Contextualizing Research in Manitoba

Where are we going? What are we doing?

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Preface and acknowledgments

The Centre for Education and Work (CEW) received project and financial support
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about the status of research in Manitoba in order to develop a framework, process, and
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Introduction

Recent initiatives by the Adult Learning and Literacy branch indicate the Manitoba literacy programs, practitioners, and students are interested in developing a more integrated and coordinated approach to research. Many programs have conducted action-based research or have developed new learning devised from literacy practices. However, this learning is not collected, analyzed, or used for devising additional research and development.

Currently, literacy projects in Manitoba have been identified on an ad hoc basis dependent upon local needs and outcomes. While these projects have been quite successful, they have not generally added to a growing knowledge of literacy practice and theory.

The researchers in this project worked with community-based literacy programs to identify research needs, identify and priorize research objectives and outcomes, and propose a framework for the development of a new paradigm for research in Manitoba for learning that embeds qualitative research into the delivery of literacy work.

This report includes four sections: Part One is an overview of qualitative literacy research (in particular participatory research approaches) in Canada, the United States, Britain, and Australia. Part Two is a summary of the methodology of the qualitative approach, used for this study. Part three is report on the data, and finally, Part four includes some recommendations for future research development in Manitoba.

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Section One: Overview of Current Research Practices

1.0   Participatory research

There is a predisposition in literacy practice for qualitative rather than quantitative research development. Researchers are interested in finding meaning in what people do rather than proving specific interventions statistically. For many in literacy programs it is extremely important to involve practitioners and students in the research process. Participatory research is "research dedicated to honoring people's own knowledge and empowering them with the ability to access and interpret information they need to act on their problems — a kind of research literacy." (Merrifield, 1997 p.1)

In some research projects, the researchers (rather than the subjects) set the agenda for the research question and the research agenda. In participatory research, the subjects are involved in the development of the question and the design of the research project. The participatory approach offers a philosophic approach consistent with learner-centered, community-based program philosophy. Wadsworth (1998) reinforces this view in her evaluation of action research,

> *These new assumptions underline the importance of social and collective processes in reaching conclusions about 'what is the case', and what the implications are for change which is deemed useful by those whose problematic situation led to the research in the first place (Wadsworth, 1998)*

Literacy practitioners value research that is embedded in the work that they do. They can see value in research that benefits them directly and values the learning of themselves and their students.

1.2 Participatory education practices

Much of what is extant in literacy research is a discussion of participatory education, not participatory research. Perhaps, it is sufficient that those developing participatory educational programs describe that process so that the development of truly learner-centred programming can be achieved more consistently. Even so, when projects report on their participatory education practices, they may not be conducting participatory research, but rather providing exemplars for best practices in participatory education.

Paulo Freire (1970, 1994) has been particularly instrumental in developing a participatory/emancipatory philosophy of community and literacy education. Freire contended that students should develop the curriculum, not the state or the school board, and that the outcomes of education should promote the development and increased ability of the learner to function as an effective citizen in society.

In many literacy programs throughout Canada and the United States, the curriculum continues to be externally set (e.g. GED up-grading programs/ high school accreditation programs). However, in Manitoba community-based literacy programs have been funded for over ten years on the basis of providing learner-centered programming. Thus, Manitoba literacy programs are likely to be aware of participatory education approaches, even if they are unfamiliar with participatory research approaches.

So, although participatory education has been the underpinning for many community-based literacy programs in Manitoba, this is often confused with participatory research. Although both processes have much in common, the premise in participatory research is that the subject (practitioner, learner, program individuals, etc.) would become active research partners. They would know and understand about data collection, qualitative

methods, and the development of research questions.

Because the field of literacy research is so new, few extensive and intensive qualitative literacy research projects exist. Exceptions are Fingeret and Danin, (1991), Horsman (1999), and Millar (1999), and most recently Norton & Malicky (2000). These studies demonstrate the strength of qualitative approaches to the developing field of practioner-led research.

1.3   Practitioners as researchers

Norton & Malicky (2000) explore some options for literacy research in particular they recommend 'research in practice' forms of research. For these authors, research should be based in and for literacy programs and should be conducted by those involved with literacy programs. They describe this approach in the following way:

> *The word "practice" explicitly designates that the focus of our research is on what happens in literacy programs. Even more significant is the word "in". Research has traditionally been conducted on practice by someone outside of the instructional context, often a university-based faculty member or graduate student. In contrast, research in practice is conducted by insiders- instructors, learners, volunteers and tutors. (p.33)*

Practioners shoud lead the research

If research is to be led by literacy practitioners as researchers, they may need to gain new skills and new perspectives.

If we want to develop practitioners as researchers then we need some models about research in learning and training for literacy practitioners. The literature on training literacy workers as researchers is, however, quite thin. However, a few examples do exist. The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NSCALL) provides support to the development of practitioners via the Practitioners Dissemination and research Network (PDRN). Additional information on PDRN can be found on the NSCALL web site (www.gse.harvard.edu). PDRN's research approaches have been to fund Practitioner Leaders who provide regional links to research being developing by NSCALL. In addition the Practitioner Leaders identify potential ABE teachers and programs who would be willing to participate in research projects.

The Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN) in England provides overall support for action research in education. Although this endeavor is not strictly related to literacy work, the emphasis on participatory practice and practitioner development has a valuable relationship to literacy practice.

Alberta has been actively involved in practitioner development in literacy research. A new web site at NALD (http://www.nald.ca/ripal/project.htm) will be focused on Canadian research projects. Alberta has funding for a project to assess desires and possibilities for professional development for Alberta literacy coordinators. The project will include consultation about professional development initiatives in Alberta and other jurisdictions, followed by interviews with Alberta coordinators and others with an interest in professional development. RiPAL Network members and others from the field will be involved in doing the interviews, as a means to build research in practice capacity.

Recently, British Columbia has developed a two-year project between Simon Fraser and Literacy BC to establish research circles in order to develop and promote literacy research in adult, family and workplace programs in B.C. (Thomas, 2000). The long-term effects of this process in the development of literacy workers and the effects of this process on research in literacy practice are yet to be determined.

Section Two: Methodology of this study

A Steering Group consisting of representatives from Adult Learning and Literacy (Manitoba Education, Training and Youth), Literacy Partners of Manitoba, literacy practitioners, and faculty from the University of Winnipeg and the University of Manitoba was consulted throughout the development of this project and the subsequent development of a Phase Two proposal.

In consultation with the Steering Group (See Appendix A) and the Adult Learning and Literacy branch which funds community-based literacy programs, the CEW organized a number of focus groups throughout Manitoba in the following jurisdictions: Pembina Valley, Interlake, Winnipeg, Brandon, and Swan River. Smaller groups discussions occurred with staff of Literacy Partners of Manitoba and with staff of the Adult Learning and Literacy branch. Although all literacy programs did not participate in the focus group discussions, a significant cross-section of programs did. Thus, we had a sample of practitioners and program organizers, which included representation from rural and urban, small and large programs, experienced, and new practitioners. In addition we had input from Aboriginal and Francophone programs. In total thirty-four practitioners participated in the discussions.

The focus groups were held on separate occasions during the months of March and April 2002. Two researchers from the CEW conducted the groups. The focus group discussions developed around a number of questions in order to stimulate responses. (See Appendix B for the stimulus questions.) Although participants were given the questions in advance, it was made clear that these questions were only the stepping off place for further discussion. The question sets were vetted by several practitioners and were amended after the first focus group.

All focus groups were tape recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were coded and analysed for analysis. The names of participants have been changed to preserve confidentiality, although the quotations are verbatim.

Section Three: Literacy Research: What for?

1.0 Context of research in literacy in Manitoba

For a number of years, literacy programs have received grants to design and develop "research" projects. Quite often these projects were linked to curriculum or program development and, while valuable to individual literacy programs, did not develop research skills of the participants. No criteria or guidelines for the design, development or delivery of research projects have been available. As a consequence, the literacy field has a confused concept of research, its purposes and use, and its role in funding of both provincial and NLS programs and projects.

As one participant put it,

> We put in an NLS proposal to do research of what the program was, for example. And technically what we're doing is funding the program. But at the same time collecting information about what to put back into the program to say, is it feasible, what we're doing?

So, literacy programs have often used research project funding to augment their programming. Not surprisingly they felt some conflict about the research agenda. As Betty said,

> So, that takes away resources in terms of my time or somebody else's time. There could be better use of, other ways… the research in a similar way. It's not that I don't want to know or understand these things. It's just we have to separate what we were there for in the first place.

If the research project takes them away from their primary need, which is serving students, then practitioners could not see the value in research. On the other hand, virtually all of the participating practitioners wanted to improve the quality of their teaching, their programs, and their services. Agnes put it,

> It does cause changes, it does cause changes in how you do things. Certainly there have been projects that we've done that were totally beneficial and we still use some of those created documents or whatever, today. I mean our intake form is an example. Our program has evolved around some of those things.

Practitioners could see the value of research that was practical and focused. They understood its usefulness in program development and program expansion. They felt that research could be applicable included research that was related to their practice. Many practitioners expressed the following kind of view,

> Research can be extremely interesting and extremely helpful especially if it has something to do with in the classroom and we can get it back and that has practical application to the research. It's not just floating research.

Quite often practitioners felt that practice-based research was not really research at all. The term 'floating research' captures the sense of the ivory tower, not grounded in practice, abstract research. This view of research reflects common notions of academic research which many practitioners hold.

Practitioners have a limited view of the kinds of research projects that could/might be undertaken. Their main direct experience of research is through surveys and statistical information and this is what they thought of when they thought of research. These views are expanded in Section 5 of this report.

Literacy workers are confused and conflicted about the value of research.

"I think of a professor in a lab coat"

2.0   When do people do research?

All practitioners who participated stated they did some informal research all the time. Informal research is conducted by a variety of literacy staff, working group members, tutors, and volunteers. Joan, a working group member, asserted,

> *Each time a new question is posed by a student or a staff member, it's looked into by your Board or your coordinator and discussed and that's really the only research that we available have on an on-going basis. It's just more what we can gather up ourselves.*

Research is a part of how we do our work.

