CONNECTING The DOTS
Accountability and Adult Literacy

Mutual Accountability and Adult Literacy

by Robin Houston-Knopff, Center for Foundational Learning, Bow Valley College, Calgary
Consultation by Merrill Cooper, M.A., Principal, Guyn Cooper Research Associates, Calgary

Connecting the Dots: Improving Accountability in the Adult Literacy Field in Canada is a two-year pan-Canadian project funded by the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (HRSDC) Canada. The goals are to examine the impact of accountability policies and practices on the adult literacy field in every province and territory; to help create a common language for practitioners and funders to talk about accountability; and to explore innovative approaches to accountability through action-research projects. This brief connects to the third goal.

Author Robin Houston-Knopff, a literacy practitioner associated with Bow Valley College, Calgary, wrote this brief drawing upon the research conducted by the Alberta action research project team. In collaboration with Calgary Learns, the team developed an assessment tool to be used by literacy providers and funders to evaluate the level of mutual accountability in their relationships. Although not a working member of the team, Robin acknowledges the contributions of the team to this brief.

This brief summarizes research from the past decade on mutual accountability which provided a context for this project.

To learn more about the findings and tools from this and four other action research projects funded through Connecting the Dots, visit www.literacyandaccountability.ca

• WHAT IS MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY?

Accountability plays a key role in the field of adult literacy. Indeed, practitioners often juggle multiple accountabilities – to funders, taxpayers, learners, boards of directors, the community, and their profession (Crooks et al. 2008, 13). These may be in tension with each other, as when teachers' accountability to learners conflicts with their accountability to deliver what funders want. The focus in this brief, however, is on the "mutual accountability" between the funder and the provider of a literacy service.

Public policy and literacy-related literatures reveal little consensus about who is accountable to whom and for what. One commentator notes, "Accountability is often viewed as a social objective thing. It is not. It is constructed in a continuing political, moral, legal and practical dialogue about what social actors can reasonably demand from one another." (Moore 2006, 12).

Generally, accountability is seen to have two aspects: financial and performance. Financial accountability usually means that money should be spent on the things funders intended. More challenging are concepts of "value for money" or "return on investment".

Problems arise when a "one model" system requires the same level of financial reporting regardless of the amount funded. With small projects, this can lead to a disproportionate amount of staff time spent on managing accounts rather than on service delivery.

Performance accountability is measuring success of programs' outputs and outcomes. Here "policy makers are concerned with assessments that demonstrate a return on their investments, including outcomes such as employment and entry into further education or training." (Grieve 2007, 127). Again, the size of a program is important. Collecting the relevant data may unduly strain small organizations with limited funding. How realistic is it to ask a small, community-based literacy program to report on the employment status of learners after they completed a program? Perhaps more important, this dimension of accountability is fraught with controversy about the proper measures of success. That is, is employment a reasonable measure of success for a community literacy program?

This issue has significance for the entire voluntary sector. The literature emphasizes a power imbalance between funders and service-delivery agencies, with accountability often running only from agencies to their funders. The point of emphasizing "mutual accountability" is to ensure that lines of accountability run in both directions. A widespread desire has been voiced for a more "truly equal relationship between the federal government [as a primary funding sector] and the voluntary sector" (Frei, Langlais 2002, 1), perhaps through the "application of Codes of Good Practice" (ibid.) such as the one created through the Voluntary Sector Initiative in 2002.

Literacy is an issue that cuts across federal and provincial jurisdictions in Canada, complicating accountability still further, as provision remains a provincial responsibility.

Mutual accountability was first highlighted in association with literacy when Merrifield published her policy paper on the U.S. system, *Contested Ground: Performance Accountability in Adult Basic Education* in 1998:

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Mutual accountability depends on the various partners knowing, understanding and accepting their roles and obligations to one another and to the system. Their relationships have to be negotiated, and require discussion and consent ...... Inequalities of power inherent in any system need to be explicitly addressed (Merrifield 1998, 75).

Merrifield's call for discussion and action was taken up in many countries.

Interestingly, another definition of accountability, appeared at about the same time in Canada from the federal government:

"Accountability is a relationship based on the obligation to demonstrate and take responsibility for performance in light of agreed expectations". (OAG&TB, 1998, Modernizing Accountability Practices in the Public Sector, 3, emphasis added)

This clearly implies ongoing interaction, or mutuality, between funder and agency in developing the "agreed expectations."

A decade later, one researcher says:

Accountability is answering the question "How can I prove that what I am doing is useful and valuable?" and must be based on a relationship that acknowledges that each party has their own set of accountabilities. It must also be based on trust (Hayes 2009, 22, emphasis added).

Again the idea of mutuality appears in acknowledging that both sides in the relationship have their "own set of accountabilities." From the late 1990s to the present, there has been a consistent call for more "mutual accountability".

• HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT

Models of greater mutual accountability existed in the past. Canada's National Literacy Secretariat (NLS), established in 1988, ten years before Merrifield's work, promoted "mutual accountability" activities such as relationship building, negotiation with partners, and community development. Yet by 1998, Merrifield's assessment of the situation in the

United States – that mutual accountability was "contested ground" in need of defense and enhancement – was also true of Canada. What happened?

