LRN
Literacy Research Network

LITERACY RESEARCH IN PEI: A REFLECTION
Looking back before moving ahead

**Where have we been? What have we learned?
What might we like to know?**

Jessie B. Lees
20th June 2006

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This project was commissioned by the PEI Literary Research Network (LRN) because research about literacy in PEI was scattered and disconnected. It was difficult to find reports and, therefore, difficult for researchers and policy-makers to build on earlier findings. Members of LRN identified a need to establish a basis for future work. The mandate for this project was to collect research about literacy in PEI published after 1990, build a bibliography and create a synthesis. The intent was to create a useful and simple tool for researchers and policy-makers.

This report is a response to three literacy-research questions: Where have we been? What have we learned? What might we like to know? As the project progressed, questions emerged about the nature of the PEI research and the ways in which it responded, or failed to respond, to the needs of the community. A discussion of issues surrounding research forms a major part of the final section of the report and some recommendations are made.

The report is based on material found in a search of government and provincial web sites as well as those of organizations concerned with literacy. Academic databases such as ERIC and general databases such as GOOGLE were also used. Some material was found in the reference lists of

reports. Some was suggested or provided by participants in interviews.

The material is collected in a bibliography that covers the years from 1990 to May, 2006. The major criteria for inclusion were that the research was concerned with literacy and that there was explicit reference to PEI A template was created so that an annotated version of the bibliography could be lodged in a searchable database. It is hoped that the bibliography and database will be useful reference tools and that they will be developed. Considerable difficulty was experienced in locating material so it seems likely that there is yet more to be found and added. New research projects may be included as soon as they are identified.

A number of people were interviewed in: the Department of Education, Eastern School District, PEI Teachers= Federation, UPEI, government and university libraries, Workplace Education PEI and organizations engaged in literacy-related activities. They were invariably helpful and valuable sources of information. They were also responsible for enlarging the scope of the project because they raised important questions about the accessibility, nature and usefulness of current research.

Definitions of literacy vary across reports but they are commonly linked to skills individuals need to function within their surrounding community. This is conveyed in the PEI Literacy Alliance Home Page, ΑLiteracy is... the ability to understand and use printed material found at home, at work and in the community - to achieve one's goals and develop one's knowledge and

potential."

To carry out research is to pick up a lens. Choices are made about the kind of lens, whether to focus or scan, where, how and what to look for. PEI literacy research seems to fall into categories according to what is looked at and how it is interpreted. Sometimes, a project will fit into more than one category.

Where have we been?

<u>Statistical research</u>

This is primarily the responsibility of Statistics Canada, alone or in collaboration with international bodies. Island researchers decide whether these statistics are adequate for their work or whether they need to collect more information. Statistical research on literacy follows this common pattern of initial reliance on Statistics Canada and independent data collection.

Internationally, Canada participated in an International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), a Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) as well as an Adult Literacy and Life Skills (ALL) study that built upon the work of IALS. Working with the Organization for Economic Co-operation and development (OECD), Canada has undertaken thematic reviews of adult learning and of early childhood education and care. Each province and territory is included in these studies so that PEI statistics are related to those from other regions of Canada. They may also be

related to statistics from other countries.

Nationally, literacy-related research includes the School Achievement Indicators Program (SAIP) and the The National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY), which began in 1994. PEI was one of five Canadian sites selected for a national, community-based study, *Understanding the Early Years* (UEY), and it was the only site that covered an entire province.

Within the province, a comprehensive survey and analysis of Island youth (15 to 29) was carried out (PEI Innovation and Life-long Learning Initiative, 2003). A Local Community Needs Analysis (Smitheram, 1998) was made in response to recommendations of the *Tough Challenges: Great Rewards* report (PEI Literacy Initiatives Secretariat, 1996). In 1998, an environmental scan of PEI youth was commissioned by the PEI Youth Employment Strategy Committee (Smitheram, 1998) to complement a national initiative. The Early Development Instrument (EDI) was used annually, from 2000 onwards, to assess kindergarten children=s readiness to learn in the provincial segment of *Understanding the Early Years* (Early Child Development Association of PEI, 2005).

