CONNECTiNG The DOTS

Accountability and Adult Literacy

LINKAGE REPORT

NOVEMBER 2009

AUTHOR:

James E. Page
Adjunct Research Professor
School of Canadian Studies
Carleton University

Table Of Contents

www.literacyandaccountability.ca

I. Setting the Context

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper presents an analysis of the significant themes and conclusions drawn from the major study: *Connecting the Dots: Improving Accountability in the Adult Literacy Field in Canada*.   The scope of the project was broad and its findings reflect the complexity of the subject matter and the level of interest generated by the topic.

It became clear early in the project that finding common ground on such a difficult subject was and remains a challenge. Not surprisingly, the project demonstrates that those involved in adult literacy often hold divergent views about what constitutes effective and appropriate accountability.

The objective of *Connecting the Dots* (*CtD*) was to gather and assess current thinking about the accountabilities that exist between the funders of literacy efforts and the providers of literacy services. There are other accountability relationships in literacy such as accountability to adult learners, to boards of directors, to taxpayers, and to the communities being served. However, the project was designed to "*connect the dots"* about accountability specifically as it relates to funders and funded organizations working in adult literacy in Canada today.

This document weaves together the research and other findings that emerged from the project undertaken on behalf of the CtD project's four partner organizations: The Centre for Literacy of Quebec, The Movement for Canadian Literacy, Literacy BC and Research in Practice in Adult Literacy (RiPAL BC). Representatives from these organizations comprised the project Steering Committee.

The goals of the project were:

- to consolidate and exchange knowledge about current accountability policy and practice in adult literacy from Canada and abroad;

- to find a common language between the literacy community and government/funders to talk about accountability;

- to build on this knowledge and use the language to develop innovative models that can satisfy the needs and requirements of both providers and funders and improve accountability in positive ways.

This Linkage Report represents a synthesis of the results of work done through the *Connecting the Dots* project. It is not an evaluation of the project. A summative report is being prepared by *INNOVA Learning* as an independent assessment.

As well, the four partner organizations will submit a final project report to the funder, the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC). In it the partners will assess their own progress towards their goals and comment on the challenges and successes encountered during the project.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Steering Committe thanks the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills, Human Resource and Skills Development for the support of this project. Thanks go, as well to Symposium participants for their contributions.

I. Setting the Context

The Linkage Report is structured in three parts, each with subsections:

- Part I, "*Setting the Context*", begins with this introduction followed by a simplified description of the project's components and methods. The report then reflects on the term "accountability" using insights drawn from all elements of the project. Finally it explains the challenges faced in attempting to *Connect the Dots*.

- Part II opens with an explanation of the methodology used to analyse project findings. The remainder of Part II is designed to *Connect the Dots* by identifying a set of "essential to know" lessons related to good accountability practices.

- Part III, *"Conclusions"*, offers closing comments.

A draft of this report was discussed at a closing symposium, *Charting the Way: Identifying Common Values for Accountability in Adult Literacy,* held in Ottawa on October 20–21, 2009. This final version of the Linkage Report incorporates not only material drawn from the research elements of the project but also reflects the contributions from symposium participants.

2. PROJECT ELEMENTS AND METHODS

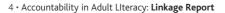The six elements of this project are described here in no order of priority.

Voices from the Field is a review of the impact of accountability policies and practices on adult literacy programs and the government departments and ministries that implement them. Conducted as a research-in-practice activity, the project's seven field reviewers interviewed 106 literacy providers and 30 funders drawn from every province and territory as well as from the federal government.

The Connecting the Dots Literature Review examines professional writing, research, public policy and legislation related to issues of accountability.   The review explores the various meanings that have developed around this term. It examines the literature that assesses the impact of accountability policies and practices on non-governmental organizations (NGO's) and funders. Finally, it explores issues such as measuring performance, and questions such as "*Accountable to whom?"* and *"Accountable for what?"*

The *Provincial/Territorial Literacy Profiles* are "*snapshots*" of adult literacy funding, services and accountability practices across Canada. Their original purpose was to describe regional policies and practices in both literacy service provision and accountability. Based on online research conducted between December 3 and 19, 2008, each profile reflects publicly available information on provincial and territorial adult literacy funders, providers, and accountability practices at that point in time.

