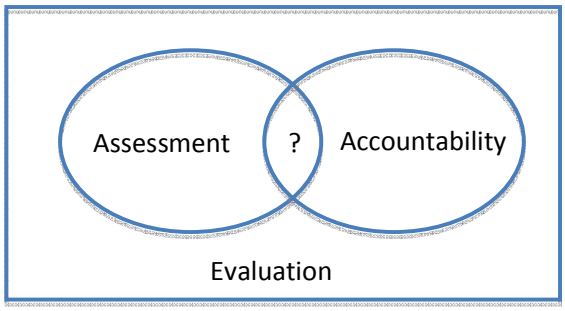

Figure 1: The relationship between assessment and accountability

In this diagram assessment and accountability are presented as two types of evaluation, with different foci and different applications. They overlap because assessment data is often used in accountability systems. One of the most controversial questions about program accountability is how big that overlap should be, or even if they should overlap at all. There is a strong argument that the form and application of assessment data is so different from the form and application of accountability data that they should be completely separate functions with no overlap. In practice, however, the progress of learners can provide important insights into the work of a program.

Some of the differences between the two areas that have been discussed here are laid out in Table 1.

Throughout the rest of this discussion, questions about the appropriate uses of these two types of information, and the form they should take, come up again and again. In British Columbia, Ontario and Scotland the approaches to assessment and accountability are far from identical, but all three jurisdictions struggle with very similar issues around demonstrating that adult literacy programs provide high quality services.

	Assessment	**Accountability**
What is the information about?	Learners and learning	Programs
Where is the information used?	Instructional decisions and credentialing	Often used for parties external to the teaching situation
Is comparability important?	Not necessarily important as long as it justifies judgments clearly	Often needs to be comparable across programs, sectors or areas
What does it change?	Instructional processes	Program design, funding and continuation

Table 1: Characteristics of Assessment and Accountability

Introduction to the Case Studies

The case studies were compiled in late 2008 and early 2009. In each case documentary evidence was brought together with interviews with key informants in order to portray the way that accountability structures were playing out in each of the three jurisdictions. It is hoped that the information be of assistance to individuals in these, and other, areas as they plan for and implement their own accountability structures.

It is clear that the case studies are far from inclusive, and there is a great deal more to be said. The intention was not to have the last word on these issues, but to capture a portrait of a moment in time as a way to clarify what some of the key concerns and opportunities were at this stage in the development of adult literacy education. There is the potential for a great deal more work to be done.

The three jurisdictions were selected because of perceived differences between them in developmental stage and emphasis. It seemed as if Scotland would provide an opportunity to look at a radical social practices philosophy in action, Ontario would be more clearly skills based, and BC might be more open and community-oriented. These expectations were quickly dashed by the very significant overlap between the three cases in terms of the type of problems they were struggling with. The issues might manifest in different ways according to the context, but very similar dynamics seemed to be influencing policy and practice.

Pan-Canadian Developments

Before looking in more detail at the specifics of Ontario and British Columbia it is useful to review the broader context of Pan-Canadian literacy work. In Canada education is a provincial and territorial responsibility, so when Ottawa has wanted to develop or support these services it has done so through the application of two strategies. One was to call literacy "workforce development," the other was to focus on research and pilot programs rather than delivery. The development of initiatives spanning the country is relatively recent, and the term "Pan-Canadian" is used to signal that a single national approach would not be politically viable nor would it recognize the extremely significant regional variations across Canada. In addition, Francophone Canadians can often feel frozen out of such discussions because of the domination of Anglophones and Anglo-American ideas.

The explosion of interest in Pan-Canadian approaches is probably driven to some extent by the establishment of a number of research networks, such as the Canadian Council on Learning. These networks do not have to be as sensitive to the federal-provincial-territorial divide as the previously influential National Literacy Secretariat had to be, and can work across jurisdictions more easily. It is likely that the International Adult Literacy Survey and its successors, which suggested that all areas of Canada had the same sort of issues regarding literacy, were also important factors.

In this brief review, the first publication of note is *Towards a Fully Literate Canada*[ii] from 2005. This report states that the committee concluded "that the Federal Government is well-placed to provide partnership-based leadership respectful of the jurisdictions of other levels of government" (p.3). One of the seven principles of the proposed Pan-Canadian literacy strategy was to "measure and report on results" (p.4), and community consultation suggested that "literacy objectives should be economic but also social, cultural or personal" (p.19). However, this latter point is not expanded upon within the report, which simply suggests that the system should be "results-based and should not be supported solely on the basis of 'numbers served'" (p.32).

In 2005, a Pan-Canadian survey of the assessment practices of 380 educators was conducted[iii]. This showed some significant patterns in the practices used in different sectors. Authentic assessments, where learners demonstrated that they could perform the actual task they were learning to perform, were used by two-thirds of colleges and community based programs and 85% of workplace programs. Standardized assessments were used by 63% of college educators, but only 31% of community educators and 8% of workplace programs. Competency-based assessment, where skills are assessed directly, were used by about one quarter of all programs. A number of developments in the last few years, including the development of essential skills frameworks, may well have changed these proportions.

The report concluded with a number of recommendations. A key theme was the need to balance a degree of standardization of approach with recognition of the differences across Canada and between individuals:

> In order to address uniformity and diversity, a national system needs to encompass national standards yet be tailored to the diversity of regional and local needs, as well as to the diversity of learners and their ways of learning. (pp.67-68)

The author was also careful to point out that data collection and analysis are not cost-free activities:

> Funders need to invest in the capacity of local programs to collect, interpret, and use data to monitor how well programs and students are doing and to improve services. Resources need to be allocated to programs that are commensurate with accountability expectations. (p.67)

Overall, the author was friendly towards the idea of a national system for both assessment and accountability, provided that it was well-designed and not over-simplistic in approach.