Statistics affect perceptions, public opinion and policy. For example, the PEI government uses IALS and UEY statistics in its assessment of healthy child development. A recent PEI Task Force on Student Achievement (2005) was formed, in part, because of government and public concern about PISA scores. Statistics provide a valuable lens through which to examine and manipulate

numbers, probabilities and connections. When used to determine policy and research, however,

they are open to the varying interpretations of those who use them.

Program evaluation

Another large body of research is concerned with evaluation of programs. This may be

undertaken by, or at the request of, individuals who are running the program, funding agencies,

government departments or interested groups. Evaluation is one way to learn about a program=s

effectiveness and, very often, researchers are also asked to look for ways in which it can be

improved.

Research has been commissioned to evaluate many literacy-related programs. The HALE

curriculum, Alternative Education Programming, and ATrain the Trainer@ program were

evaluated by UPEI faculty members (Brookes & Timmons, 1996, 1998, 2000) as was Project

L.O.V.E. (Doiron & Lees, 2005). Consultants carried out evaluations of a literacy/adult basic

education program (Smitheram, 1999) and the early childhood program, Best Start, (Hornick,

Bradford & Boyes, 2005). A review of adult literacy programs and initiatives was also

undertaken (Fogarty, 1995).

A phonological awareness initiative was both undertaken and evaluated at Holland College

(McKenna, McMillan & Dempsey, 2005). Similarly, participants were involved in annual

evaluations of the Summer Tutoring Program for Kids (PEI Literacy Initiatives Secretariat (2001-2005). The literacy/adult basic education program, part of the *Tough challenges: Great rewards* initiative, was also evaluated annually (PEI Literacy Initiatives Secretariat, 2002, 2003).

Programs may be assessed by graduate students who undertake this research for their thesis work. Two UPEI programs were evaluated in this way: the Diploma in Adult Education (Wood, 2000) and the Inclusive Post-Secondary Program (Leary, 2002).

Program evaluations can incorporate suggestions for improvement or modification. They are often important for funding requests. This lens is useful when faced by questions about whether a program or intervention is working or how it might be made better but a program evaluation can be understood in a number of ways. It may be influenced by scores assigned to participants and success rates, by experiences and attitudes, by feelings and motivations. It is the user who decides where, how and on what to focus

<u>Descriptive studies</u>

Research is not necessarily statistical or evaluative. It may describe a person or situation, increase understanding, or act as a first step towards formulating programs or policies. There are many possible categories for descriptive studies but, in this paper, they will be considered as a group..

Some descriptive reports use existing statistical and non-statistical information to create a broad picture. Needs and resources have been described in this way (Smitheram, 1998). Alternatively, existing information may be supplemented by the collection of new data (McCardle, 2000). In longitudinal studies, data, including statistics, are gathered over several years to describe a situation and how it is changing or evolving (Early Childhood Development Association of PEI, 2005).

Descriptive research may focus on a group of people rather than a situation (Edmonds, 2003; McKenna, 2005). In-depth descriptions of an individual=s situation and response to an intervention provide another way to assess its effectiveness (Cole, 2003).

Possibilities may be described by collecting information from a number of people in similar situations. Holland College is participant in one such national study of e-learning in adult literacy programs (ABC Canada Literacy Foundation, 2005). The Laubach Literacy Council and Holland College are mentioned in a study of adult literacy work across Canada (Darville, 1992).

Wide-ranging research projects are commissioned to look at complex situations. One such project was mandated to describe the province=s elementary schools (PEI Department of Education, 1990). Another was commissioned to describe effects of semestering in PEI high schools (Lees, 1995). Literacy is not explicit in these reports but each has literacy implications

and, in each, literacy-related recommendations are made. National wide-ranging reports may include PEI and literacy may be discussed in them (Canadian School Boards Association, 1995).

Research-based description provides a basis for understanding situations and people. This may be undertaken as a first step in designing programs and interventions, a way to resolve a puzzling event or situation or from a belief in the importance of mutual understanding as an affirmation of common humanity and a basis for other knowledge. Some studies are described as personal and interpretive. Others are not, but description, by its nature, entails a choice of where to focus and how to interpret what is seen.