Action Research Teams (ARTs) conducted five action research projects in four provinces intended to showcase funder/provider collaboration in developing innovative approaches to accountability.[i]

The Alberta ART explored "*mutual accountability*". Their research question was: "What characteristics of the relationship between Calgary Learns (funder) and two Bow Valley College adult literacy/basic education programs (providers) support mutual accountability and how these characteristics can be strengthened or nurtured?" A tool was developed to assist funders and providers to self-assess the degree of mutual accountability within and between their organizations.

I. Setting the Context

The Storyteller's Foundation ART, based in Hazelton, BC, explored *Literacy Outcomes of Community Interventions*. The team developed and piloted a tool to measure learner progress in improving social capital skills such as civic responsibility and community inclusiveness.

The Peterborough (Ontario) Native Learning Centre ART, *Development of a Wholistic Accountability Framework for the Native Literacy Stream*, strengthened the accountability relationship between literacy providers in Native communities and provincial funders. The team developed a tool to support the completion of the province's Program Monitoring Report and piloted the tool with three on-reserve literacy programs.

The Quinte (Ontario) Adult Day School, ART focused on the role of self-management, self-direction skills in literacy acquisition. Their project, *Measuring SMSD Skills in Literacy Learners Using United Way's Outcomes Measurement Model* used the United Way's outcomes measurement model to develop a learner assessment process for measuring improvements in these skills.

The Newfoundland ART, *Connecting the Dots: Practicing Shared Accountability,* was a joint project of Literacy Newfoundland and Labrador and the Newfoundland Department of Education's Adult Learning and Literacy Division. Team members tested a model of stakeholder communication with a goal to improve awareness of each others' needs and to discover common language to address accountability issues. They developed a poster of "tips" to assist others in practicing shared accountability.

Research Briefs are readable summaries of current literature on project-related topics. Two briefs were developed as natural outgrowths of action research projects. An Newfoundland ART team member researched and wrote *Understanding Horizontal Governance* which examines how government ministries have moved from providing services directly to working in partnership with community providers of literacy services. The second research brief, *Mutual Accountability and Adult Literacy,* evolved out of the work of the Alberta ART. This brief explores the concept and provides pointers on how to create mutually accountable relationships.

Two *National Symposia* were held to gather feedback from the stakeholder groups with an interest in the project. The first, *Moving the Conversation Forward,* was held in Montreal on May 13–14, 2008, after the first year of *Connecting the Dots*. It brought together over 60 adult literacy practitioners, funders and other experts to discuss the findings from the field and literature reviews, and recommended ways to enhance accountability.

The closing symposium, *Charting the Way: Identifying Common Values for Accountability in Adult Literacy,* hosted 45 participants, many of whom had attended the first gathering. The three objectives of this October 20–21, 2009 event were to present the final results of the five ART projects, to discuss a set of principles for accountability proposed by the project Steering Committee, and to discuss the first draft of this Linkage Report.

I. Setting the Context

3. CHALLENGES

This section reviews some of the challenges faced by *Connecting the Dots*.

Perspectives of funders
The views of funders on accountability-related issues are not as fully represented in the project documents as had been expected.   While about 25% of interviewees for *Voices from the Field* were funders, about 90% of comments shared in the report were by providers. The reasons for funder reticence were not clear. As the research was carried out by practitioner-researchers perhaps literacy providers felt more comfortable expressing their views. Funders may have viewed the project as primarily focused on providers so were hesitant to share their perspectives.
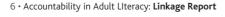
Funders may have also exercised caution for fear of making commitments or expressing views that their government departments might not have agreed to or supported.   Some funders at the 2008 Symposium spoke about feeling "caught in the middle" between their obligations to their employer and their understanding of the needs in the field. Funder comments at the 2009 Symposium confirmed that many of these factors were at play. There was a consensus that the engagement of senior government officials and policy makers is essential if mutual accountability is to be realized. The need for "policy-oriented" documents on mutual accountability designed for senior officials and politicians was identified as a priority.

Human versus social capital perspectives
Another challenge faced by *Connecting the Dots* is, as the literature review observes, that governments appear mainly interested in human capital skills acquisition in order to increase employment, competitiveness and productivity. Literacy providers appear to attach greater importance to building social capital by enhancing, for example, adults' abilities to navigate the health care system, engage more fully in community life, or become more active citizens or more effective parents. At the closing symposium and in the ARTs there was evidence that these views need not be in competition. Rather they should be aligned if Canadians are to achieve the goal of economic and social wellbeing for all.

