

Enhancing Literacy Research in Canada

**A Framework for the Research
Support Activities of the
National Literacy Secretariat
Human Resources Development Canada**

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Enhancing Literacy Research in Canada: A Framework for the Research Support Activities of the National Literacy Secretariat

Introduction

Since its beginnings a decade ago, the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) of Human Resources Development Canada has supported research as one of the important elements in its work to advance literacy in Canada. In light of the 1995 evaluation of the NLS and the February 1997 increase in NLS funding, the Secretariat decided to reassess the focus of its research support activities. This paper is the result of that review and presents the resulting framework for the future of NLS research support activities. Research support activities refers to the work of the NLS in the area of literacy research, including funding research work, contracting its own research activities and working with its partners to address research issues.

The framework is intended to enhance the cooperation between the NLS and its partners to support research itself and to promote the dissemination and application of research results to literacy policy and practice. This framework will guide future NLS efforts to strengthen research and enhance its relevance to the broad goals of both the NLS and the literacy community.

Reviewing NLS Research Support

In 1988, the architects of the National Literacy Program recognized the key role that the federal government could play in promoting literacy research. Accordingly, the NLS has devoted a portion of its annual project funding budget to research activities as one of five key funding areas. In recent years, this has amounted to about 10% of the [then] NLS annual \$21M grants and contributions budget.

Research supported by the NLS has included needs assessments, evaluations, pilot projects, and research into best practices. The NLS has responded to research needs identified by the literacy community and other partners, in keeping with the responsive model the NLS has followed in its project funding generally.

The NLS has also commissioned large-scale statistical surveys: the survey of Literacy Skills Used in Daily Activities (LSUDA) in 1989 and the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) in 1995. As well, through ongoing sponsorship of UNESCO's International Award for Literacy Research and the ALPHA research series, the NLS has promoted international excellence in adult literacy research and the sharing of research results.

In the 1995 evaluation of the NLS, the assessors gave credit to the NLS for advancing literacy research in Canada. However, the evaluators found that the scope and quality of research was not always adequately monitored and that the results of research projects had not been adequately disseminated. The evaluation concluded that the NLS needed to identify more clearly the objectives to be accomplished through its research funding activity.

Since the evaluation, notably at the Policy Conversation on Literacy Research, a number of areas have been identified that warrant NLS attention: (1) disseminating research findings, (2) building Canada's literacy research capacity; and (3) creating bridges between researchers and practitioners. Overall, they have pointed to the need for a more strategic and coordinated approach to NLS research support.

As part of an increased commitment to literacy, the Government of Canada announced in its February 1997 Budget an additional \$7 million per year in funding for new literacy initiatives. A portion of this is intended for literacy support mechanisms, including literacy research. This move, too, has increased the need for a framework for action.

Developing a Framework for NLS Research Support Activities

Objectives

The fundamental objective of NLS research support is defined in the Terms and Conditions originally approved by the Treasury Board for the National Literacy Program:

To stimulate applied research and development initiatives which address the needs of literacy practice and practitioners.

With this in mind, the NLS has developed the following, more specific, objectives for its future efforts to encourage, enhance, fund and commission literacy research in Canada.

Specific objectives of the NLS research support framework will be:

- \$** *To provide sound information to inform literacy policy and practice in Canada;*
- \$** *To encourage coordination of research projects to prevent duplication and ensure that research meets widely felt strategic needs;*
- \$** *To promote collaboration between researchers, practitioners¹ and learners;*

¹Note: The term *practitioner* is intended to be inclusive of all individuals working with adult learners in a literacy learning environment, including literacy workers, tutors, workplace trainers, instructors, etcetera.