People generally used research to solve a problem, examine a situation that is problematic, or to evaluate a situation. They realized that research could help programs change, but they also could see the value in retaining practices that were working well. One practitioner put it,

> *It's also to examine what's working well. So you don't get rid of what's working well.*

Literacy workers could see the value in conducting both formal and informal research if it had a direct impact on their programming. They also wondered if the issues and problems for research were somewhat different for program coordinators than for instructors and tutors. For example, program coordinators and working groups might find the issues of recruitment and retention of greater interest. Instructors and tutors might find the issues of motivation, learning styles and strategies, resources for adult learners of greater interest.

2.1 For teaching

Practitioners mentioned first their need to find resources for teaching.   Literacy workers want help in working with learners with specific needs. They want ideas on how to keep learners motivated and how to create interesting lesson plans. They search for resources for teaching including books, articles, and newspaper clippings, news items… anything that will be useful in their teaching. Alice summed the research strategies commonly used,

> *I feel the need on a daily basis whenever I have time, informally. Especially teaching strategies for learning disabilities, and learning about learning disabilities, what to look for, and what to do. On a daily basis I'm always constantly researching different lessons plans, different… everything. Books for adult learners which are so difficult to find because everything that's on the lower level is always for children. So, that's the kind of research that I think I do constantly*

Instructors used informal research to come up with teaching ideas.   They are thinking about the needs of their students and searching for resources to meet those needs. As Mary put it,

> *On top of schoolwork research, I just like reading it and thinking, well why is that? That often can lead to classroom discussions, like 85% of the population make so much of a wage, but that many people have colour TV's. Like how come they have colour TVs? So in classroom discussion, it comes in handy that way.*

Many tutors and instructors expressed the need to restate information for the learner. They wanted strategies on making information interesting and on making sure the learner was understanding the lesson. Doris stated it this way,

How can I say this differently to the learner? If they have certain needs, you're certain, you know, difficulties. Maybe it's my difficulty. Putting it in plain language, or something like that.

Doris is reluctant to make the issue the learner's fault. She believes that there are approaches and ways to facilitate learning that she can acquire. And she's ready to think that research might provide her with some of those strategies.

2.2 For starting up a new program

Most frequently practitioners used research when starting up a new program. They began by considering the needs of the community. In order to get new literacy program funding from the province communities are required to conduct a needs assessment. Carole, a practitioner in a program, stated,

> *I'm not sure whether a formal study was done, but I believe it was, when our literacy program began. The group that started it did a needs assessment in the community.*

Practitioners consider this the research element of funding for their new programs.   In many cases, the initial community needs assessment was the most formal research they had been involved in. As programs consider the range of information needed to develop a successful literacy program, they need to collect and analyze data. As Monica put it,

> *What are the dynamics of a new community? What are the partnerships that we need to make? And all of those things create the need to find our information. Whether that's done in research or whether we call that research or call it something else, it's a constant reality of programs. If they move into a new program category, like family literacy, there's a whole new program orientation and learning that's often research that they have to do to make good decisions about what they're going to do next.*

Practitioners seem satisfied that the research they conduct in order to start up a new program is effective, efficient and meeting their needs.

2.3   For expanding current programming

Many practitioners use research when introducing a change in the program or when expanding the program. They consult with students, partners, the community, and any other relevant people to determine the advisability and effectiveness of new initiatives. This may be a formal or informal process, as Gloria said,

> *I think when we started a family literacy program we had a committee that sat down and sort of hashed out what we felt would be the requirements or the target group and that sort of thing.*

They recognize that the program expansion will have an effect on their current programming and will target new groups and new possibilities within the community. Practitioners use research to develop the new program and adapt it to their specific needs and contexts. One program coordinator provided the following rationale and research context,

> *We've applied for a grant to run a parenting program, because most of our students are parents, and anything that affects them as parents, like their*

Doing assessment is doing research

learning capabilities. So we're looking at a Manitoba version of a triple P positive parenting program that's running out of Australia. And there's a research component to that as well.

Literacy programs in Manitoba adopt and adapt new programming under consideration, planning, dialogue, discussions and perhaps even debate. They refer to other models in other regions, provinces, and even countries. Although their research processes and methodologies may not be documented, they report that they search for and find information from a variety of sources.

2.4   For evaluating programming

Practitioners realize the value of research in helping them evaluate and design an effective program so they don't eliminate best practices. They conduct research on an informal, responsive way all the time. Susan, a literacy working group member, said,

> *Our program runs very much like that so that it's never a formal research but it's like an on-going research. Each time a new question is posed by a student or a staff member, it's looked into by your Board or your coordinator and discussed and that's really the only research that we have available on an ongoing basis. It's just more of what we can gather up ourselves.*

We do ongoing research to evaluate our program.