In 2007, *Mapping the field*[iv] presented the Canadian Council on Learning's initial steps towards a framework for tracking and assessing adult learning generally, including literacy. It is a complex hierarchical model somewhat reminiscent of the International Standard Occupational Classification. The authors comment on the current state of the field:

> In summary, there is not a lot of comprehensive and reliable information available to track participation in adult learning in Canada, and what there is does not paint a very positive picture . . . A particular focus of concern is the lack of consistency and collaboration in the collection and dissemination of data by institutions and organizations providing adult learning programs. (p.50)

Two of the Canadian Council on Learning's centres—the Adult Learning Knowledge Centre and Work & Learning Knowledge Centre—organized a roundtable in early 2008 to discuss a Pan-Canadian literacy strategy[v]. The event was attended by a number of stakeholders interested in raising the profile of adult literacy education. It is striking that there was very little discussion of assessment or accountability recorded. The general consensus appeared to be that literacy development could increase people's ability to participate in the social and economic life of the family, community and society, yet the most concrete statement on using data to support this argument was that the literacy

community would know it was successful when "objectives/milestones can demonstrate what literacy delivers" (p.9).

The Canadian Council on Learning's 2008 publication *Reading the Future*[vi] takes a different tack. This data-intensive analysis of the needs of Canadians with literacy development needs describes a number of categories of learner groups based on their position on a standardized assessment tool and lays out educational strategies and objectives for these groups. In this report, the accuracy of statistical assessments of individuals' abilities is taken for granted and made central to the strategy. The report was controversial[vii], and generally received with a degree of caution within the field.

The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada are interested in various Pan-Canadian initiatives, including adult education under their post-secondary remit. The interest in national level studies with global comparability, such as PISA, TIMSS and IALSS, is a strong policy influence towards developing more inclusive Pan-Canadian initiatives because the reporting unit is expected to be the nation. There is some concern that a highly regionalized and diverse country such as Canada does not fit well with the assumption, by the OECD and others, that the national level is the most appropriate level for these studies. Developments within the country could be driven by international standards, offering unclear advantages to the Canadian educational system. With regard to adult literacy specifically, a Council of Ministers of Education, Canada forum[viii] in 2006 was attended by many literacy specialists from across the country, and called for a federal-provincial/territorial effort to establish a Canadian policy framework.

A further Pan-Canadian initiative on accountability and adult literacy is the *Connecting the Dots* project, funded by the federal Office of Literacy and Essential Skills and led by Linda Shohet. There are a number of research projects falling under the *Connecting the Dots* umbrella, and most are still at a relatively early stage. However, in May 2008 the program organized a symposium in Montreal to look at accountability in literacy[ix]. A key theme was the degree of mistrust between providers, funders and the public, which was seen as underpinning many concerns about accountability. There was interest in a ten year old definition of accountability derived from the Auditor General and Treasury Board: "Accountability is a relationship based on the obligation to demonstrate and take responsibility for performance in light of agreed expectations." This approach, with added emphasis on collaboration and mutuality, was seen to offer a way to think about accountability that would be less concerned with blame and surveillance than current conceptions.

Connecting the Dots produced a report[x] on accountability in late 2008 based on interviews across the field and containing a set of 12 recommendations. Among them is the need for accountability to be mutual and reciprocal, with funders responsible for consistent and sufficient resourcing to produce the results educators are responsible for. The report

suggests that there is a need to recognize the multiple accountabilities of most stakeholders, and the requirement to avoid tying funding exclusively to learner outputs that are shaped by contextual factors as much as by program quality. In addition, the point that the field needs strong employment and training structures to deliver high quality programs with strong accountability is clearly made.

The National Literacy Secretariat, which was a major supporter of research and some programming across Canada, has now become the Office of Learning and Essential Skills. The research program has been considerably reduced and strongly refocused on pilot projects intended to demonstrate effective ways to raise levels of essential skills in particular contexts. The placement of the office within Human Resources and Social Development Canada has become more influential over time, and there is little evidence that the office does more than contribute to workforce development.

Overall, there is evidence of increasing interest in accountability in adult literacy education in Canada, and of resources dedicated to understanding what this might mean for the field. However, this comes with a significant price. Throughout the Pan-Canadian discussions there is heavy emphasis on economic models of literacy, the meaning lying behind the use of the term essential skills. Economically significant outcomes have the doubly attractive features of political desirability and relatively simple measures, but it is a troubling over-simplification of a complex field to adopt these outcomes as the only key measures. Certainly other outcomes are mentioned fairly consistently, such as the social impacts of literacy, but the policy wording tends to de-emphasize these aspects.

One critical issue here is the difficulty of creating a clear cause and effect relationship between literacy provision and social outcomes, and there is clearly need for careful and imaginative research in this area. However, it is important not to dismiss out of hand the decades of anecdotal evidence available on this topic, which can perhaps be better described as professional case studies. There is a broad range of outcomes arising from literacy education, but the Pan-Canadian approaches can all too often limit what counts and what is counted.

Most significantly for this discussion, these developments create an influential backdrop for developments at provincial and territorial level.

Case Study 1: Ontario

Ontario is probably the Canadian province that has done the most to develop and implement a deeply systematic approach to understanding learner progress and issues of program quality. One of the keys to this approach has been the notion of Essential Skills, a listing of competences required for workforce and wider social engagement. Essential Skills have been controversial, as some commentators have seen it as threatening to reduce services to vulnerable populations[xi]. At the same time, in practice they have provided a common language to talk about the issues of literacy. Other jurisdictions have a great deal to learn from the Ontario experience.