When we consider the reports as a whole, what can we say about sources of literacy research in PEI? Statistical projects are very much in the domain of the federal government through Statistics Canada. Other studies may be funded by the federal government through one of its agencies or by the PEI government and one of its agencies.

Faculty members at UPEI have initiated projects and applied to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) or other bodies for support. They have also been commissioned to undertake projects. Graduate students= theses make a useful contribution to PEI research and these may be funded by their university. Some projects are funded by groups with a special area of interest such as the Canadian Educational Association. Some are undertaken when organizations or individuals make proposals for research into issues they have

identified.

What have we learned?

Statistical Research

Prince Edward Island doesn=t fare well when literacy scores are calculated. In 2003, it was estimated that 40,000 (nearly 43%) of PEI residents who were16- to 65-years-old had literacy levels below the Adesired level@ of coping (Statistics Canada, 2003, p.107).. Seniors did not perform well; it=s of particular concern that young people between 16 and 25 years old also scored badly. Why is this? A number of possibilities are discussed in research reports:

Poverty: Literacy levels can be linked to annual earnings, (Coulombe, Trembley & Marchand, 2004) and Island incomes tend to be relatively low (Statistics Canada, 2003). This may not be the whole story. It has been calculated that provinces vary in their scores even when people of the same economic standing are compared (Willms, 2004);

Early years: Provincial differences show up as early as Grade 2: Willms (2004) stresses the importance of literacy experiences of the early years. A recent PEI educational task force also emphasized this and some recommendations were made (PEI Task Force on Student

Achievement, 2005, p.24). There=s good news from the *Understanding the Early Years* project (UEY), kindergarten children in PEI score higher than those in other UEY sites across Canada (Early Child Development Association, 2005, p.56). In 2001, however, 25% of these children were doing poorly or were vulnerable (Premiers Council on Healthy Child Development, 2001, p.38).

Education: Not surprisingly, level of education makes a great difference to literacy scores in PEI as it does elsewhere A person=s score tends to increase at every stage of schooling (Stastics Canada, 2003);

Schools: In PEI, as in other provinces, school policies and practices appear to affect literacy achievement (Willms, 2004);

Training: In PEI only about 45% of workers took part in adult training compared to 50% across Canada (Statistics Canada, 2003);

Nature of employment: Those who work in administration, education, technology and similar occupations, generally, tend to have good literacy skills while those in manufacturing, fishing, construction and other industries are likely to have low literacy scores. In PEI, about 60% of the low-literacy-level population have jobs in manufacturing, fishing and similar occupations.

This reflects entry requirements since employers in the first group will screen out low literacy-level applicants but skills training, through practice in reading and writing, is much more likely to occur in administrative, educational and technological work (Statistics Canada, 2003). This may be equally true of full-time as compared to seasonal work.;

Migration: There is an out-migration of youth and especially of highly educated Island youth (PEI Innovation and Lifelong Learning Initiative; 2003, Institute of Island Studies, 2000). It has been argued that literacy levels of those born in Newfoundland and Labrador but living elsewhere are higher than the levels of a similar group remaining in the province and comparable to the Canadian average (Norris, 1992, p.7). This finding may be applicable to PEI;

Special needs support: Statistics show a literacy gap between children with special needs and those in the general population (Timmons, 2004). A number of improvements in the support systems have been proposed (Provincial Joint Working Committee on Learning Disabilities, 2004);

Computers: In PEI, 67% of people aged 16 to 65 years have access to a computer at home as compared to an average of 76% across Canada (Statistics Canada, 2003). PEI was one of three Canadian provinces with the lowest rate of home-Internet access by 15-year-olds (Bussiere & Gluszynski, 2004);

Cultural values: Literacy and education are valued in PEI but other activities and values may take greater priority (Gushue, 2006);

Health: Health is connected to literacy but the direction of cause and effect isn=t clear. Does poor health contribute to low literacy or is low literacy associated with other factors that cause poor health? There is probably a complex relationship

Indeed, most of these connections are complex and the same statistics can be interpreted in different ways. Important messages seem to be that literacy has a significant effect on an individual=s life and opportunities, that the early years matter a great deal, that the surrounding culture is influential and that education, even in later years, can make a difference.