Practitioners want to improve the quality of their programming and want to offer the best possible service to their learners. Carole, an experienced program coordinator, stated,

> *For us research is what we use to guide where we're taking our program. It gives us insight into what's really needed so we can be flexible and adaptable to what we need in our program.*

Practitioners explore other programs and other models to determine what worked and what didn't work.   They wanted to know how others determined rates of success and how a specific model worked. A number of practitioners talked about the need to improve teaching and program delivery. They recognized that the Good Practice Guide used by the Manitoba government to evaluate programs is a kind of research tool. They commented that they found this tool effective and useful in evaluating their programs.

Nevertheless, they also recognized they need support and development in how to best evaluate their programs. As one working group member put it,

> *I guess as an agency we need support in how to do that. So that we are continuing through that process as opposed to stopping halfway because it isn't being documented. Which takes a great deal of time but to be of value to your program a year down the road it has to be documented as to how you used it. Whether or not it was successful.*

Literacy workers understand the value of documenting, recording and reporting on program quality, not only to meet funding demands, but also to better serve their clientele.

2.5   For meeting the unique needs of learner groups

Community-based literacy programming seeks to meet the needs of a wide range of learners. For example, programs exist in Manitoba with a focus on Aboriginal learners, Francophone learners, or people with disabilities. Programs run in urban, rural,

and remote communities. Each of these programs exhibits unique needs and unique responses. So, much research is conducted to find and meet these unique needs. Practitioners and programs often search outside of the province (and even the country) to find models and strategies for meeting the needs of their students.

Grace, a teacher in an Aboriginal program said,

> *I'll go to other programs that have similar circumstances to see what they do. I research what the outcomes have been in implementing their programs. What worked? What didn't work?*

So, practitioners analyze and evaluate by direct observation what applies to their own circumstances and what does not. By researching directly in the field, they bring a richness of experiences back into their own programs with the intention of building better programs.

Other programs commented on the need to develop specific materials and approaches for learners from different cultural backgrounds (such as Mennonites) and different language and ethnic backgrounds (such as Francophone). They recognized and differentiated the needs of learners with diverse learning difficulties such as Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) and those with developmental or intellectual disabilities. Research on learners with these specific needs is always a part of program or curriculum development.

Practitioners use active research strategies

3.0   How do practitioners do research?

Practitioners use the Internet, print materials, and human resources most commonly in their research practices. Almost all practitioners use the Internet on a regular basis. They less regularly use the library and databases. Next, practitioners talk to people. They gather information and resources from individuals on the community on a regular basis. Participants in this study cited a variety of community resources including personnel in government departments, professionals in the community, and other teachers (including those in schools). A few mentioned the helpfulness of librarians, although this was not a common response.

3.1 Using the Internet

Practitioners most commonly use the Internet to research any number of problems, concerns, ideas, or information. The Internet has clearly become a way for teachers, tutors, instructors and learners to easily access information they need. As one coordinator put it,

> *I think my ability to access research through the Internet has probably been the biggest blessing in my life because it's accessible; it's convenient; it's there. I don't have to leave my office. I can flick in a few key words, and through that process of being able to do that, I have opened up a whole new world of research on adult learning theory and adult education. It has helped me investigate ideas, and philosophies and notions of practice.*

The Internet has provided source material for people in rural and remote areas without easy access to larger libraries or databases. It has enabled locating a range of sources that might have been inaccessible in days past. It has helped people find resources and information in convenient, speedy ways. One potential cause of concern may be that little critique of the source material on the Internet exists. For example, practitioners may lack the background to discriminate between quality research and opinion. This research did not probe deeply into this area, but it may be a potential area for further research especially as students need to develop critical skills towards information gathered from the Internet.

3.2 Talking to other practitioners.

Practitioners use human resources in order to find relevant information. This may be to develop more appropriate teaching materials, or it may be to set up a new program. As one person put it,

> *We phone people in Winkler. We phone Dauphin. We phone Marie. Various places.*

Practitioners also contact, talk to and interact with other community groups and potential sources of materials and information. It is interesting that although rural practitioners tend to see their resources as more limited, in fact, their ability to call by name, for example, the local home economist to get access to health and nutrition information may be easier than in Winnipeg.

Practitioners specifically referred to the support of the rural coordinator in Manitoba. Her ability to respond to their unique needs was reported as invaluable to their program and personal development.

3.3 Working with their students

Practitioners spoke about the work with students as a source of research. Elaine, a practitioner with many years experience, said,

> *By working with the students with different materials, we can decide fairly easily whether they're at stage one, two, or three. … When I first started in literacy I used some specific assessment tools. But now, I can asses by give them this and they read and I listen for mistakes and give them a texts a little harder until it's too difficult for them. Then I decide from there where they're going to go.*

Experienced literacy workers use the individual students as sources for determining the initial needs assessment, level of materials, and potential stages of development. Less experienced tutors and instructors may need more formal initial assessment approaches, but ultimately they need to learn how to use the learners as resources.

3.4 Formal research

A minority of practitioners have participated in formal research studies. One practitioner spoke of her involvement in an overseas research project. She was part of a research team that went into a community for an action research project.