Multiple literacies and cultural and linguistic diversity
At the 2009 Symposium it was noted that the concept of multiple literacies had not been raised during the project to that point. The concept of multiple literacies suggests that people acquire, learn and use many forms of literacy – print, visual, oral – for different purposes in different contexts. Those circumstances are shaped by history, culture, religion, language, and socio-economic conditions. Rather than seeing literacy as a fixed set of generic skills (as in basic literacy), this concept explores the shifting social dimensions of the acquisition, development and changing uses of literacy. Yet most policy and accountability frameworks take account of a narrow definition of literacy. There was also considerable interest in how accountability issues relate to cultural and linguistic diversity, especially as they refer to the needs of aboriginal peoples. This was also a thread in *Voices from the Field* and at least two of the ARTs, as well.

I. Setting the Context

4. DEFINING ACCOUNTABILITY

Throughout the project it was clear that accountability, like literacy, means "different things to different people". The literature review concluded that few documents manage or even attempt to define the concept in simple terms. Those definitions that were discovered often reflect a view that accountability flows primarily in one direction, assuming a superior-subordinate relationship.   In the literacy world that generally means that accountability is assigned by the funder who retains both the responsibility and ability to judge the performance of the provider.

However, the literature reveals another possible approach to accountability: a two-way relationship that allows for and supports both decision-making and feedback to inform program delivery and performance. This notion of interactive and ongoing accountability is found in this 1999 definition from the Panel on Accountability & Governance in the Voluntary Sector.

> "Accountability is a relationship based on the obligation to demonstrate and take responsibility for performance in light of agreed expectations." (p.11)

This definition of accountability was chosen for discussion at the first symposium, *Accountability and Adult Literacy in Canada: Moving the Conversation Forward* in 2008. Participants suggested adding: "*collaborative* relationship, based on a *mutual* obligation." A funder added that: "…the mutual establishment of expectations is key".

As R. Houston-Knopff suggests (2009, p.3), it is important to stress the words "*in light of agreed expectations*" because these words imply an ongoing interaction, or mutuality, between the funder and the funded.

During the field review practitioners and funders were asked for their definitions of accountability. In response, interviewees used key words and phrases such as *"being responsible"*, "*taking ownership*", "*answering for*", and "*justifying*". They also often signalled that accountability was an undertaking which included a promise to the other party: "*commitment, agreement, and what we said we would do"*. Finally the definitions included reference to outcomes and outputs as a result of the program or project undertaken through words such as: *"showing", "sharing information", "explaining", "demonstrating results"*, and "*telling the story*" (*Voices from the Field,* S. Crooks et. al., 2008, p.12.)

The evidence gathered for *Connecting the Dots* affirms the value of adopting a collaborative, shared and mutually respectful approach to accountability based on good communication, common expectations, adequate resources, appropriate and balanced reporting requirements, and shared responsibility for results.

The suggestion of one 2008 symposium participant to: "…*apply our skills to create our own definition"* was taken up at the 2009 Symposium. A draft definition of accountability was discussed and resulted in this refined definition:

> "Accountability is fulfilling obligations negotiated by all parties taking shared responsibility for performance and results."

Consideration was given to what indicators of mutual accountability might include, for example, that negotiations take place in a transparent and respectful manner; that the human and financial requirements needed to accomplish the agreed upon tasks are adequate; and that expectations, outcomes and reporting requirements are jointly derived.

"When I say I am going to do it, I should do it and I should be able to show that I have done it."

– Voices from the Field

II. Connecting the Dots

5. THE APPROACH USED TO CONNECT THE DOTS

The wide knowledge and experience represented in the six strands of this project made it difficult to pull all the findings together into one document. Consequently, a decision was made to sift through the materials looking for those elements considered **essential to know**. The choices illustrate the range of ideas from the project. They are not a full summary of all of the knowledge gleaned from this exercise.

Connecting the Dots found that issues of accountability surface at every stage in a project's life cycle. Consequently project design should be concerned with accountability from inception to final reporting. Successful projects are based on a proven need for their intended results, their relevance to potential users or audiences, a shared understanding of project goals and objectives, the adequacy of the skills and resources assigned to the task, and a clear understanding of who is accountable for what and to whom.