Background

Ontario began to be interested in putting a systematic framework in place around adult literacy education at least 15 years ago with the 1994 initiation of the Recognition of Adult Learning Strategy[xii]. While the complexity of the system in Ontario should not be overlooked, nor the sheer size of the province (at 12 million people almost three times the size of BC or Scotland), there is a logical coherence to most of the developments that have occurred over this period.

Delivery of literacy services in Ontario is divided into four target populations, each of which has a representative organization. These are Anglophone, Francophone, Native Canadian and Deaf populations. There are three modes of service delivery: community-based organizations, colleges, and school boards. The Literacy and Basic Skills programs funded by the Province, of which there are several hundred, take learners up to the equivalent of Ontario Grade 9, at which point they move into academic upgrading if they wish to continue studying.

The Literary and Basic Skills program has three outcomes associated with it: employment, further education and training, or independence. This last outcome is designed to accommodate individuals who benefit from the skills maintenance provided by engagement in a literacy program, but who may not pursue upgrading due to personal barriers. In any given year, it is expected that 70% of learners across the system will attain the first two outcomes.

Recently Literacy and Basic Skills programs have been moved to come under the jurisdiction of Employment Ontario. There is some concern about what this may mean for the emphasis of the programs and the expectations associated with them.

In Ontario there is a notable level of cooperation and collaboration between the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. The Ministry works hard to recognize the concerns and perspectives of educators across the three sectors, and even though there are differences between the various players there still seems to be a high level of mutual respect. For example, some of the key tasks of organizing literacy across the Province are devolved to practitioner organizations, such as the definition and description of skill levels. One interviewee from the Ministry talked of the need to "use the wisdom of the field" to guide development. Many educators also identify advantages arising from the essential skills framework, despite reservations about its influence and potential long-term effects.

Capturing learning

Ontario has attempted to put a common assessment framework in place across all literacy and basic skills programs, using essential skills as an organizing mechanism. The essential skills framework has an extensive list of skills categories. These are:

Literacy	Reading Text, Writing, Document Use, Computer Use, Oral Communication
Numeracy	Money Math, Scheduling or Budgeting and Accounting, Measurement and Calculation, Data Analysis, Numerical Estimation
Thinking	Job Task Planning and Organizing, Decision Making, Problem Solving, Finding Information[xiii]

These skills have five levels of proficiency associated with them, roughly mapped across to school grades. So a learner may have an aim of achieving Level 5 in computer use, which would be equivalent to Grade 9, and also be focusing on Level 3 in Decision Making. The key to attainment of these levels is a device known as a "demonstration." The Ministry defines these as:

> Demonstrations are real-life tasks integrating essential skills, knowledge, and behaviors that a learner can perform and the attainment of which may be measured and verified. An example of a demonstration is a prepared activity such as composing a business letter[xiv].

When individuals are working consistently at Level 5, they will move out of the literacy and basic skills programs.

The demonstrations are not standardized across the Province, or even within sectors. They are created by instructors within programs. This reflects a central decision that

standardized demonstrations would not be desirable or practical, as well as the difficulty of matching demonstrations for, say, Francophone and Anglophone learners.

Time spent with a program in Toronto suggests that many educators have their own approach to assessment at the time of intake and for reviewing progress. The program I visited worked with learners at the lowest levels of the scale, and had developed an extremely effective intake assessment that included light touch testing along with biographical data. The intake interview could take up to three hours with some learners, but the program administrator saw the intake interview as a means of engaging the learner and getting them comfortable, as well as collecting essential information. This example of good practice suggests that the "official" data collection is only one layer of the assessment practices in Ontario.

Capturing quality

Program quality is a significant concern in Ontario, and the Ministry is concerned with three aspects of this: efficiency, effectiveness, and learner satisfaction[xv]. The number of learners attaining each of the desired outcomes is considered to be a key indicator at the program level. Since 2001 there have been substantial moves towards the implementation of an online Continuous Improvement Performance Management System, which would collate learner attainment across the field. The initiative has reached the point of training practitioners on the system.

The key principle behind accountability in Ontario is the notion of learner skill attainment, with agencies responsible to deliver a goal-directed and learner-centered program. It seems unclear how this is currently evaluated, however, since the measures tend to prioritize efficiency over other values. This is reinforced to some degree by the funding structures for community-based organizations, which allocate support on the basis of contact hours.

The Ministry is aware of these difficulties, and working at a way to emphasize "transition-readiness" as a key measure. This means that programs would be expected to demonstrate that they had managed to get a certain number of learners ready for further study, employment or independence. The sophistication of the Ministry is shown by the fact that they do not expect the programs to demonstrate that these transitions have been made, which is out of their hands, but that programs have assisted individuals to be ready for the transitions.

Key issues

The first challenge pervades the Ontario approach, and that is the use of assessment data

as accountability data. If Figure 1 were re-drawn to reflect the current situation in Ontario the two circles would overlap very significantly. For example, in the *Common Assessment* document, two purposes of assessment out of four are "developing or improving the learning program" and "demonstrating accountability" (p.2). All the players in literacy and basic skills acknowledge concerns with this issue, but also recognize the difficulty of moving away from the linkage.

The Ontario assessment systems also tend to be extremely labor intensive, especially for smaller programs, who are having to maintain quite complex information management systems with limited resources. This is less of an issue for organizations such as colleges, which already have a well-constructed infrastructure in place for exactly this type of information management. There is a concern about the volume of data programs are being asked to produce and whether this data is actually being used in an informative and effective way.