Program Evaluations

Evaluative reports indicate that many programs and people in PEI are, indeed, making a difference to literacy. Some are listed below. Some will be missing if they have not been evaluated as part of a research project, or if their evaluation has not been located. Bracketed references indicate the relevant research document.

The Early Years

Programs concerned with the early years often focus on families:

***Best Start*:** Its goal is to maximize the development of young children. It works with newborns and their families and supports families by enhancing their parenting skills and knowledge of child development, connecting parents to programs and services that focus on training and career planning and promoting family literacy (Hornick, 2005, p..34);

Families Learning Together: This is a reading program designed to enhance the literacy levels of children in grades 1 to 4 in rural PEI by tutoring children while teaching reading strategies to their parents (MacGillivray, 2005, Timmons, 2005);

***Family service providers*:** They work in kindergarten and day care centres, contribute to children=s early literacy development: government and community service providers support parents. There=s a need for literacy-specific training for these workers (PEI Family Literacy Advisory Committee, 2001).

<u>Elementary School Children</u>

***Reading Recovery*:** This is an in-school one-on-one tutoring program. An in-depth study of one PEI child=s progress affirmed its potential effectiveness (Cole, 2003);

***Summer Literacy Programs*:** These provide summer tutoring for young people who are referred by elementary schools across the island (PEI Literacy Initiatives Secretariat, 2001-2005)

*Volunteers for literacy***:** This is an initiative whereby senior volunteers read to young children, mainly in elementary schools. They give children practice in reading, help them to build self-esteem and social skills and affirm the community=s role in the education of children (Doiron & Lees, 2004);

Early Intervention program: This is designed to support children with developmental delays, and their families (Wight-Gilley, 1998)

Youth

*Alternative Education Initiative***:** It was funded in five sites across PEI to provide an opportunity for students, Awho find courses too difficult, irrelevant or who are unable to cope with the regular school setting@ (Brookes, Mahen & Timmons, 1998, p.11);

Adults

*Holistic Adult Learner Education (HALE)***:** A pilot program in Holland College, Montague campus was the subject of an in-depth case study. HALE focuses on the development of literacy and thinking skills as well as the skills of numeracy, communication, team-building

and problem-solving (Brookes & Timmons, 1997);

***Adult Connections in Education Program* (ACE):** This provides intellectually challenged students with access to post-secondary programs on the UPEI campus (Leary, 2002);

***Phonological reading intervention*:** Based at Holland College, it is a group-delivered remediation program for low literacy adults (McKenna, 2005). Its effects over time continue to be evaluated (personal communication);

Literacy/Adult Basic Education Program: Based at Holland College, it supports adult learners at all literacy levels who wish to complete the GED, the PEI High School Graduation Certificate for mature students, or to take individual high school credits (PEI Corporate Projects Division, 1999; PEI Literacy Initiatives Secretariat, 2003)

Diploma in Adult Education: Based at UPEI, it was implemented to meet the needs of adult educators. This program is under review and may be redesigned. A course in teaching literacy skills to adults has been proposed (Woods, 2000).

Community-based trades training program Based at Holland College, essential employability skills, including literacy, are integrated into this program (Association of Canadian Community Colleges, 2003);

Workplace basic skills programs: The national research project included two PEI workplaces. Programs include reading, writing and communication skills (Long, 1997)`

Laubach literacy: The PEI program is mentioned but not evaluated by Darville (1992) and Smitheram (1998).

Individually, these programs have made, and can continue to make a great difference to literacy levels across the Island. What of the collective picture? When the reports are considered as a whole, can anything be said about literacy programs and program-evaluative research in PEI?

The most striking impression is a lack of connectedness. The fable of the bundle of sticks comes to mind. With greater communication and connectedness, could the various literacy initiatives gain strength and coherence both individually and collectively? Over time, using LRN, could their members envisage and formulate a coherent province-wide approach to literacy programming and research? This is not to suggest regulation but, rather, concerted community action based on experience and research that could influence government and help to promote literacy in PEI.