> *It was in Poland actually. So that need was felt, and it was echoed by the participants in my program so we went ahead and did a research project in regards to what the youth were doing in that community and what they could do to make it more sustainable. Because we left, it was short term, I always wondered what has happened to that research.*

Occasionally, more experienced practitioners have participating in participatory research projects,

> *I've had the opportunity to be involved in participatory action research and I think that's a very engaging kind of research that would be very useful for our field. I think we need to, as Carole said, a real focus as to what do we want research to do for us, what's the need in our field for research, how does that get done. How does it get put back into practice so it is useful?*

Practitioners see the value of research as if they have gained new skills and can see the impact directly on their practice.

3.5   Print materials

Practitioners use 'traditional" sources, such as books, articles, curricula, newspapers, etc. In particular, they needed to search out specific materials for teaching, but they might also search out materials for program development and expansion. They look for articles and reports such as working with Aboriginal people, the needs of immigrants, or ideas for working with students with learning disabilities.

4.0   Research skills of practitioners

Practitioners use secondary research all the time. They use libraries, books, articles, the Internet, and resources supplied by their program coordinator or regional coordinator. They use primary research skills in talking to practitioners, other community human resources, librarians, and government workers. People apply these skills to other contexts and regularly use them in work. As one literacy working group member put it,

> *We just did some research, and it applies to what I do in my work life in that we do the same kind of things. We asked, what are the problems? Then how can we solve them? And who will do it? And what is the time line? And what will the results look like when we've done what we say we're going to do. So, basically that's what we all do in our programs whether formally or informally.*

Literacy people, even those serving in literacy working groups, have a sound concept of what the purpose of research should be and how to go about developing a research project. They often have considerable knowledge about research in particular program areas such as family literacy, literacy for employment, people with learning difficulties or learning disabilities, etc.

Practitioners cited research literature that had affected them which included such diverse studies such as: the healthy child, cognitive development in adults, family studies, individuals with learning disabilities.

In practice, research experience has often been limited to the development and compilation of survey information. On the whole, the survey information has not been statistically analyzed. The surveys have rarely been subjected to scrutiny by other expert researchers and so the quality of the instrument itself may be called into question. Few researchers understand the process of good practice in qualitative research. They don't keep field notes, journals, nor do they tape and transcribe interviews. Thus, they lack research skills specific to participatory research practice.

Literacy workers and literacy programs seem to know what their issues are. For example, recruitment and retention is a larger issue in rural Manitoba than it is in Winnipeg. So, although rural programs may want to develop research projects around retention and recruitment but not know appropriate methodology or process to develop a sound research study. Thus, during one Focus Group, the lead researcher wondered,

> *It sounds like you need this kind of "brainstorming" event to come to grips with what a good research project would look like. What appropriate mythology would be? How you are going to collect the data, where you think somebody would be thinking these ethical issues. In terms of where are the ethical perimeters?*

4.1 Building Capacity

Literacy practitioners, even those with many research skills, do not perceive of themselves as literacy researchers. One very experienced practitioner, who has conducted a number of research projects, speculated,

> But until you brought up a couple of practical topics. I have that idea about research too, that it's pie in the sky. That it's not going to be good to me. But that's not right and maybe a lot have that feeling about research.
>
> I'm not sure what literacy research is. I don't think we do it here.

This may be because they have never received formal training in research or they feel that research is something conducted by academics, not those in the field.

Many, however, do not know what the skills are for developing qualitative or participatory research projects. They do not know the difference between quantitative and qualitative research except that quantitative for them is often more distant as a conceptual framework than qualitative. Few literacy workers have developed a literacy project with a research design beyond developing a survey instrument, collecting data, and reporting on responses.

As was stated earlier, most practitioners recognized that the Good Practice Guide used by the Manitoba government to evaluate programs is a kind of research tool. However, some practitioners also spoke about the time allotted to collecting statistical data which is never fed back to them. If research was focused on teaching practice and in particular teaching issues relevant to their needs, then practitioners were more interested in participation.

5.0   Barriers to research

Not surprisingly, many practitioners were resistant to undertaking research activities. They noted issues of time, energy and relevance most often.

5.1   Conceptions of traditional research

We began our conversations asking people what they thought of when they heard the word "research". Although the following response what meant somewhat humorously, the content does confer some of the negative images people have of research.

> I think of a lab with a professor in a lab coat. A mad professor in a lab coat chuckling maniacally with these pigeons/first year university students. Working at building blocks or something like that. And their task is to build blocks, but it has an ulterior motive of some kind to see how long before they have to go to the bathroom or something like that …

In this image, the researcher is manipulative, distant, using people as "subjects," and only interested in responses for his/her own needs. Clearly, literacy practitioners reject this process of doing research. Even so, it does colour their willingness and enthusiasm for developing research capacities beyond informal research.

5.2   Extra paper work

Other practitioners expressed concern that the main outcome of research was paper-work that didn't lead to anything.

> *I guess I'm a little hesitant when I hear people talk about research because I'm concerned that it's gonna be a lot of paper work for naught. Or it's going to be more information which is focused on an urban environment as opposed to what the rural needs are. So, I find that very often in rural communities we kind of get put aside when the research comes out.*

Too often, the experience of literacy workers is that the research project took up valuable time without a commensurate gain or benefit.