One key vulnerability of the Ontario system, with its reliance on demonstrations, is the skill level of practitioners. In common with most jurisdictions, Ontario's adult literacy educators are generally part-time employees with limited access to the professional development needed to ensure confident and accurate engagement with learner assessment. In some cases this can lead to an over-reliance on the standardized tools that are available, even if their match to the learning aims is not perfect.

It is also important to acknowledge that while the essential skills framework has brought benefits to the field, there are also concerns. While essential skills documents identify "work, learning, life" as their areas of application, the system is strongly reflective of employment-based activities and values. The political value of the economically embedded approach is undoubted; what is less clear is who has been excluded by this emphasis, and whose learning may have been devalued.

Future developments

Given the history of intense interest and investment in the literacy and basic skills sector in Ontario, it would be surprising if systems did not continue to develop at a rapid rate. The absorption of the sector into Employment Ontario is troubling to some commentators, who see this as an indicator of ever-strengthening ties to work related outcomes. As yet, there is little way to know how this will affect the literacy provision in the province.

In the near future it seems likely that program-level evaluation will be tied more tightly to more-detailed forms of learning evaluation. Rather than levels, for example, it might be possible to create a scale of some sort to capture the smaller increments of learning produced by programs. If a Level within the current framework is equivalent to two

grades, it is going to take a long time for a learner (and program) to demonstrate that level of attainment in a two hour-per-week program. Assessment with more discrimination might allow learners and programs to claim more success and demonstrate more effectiveness.

The development of online training for literacy instructors by Community Literacy of Ontario and their partners is a very positive development, and will hopefully lead to enhanced and expanded knowledge of the practices and issues of literacy and basic skills across the province.

Case Study 2: British Columbia

The second provincial case study offers a different set of characteristics from Ontario, but many similar issues are being addressed. The will to create an overarching framework for adult (and initial) literacy in British Columbia is relatively recent, and so many of the tensions identified in Ontario are still in the early stages of resolution in BC.

Background

A step change in BC literacy programs occurred in 2007. Previous to this government supported programs had been funded and managed mainly through the Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development, the ministry responsible for colleges, universities, apprenticeships, and similar programs. These programs were, in theory at least, tied to labour market development. The Ministry of Education had supported school-based upgrading programs. In 2007, however, the provincial government launched an initiative called ReadNowBC based in the Ministry of Education[xvi]. ReadNowBC takes a lifelong learning approach to literacy, with school districts identified as key players in the development of district literacy plans in conjunction with community based organizations. While Advanced Education is recognized as the lead agency for adult literacy, there is inevitably some overlap between the two ministries.

Advanced Education responded to the ReadNowBC initiative by producing the Adult Opportunities Action Plan[xvii] of 2007. This plan has three goals: reduced barriers and increased participation, improved literacy rates for key populations, and coordinated, quality programs that produce results. There are five success indicators for the action plan as a whole:

- the number of learners, courses and programs taken, and instructional hours
- literacy rates for key populations
- overall literacy rates for the province
- average literacy score will improve
- increase in people moving from level 1 to level 2 (on the 5 level IALSS scale)

Interestingly, the plan explicitly defines literacy as Level 3 in the International Literacy and Skills Survey, roughly equal to high school graduation. This reflects growing interest in converting the IALSS test from a way to estimate population skill levels to an individual performance measure. In addition, there is an intention to link benchmarks to workplace essential skills, though it is not yet clear how essential skills will be defined and what this linkage will look like.

BC has three modes of provision: school boards, community-based organizations, and the post-secondary sector. The relationship between these modes is not always as strong as it could be, even though instructors often move between the different venues. It is probably fair to say that the relationship between community-based organizations and the province has not always been easy. Community organizations have had a strong presence in BC, but see the ministry as operating in a top-down manner. Advanced Education has a Community Adult Literacy Program to fund community-based organizations in partnership with post-secondary institutions[xviii]. Since 2008, the province's Regional Literacy Coordinators are fulltime faculty positions located in each of the 16 post-secondary institutions that provide fundamental adult literacy programs.. There is potential to view these policies as a way to bring the community organizations more clearly into the provincial framework.

BC has a history of workplace literacy that is recognized across Canada. There has been less support for these programs in recent years, and even though the essential skills frameworks would be directly beneficial to workplace literacy the province appears to have become less interested in supporting them.

Capturing learning

The area of learning assessment has had a great deal of attention in BC. The Ministry of Education has developed a set of literacy indicators called the BC Performance Standards, which sets out to provide schools with a common framework[xix]. The standards are complex and detailed, and well designed for use in a school setting. While there is little expectation that these standards are directly relevant to adult literacy, they form a backdrop against which adult literacy assessments are developed.

Literacy BC and LiteracyNow, part of 2010LegaciesNow Society, joined forces with the Ministry of Advanced Education to create a proposal for a set of benchmarks[xx] for community-based literacy programs. Very importantly, the proposal clearly identified the need for training to support the implementation of the benchmarks. The benchmarks were applied fully for the first time in 2008-2009. They are competency based, and break broad domains such as "reading" down into four levels of three functional components. These components are: analyze, interpret, and monitor. As an example, the highest level of monitoring involves asking questions when unable to understand text or graphic material and initiating strategies to assist comprehension and decoding.

The overall tone of the benchmarks reflects the philosophy lying behind them. They clearly promote critical engagement with literacy suggesting the need, for example, to "identify propaganda in popular media." This reflects the value-based perspective the developers of the benchmarks wanted to incorporate. There is more work to be done on the benchmarks, primarily around the development of tools to discriminate reliably

between the levels and the need to link the levels to instructional strategies. Overall, the benchmarks are not too different, in conception or execution, from the Performance Standards despite the difference in underpinning philosophy and educational contexts.