While some literacy providers (school boards or colleges, or private sector skills programs) do not rely on project funding alone, the consensus from the final Symposium was that, whatever the funding mechanism, the following lessons apply.

6. ESSENTIAL LESSONS FROM *CONNECTING THE DOTS:*

Lesson 1

Recognize and accommodate the fact that every stakeholder has multiple accountabilities.

While this project looked at the relationship between funders and literacy providers, this relationship is influenced by the other accountabilities that are characteristic of adult literacy in Canada.   For example, literacy providers' responsibility to learners and communities differs from their answerability to funders. Cost effectiveness and efficiency may be of utmost importance to the funder, while providing a community with flexible and accessible literacy services on an on-going basis may be the central concern of the provider.

In *Voices from the Field* some practitioners described a dual accountability to the funder and to the learner. Others acknowledged multiple accountabilities including to funders, taxpayers, learners, boards of directors and agencies, the community, and the literacy profession. The Peterborough, Ontario ART pointed out that Native literacy practitioners have three levels of responsibility: to the provincial ministry that is their primary funder, to the Band or tribe, and to learners or community.

There are many bosses to please and a variety of frameworks within which to demonstrate accountability. The Native literacy worker has a lot of explaining to do!
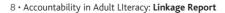
– Peterborough ART

The research brief on horizontal governance relates directly to the subject of multiple accountabilities and how they can be managed. Horizontal governance is an umbrella term that covers a range of approaches to policy development, service delivery, and management practices.   A horizontal governance initiative can work on a variety of levels: across units in a single department or agency; between multiple departments or agencies; across levels of government or across the public, private and voluntary sectors. It replaces vertical hierarchical leadership with its focus on command and control, with a horizontal approach that values collaboration, coordination, shared responsibility for decisions and outcomes, and a willingness to work by consensus.

The research brief concluded that the literacy field is a good fit for a horizontal approach because it does not fall neatly under the priorities of a single government department or level of government. At a minimum, partners in a horizontal governance arrangement have a dual set of accountabilities: "the accountability each has to the other and the vertical accountabilities each has to their governing authority" (T. Fitzpatrick, 2000).

www.literacyandaccountability.ca

II. Connecting the Dots

Lesson 2

Accountability agreements must reflect the circumstances of both the funder and the funded.

At the 2009 Symposium participants discussed the importance of realizing that what drives accountability can often be quite different from what drives literacy, and vice versa. The literacy field needs to understand that the demand for accountability can constrain what a government funder can do given "vertical accountabilities" to senior officials and ministers, and the realities of the political environment. As Ian Clark and Harry Swain (2005, p.455) explain it:

> "Government officials have to manage in a political environment replete with demanding ministers, energetic political staff, sceptical opposition MPs, headline-seeking reporters, impatient stakeholders, human employees, late night calls from the Privy Council Office, and limits on money, time and people".

Likewise, funders should appreciate that literacy programs and organizations are not all the same. The contexts within which delivery programs operate differ considerably between municipalities, regions, provinces and territories. These are variables beyond the control of funding programs. However, some funders require organizations to account for their programs without any apparent recognition of their context, as if all programs were operating against the same backdrop. That is why many practitioners interviewed for *Voices* said accountability measures must take account of the diversity of circumstances learners and practitioners face.

As one practitioner phrased it:

> "The people who are still on social assistance are harder to serve, have multiple barriers to work, or have never worked and these are the people now in literacy programs and these people require more supports when they come to school.**"**

A primary focus of the support tool created by the Peterborough, Ontario ART was to help Native literacy practitioners communicate their unique circumstances, including challenges and successes, to the funder's representatives. Similarly, the Hazelton, BC ART created a tool to assess social capital growth among learners of their majority Native community. Their goal was to develop a tool that both measured learner improvements within this unique community context and determine if these changes contribute to literacy acquisition.

"Accountability has to be negotiated. Both parties need to agree on what is reasonable accountability."
— *Voices from the Field*

"Accountability structures need to recognize the significance of context in the delivery and outcomes of programs."
— *Voices from the Field*

II. Connecting the Dots

Lesson 3

Both parties must work to earn and maintain trust.