- \$ *To develop an increased capacity to do high quality literacy research in Canada B both in the academic environment and in the field;*
- \$ *To ensure that results of research work are widely disseminated to practitioners, program and policy developers, researchers and the broader literacy and non-literacy community.*

Guiding Principles

In developing its research support framework, the NLS is guided by some fundamental principles which flow from these objectives:

- 1. Research should be founded on partnerships between researchers, practitioners and learners.*

As in other literacy work in Canada, a partnership approach is key to success. Projects in which practitioners and researchers work together will build links that ensure the relevance of research. Learner involvement, where appropriate, will also contribute to the richness of the research.

- 2. The approach to research support should be balanced.*

No one type of research is inherently more legitimate or important than another. The NLS will respect both qualitative and quantitative research, recognizing that there is place in the literacy field for both academic and program-based, participatory action research projects.

- 3. The areas of research should reflect the wide range of literacy needs.*

An appropriate balance in research support should be maintained between the literacy needs of francophones and anglophones, and of the many other groups requiring special attention in literacy policy, programming and practice.

- 4. Applied research remains the focus.*

Research, to be useful and effective, must be relevant to the program and policy needs of the NLS and its partners.

- 5. Quality research is the goal.*

Whether practitioner-driven or more academic, whether narrowly focussed on evaluating a particular project or broadly based, the research supported by the NLS should meet generally accepted standards of quality. The goal is to improve the quality of literacy research.

6. Building research capacity for the future is important.

Research support provided by the NLS should help to develop Canada's capacity for literacy research. This means funding for research projects, for infrastructure, and for the training of future researchers.

7. Research results must be disseminated.

The publication of research findings and the sharing of research methods is key to making the best use of research dollars. Sharing information about research work can inform as well as inspire work in other areas of the country and the world. Effective dissemination of research results will contribute to the development and application of literacy knowledge and expertise in Canada.

Components of the NLS Research Support Framework

This Framework will guide NLS research support activities, bringing a new focus and coordination to the work of the NLS in this area. It is designed to reinforce and complement other priorities and initiatives to which NLS resources are devoted. This Framework is not intended to replace current funding practices and procedures, particularly within the Federal-Provincial/Territorial funding stream where priorities are elaborated to meet specific local and regional needs. It does not presume to prescribe a framework for Provincial and Territorial partners. They will be encouraged, however, to consider the objectives and principles of the NLS Framework in their own research funding.

There will be two components of the NLS Research Support Framework:

Component 1: Strengthening Literacy Research Infrastructure and Capacity

The focus of this component of the research framework is infrastructure and capacity-building projects which will lay a lasting foundation upon which to build a thriving literacy research community. This requires a long-range plan, building in elements as capacity grows. Over the first three years, from 1998 to 2001, initiatives will be developed in partnership with a range of organizations, including universities, research institutes and literacy organizations. Specific priorities will be established for this component which recognize the interests and experience of partners. They will be adjusted from time to time in light of experience and funding availability, and based upon feedback received.

Four goals are at the heart of this component:

- Building literacy research capacity in Canada
- Improving research quality

- Encouraging and assisting cooperation between researchers and practitioners
- Improving the dissemination and application of results

Potential areas of support under this component could include:

Building Literacy Research Capacity

- ▶ Support for networking among literacy researchers
- ▶ Literacy research fellowships for faculty
- ▶ Scholarships for graduate students in literacy studies

Improving the Quality of Literacy Research

- ▶ Support for centres of excellence in literacy research
- ▶ Stronger links between Canadian and international literacy research workers

Encouraging Cooperation Between Researchers and Practitioners

- ▶ Research sabbaticals for practitioners
- ▶ Practical sabbaticals for researchers
- ▶ Support for networking between literacy researchers and practitioners
- ▶ Joint seminars and workshops of researchers and practitioners

Improving Dissemination and Application of Research Findings

- ▶ Using the Internet to promote access to Canadian literacy research
- ▶ Support for a Canadian literacy research journal and for a transfer journal for practitioners
- ▶ Support for a regular national conference on literacy research

Component 2: Continued Support for Literacy Research Projects

The NLS will continue to support a broad range of research which addresses current and emerging literacy needs. We will do so in a coordinated fashion in order to make the most of the funds available for research work. When supporting research projects, the NLS will place a strong emphasis on research excellence, broad applicability of results and dissemination of findings to both researchers and practitioners.