Post-secondary and school district based programs have engaged less directly in the process of developing the benchmarks. Post-secondary institutions have had an outcome framework in place for many years, and this was adopted by the school boards in the late 1990s. It is based on a concept referred to as "Adult Literacy Fundamental English" described in some detail in the articulation handbook[xxi]. In effect this is a third matrix of benchmarks for learner assessment.

Capturing quality

The principle that what happens in the field should be decided in the field has led the community-based literacy sector to become involved in the process of program evaluation and accountability. Over the last three years RiPAL-BC and LiteracyBC have conducted a project called *From the Ground Up*, which used participatory research methods to develop accountability strategies. Currently, a few of the tools that have been created are available for review.

One of the principles of the *From the Ground Up* approach is that there are three levels of accountability data: assessment of individual learners, evaluation of individual programs, and macro analysis of program effectiveness[xxii]. The existing documents emphasize different aspects of these three levels. For example, the approach developed by the Carnegie Learning Centre is focused strongly on the environment for learning provided by the program and the effectiveness of engagement strategies for hard to reach learners.

Again the colleges and the school boards have their own accountability structures consistent with sectoral practices. The available information[xxiii] tends to suggest that college courses are remarkably effective in supporting learners to move to employment or further study, but it has to be remembered that literacy learners in colleges are a different population from literacy learners in the community, often entering programs with employment expectations.

Key issues

This review suggests that one of the most pressing issues for BC is a lack of cross-sectoral co-ordination. There is a degree of redundancy in the adult literacy systems that arises from historical relationships rather than from the functional requirements of the present adult literacy system. To some extent this redundancy is fed by a degree of

mistrust between different sectors, which encourages each delivery mode to create its own frameworks. The problem is not the degree of diversity in the systems, which is only to be expected in a diverse province, but the complexity of the overlapping processes. For example, the *From the Ground Up* framework of program quality does not appear to feed into the Community Adult Literacy Program. This makes it necessary for effective literacy workers to know about multiple frameworks of practice, assessment, and accountability.

The literacy community in BC share a principled and value-based stance towards their work. They are committed to learner engagement and retention, and wary of processes that might encourage the field to focus primarily on higher level learners. This is an important orientation that must not be lost. However, it does not encourage the development of clear reporting mechanisms, on either individual or program level, in the quantitative terms valued by current government. It appears that it would be extremely helpful to have continuing discussions regarding exactly what the expectations of different types of programs are, and how they can best be demonstrated.

Future developments

The ReadNow policy is likely to be strongly influential over the next few years. The idea of area-based literacy co-ordination with all of the interested organizations involved is an ambitious one given the current situation, but could be an extremely positive development as long as the best-resourced partners do not dominate the discussion.

It seems likely that the need for an evidence-based accountability system to demonstrate program quality will not go away. The challenge will be developing such a system without losing the most valuable aspects of community-based provision, including responsiveness and locality. The various frameworks are an important step in the right direction here, but there is a need to develop a shared set of principles and values around literacy provision in the province. Once these are in place, the factors that make for a good program should emerge.

BC has a remarkable opportunity to make progress in literacy with the LiteracyNow framework, funded by the 2010 Olympic legacy. However, this support will be available for a limited time and it is necessary to use it in a strategic and focused way over the next few years.

There remains a perception in BC that the intensity of development over the last few years will not be backed up by an explicit commitment to funding the field sufficiently and consistently. In many ways, this will be the test of the province's real understanding of the issues of adult literacy.

Case Study 3: Scotland

The Scottish adult literacy and numeracy (ALN) system is an interesting one to include in a comparative study of this kind. Unlike England, which has developed a test driven and vocationally focused system based mainly in colleges, Scotland has taken the idea of literacy education as a social good very seriously. This has significant implications for the way learning is conceived and measured, as well as the way program quality is supported. The Scottish system is the most learner-centered case in this report, and the most reflective of a social practices view of literacy.

Background

Scottish education has always been separate from education in England, but the establishment of the Scottish parliament in 1999 created an opportunity for that distinctiveness to be underlined. The Scottish government created at that time were Labour, and further left than the UK variety. They saw "social inclusion" as a priority in tackling Scotland's substantial poverty issues, meaning that people marginalized by education, employment, health and housing would be provided with supports to reduce that marginalization. Adult literacy and numeracy education was seen as a key strategy in achieving these aims.

The foundational policy document in establishing the direction of the Scottish system was the Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Scotland (ALNIS)[xxiv] report of 2001. This report was written by a small committee who were familiar with the work of New Literacy Studies theorists at the University of Lancaster. New Literacy Studies promotes the notion that literacy is not a set of stand alone skills, but a range of social practices used by different people in different ways in different contexts. This radical relativism implies that literacy cannot be set up as a single scale against which people's skills can be tested, but must be seen as highly diverse and contextualized. There is a clear statement of the authors' philosophy early in ALNIS:

> Literacy and numeracy are skills whose sufficiency may only be judged within a specific social, cultural, economic or political context. Our own definition, which received strong support in the consultation process, tries to take account of this:
>
> The ability to read, write and use numeracy, to handle information, to express ideas and opinions, to make decisions and solve problems, as family members, workers, citizens and lifelong learners. (p.7)

This is clearly a very broad definition of literacy, yet it has been implemented

consistently throughout the last eight years. Adult literacy and numeracy in Scotland is delivered through 32 literacy partnerships including colleges, local authority programs, and non-profit organizations such as the Workers' Education Association. This is a complex framework for a small country of 4.5 million people. It is pulled together to some extent by a branch of the Scottish Government called Learning Connections, who have the job of supporting the partnerships in their work through research, training and ongoing consultation.