The importance of trust manifests itself throughout *Connecting the Dots*. The 2008 Symposium Proceedings, *Moving the Conversation Forward*, identified trust as foremost among the themes identified at the meeting, asserting that trust and mistrust underlie the public's understanding of accountability. The Alberta ART noted that respect, trust and open communication are critical. The BC ART found that trust is exercised by the mutual acceptance of obligations. Improving trust was one of the desired outcomes of the Newfoundland and Labrador ART. The literature review reported that accountability expectations have grown out of a lack of public trust in governments' abilities to be responsible stewards of tax dollars noting that this perceived lack of trust is fed by media reports of alleged misspending of public funds.

At the 2008 Symposium participants observed repeatedly that since providers and funders are reliant on one another they have to believe in the integrity of their relationship and enjoy shared convictions about the propriety of their goals. At the 2009 Symposium some interesting refinements or distinctions were made. In the discussion of the Alberta ART a participant commented on the importance not only of trust (*relying upon or depending upon the other party*) but of trustworthiness (*deserving of the trust or confidence of the other party; being dependable or reliable)*. There was consensus on this point. In the discussion of the Newfoundland ART, participants stressed that trustworthiness has to be earned by both individuals and organizations.

Lesson 4

Effective accountability is based on open communication and shared knowledge.

Trust and trustworthiness make openness and transparency possible in any funding relationship. All the work from *Connecting the Dots* leads to the conclusion that where open communications were a feature of the relationship between the literacy service provider and funder then issues of accountability were viewed positively by both sides.

This was especially evident at the 2008 Symposium. For example, funders spoke of the need for improved communication with other funders and within the organizations they represent. They noted the importance of sharing information on the impact of accountability practices within their systems and on their own programs with their superiors. They commented on the need to explain to clients the reasons behind accountability criteria and to alert them to pending changes. For their part providers also realized that communication is essential, not only to funders but to other stakeholders such as the media, current and former learners, board members, and the communities they serve.

Throughout the project there was consensus that knowledge and experience are the bases for good communications and respectful, reciprocal relationships. Consequently, building knowledge transfer skills and processes is important for both government program delivery and for quality literacy provision.

In *Voices from the Field* knowledge was identified as a key factor influencing the relationship between funders and service providers. When practitioners perceive that a funder is not knowledgeable, effective communication and trust can be diminished.   The same is true, the research showed, if a funder is concerned about a provider's ability to deliver on commitments made.

> *"Trust is a big issue between the organization and the division. [The coalition and government] have openly talked about how to get beyond that and be able to talk it through and feel the level of comfort needed to say we are true partners."*
>
> *– Newfoundland and Labrador ART – www.literacyandaccountability.ca/innovate-nlprogress.htm*

> *"Communication and respect for one another's decisions and their impact on each other. For communication you have to be open-minded to other people's opinions and decisions and instructions. Don't judge people."*
>
> *– Alberta ART - Final Report*

II. Connecting the Dots

At both *Symposia* and in the *Voices* interviews practitioners observed that the success of a mutual accountability project depends on personal working relationships. This was evident in all five ART projects, but especially those that focused on the accountability relationship such as Peterborough, Newfoundland and Alberta. Given the personnel "churn" in many departments and agencies of government, as both staff and management appear to move from post to post frequently, accountability relationships can be put in jeopardy. If one or more of those partners leave, the challenge is to find a working accommodation that survives changes in personnel. This is another reason why knowledge transfer was considered to be so important.

An important benefit of shared knowledge is "closing the loop" of the data collection process that is a central aspect of any accountability system. Ideally, providers should see the results of their efforts at tracking and reporting data and how this data impacts future policy or funding decisions. In V*oices from the Field* practitioners noted that previous accountability experiences with performance reporting and statistical analysis created opportunities for them to reflect on their work and enhance their practice. The field report also recommends that funders review their accountability requirements regularly, using feedback from funded organizations to ensure future accountability reporting requirements are balanced and appropriate to the projects being funded.

Lesson 5

Human and financial resources must be adequate to the tasks of delivering on project outcomes and being held accountable for results.

Practitioners interviewed for *Voices in the Field* frequently noted that writing funding proposals was the most time consuming part of their work. They claimed that writing requirements are now more onerous and complex than in the past. Adding to their concern is the fact that they do not receive funding to offset the increased costs of more stringent accountability measures and more detailed reporting requirements.