> *But once again it comes back to what's your definition of research. Are you doing a lot of paperwork? A lot of answering questions. Gathering demographics for it to sit on a shelf and say well that's fine.*

Practitioners worry that they will put time, energy, and 'paperwork' into research that will ultimately be unhelpful to them and their programs.

> *Is it going to be helpful in any way? Is it an interest that they all share or is it your own interest? Research for the sake of doing research is not productive. We teach our learners to set goals and have a focus and as practitioners we should do likewise.*

Research for research sake is not productive.

5.3 Time

Practitioners feel pressed for time. They generally spend any of their spare time hunting down teaching resources, activities for learners, interviewing and talking to learners. They have little free time for research activities or reflection. They may even have some particular source material in mind, but rarely have the time to follow up. Candace summed up this feeling,

> *I think what it all comes down to is the "time." You go into the Internet and your researching or searching for something…and like the workshops we had last week, was really good for bringing web-sites to our attention to a different area, in learning and instructions, that there is no time to get into any of them. And then there's a lot of time between. And if you're doing this at home and you do it at home because there is no other time. And you spend hours doing it.*

Practitioners want to help their students and often contribute their own time in order to develop what they perceive as better delivery, better resources, better work with individual learners. But, they feel there are limits to how much they should be expected to contribute of their own time.

5.4   Paid work

The issue is not just about time, but time outside of paid work. Most literacy workers in Manitoba are part-time. Practitioners do not have conditions of service that allow for research time. So, although the research might be interesting and tangentially helpful, practitioners need to select time spent in preparing teaching lessons and time spent in reading related research. Doris, a literacy worker in a rural program, pointed out,

Research doesn't pay

> *Just doing the teaching is time consuming. And you only have so much to allocate for that. So part of that is that you don't really have much time outside of that. There is not room for negotiating so to speak, within your time even if you were paid for it. There still is not any time, cause you're using all the time doing these other preparations.*

This is consistent with Norton & Malicky's (2000) descriptions of the difference between university researchers and community researchers.

> *The difference is that the job description of university faculty members includes research and service as well as teaching, whereas this is generally not he case for practitioners in other adult education programs. There is little support and even less reward for practitioners outside of universities and colleges to engage in research activities. (p.33)*

It is difficult to get excited about an undertaking that expects you to spend time, money and energy when the practitioner perceives no benefits.

5.5   Non-relevance of the research

Practitioners sometimes felt the research had little to do with them or their programming.   Instructors from one community-based program with a long time experience in the field said,

> *We participated in some projects and we never even heard from them. We don't know the results and we have no idea whether our contributions were useful.*

They often talked about being asked to participate in other people's research. For example, Manitoba literacy programs may be funded to collect data on programs. Therefore, the researcher sends out surveys to literacy programs which ask the programs to submit data to the researcher. Thus, the upshot is that the programs are actually conducting the research with no financial, personal, or program gain. Practitioners resent being asked to contribute in this way, but also feel slightly guilty if they don't. Thus, the research problem seems to put them in a double bind and they have one more reason for not wanting to be involved in research projects. One program coordinator put it,

> *I can't tell you the number of surveys which come across my desk. I'm starting to just toss them in the wastebasket.*

By the same token, practitioners did not want research "done to them."   They would not welcome an external researcher with no relationship (other than data collection to their programming).

5.6   Lack of feedback on current research

Practitioners complained that they often did not know the results of research or indeed what kind of research was happening elsewhere in the province.   They often felt abused when collecting data when they weren't informed about the end results. In particular they felt they spent long hours collecting statistical information for the province with little feedback or information on the purpose or use.

They wondered if this wasn't 'busy work' for them on behalf of the government. If the Adult Learning and Literacy branch was making use of the statistics, they felt they needed more extensive communication about the benefits for them to put time and energy into collecting statistical data. They also wondered if the statistics couldn't be used to improve program development.

6.0   Future wishes: Communication strategies

Many practitioners felt that they did not know what research was going on. They knew that other programs were conducting research projects but they rarely had feedback on either the results or the process. So, we asked practitioners how they would like research communicated to them.

6.1 Personal communication

Practitioners wanted people to communicate to them about research. They wanted live bodies to talk and explain research. They also felt exhausted from print and wanted to explore alternatives for gaining information. As one instructor put is,

> *to do good research or to participate in research. You are trying to get feedback from people, personal contact is the best, but it's not always the practical thing.*

They recognized that personal contact might be difficult and not practical, but nonetheless they felt most comfortable with this mode of communication. Someone needs to follow up to develop and expand research resources and knowledge.

6.2   Vet the research

Practitioners complained that they were too busy to find, read and relate to research. They wondered if some of that culling and sifting of information could be done by someone else, other than themselves. One coordinator suggested,

> *One resource that might be interesting is having someone who collates information. And is basically in charge of cataloguing it. So you know what is basically what's the premier information.*

Literacy workers contend that they might find research more useful and meaningful if all of it did not come their way. They were quite happy with someone providing an overview and access to the complete research information if that "clicked."