In 2005, a curriculum framework[xxv] was created for adult literacy and numeracy as a resource to support the work of these partnerships. It proved quite difficult to find a way to show what a high quality curriculum would look like without losing some of the highly prized learner-centered philosophy, but the document focused usefully on the process of creating curriculum rather than what the content should be. The partnerships received some training on the use of the curriculum, though it is still not clear how widely it is applied. The curriculum included a device known as the "curriculum wheel," which has proven popular with practitioners and is beginning to gain ground with learners as a way to consider their aims in a visual form.

Capturing learning

Teaching and learning within adult literacy programs in Scotland is based on Individual Learning Plans negotiated between learners and tutors or intake workers. The idea is that learners enter the program because of a perceived need to strengthen particular social practices of literacy, and are able to identify what they need to do to fulfill that need. The Individual Learning Plan could include specific aims such as "learn to use semicolons;" equally it could be extremely broad, such as "improve spelling." The role of the worker involved in preparation of the plans is to help with setting clear, attainable but significant aims.

There are currently no formal tests built into the Scottish adult literacy and numeracy system at all, and learners do not have to be working towards any particular credential. The common means of assessment across the system is completion of the individual learning plans, which are reviewed periodically. The program is considered a success if learners attain the goals they define for themselves.

Some learners do end up attaining qualifications on the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework. This framework is designed to span all sectors of learning by mapping school, academic and vocational awards onto a single scale. It is designed to be extremely open and recognize many ways of demonstrating mastery of a particular subject at a particular level. Literacy learners who achieve these qualifications are largely learners within the college sector. Community-based provision, whether from a local organization or a local authority, generally has less experience with credentialing

and tends to be less interested in promoting it due to a historical commitment to open access programming.

Capturing quality

Every year each of the funded literacy programs, through their local authority, provides a monitoring report to Learning Connections on its activities. These reports include some recognition of the number of individual learning plans completed, but focus far more strongly on the way adult literacy and numeracy education is provided in that area than on the outcomes in terms of learner progress. In other words, there is considerably more emphasis on the inputs rather than the outputs of the system.

In some ways this makes sense, since Learning Connections does not have the remit to evaluate the system and make changes. However, it does leave a vacuum regarding the responsibility of ensuring that the system is effective and efficient. Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education (HMIe) look at the system in some detail every few years, but this does not provided the short-term guidance that might be useful to educators and administrators. Given the enormously complex and costly evaluation procedures applied to schooling, further, and higher education in Scotland the lack of monitoring is an anomaly.

Key issues

In Scotland deliberate choices have been made about what adult literacy and numeracy education should value, and generally this has emphasized openness and diversity. There is a clearly theorized background for this approach, and a tendency for people in other parts of the world to look upon it with some envy. This is particularly true in England, where practitioners can feel very constrained by the tight curriculum and obligatory testing.

Recent practitioner based research[xxvi], however, has highlighted some of the challenges of using individual learning plans as a means of assessment. These include the need for highly skilled staff to write them and put them into practice, the huge variety of practices across the partnerships (even between partners in the same area), and the tendency for learners not to feel any ownership of the plans. There is also the theoretical question of whether any group of learners can realistically assess what they do not know, and what the priorities for learning should be.

In a report published in 2005, HMIe[xxvii] are strongly supportive of the Scottish approach, especially regarding the confidence and engagement of learners. They do sound a cautionary note about assessment:

> Assessment arrangements were generally inadequate for monitoring progress, assessing achievement and tracking learners including those who progressed into award-bearing programs and further study. There were too few structured opportunities for learners to progress into award-bearing programs where this was appropriate . . . Arrangements for the initial assessment of learners' needs involved initial interviews or other structured processes. However, in the majority of cases, arrangements were not fully effective. (p. v)

In the language of the Inspectorate, these are very strong criticisms.

The framework established by the Adult Literacy and Numeracy In Scotland document is due for review, and a great deal of evidence has been collected about the strengths and weaknesses of the approach. Within the evidence[xxviii] there are a number of interesting comments. Stakeholders (professionals) were described as having the perspective that: "monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are felt to require further review, in order to retain compatibility with the Social Practice model and so promote a learner-led focus" (p. 7). This can be read this as identifying the contradiction between instructional needs and systemic needs for data on progress and program quality.

Interestingly in the same document, it states that the "main benefit of learning noted by learners was heightened confidence which encourages them to take on new life experiences and further learning" (p. 8). While this may fit well with the experiences of many literacy instructors, there is surely some cause for concern that learners are not identifying increased engagement with texts as the main effect of literacy instruction. Confidence, though it is key to an individual's success, could potentially be dismissed as a soft skill.

The evidence suggests that while the Scottish system is very open and flexible, as well as strongly learner-centered, the approach is less useful for understanding learning outcomes at either the individual or program level. It is conceivable that these shortcomings could be addressed if instructors were trained in a systematic approach to data collection, but the part-time nature of the workforce, along with very high staff turnover, makes this unlikely. Addressing this challenge would require considerable care and potentially some degree of compromise of social practice principles.

The Scottish approach to assessment and accountability is systematic to the degree that it is driven by a shared set of values, but seems to fail to provide many of the benefits of other systems, such as clear lines of accountability. This situation has considerable philosophic support in Scotland, but runs the risk of creating an "accountability vacuum" into which potentially undesirable mechanisms may leak.