Several funders and a number of practitioners stressed that funders need to provide not only money to carry out a project but also resources to support organizational capacity-building and learner accessibility, as well as compensation for added reporting and paper work. In *Voices* many project managers said that funders should provide sufficient support not only for program delivery, but also adequate resources to enable them to report on results in ways that meet funder expectations.

However, there is a danger in all of this that was identified in the literature review:

> Ultimately, practitioners are caught in a Catch-22: in order to receive funding, they must comply with reporting demands; in order to comply with demands they need sufficient resources; and seeking more resources results in more accountability demands.

> In *Voices* people noted that often reporting requirements were disproportionate to the funding received saying that practitioners should not lose sight of project goals by being forced to focus more on reporting than achieving results.   As one provider phrased it,

> "As accountability measures have constantly increased, especially during the past 10 years, there has been no additional funding, no recognition that these things cost money – you have to do as part of your contract. There is only one place resources come out of and that is out of the classroom."

"Funding staff are approachable, collegial, and respectful. Service provider staff are approachable, collegial, and respectful. "

– Alberta ART - Mutual Accountability Tool

"Thoroughly review the funder's mission, objectives, values and desired outcomes, along with the criteria for eligibility for funding."

– Alberta ART - Mutual Accountability Tool

"There needs to be adequate funding, salaries, training, resources, and space. Accountability means finding funding strategies with humane guidelines (daycare, transportation)."

– Voices from the Field

II. Connecting the Dots

> *"Funders typically want to have information that can be quantified and compared. They want to have information on results to justify spending and make policy decisions."*
>
> – *Literature Review*

The research briefs noted that problems can arise when there is a "one model" system that requires those funded to provide the same level of financial reporting regardless of the amount of funding involved. With small projects this can result in too much staff time being devoted to managing accounts rather than the delivery of the services being funded. This suggests that funders need to consider the proportionality of reporting requirements.

Lesson 6

Attention needs to be paid to both financial and performance accountability.

The previous lesson leads logically to this lesson. Accountability has to balance both fiduciary and programmatic concerns. *Financial accountability* is, perhaps, the more straightforward of these two types of accountability and is the one often stressed by funders. Most agree that the parties must be accountable for how money is spent. The challenge is how to determine if those expenditures result in value for money. An emphasis on financial accountability can result in the conundrum of "what is counted becomes what counts". This is underscored by the fact that, as the literature review emphasizes, there is a lack of balance in the relationship between funders and providers, with accountability expectations flowing from the funder down to the providers. What gets counted are things that matter to funders, often despite the fact that there are a number of measures of "performance accountability" which, if collected, could enhance the quality of instruction and increase the return on investment for the funder.

> *"Not everything that can be counted counts; not everything that counts can be counted."*
>
> – *2009 Symposium Participant*

Performance accountability, the measurement of the quality of the outputs and outcomes of programs, is a more complicated matter because it involves reaching agreement on what should be measured. The research brief on mutual accountability suggests that there are ways to reach such agreement, and all the ARTs found specific means to reach local collaborative agreements in each of their funding relationships.

Lesson 7

Policy consistency and policy coherence are essential for effective accountability.

Frequently shifting policies pose challenges for a field like literacy where improvements occur incrementally and nothing happens overnight.   That is why the project found that policy consistency and policy coherence are important in slowly evolving fields such as literacy and essential skills. When macro policies change, program policies change too. This has an effect on expectations and consequently on the services delivered by the organization funded.

> *"(Front line government funders) are under a lot of pressure from above to deliver things. They need to answer to above. It is difficult for them to plan ahead, to develop a system, to think things through."*
>
> – *Voices from the Field*

The *Connecting the Dots* effort to create provincial and territorial government literacy profiles illustrates the problem. As mentioned, three attempts were made to create those profiles and each try revealed changes in policies or programs in one jurisdiction or another making it difficult to pin down what long-range literacy policy and program objectives are across Canada.

This fact has implications for front-line public servants delivering funding programs because they have to deal with pressures from the vertical hierarchies they report to and receive instructions from. It also has major implications for their masters.

This issue affects providers as well because they are always searching for longer-term stable funding. There is a consensus among literacy programs that the field needs to be

II. Connecting the Dots

freed from the cycle of annual requests to funders to support the work they do on an ongoing basis. Most agree that shifting policies and priorities compromise quality and accountability over the long term to the detriment of both funders and those funded.

Lesson 8

The way providers are held accountable can compromise their ability to be accountable.