Descriptive studies

Some descriptive studies result in recommendations. Others are designed to gain understanding

or explore factors that could have influenced an event or statistic.

Recommendations:

As information is gathered and understanding is gained, researchers may feel that they can identify problems, suggest improvements and envisage possibilities.   This is true in studies of :

Community Learning Centres providing literacy/adult basic education (Smitheram, 1998)

East Prince Youth Development Centre (Rideout, 2001).

Literacy workers and learners :where recommendations for change and a vision for adult education were described (PEI Literacy Alliance, 1995).

Two wide-ranging studies, one of *elementary schools* and one of *high schools*, made a number of recommendations. Many were connected to literacy in its broadest sense (PEI Department of Education, 1990; Lees, 1995). PEI participated in a study of *child poverty* that resulted in a recommendation to school trustees about the need to focus on children=s literacy (Canadian School Boards Association, 1999).

Understanding:

Some descriptive research is designed to gain understanding:

an in-depth study of ***low literacy adults*** was made to better understand their poor participation rate in educational programs (McKenna, 2005);

*a **seniors= literacy research project*** was designed to understand the background, coping skills and strategies of low-literacy seniors and to find ways to attract them to literacy programs (McCardle, 2000);

challenges facing the community and community strengths were described in a profile of ***West Prince*** (Ployer, 1997).

a masters thesis gave voice to feelings and experiences of ***learners who became disconnected from their schooling*** (Lyle, 2005).

a cross-Canada study of ***nonparticipation in literacy programs*** was undertaken to explore and understand nonparticipants= motivations and their perceptions of the programs (ABC Canada, 2002).

a cross-Canada series of interviews created a description of ***labour=s involvement and experience with essential skills*** (Canadian Labour Congress, 2005);

In a longitudinal study, a situation or group is traced over a period of time in order to notice changes and identify issues. ***Kindergarten children*** in PEI have been tested every year for four years using the same Early Development Indicator to see whether and how that population is changing.

Exploration

Some research explores factors that could be influencing an event or statistic.

PEI is mentioned in an exploration of ***community-related factors*** that could affect the lower literacy rate of Newfoundland and Labrador (Norris, Phillips & Bulcock, 1992). Some factors are likely to be similar in the two communities.

Descriptive studies can create a picture of people or groups or a community. Studies may be designed to gain insight into the world of low-literacy adults and children, show the interconnectedness of situations, trace changes that occur over the years or illuminate the complexities of an intervention. Some are designed to expand a statistical picture by exploring possible explanatory factors.

Considered together, statistics, evaluation and description can provide a three-dimensional image of literacy in PEI. What happens after the image has been drawn? Is it widely accessible?

Are there gaps - parts of the picture we=d like to be able to fill in? To what extent is the research

adequate? To what extent is it used? To what extent is it valued?

What might we like to know?

Questions about the nature and usefulness of PEI literacy research arose in interviews and

discussions. The accessibility of research, the sources and nature of funding, the use and

practicality of results, the origins of research questions and the extent to which research is valued

have a great deal to do with whether there is an available, useful body of work on which PEI

researchers can build and from which PEI literacy organizations can draw information.

Accessibility

It was difficult to collect PEI-specific research reports for this project and participants spoke

about their own difficulties in locating material. Where is it to be found and how is its existence

to be known? There are limitations to the value of some obvious sources;

       National Literacy Secretariat:. There are useful lists of funded projects on the National

Literacy Secretariat (NLS) web site. Some projects involve research but it is difficult to trace the

resulting reports. Contact names and phone numbers may be out of date. Work not funded by NLS isn=t listed;

National studies: These include Prince Edward Island but results from PEI are not always given because the small population makes confidentiality difficult. This is especially true when a study is concerned with a very specific group of people with few representatives on PEI. One such group, for example, is guided by New Brunswick results because these are thought to be most comparable;

PEI government library: Some research material is available but unpublished government reports aren=t lodged there and these are thought to constitute the majority:

UPEI: Faculty and graduate students in the Faculty of Education are doing, and have done, a great deal of literacy-related research and other faculties have undertaken or supervised literacy research projects. Graduate theses are lodged in Robertson library but there=s no directory of graduate work-in-progress. A categorized list of faculty reports and on-going work in the Faculty of Education would provide useful information. The addition of literacy research from other faculties, and of PEI-related work from other universities, could ensure the completeness of such a list;

Organizations and programs: Literacy-related research has been commissioned on

behalf of organizational and program communities, and they have participated in research, but reports tend to stay within the communities.