The NLS funds research of four main types:

- Understanding the literacy skills of the Canadian population and assessing the implications of these findings (including statistical and demographic research).

- Investigating new ways to assist various groups of Canadians in developing literacy skills (policy research).
- Assessing the nature and effectiveness of efforts to address literacy needs (program-related research).
- Understanding better how people develop literacy skills (pedagogical research).

Specific research priorities within this component may be set by the NLS from time to time. These priorities will reflect related NLS priorities, such as the current emphasis on Family and Workplace literacy identified with in the 1997 Budget documents.

The Future of the Research Support Framework

The implementation of a framework of this kind is an evolving process. Adjustments will be made to meet the changing needs of a developing field. The NLS will seek opinions and information from partners, researchers and the literacy community in a variety of ways to assist with the evolution of the framework and to set priorities. Regular on-going consultation mechanisms and sessions specifically devoted to research issues will be used.

Conclusion

This framework is an important next step for the NLS in its work to support literacy research in Canada. Its focus on research infrastructure development represents a commitment to create an environment which will be supportive of literacy research. As well, the NLS maintains its commitment to fund and to commission projects which address the various needs of learners and practitioners. It is built on the principle of partnerships, a hallmark of NLS activity. The provinces and territories, the academic and practitioner communities, and literacy and non-literacy partners are encouraged to find a place within this framework to contribute to a more literate Canada through research.

A Selection of Ideas Offered at the Policy Conversation on Literacy Research

February 5-7, 1996

- Literacy research cannot be isolated from literacy practice or literacy conditions.
- A research strategy needs to place the learner at the centre and include the practitioner.
- Significant advances have been made in understanding literacy skills, but we need to know more about why learners are in programs and what they gain from improved literacy.
- Research has been too centred on the delivery of literacy training and not enough on teaching techniques.
- Research must not be restricted to matters of immediate relevance. It must take a longer view.
- We must do more to ensure that research is applied. Research is not finished until it is used.
- Academics and practitioners must work more closely together. Academics can help practitioners do research, and practitioners can ensure that academic research is relevant.
- We need to strengthen the quality of literacy research. More *hard@expertise* is needed.
- Academic researchers need to be imbued with passion about literacy research.
- Research councils should treat literacy as an appropriate and important academic activity.
- Research is needed on the contribution of literacy to social and economic development.
- More evidence is needed to show how literacy affects health, justice, inter-generational issues, seniors=independence, etc.
- More research is needed on literacy in relation to Aboriginal Canadians, immigrants, francophones and other groups.
- Increased funding is needed for literacy research. A wide range of sources should be developed, not just the NLS.
- An interdisciplinary approach to literacy research is needed.
- What we learn from research is often not widely known or translated into effective policies.
- Communicating the findings of research is critical. Dissemination should be an integral part of the research plan. New means such as transfer journals are needed.
- We need NLS to provide leadership for a dynamic literacy research strategy.
- Research networks are needed to tie researchers together. Also centres of excellence.
- We need to identify research priorities continuously, not just once every few years.

Policy Conversation on Literacy Research

Extracts from Closing Remarks by James E. Page
Executive Secretary, National Literacy Secretariat

SOME PRINCIPLES HAVE EMERGED...

Primacy of the learner...

The first and foremost principle is the primacy of the learner in the many ways they learn. We have to give learner and learner-practitioner relationships high priority in the development of a literacy research strategy.

Importance of partnerships...

A second principle . . . is the importance of partnerships in advancing research on literacy B partnerships in which practitioners and researchers work together; partnerships to identify what . . . needs to be done; partnerships in providing support and funding; partnerships for the dissemination of results.

Praxis...

The third principle is about praxis, that is, theory being informed by practice and practice by theory. That has to be . . . one of the pillars of any kind of meaningful strategy in the literacy field.