Future developments

In 2007 the Scottish Government changed, and is now dominated by the Scottish Nationalist Party. This party has taken quite a different approach to social programs generally and adult literacy and numeracy in particular. There has been a move to managing funding of local authorities by what are called single outcome agreements—in other words a single outcome is seen as an indicator of quality, and the means of reaching that indicator is left to the local authority. In the case of literacy, the key indicator is the proportion of adults with skills at less than Level Four on the Scottish Skills and Qualifications Framework. According to the available information the proportion of the population with skills below Level Four has dropped from 20% in 2001 to 13.8% in 2008. Since adult literacy and numeracy education ends at Level Three this could be seen as demonstrating the effectiveness of programs and creating a strong argument for their continued support. The Scottish Government is currently funding a re-run of the 1996 International Adult Literacy Survey to establish baseline population levels of literacy use.

These developments could make the continuation of the social practices approach very difficult. Individual Learning Plans are not really sufficient to address the data needs of these type of broad outcomes, and it is likely that they will be supplemented or replaced at some point. It is not yet clear what form the new approaches will take.

Findings and Implications

The aim of this project has been to pull together what has been learned about building accountability systems in adult literacy in British Columbia, Ontario and Scotland. Hopefully, some of the description and insights will be useful to people working in these and other jurisdictions. The findings collate the information from interviews, documentary review, previous research, and informal commentary by people involved in the field.

The findings are presented in three sections, dealing with systemic issues, how accountability mechanisms should be designed, and working with data. Wherever possible the findings reflect experience in all three jurisdictions and are selected to represent common concerns.

Systemic issues

These issues are top level concerns, to do with the way accountability could be conceptualized and implemented.

The expected outcomes for adult literacy programs need to be laid out clearly.

Adult literacy education often has a huge number of expectations attached to it, such as engaging marginalized groups in education, providing language instruction to people who have moved beyond English as a Second Language, finding work for participants, or community development. It is not feasible for any one program to meet all of these outcomes. While adult literacy programs may well be a gateway to many of these outcomes, they should not be held responsible for them.

The exact outcome of literacy programs will tend to be contextual. For some programs in some sites it may be largely about employment, in others it may be educational engagement. Nonetheless, there is a need for clearly negotiated outcomes between funders and programs, including a degree of reciprocity to ensure that programs have the resources they need to fulfill the expectations.

Lack of a systematic approach to accountability leaves adult literacy exposed.

Since the development of outcomes based management in the public sector, any program that lacks a clear rationale and a well developed logic model is in a vulnerable position. At the same time, it is important not to over-claim what literacy education can

achieve. There is a need for a balanced approach to literacy programs that sets out a realistic set of goals and the ways those goals can be demonstrated to have been attained.

Partly, this point refers to systems that have only a highly personalized system of progress measurement, and no means of collating it. For accountability to politicians and the public, there is a great deal to be said for straightforward, plain language reporting that sums up the achievements of the sector as a whole. This does not come naturally to adult educators, who are usually accustomed to complexity and loose connections between actions and outcomes. With funding increasingly tied to demonstrated performance, however, it is critical that the field develops a way to tell a unified story of achievement.

The wisdom, experience and values of the field cannot be overlooked.

Adult literacy educators tend to be committed people with strong values and a profoundly optimistic sense of human potential[xxix]. Any accountability system has to acknowledge the wisdom, experience and values which have built up within the field of adult literacy. At the early stages of creating accountability mechanisms it means involving practitioners and learners in the design process; as they evolve it means ensuring that trust is maintained. Any accountability system that begins from the position that educators need to be checked up on, rather than have their achievements recorded, is likely to be ineffective.

A key question here is the difference between adult education and schooling. In all three jurisdictions there have been conversations about a unified scale for children's and adult literacy skills. While this makes a lot of sense on some levels, it would require careful development to acknowledge the more complex learning situations of adults. While the outcomes may be similar, the processes usually are not. Across all three jurisdictions practitioners demonstrated a strong and consistent dedication learner-centered and individualized process that is perhaps less common in schools.

Any effective accountability mechanism has resource costs.

As with assessment, any effective accountability system needs a number of resources invested in it. Some of these are central, such as the development of such a system in the first place. Others are devolved to programs, such as data collection, collation and entry. There is also a need for training to ensure some consistency in the application of measures. In very broad terms, more detailed approaches tend to be more expensive, so collecting data that is not going to feed directly into decision making can be a costly diversion for program activities.

It is also likely that the lower the resource costs of accountability are, the more likely it is to be done well at the program level. This is simply due to the limited resources literacy programs work with, and the need to stretch them a long way. Accountability data may not be the priority for programs. The lightest touch that can get the necessary data is most likely the best approach.

The design of accountability

These comments are more concrete, and tend to be relevant to the development of a system.

The IALS(S) constructs need to be approached with care.

Over the last 15 years the approach to measuring literacy originally developed for the International Adult Literacy Survey of the mid-1990s has grown into a system. It has been refined and developed in a responsible and interesting way by those involved in the various projects over the intervening years. However, IALS approaches literacy in a very specific way, and it is important to be aware of what this approach can be used for, and where it is more problematic.

In general terms, the understanding of literacy behind IALS(S) is designed to give a snapshot of a population's literacy abilities at a specific point. It is not a way to talk about an individual's literacy abilities, which would require far more extensive exploration than the IALS(S) permits. It is also not diagnostic, and cannot be used to identify what an individual needs to learn. This is because IALS(S) tests deliberately jumble up several different skills in each question.

The levels associated with IALS(S) also need to be approached with some care. The claim that the Level 2 to 3 transition is an important indicator of functional literacy is a statistically sound claim, but it does not indicate what will happen to an individual. Many other factors will the influence the outcomes of literacy learning.

There is a need to differentiate outputs and outcomes.

A key principle of assessment is not holding people accountable for things they have no power to change. In the case of adult literacy programs, this could include employment of participants, or whether they continue their education. Things that programs can be responsible for include a welcoming and effective induction process, and demonstrated achievement of learning objectives. The first examples are program outcomes, the

second group of examples are program outputs.