The Steering Committee of the Innovation and Lifelong Learning Project (2003, p.2) proposed an initiative to, Αcreate a shared knowledge base by bringing together data and insights held by involved organizations@(2003, p.2). In a report of the PEI Literacy Alliance (1995, p.6), some difficulties faced by adult learners are described. These learners are often unable to find out about programs or determine their suitability. There=s an evident lack of a central clearing house for literacy-related information whether about research or programs

Recommendation # 1

...that a central clearing-house be established for literacy-related material developed in PEI or in which members of the Island community are participants; that an accessible, searchable database be designed to house the material with provision for continuous upgrading

The bibliography and database resulting from the present project could provide useful starting places.

Funding: Nature of the research

Proposal-based funding has a tremendous effect on the kind of research that can be done because this funding is usually short-term and criteria are likely to change from one funding period to another. It is difficult for researchers - and organizations - to obtain funding for implementation, feedback and fine-tuning of their recommendations or initiatives. Experienced researchers and administrators are beginning to incorporate follow-up elements in proposals but it is difficult for a novice to recognize the possibility or importance of doing this. Proposal-writing workshops are useful and a mentoring program in which experienced proposal writers work with novices could help a great deal. It is a comment on the system, however, to realize that mentors and mentees could find themselves competing for the same pot of money.

There are two other hurdles. One has to do with time constraints of the funding. It may be impossible to carry out necessary work within the permitted one or two year time span. It is especially difficult to obtain funding for local longitudinal studies because, by definition, they incorporate a follow-up plan that extends over a period of years. There is on-going national research of this kind, the National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth for example, but few local initiatives have been designed to trace the long-term effects of an intervention or program. Important program-related questions about whether literacy improvements are lasting, whether they affect later decisions, how they influence self-esteem, the family and an individual=s sociability over time are not easily answered during the one- or two- year-long

process of a typical study but it is difficult to obtain funding for a long-term project. University-based researchers are better able to carry out this kind of study because they have access to agencies with a relatively broad mandate but literacy is not the focus of every faculty member=s work.

A second hurdle, in education and therefore in much of literacy, is the federal/ provincial divide. Implementation is within provincial jurisdiction and funding is commonly federal. Federal agencies may be able to provide money for a pilot study but they cannot overstep their boundaries by funding the provincial implementation of an educational program.

Recommendation #2

...that the Literacy Research Network make representations to the provincial government about the need for follow-up funding of local and federally-initiated programs, and for local longitudinal research;

Recommendation #3

...that a mentoring program be established in which experienced proposal-writers mentor the less experienced, and that proposal-writing workshops be offered;

The link between research and practice

To what extent does research influence practice? Issues of dissemination have been discussed, people can=t use what they don=t know. Other problems were identified by participants. The short-term nature of research funding has been described. Funding guidelines incorporate very specific and sometimes narrow criteria. These are likely to change from one funding period to another but successful applicants have usually matched their proposals to the criteria as closely as possible. In doing so, they are often forced to move away from questions of immediate practical concern to them. This is a vicious circle because research that does not meet the expressed needs of practitioners is less likely to be used by them. At the same time, research that has practical value must wait until a suitably worded call for proposals is issued - and this may never happen.

Funding for implementation would help because a pilot program could demonstrate the practicality of a piece of research but it is equally important for practitioners to be able to carry out their own research. Two things would be needed: a source of funding and a reciprocal research- mentoring system. The province or university are potential sources of funding. The province could establish a dedicated research fund as part of its literacy initiative and there may

be university faculty members, interested in a particular field of practice, who can access

academic funding. Even given these possibilities, it is essential to point out, as often and as

clearly as possible, the lack of connection between funding guidelines, often devised in Ottawa,

and the grassroots identification of research needed for practice.