The reporting aspects of accountability appear to be the greatest concern. The issues boil down to the need for funders to have information that they can use to justify their expenditure of either private or public money in terms of the return on investment. The literacy field needs reliable assessments of the impact of their work on learners to ensure quality programming.

Throughout the documentation produced for *Connecting the Dots* the reader finds frustration with many current accountability policies and practices. Much of this anxiety results from what many perceive to be an excessive paper burden and a sense that some reporting requirements are preceived as simply bureaucratic busywork.

Voices from the Field concluded that: "*The time dedicated to collecting data, filling out forms and submitting information cannot be underestimated*" (p.22). The report concluded that many providers found that the time and resources they had to spend preparing and filing reports to various funders was compromising their ability to work with learners in effective and meaningful ways. To put it another way, their accountability to learners was compromised by the accountability demands of their funders.

Accountability requirements can affect literacy organizations in unexpected ways. For example, the study found that "*volunteers who have dedicated themselves to tutoring do not want to be burdened with the extra work required to comply with funding requirements*" (p.27). Consequently, some organizations reported that they had lost volunteers upon whom they depend to provide services to learners.

"Accountability should enhance what I do instead of hinder or stifle it. It should not drain too much time away from what one is doing. [It] should be minimal rather than oppressive."

– Voices from the Field

"Connect(s) service providers to information sources that can enhance performance and effectiveness (e.g., research and policy papers, research networks, think tanks, and other literacy organizations with similar interests)."

– Alberta ART - Mutual Accountability Tool

III. Conclusions

This paper was originally written to help the participants at the Closing Symposium digest the information the project had generated. As a "linkage" document it pulled together the themes found in the various components of *Connecting the Dots.* Symposium participants discussed the paper and the lessons it contained. We have taken account of their comments in the final version of this paper.

LESSONS FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

In order to take actions to create effective, mutual accountability relationships the following lessons have been identified in this Linkage Report. These lessons apply equally to both funders and funded organizations.

- It is important to recognize and accommodate the fact that every stakeholder has multiple accountabilities.
- Accountability agreements must reflect the circumstances of both the funder and the funded.
- Both parties must work to earn and maintain trust.
- Effective accountability is based on open communication and shared knowledge.
- Both human and financial resources must be adequate to the tasks of delivering on project outcomes and being held accountable for results.
- Attention needs to be paid to both financial and performance accountability.
- Policy consistency and policy coherence are essential for effective accountability.
- The way providers are held accountable can compromise their ability to be accountable.

III. Conclusions

SO WHAT IS ACCOUNTABILITY?

Connecting the Dots has gathered considerable information and evidence on the subject of ensuring effective accountability in the field of adult literacy in Canada. The project demonstrates that this is a complex subject and that there are no easy solutions to the accountability challenge both funders and funded organizations face.

At the final symposium participants were also asked to consider what might be an appropriate working definition of accountability. The definition highlights reflects the consensus expressed as a conclusion of *Connecting the Dots*.

The participants were extremely positive about the project outcomes to date and suggested that this is only the beginning of the journey. They made recommendations and commitments for follow-up actions, ways to share what was learned and to build toward improving future policy and practice in accountability for the field and for funders.

"Accountability is fulfilling obligations negotiated by all parties taking shared responsibility for performance and results."

END NOTES

See the Action Research Teams page of the Connecting the Dots web site (http://www.literacyandaccountability.ca/action-research.htm) for detailed information on the projects.

Sources

Clark, I.D. & Swain, H. (2005). Distinguishing the real from the surreal in management reform: Suggestions for beleaguered administrators in the government of Canada. *Canadian Public Administration, 48*(4), 453-476.

Crooks, S., et. al. (2008). *Accountability in Adult Literacy: Voices from the field.* Montreal, QC.: The Centre for Literacy of Quebec.

Fitzpatrick, T. (2000). *Horizontal Management: Trends in Governance and Accountability.* Canadian Centre for Management Development Action Research Roundtable on the Management of Horizontal Issues.

Panel on Accountability and Governance in the Voluntary Sector (1999). *Building on Strengths: Improving Governance and Accountability in Canada's Voluntary Sector.*

Houston-Knopff, R. (2009). *Research Brief on Mutual Accountability and Adult Literacy.* Montreal, QC: The Centre for Literacy of Quebec.