The concept of transition readiness can be helpful here. Adult literacy programs, like any form of education, are not destinations but supports for people to move towards their destinations. Programs cannot make the transition for individuals, but they can certainly ensure that they are educationally prepared for the transition ahead of them.

Accountability and assessment systems need both "looseness" and "tightness."

Some parts of an accountability system need to be tightly defined and laid out. An example is standardized data intended for comparison across a number of programs, or across sectors. Here it is worthwhile to ensure that there is a high level of congruence across the information. Other parts may be less important to frame tightly. An example would be the order in which topics are covered, which can vary depending on the issues of the day in a given context. Educators can find a fairly loose approach is more effective, as it can follow the interests of learners rather than a pre-determined pattern.

The challenge is to know where a system can be looser and where tighter. Unnecessary tightness not only costs resources to manage and monitor, but can have negative consequences for staff motivation and learner retention. Inappropriate looseness can result in lost data and programs that cannot demonstrate their effectiveness as well as they might.

The nature of data

In this section, the findings concern the nature of data itself.

Data used for accountability is not the same as data for learning.

This point is intended to underline the different uses of data, and the different forms data must take. Data collected for accountability reasons is unlikely to be much use for educational decisions, and vice versa. Among other factors, accountability data must by definition be summative, whereas data for planning learning is formative. In addition, accountability data needs to be quantifiable to some extent, whereas assessment of learners' progress and direction-setting is often better if it is individualized and authentic.

The implication of this finding is that two parallel processes of data collection may be necessary in adult literacy programs. The first is the rich, detailed data required to understand a learner's progress and respond appropriately. The second is the thinner,

but tightly defined, data required to show the program supports learner progress. Benchmarks and similar approaches may reduce the starkness of this distinction, but it still remains important. Attempting to combine the two forms of data can confuse the issue enough to make the data inappropriate for either purpose. These two forms of data need to be separately conceived and planned for.

The necessary tools are not yet developed.

While there have been remarkable strides in assessment and accountability tools in recent years, the tools needed to understand the learning processes in adult literacy have not yet been created. There are some key ideas pointing the way, such as benchmarks, demonstrations, and individual learning plans, but they have not yet been built into an inclusive and reliable systematic approach.

It is becoming clearer what those tools might be. There is a need for an instrument to develop standardized system-wide data to represent unequivocally the contributions of the field. There is a need for diagnostic tools and sensitive approaches to progress measurement, and for a way to capture the broader outputs of adult literacy programs. There is also a requirement for these tools to deal with the diversity of learners in a sophisticated and informed way. Even though there is an emerging list of helpful instruments, the process of developing them will require commitment and resources.

Demonstrations of competency are a priority.

One key development in each jurisdiction would be a means to demonstrate competence in relation to self-defined goals. If the idea of learner-centeredness is taken seriously then the goals of learning will vary substantially, and this creates a significant challenge for mapping onto some consistent method for recording progress. Radically learner-centred approaches can be vulnerable to criticism because accountability and assessment data ends up being a collection of eclectic and non-comparable achievement.

Yet demonstrations of competence are an effective way to create links between individualised learning and overarching program frameworks. Portfolios of demonstrations are strong evidence of learning, and have many applications. It would be helpful to have further development of demonstrations so that they can become more reliable as a key component in systematic approaches to accountability.

Conclusion

There were two surprising findings in this project. The first was the similarity of issues across the three jurisdictions despite the different contexts. The International Adult Literacy Survey and follow-ups has moved the field on in important ways, not least by providing an international language for discussions about literacy in developed societies. Of course, some would suggest that the developments have not all been positive, and that the economic privilege associated with adult literacy is troubling. Most of the informants in this project would have agreed strongly with this, and there was evidently extremely sophisticated understanding of the complexities of literacy among the people who contributed. A key issue acknowledged across the board was the difficulty of capturing the diverse effects of adult literacy education in a easy to communicate measure.

The second surprise was the amount of energy and resources that are being put into answering such questions. While the three jurisdictions are clearly at different stages of development in their accountability systems, they are all bring vast amounts of expertise and imagination to bear on the problem. A related comment is that all three are similarly struggling with the burden of history, which is not always kind to the collaborative action needed to address such broad complexities.

The consistency of the efforts in the case study jurisdictions suggests that the key findings may be recognisable beyond these locations, and certainly my own experience in European discussions would tend to support this view. It is fascinating to see global issues being addressed on a local scale, and local experience can generate some important insights. The dilemmas of accountability, however, are likely to be challenging the field for some time to come.

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[x] Crooks, S. et al. (2008). *Voices from the field.* Montreal: Centre for Literacy of Quebec.

[xi] See, for example, Millar, R. (2005). Essential skills and lifelong learning: Friend or foe? *Literacies 6*, 31-33.

[xii] See Literacy and Basic Skills Section, Workplace Preparation Branch, Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. (2000). *Common assessment in the literacy and basic skills program.* Toronto: Author. Available at: *www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/training/literacy/assessmt/assess.pdf*

[xiii] There are also a list of work-related skills that are sometimes appended, though these are of a different order than those above.

[xiv] *Common assessment*, p.18.

[xv] For a fuller description of the Ontario system, see Connecting the Dots. (2008). *Ontario provincial adult literacy profile: Funders, providers and accountability*. Available at: *www.literacyandaccountability.ca*

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[xxix] For discussion of this phenomenon, see Battell, E., Gesser, L., Sawyer, J., Rose, J., & Twiss, D. (2002). *Hardwired for Hope: Effective ABE/Literacy Instructors.* Malaspina University College. BC. Available at: www.nald.ca/fulltext/hwired/cover.htm