6.3 Provide summaries of research

A number of individuals recommended that research summaries could be circulated with additional documentation about where to find the longer research report if needed. As one literacy group member said,

> *What I find really good is some reports have an executive summary which is like a page - page and a half. And if I can go through that and it clicks.*

In these cases, the individuals might like the entire research report or a more in-depth piece about it. A shorter, more accessible version would be appreciated.

At the same time, practitioners wanted research put into plain language. They felt they needed someone to 'translate' research jargon into everyday language (much as we often need to do for developing readers in literacy programs).

6.4 Provide research information in print

Although almost all practitioners had access to e-mail, many seemed technologically 'exhausted.' They used the Internet for finding critical information and didn't have the time or energy to read dozens of e-mails pointing them to research projects and reports. It occurred to the authors of this report that a newsletter or research bulletin might be a viable alterative to explore.

Since many practitioners did not know what others in other Manitoba programs were doing, this kind of print information might provide easy to access names and project information for follow up. The research newsletter and/or bulletin could be the beginning of a Manitoba research database for keeping track of current and past research projects.

6.5 Present at conferences

Practitioners who attended conferences invariably felt that the presentations they attended were valuable. They learned about research in other programs in this way. They interacted with others and had a venue for discussing and reacting to specific projects and curricula.

> *The Literacy Partners Conference had a sharing circle and so a number of different instructors did come forward and share what they were doing in their programs and what was successful. I think what was positive and even negative. And it was very useful.*

So, practitioners want to hear about both successful experiences and not so successful experiences. They accept that not every initiative will work, but they do like to explore why something was or was not successful.

They find sharing, talking, interacting with one another extremely useful, particularly when the experience is focused on practice.

7.0 Building a Research Agenda

Although the original concept of this project was to provide data on identifying the research agenda for Manitoba, the feedback from the focus groups indicated this concept was premature. Few groups or practitioners have the skills nor the opportunities to reflect on the direction of literacy research.

Only one Focus Group of very experienced practitioners in Winnipeg seemed anxious and eager to discuss setting research agendas for the province. Even within this group, however, the sense was that research should be practice-based and participatory.

7.1 Provincial resources in literacy

Many rural practitioners felt the Adult Learning and Literacy personnel were extremely helpful in finding information, linking to ideas, strategizing for program development, etc. If they wanted information, the rural coordinator would be their first line of inquiry. However, the programs did not name the Adult Learning and Literacy branch as being a source of research information. The implications of this are that the branch is not communicating its own research role clearly. In addition, the primary research the branch regularly conducts, such as the Statistical Return and the Good Practice Guide, is not used effectively for feedback in the programs.

It should also be noted that few programs cited Literacy Partners of Manitoba as being a resource in literacy research. The researchers did not specifically ask people whether Literacy Partners was a resource in research, so this is perhaps a shortcoming of the research data.

Section Four: Summary and Reflections on the Future

Almost grudgingly, practitioners can see the point of research. They realize that statistics are necessary for the development and expansion of funding for adult literacy programs. They use and find information and resources that support the development of their programs. They can see the merit and value of research, but they feel a number of gaps in both funding support and skill development exist.

Practitioners have been burned a number of times by formal research projects. If their input was sought, they did not see the results of the product or the research. They have not been given feedback about NLS research projects nor if there is an emerging 'agenda' around literacy research. It is also fair to conclude that although research plays a significant role in how they do their work, practitioners do not view research as a major product of their day-to-day work.

As part of the analysis of the data by the researchers, the following reflections have emerged.

1.0   Federal-provincial research expectations should be made clear to literacy programs

Practitioners suggested that if research is a priority, then programs should know that the allocation will be X per cent of the totally federal-provincial dollars. Thus, certain amounts could be set aside for family literacy, curriculum development, program innovation, and research. Thus, informal research needed for any new initiative could be a part of all areas, but the research "pot" would be more focused and documented as a research project.

2.0   Make the research agenda overt

At this point, practitioners feel research in literacy is marginalized. They do not feel that an emphasis on quality research has been either a part of their mandate or a requirement of the province. They do feel that the Good Practice Guide helps them become better programs and allows them to be accountable for analyzing their programs.

This history in the province of working with the Good Practice Guide is a potential starting point for developing research skills of practitioners. Since they are familiar with it and regularly use it, the value of the Good Practice Guide as a research instrument could be expanded and built on in order for practitioners to better understand both the purposes and processes of research.

3.0 Research initiatives should fund all partners

If a research project funds a program to conduct surveys, then the participating literacy programs should receive some compensation for the data they collect. Too often literacy programs feel abused in this data collection process.   Commensurate honoraria for participation, which is consistent with current rates of pay, should be a part of funding applications.

4.0 Research should be participatory and collaborative

All practitioners contended that unless research projects included them as researchers and showed them the benefits of the research, they were not interested in being a part of those projects. Clearly, traditional 'academic' research will not work in this climate.

