

Manitoba Research in Practice Initiatives

by **Robin Millar**

Research in practice in Manitoba is in its infancy. We are just starting to build a research agenda which will be responsive to literacy programs, students and practitioners.

The Centre for Education and Work (CEW), a not-for-profit organization, has been a leader on this issue.

Last winter the CEW started the process. We conducted focus groups in five different regions of Manitoba to find out whether community-based programs were interested in and able to conduct literacy research. We compiled a report from these interviews. The report includes recommendations about how developmental work in research should develop. In brief, literacy practitioners targeted three areas:

- increasing access to research
- finding a variety of ways to circulate information about research
- developing research skills

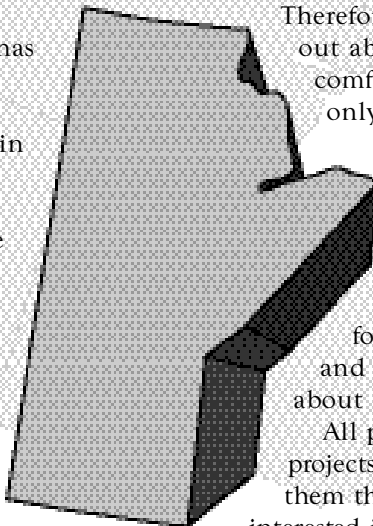
Feedback from the field

Literacy practitioners felt they didn't have the time or energy to seek out literacy research.

Therefore, they wanted a variety of ways to find out about literacy research. Although most are comfortable using the internet, they often read only urgent e-mails. Thus, programs are not ready for electronic-only

communications. Sharing research should include print, electronic and in-person information. Practitioners wanted brief summaries of a range of research literature. Instructors wanted a focus on teaching practice and coordinators and working groups wanted information about program development and expansions.

All practitioners said that unless research projects included them as researchers and showed them the benefits of the research, they were not interested in participating. Clearly, traditional academic research will not work in this climate. Thus, new research agendas should integrate participatory approaches and professional development. At the same time, literacy practitioners are unsure of their own



expertise. They worry that they do not have adequate skills to conduct a research project.

Moving forward: the CEW research project

To meet the needs identified by practitioners, the CEW developed a project for 2002-2003, which was supported by the National Literacy Secretariat. The project has three main goals.

Goal # 1: Produce literacyNOW!

We developed a short, easy to read, research journal which is mailed to literacy programs. As of March 2003, we had produced four issues. *literacyNOW!* is available on the CEW web site and easily links to other web sites. The project also gave honoraria to a number of Research Leads who distribute *literacyNOW!* and get feedback about content, format and future needs.

Goal # 2: Find out what skills and knowledge people need to do literacy research

We conducted an occupational analysis (DACUM) with literacy researchers. The Adult Literacy and Learning branch for the province of Manitoba will use this data to develop further training. As well,



literacy practitioners can use it to assess their own capacities. It is one way to help them identify what they need to learn.

The DACUM Committee included literacy researchers from Manitoba and across Canada. Our report on the process and outcomes, *You Know More Than You Think You Know*, is available on the CEW web site.

Goal #3: Offer workshops at provincial conferences and learning events

The CEW developed a number of workshops to raise awareness of current research in literacy and develop research skills in literacy practitioners.

Further debate: Where are we going?

When we analysed the original interviews and focus groups, we developed a number of recommendations for future work in literacy research. These are relevant not only for Manitoba, but other provinces as well. Perhaps these recommendations could be the beginning of a debate about the roles of both federal and provincial literacy funders.

Here are our recommendations:

- 1) Federal and provincial funders should make their expectations clear to literacy programs. This includes funding objectives for NLS-funded projects.
- 2) All partners of research initiatives should be funded. Research projects that expect in-kind contributions from programs should check with participating programs or build in extra costs for collaboration.
- 3) Research should be participatory and collaborative.
- 4) Research capabilities that already exist in programs and practitioners should be highlighted and celebrated.
- 5) The literacy community should build a long-term research strategy.

The full report, including these recommendations, is available on the CEW web site (www.cewca.org). ■

Dr. Robin Millar is the Executive Director of the Centre for Education and Work. Robin worked for the Province of Manitoba in adult literacy for ten years. She has presented at conferences and workshops in workplace education, adult literacy, adult education and learning disabilities, and more recently prior learning assessment.