Since the mid-1990s there has been an increased emphasis on accountability for publicly funded services (Belzer & St Clair 2007, 162) as " international competitiveness and its link to the education and skills of a country's workforce led to dramatic changes particularly in countries that are members of the organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)" (Grieve 2007, 125).   In Canada there were fears that jobs would move overseas. Concerns about the skills of the workforce and employment preparation dominated discussions of adult education. At this time the NLS was moved into Human Resources Development Canada (HRSDC), which signaled a gradual shift from the original values of partnership and relationship building to a focus on outcomes measurement and intense fiscal accountability. This new relationship between the funding agency and the service provider is what Hayes refers to as a "transactional" relationship (Hayes 2009, 19). Voices from the Field, Connecting the Dots: Accountability in Adult Literacy reflects dissatisfaction, from both funders and literacy providers with this approach in the literacy field (Crooks et al. 2008).

At the same time, a full swing of the pendulum away from transactional relationships to the complete implementation of "mutual accountability" is itself "contested ground", and there is little evidence in the literature that the literacy field has fully embraced the concept of mutual accountability. Perhaps there is an acceptable middle ground.

• HOW IS MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY PRACTICED?

Mutual accountability, as defined by Merrifield includes the following characteristics:

- agreement on indicators of success and their appropriate measurement
- transparent, clear and consistent flow of relevant information
- capacity of both parties to hold and be held accountable
- an ongoing process based on the involvement of key stakeholders such as learners, practitioners, administrators and funders
- a process that leads to improvements and capacity building

  In everyday life accountability means responsibility, being answerable or liable to someone else for one's actions. We cannot use the term without specifying to whom and for what. Sometimes adult educators feel accountable to learners, sometimes to funders. Accountability looks very different from different places in the system....One's position in the system, particular context and experience, resources and support, all shape to whom one feels accountable and for what" (Merrifield 1998, 16).

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In the field of literacy, with its vast array of programs and approaches, agreement on accountability is a challenging task. Programs encompass activities as diverse as preparation for independence, family literacy, and adult basic education. Delivery methods vary as well, ranging from one-to-one interaction, to classes both large and small, to technology-based delivery. This is complicated in Canada with a range of delivering agencies, including "community colleges, school boards, workplaces, learning centers, and community based programs." (Campbell 2007, 207). Given the multiple and overlapping complexities in the literacy field, a great deal of interaction among stakeholders would be required to reach agreement on indicators of success and ways to effectively and efficiently measure it.

• LIMITATIONS, BENEFITS, AND THE FUTURE OF MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Recall the question which Hayes says animates accountability: "How can I prove that what I am doing is useful and valuable?" This is a question that cannot be answered unless both parties interested in the answer – in this case funders and service providers – share perspectives on what constitutes success.

Here differences and difficulties can arise. As noted, government-led accountability movements have focused mainly on "financial accountability" and "performance accountability."

More complex is what counts as relevant data for performance accountability. "What is counted usually becomes what counts" says Merrifield (1998, 47). For example, if what is counted is attendance by students, energy and resources may go to recruitment and retention rather than curriculum and delivery. Campbell criticizes such measures, arguing that "accountability [should focus] on the quality of programs and services that support learning rather than narrow performance measures". She urges the system to achieve "a balance between developing a common set of standards and meeting the diversity of communities and learners" (Campbell 2007, 327-328). Ideally, performance or outcome data should reflect all the most important and relevant criteria of success. When this is not so, it is arguably because a truly "mutual" accountability relationship does not exist.

However, the recommendation to increase "mutual accountability" may also have real costs. Demetrion (2000, 24) concludes that "develop[ing] mutual accountability relationships based on various partners knowing understanding and accepting their roles and obligations to one another and to the system" is daunting and wistful, simply too labour intensive.

While progress toward increased mutuality in the funder/provider accountability relationship may be labour intensive, some steps in this direction and away from merely

transactional relationships seem warranted. Indeed, the literatures on literacy, the voluntary sector, and social policy speak of "adjustments" in the direction of greater mutuality (Demetrion 2000, 24-26; Frei and Langlais 2002, 1-3; Hayes 2009, 22; Merrifield 1998, 75-76). As Tuohy observes, "A new more trust-based and effective model of accountability within networks needs elements that facilitate success as well as ensuring appropriate stewardship of public resources." (2006, 88)

The recommended adjustments include these actions:

- Directly engage key decision makers at all levels of the system, from the local program to the national level
- Ensure top quality management in all the stakeholder arenas accompanied by adequate training
- Choose a small number of key measures of the most basic indicators of success, measures that are useful and used by both funders and service providers
- Build the capacity of the field to be accountable by using existing tools, technology and resources while developing and providing new ones
- Use clear, concise and timely communication
- Create a culture and process that can translate information and research into action

• CONCLUSION

"Mutual accountability" in the abstract is like apple pie: obviously a good thing. The concept is positive and constructive. Its characteristics seem to fit the values and priorities of the literacy field. Certainly it is a way of working that supports continuous learning and change based on negotiation. Yet, as with so many abstract goods – and to thoroughly mix metaphors – the "devil is in the detail". If accountability is too one-sided programs can be jeopardized by overly onerous and/or inappropriate reporting requirements. Funders risk not achieving their goals if performance standards are unclear, if measurement tools are inadequate, or if the capacity to produce relevant information is lacking. These issues might be usefully addressed by a full "mutual accountability" that leads to genuine agreement about goals, expectations, and outcomes. But that full mutuality has its own costs and perils, among them the danger of becoming so engrossed in the "process" that accountability goals are not reached.

There is work to be done! What seems clear is that the literacy community must be thoroughly engaged in the evolution of any new policies and approaches. As Demetrion (2000, 25) puts it, "It is only through sufficiently strong advocacy among the literacy constituency based at least on a pragmatic consensus, that the field will be able to muster adequate political power to change current social policy."

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