Thus, participatory approaches and professional development must be integrated into any new research agendas.

5.0   Research awareness needs to be raised through a variety of communication vehicles

Although individuals are comfortable with using the Internet, they do not read e-mails unless they view them as urgent. Thus, programs are not ready for electronic-only communication approaches. Few practitioners know about Fresh Start e-learning systems.   Program funding could priorize research or give additional funds to those programs willing and able to conduct additional research.
Dissemination of research should include a variety of modes and delivery mechanisms.

Practitioners suggest that a central source should collect current research and disseminate the results in a variety of ways. They liked personal interaction with people in their programs and thought that a research lead was a good idea. They felt both print and electronic communication would also be of value.

They wanted brief summaries of a range of research literature with a focus on teaching practice (for instructors) and program development and expansions (for coordinators and working groups).

6.0   Research capabilities already existing in programs and practitioners should be highlighted and celebrated

As the data in this report suggests, many practitioners already possess good research skills. However, these skills are under-valued. A mechanism should be sought to help practitioners self-evaluate their own skills and determine what professional development is needed to increase their skills.

Once some competencies have been identified individual practitioners can self-assess their gaps in learning and experience. Once research skills and needs have been highlighted, the province should have a clear idea of professional development for literacy workers.

7.0   Research may have a different focus for program coordinators than for instructors

It was clear in all the Focus Groups that a major agenda for instructors, tutors and teachers is to provide better quality teaching for their students. This includes the development of resources, identifying better resources, professional development, etc. Teachers want and need specific materials for specific audiences such as Aboriginal or Francophone learners. This group of literacy workers found it difficult to conceptualize a research project. Research-in-practice initiatives seem particularly well suited for them.

Program coordinators and literacy working group members were more focused on program development issues such as recruitment and retention of students, program evaluation, and expansion. In their cases, perhaps both because of more years of experience but also because of their roles, research projects were easier to conceptualize. For example, they could easily relate to a research project that compared results in different groups. Program coordinators had little difficulty identifying a problem to research.

8.0 Literacy community needs to build a long-term strategy

Practitioners can appreciate that building a research agenda may take time and will need to be developed over a number of years. They had difficulty pinpointing exactly what was needed to improve research capacity. This may be because exploring the research agenda is a fairly new concept for them.

Although many practitioners possess good research skills, these skills need refinement and development in order to produce quality research results. The research circles in B.C. seem too vague for the specific skills which people need to build. It had been suggested by members of the Steering Committee of this project that linking literacy workers to university faculty might be a fruitful way to improve literacy research skills. From the data we collected, this arrangement seems premature. Currently, too much confusion and resistance to traditional university research exists in programs. Unless, the program itself wants and needs formal research input, these partnerships will not be productive. However, after more awareness about literacy research is raised, it may be that these partnerships will be possible.

Until literacy practitioners, working groups, and even students understand the usefulness and the value of increasing their own understanding of research, research capacities, and research skills, it will be quite difficult to build a research agenda. Any new literacy research projects should take these realities into consideration.

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Appendix A: Steering Committee

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Appendix B: Stimulus Questions

The following questions are only intended to produce some initial points of discussion and are not the only basis for discussion. All focus groups will be audio taped and the data used in order to provide information for further research development in the literacy field.

1. What is your definition of research? What do you think of when you think of the word 'research'?
2. When have you felt the need to conduct formal or informal research?
3. What sources have you used?
4 What kinds of research in literacy have been helpful to you in your practice?
5. Are you aware of the literacy research done in other programs?
6. What research would be helpful in the future?
6.1 How would you like research to be disseminated?
6.2 Would you like Guidelines to be developed for NLS Research Projects?
7. What research would be helpful in your practice?

    o Teaching strategies
    o Classroom organization
        ❏ Learning difficulties and differences
        ❏ Learning disabilities
    o Assessment and evaluation
    o Helping student do goals setting
    o Resources and materials to facilitate learning
        ❏ Links to other programs and services
        ❏ Technology
        ❏ Software programs
        ❏ Multi-level teaching
8. What barriers to developing and conducting research project do you think there are?
    o Don't know how to do research
    o Don't know how to develop a proposal
    o Don't have the interest in doing research
        ❏ Don't see the relevance to my program
        ❏ Don't see the incentive for doing
        ❏ Don't see the impact with others
        ❏ Too much competition
        ❏ Need a research lead

9. Would you like more training/professional development in any of the following?
    o Interpreting educational research
    o Designing and developing research project
    o Defining the problems or questions
    o Getting support and guidance in the research project idea
    o Getting support and guidance in writing a research application
    o Linking research to practice
    o Gaining research skills

10.   I have/have not developed research projects for the following reasons:

   o   No time
   o   Not enough personal expertise
   o   Not enough resources to do the project
   o   No support for the research development and project management
   o   Not interested in research
   o   Research doesn't have anything to do with my teaching
            ❏No support from program or working group
            ❏No one to network with about research possibilities

11.   What do you think should be the literacy research priorities for the next five
        years?

1 More details on the qualitative analysis process are available from the authors.