Collaboration between researchers and practitioners...

[We need] . . . full discussion and collaboration between researchers and practitioners in developing a strategy and in realizing it. . . . Research needs to be co-owned rather than being the exclusive domain of one or other group.

Literacy research for well-being...

. . . literacy is premised on social, economic, political (citizenship) and cultural participation. I liked very much the turn of phrase, Aliteracy research for well-being@ We need to keep that word Ademocratic@in mind - democratic in how we phrase a research agenda B and also in how we go about fulfilling it and sharing the results of it.

ARCHITECTURE OF A STRATEGY...

Astate of the art@ review...

Clearly one of the first elements in this evolving architecture is a Astate of the art@review of literacy research. . . .

Dissemination of results...

Any research strategy . . . needs to include the dissemination of research results in both French and English. This needs to encompass a variety of tactics including . . . the one-page fiche; . . . the development of an appropriate database and Web site; and the development of a publication infrastructure which might include a transfer journal, a set of occasional papers, and an academic journal. The publication of research findings and the sharing of research methods in a coherent, predictable, established way is important.

Research advisory mechanism...

Another important part of this . . . [is] a research advisory mechanism to help us remain relevant and current when making choices about what we should support. Based on that process, we could regularly identify changing research priorities to articulate clearly what we plan to do to advance the field at any particular point in time.

Identify our priorities...

More thought is needed . . . about where we should place our priorities. . . .[What] about policy relevance and about action-oriented and participative research? Do these have equal weight now? Will they in the future?

We need to identify priority fields . . . We need to identify broad areas and then see, both by active solicitation by the NLS and by what people bring to our door, how we can advance research on Aboriginal literacy; minority language, official language and immigrant language literacies; family literacy; workplace literacy; empirical work; statistical work; and analyses of what happens to learners throughout their lives.

Doing something of a long-term nature around learners is both attractive and necessary. What happens to learners as a consequence of the programs they complete? What sorts of literacy practice affects them? Do learners become part of a culture of learning and a culture of reading?

Information on work abroad...

. . . in addition to identifying what needs to be looked at in Canada, we would well be served if we were to ensure that we have access to information on quality work abroad. . . .

Work with other federal departments and agencies...

We also need to develop of a plan to work with other federal departments and agencies on literacy research issues, in particular with DIAND on native issues, with Canadian Heritage on official languages, (particularly official language minority issues) with the Department of Health, with Solicitor General and Justice, and with the research granting councils.

Development of a research capacity...

Short, medium and long-term attention must be paid to the development of research capacity. We talked about training and education, graduate scholarships for students, research fellowships for faculty, . . . practitioner sabbaticals to provide literacy workers with time to refresh their thinking and to learn about what is current in research. . . . we should [also] be looking at the development of a domestic award to stimulate literacy research in Canada.

[There are] matters on the infrastructure side@ which require attention over the short, medium and long-term as well. We need a time series of empirical data which periodically defines and continuously refines the literacy challenge. We need to identify some additional longitudinal work. We have already mentioned the importance of a literacy component in the Longitudinal Survey of Children.

Bring legitimacy and recognition to the field...

[We must] ensure literacy is perceived as a legitimate area of academic activity with appropriate scholarly recognition and rewards [for example by] creating publishing venues in both official languages, so that there are ways in which literacy scholars can get their work published to receive the academic recognition they deserve.

Research communication strategy...

Beyond all of this, there is a need for a coherent research communication strategy. [We need to help journalists] in the area of literacy research, not necessarily to write about every piece of research done, but to build up, in their own files and in their minds, the depth of knowledge of literacy to write about it effectively and pointedly. We need to make literacy research part of the agenda of other non-literacy organizations

What can the NLS do...

We can support multi-year research projects. We also could consider ways to promote research-sharing or collaborative research. . . . When we fund conferences and seminars, we might encourage sessions devoted to the sharing of related research results so that those who are active in research can run workshops on what they are doing. This would provide research leaven to assist the development of the field.