In a mentoring approach, university faculty or experienced researchers would share their

research expertise and practitioners would contribute their knowledge of their field. This is a

potentially valuable approach because practitioners are unlikely to have research experience

while researchers may know nothing about the field of practice. It is especially valuable because

practitioners are engaged in research that interests them and whose importance they have,

themselves, identified .

Recommendation #4

...that a reciprocal mentoring program be established between practitioners who wish to

undertake research in their field and interested, experienced researchers;

Recommendation #5

...that the Literacy Research Network make representations to the PEI government about the

need to establish a research-in-practice fund as part of its provincial literacy initiative;

Recommendation #6

...that the Literacy Research Network make representations to appropriate federal government

agencies about the lack of connection between proposal guidelines and research needs identified

by practitioners;

Recommendation #7

...that the Literacy Research Network collaborate with other interested groups and organizations

across Canada to devise a scheme whereby research identified and proposed by practitioners

would be eligible for funding and that this scheme be presented to both federal and provincial

governments;

Research potential: unexamined data and unpublished reports

Participants spoke about the on-going collection of data in schools and the Department of

Education. In some cases there were confidentiality issues but they conveyed a sense that the

province was a repository for a wealth of unexamined data.

At the same time, exciting initiatives are being undertaken without the incorporation of a

research component Money and resources are inevitable limitations but well-designed research

could provide insight and future guidance for programs related to data that=s being accumulated

and for projects. Because this research would be local and specific to PEI, it could add a great

deal to our understanding of our own situation.

Questions about the research potential of an undertaking or collection of information will only be

asked when there is a belief that research may have something useful to offer. There are barriers

to establishing such a belief. A lack of connection between research and practice has been

described. Unpublished reports, mentioned as an accessibility issue, create the impression that

research is an end in itself with little accountability or effect. This is reinforced by the fairly

common perception that it is a cocooned, obscure and ivory-tower activity. If the literacy effort

in PEI is to reach its potential, it will be necessary to convey the everyday usefulness,

comprehensibility and interest of research: to create an island-wide research climate.

The Literacy Research Network can help to develop such a climate by undertaking new

initiatives and extending those already underway. Workshops to demonstrate the interest,

practicality and understandability of research have been carried out and these are valuable. In a

spirit of reciprocal mentoring, it would be useful to hear about the dilemmas of practice.

Communication between researchers is important and the suggested database may help. Equally,

communication among practitioners who are interested in undertaking, or have undertaken,

research in practice is a necessary component.

Recommendation #8

...that the Literacy Research Network continue its work and extend it in ways that will help to create a climate of research in Prince Edward Island.

A personal reflection

On a final, personal note, I find myself musing about programs and projects that I have described. Some wonderful things are happening. Still, I am struck by the instrumental nature of so many documents and programs: concern to move individuals from levels 1 or 2 to levels 3 or 4, worries about employment and literacy, anxieties about low literacy and the future of PEI. These are crucial issues for individuals and governments but I wonder if something is missing.

When I think of literacy, I think of agility in the world and the phrase captures the great joy I feel when I read a poster or book, find my way around a strange city or discover just the right word to express my meaning. It captures, too, the sense of a world within which my literacy exists. Gushue (2005) describes the significance of cultural context. Lyle expresses something of my feeling when she writes that she has come to understand the complexity of literacy and that, for her, Ait is a way of being in the world that evolves with personal and social change.@ (Lyle, 2005, p. 106). In a Statistics Canada report, it is stated that, Aliteracy is not a skill fixed by education@ (Statistics Canada, 1996, p. 27).

I fear that a construction of literacy as a difficult once-for-all educational task may be self-defeating because it is daunting. Is it possible to convey the emotional, aesthetic, personal, social and ephemeral quality of being literate? I think of Alow-literacy@ students who confided their love of wrestling magazines to David Booth and of fisher=s children who see no need for reading but probably know more about the vagaries of the sea than I have ever learned. I think

about my own literacy failures in an increasingly iconic world and I recognize an amazing

complexity of context and motive and time.

What does this mean for research in PEI? I=m not at all sure but maybe it=s something we can

talk about together.

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