

Research Review: Setting Research Priorities

by **Pat Campbell**

Some nations, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, have established national research agendas in the field of adult learning and literacy.

An important aspect of these two agendas is the identification of specific research priorities. The research agendas have focused efforts on a small number of core themes to maximize the probability of making a significant impact on policy and practice.

Although the two nations present their themes as separate entities, it should be acknowledged that the themes are interconnected.

United States

In the United States, the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL), the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL), and the US Department of Education's Division of Adult Education and Literacy (DAEL) partnered to create the national agenda. The three partners recruited a national steering group that included practitioners, policy-makers and members of the research community. Together, the stakeholders developed a National Plan for Research and Development in Adult Education and Literacy that outlined five themes: (1) adult learning, recruitment, and persistence; (2) types of instruction that work best; (3) learner assessment and program evaluation; (4) staff development; and (5) policy and structure. Specific research questions were identified within each theme or area.

United Kingdom

The United Kingdom's Economic and Social Research Council has developed a Teaching and Learning Research Programme. Their agenda has



identified three research themes for lifelong and adult learning. These themes are: (1) learners and learning; (2) teachers, training, and learning environments; and (3) learning communities. The agenda emphasizes the importance of doing research that cuts across the three themes.

Canada

This leads to the question: "Do Canada's practitioners,

academics, and policy makers need or want to set research priorities?" By this, I mean, is there a set of core research themes and questions that need to be addressed? In March 2004, the National Literacy Secretariat hosted a consultation meeting entitled Setting Priorities for Literacy Research. Some of the participants verbally expressed an interest in identifying core research themes and questions, while others did not.

Although the literacy field has never developed an explicit set of priorities, we have inadvertently begun to establish them. This became evident when I analyzed the research within the *Directory of Canadian Adult Literacy Research in English* to see where the literacy field has been focusing its attention since 1994. The findings are documented in a report called *From Coast to Coast: A thematic summary of Canadian adult literacy research*. The

analysis revealed that bodies of knowledge have been developed in ten different areas. Each area or theme contains between six and seventeen studies. Given that the literacy field has channelled much of its energy and efforts into ten distinct areas, we can probably assume that the literacy field has already established some priorities for literacy research. The next section briefly describes each theme.



Searching the database

THEMES	NUMBER OF STUDIES
Family Literacy	17
Access and Retention	14
Educators and Students	13
Literacy and the Labour Market	13
Programs	13
Workplace Education	12
Learning	10
Technology	10
Health	9
Reading and Writing	6

Research Themes: 1994 to 2002

Family Literacy

Studies of family literacy can be categorized into three broad topics. The majority of research conducted by academics and practitioners focuses on emergent literacy or the impacts of family literacy training and programs. The two studies commissioned by the government explore the intergenerational aspects of education, literacy acquisition, and economic status.

Access and Retention

The body of research on access and retention is quite comprehensive and there is evidence that the studies are starting to show similar findings. For example, several studies on retention "have raised the importance of discussing learners' fears and concerns about going back to school, and openly discussing the programs' culture and expectations" (Grieve 2003, p. 42). Rather than conducting additional studies in this area, it would seem more beneficial to explore ways of applying the research findings on access and retention to policy and practice.

Educators and Students

Within the theme of educators and students, there is a broad array of topics. The completed studies pertaining to educators describe their knowledge, experiences, working conditions, practices, beliefs, and roles. The completed studies pertaining to students

explore their experiences in educational systems and their work values, goals, and perceptions about themselves and their lives.

Literacy and the Labour Market

The majority of the thirteen studies within the theme of literacy and the labour market were conducted by sociologists, economists and statisticians, using data from the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and Statistic Canada's Survey of Literacy Skills Used in Daily Activities (LSUDA). Two of the studies within this theme were longitudinal, using qualitative methods to gather data. While many of these IALS studies found that levels of employment rise with literacy level and education, Malicky and Norman's longitudinal study (1994) found that most learners returned to the same type of low-paying, temporary work that they had done before enrolling in literacy classes. This finding suggests that literacy policies and programs must continue to recognize the multiple impacts of literacy education and not overlook the issues of social justice and participation in society.

Programs

The body of research on programs explores adult basic education within correctional programs, community-based programs, and employment preparation programs. It might be beneficial to examine the connections between educators' belief systems and the ways in which these are acted upon in programs. In other words, what is the match between what we think, what we say, and what we do? Beder and Medina (2001), two American researchers, found that educators might express the intention of being learner-centred, yet the delivery of instruction is usually very teacher-directed.

Workplace Education

The research within workplace education represents the different ways of thinking about literacies in the workplace. Cognitive, economic and social theories provide the foundation for these studies. For example, *Reading Work: Literacies in the New Workplace* explores the nature of literacies in contemporary workplace settings. The authors of this book embrace the view that literacies are social practices that occur within relations of power that are both specific to individual workplaces and global.

Learning

The research within the domain of learning is challenging some of the dominant discourses and our assumptions about learning. For example, Jenny Horsman's book, *Too Scared to Learn*, re-examines learning through a lens focused on the prevalence and impacts of violence in women's lives. Katrina Grieve's study, *Supporting Learning, Supporting Change*, challenges commonly held assumptions about learning and suggests that we need to move toward a more complex understanding of learning, recognizing the importance of relationships, context and meaning. Finally, situated cognition theories are reframing our ideas about the transfer of learning. Grieve (2003) notes that "recent research is not exactly 'transferred' between settings, but rather is reinvented by learners who make it relevant in each new setting" (p. 45).

Technology

The studies that focus on technology can be categorized into three broad topics: software, students and programs. The majority of the studies examine the effectiveness of software programs or explore what students need in order to progress and succeed when using computers.

Health

Within the theme of health, three different conceptual frameworks guide the studies: functional health literacy, interactive health literacy, and critical health literacy. Despite the importance of health literacy, there are only a handful of studies on this topic within the fields of both adult literacy and health. However, this research gap is being addressed through a three-year project to develop a national program for literacy and health research. The Canadian Public Health Association and the University of Toronto's Centre for Health Promotion are sponsoring this project. In addition, Linda Shohet, Allan Quigley, Doris Gillis, Donna Gallant, Sharon Dublin and Marg Rose are currently conducting three studies in the area of health.

Reading and Writing

In comparison to the other nine themes, the topic of reading and writing has received the least attention. Between 1969 and 1998, only 3 per cent of the studies on reading involved adults as research participants (Guzzetti, Anders & Neuman 1999). Perhaps research in the area of reading has never been a priority because we acknowledge the complexity and multiple meanings ascribed to

literacies. We do not want to reduce it to merely the mechanics of reading and writing.

Research Gaps

As well, there needs to be a collaborative effort to identify additional themes. For example, there appears to be a paucity of research in several areas: Aboriginal literacy programs and learners; assessment practices; and the history of adult literacy. Finally, the literacy field might benefit from research on policy. For example, what impact have accountability frameworks and educational reforms had on programs, educators and learners? What lessons have been learned by stakeholders involved with educational reform in Ontario and Quebec? And how are the different funding and income support models affecting practice?

Looking Ahead

As we develop a research culture in Canada, we need to continue challenging our assumptions and building our knowledge base in each of the themes. Moreover, we need to balance our efforts between research and its dissemination and integration into policy and practice. Hopefully, the new framework for the research support activities of the National Literacy Secretariat will address the original question in this article: "As we develop a culture of research in Canada, do we need to develop a set of core research themes or priorities?" ■

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