



The Literacy Lab

OUR PROCESS SO FAR

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INTRODUCTION

The Challenge & Context

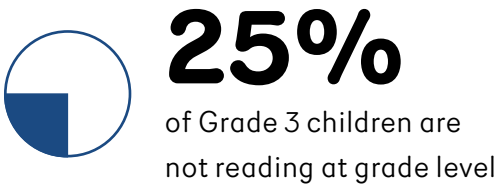
The childhood literacy challenge is complex... and urgent.

In 2012, the Supreme Court of Canada released a unanimous decision recognizing that learning to read is not a privilege, but a basic and essential human right. Literacy is the single most important skill to learn - it is the gateway to all other learning and a pre-determinant of many social, health, and economic outcomes. People with low literacy skills are more likely to experience poor educational outcomes, to be less engaged in their communities, to live in poverty, to suffer from addiction and other mental health challenges, to be incarcerated, and to be unemployed or underemployed.



One in five Albertans have faced literacy challenges since childhood. Almost half of working-age Albertans do not have the literacy skills required to perform most jobs in today's economy. In the past 20 years, the overall literacy rate amongst students in Alberta has dropped and the percentage of children who are functionally illiterate has almost doubled. More than 1 million children in Canada have below grade reading skills, and 25% of Grade 3 children are not reading at grade level. The transition from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn' occurs between the ages of 6 and 9. If a child lacks proficiency in reading by the end of Grade 3, they will encounter significant obstacles for the rest of their educational journey. Seventy-five percent of children who do not overcome early literacy challenges, struggle throughout their lives.

Teacher education, complex student needs, outdated assessment tools and conflicting pedagogical approaches to teaching reading are all significant factors in the literacy challenge. However, literacy does not happen in isolation nor is it restricted to the educational system. Covid-19 learning loss has put many children behind and struggling to catch up. Childhood trauma, domestic violence, poverty, and lack of access to



books and the internet all affect a child's ability to learn. As we welcome new immigrants and refugees into our communities, more and more children are entering the school system with a range of language skills and varying educational needs.

Systemic inequities also contribute to the literacy challenge. Black, Indigenous and children of colour from underserved communities have always been subject to a persistent gap in reading outcomes relative to white and more affluent peers. Black students in Canada face disproportionately high rates of suspension, dropout, expulsion, and streaming into applied rather than academic programs. Educational systems lack the data, the training, the evidence base, and the flexibility to adapt literacy and learning for the kids and families most vulnerable to being left behind.

Although this challenge is complex and will be difficult to address, it is imperative that leaders put more attention towards it and that a mindset of innovation and collaboration allows them to work together to come up with new ideas and work together in new ways. This is the calling of the Literacy Lab.

INTRODUCTION

The Lab Team



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INTRODUCTION

The Literacy Lab

The Literacy Lab is a multi-year social lab with a focus on addressing the challenges related to childhood literacy in Calgary. Facilitated by the Institute for Community Prosperity at Mount Royal University, in collaboration with Arete Initiative, the Literacy Lab will bring together diverse community participants from across traditional boundaries, backgrounds and sectors who bring different perspectives and lived experience to the issue. Together, the Lab will dive into the patterns, structures and mindsets that are keeping the challenge entrenched in order to uncover root causes, identify systemic interventions and design and test new ideas for addressing this issue. The Lab will integrate the work and expertise of MRU faculty and engage students in the process throughout.

The Literacy Lab is generously funded by an anonymous donor through the Calgary Foundation.

The Convening Question

**HOW MIGHT WE
COLLECTIVELY
ENSURE ALL
CHILDREN IN
CALGARY ARE
READING BY THE
END OF GRADE 3?**

INTRODUCTION

What is a Social Lab?

Social labs are an approach to addressing complex social, environmental and economic challenges. Complex challenges are multidimensional, constantly changing, nonlinear and... messy. In a social lab we bring together participants from different parts of the system to dive into the systems, structures and mindsets within a challenge in order to uncover root causes and take action. In the lab process we are purposefully learning and experimenting throughout to design, test and adapt our ideas. Throughout the process we are increasing trust and collaboration, building capacity and co-creating solutions.

IN ESSENCE, SOCIAL LABS ARE THREE THINGS:



SYSTEMIC: Seeking to understand the systems, interconnections and dynamics contributing to and upholding a particular problem, rather than looking at a challenge in isolation.



SOCIAL: Problems cannot be solved by one individual or sector. Social labs focus on relationships, connections and building trust across typical boundaries. We elevate the participation and voices of those with lived experience with a commitment to collaboration and inclusion.



EXPERIMENTAL: Complex problems do not have singular or easy solutions. In a social lab, creativity is used to collectively generate new ideas and co-design potential solutions. Through continuous experimentation, learning and improving on ideas we can discover something with significant impact.

INTRODUCTION

Lab Counsel

An essential part of the first phase of the Literacy Lab was the establishment of a Lab Counsel. The Lab Counsel is a small group of community leaders with different experiences, perspectives and understanding of the systems, structures and factors that influence early childhood literacy.

Whereas the Design + Facilitation Team holds expertise in process design, facilitation, complex problem solving, social innovation and systems thinking, the Lab Counsel provides the expertise in childhood literacy and a deep grounding in the community, providing connections and helping establish relationships for engagement. The Lab Counsel is critical to help ground-truth any assumptions or decisions that the Design + Facilitation Team make and serve as an anchor to the convening question.

At its core, the Lab Counsel is a wisdom circle that provides ‘counsel’ - It is not a steering committee, board or governing body (or a traditional Council).

LAB COUNSEL RESPONSIBILITIES

- To provide guidance, feedback, and insights throughout the Lab process
- To serve as community connectors - connecting diverse groups of community actors to the Lab to ensure wide and inclusive community engagement
- To participate in Lab activities such as workshops, interviews, meetings and events



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THE LAB JOURNEY

Our Journey So Far...



THE LAB JOURNEY

Who’s been involved so far...

The Literacy Lab has been in collaboration with educators, parents and over 30 different organization.



PHASE 1: SYSTEMS & STORYTELLING

Challenge Mapping

To more fully understand the issue of children's literacy as it exists in Calgary, the Literacy Lab engaged with an array of diverse community members to explore the barriers, relationships, dynamics, and possible nuances that entrench the challenge of children not reading by the end of Grade 3. Multiple community workshops were hosted in early 2024 to explore this, which engaged Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators, child welfare workers, neurodiversity specialists, newcomer representatives, teacher candidates, and other concerned community members. Additional secondary research was conducted to better understand the challenge. Together, the first "Challenge Map" was prepared that presented seven distinct themes:

- Child's home environment
- Child's internal environment
- Challenges within the school system
- Challenges in teaching
- Classroom challenges
- Intersectional social factors
- Unique challenges for Indigenous children

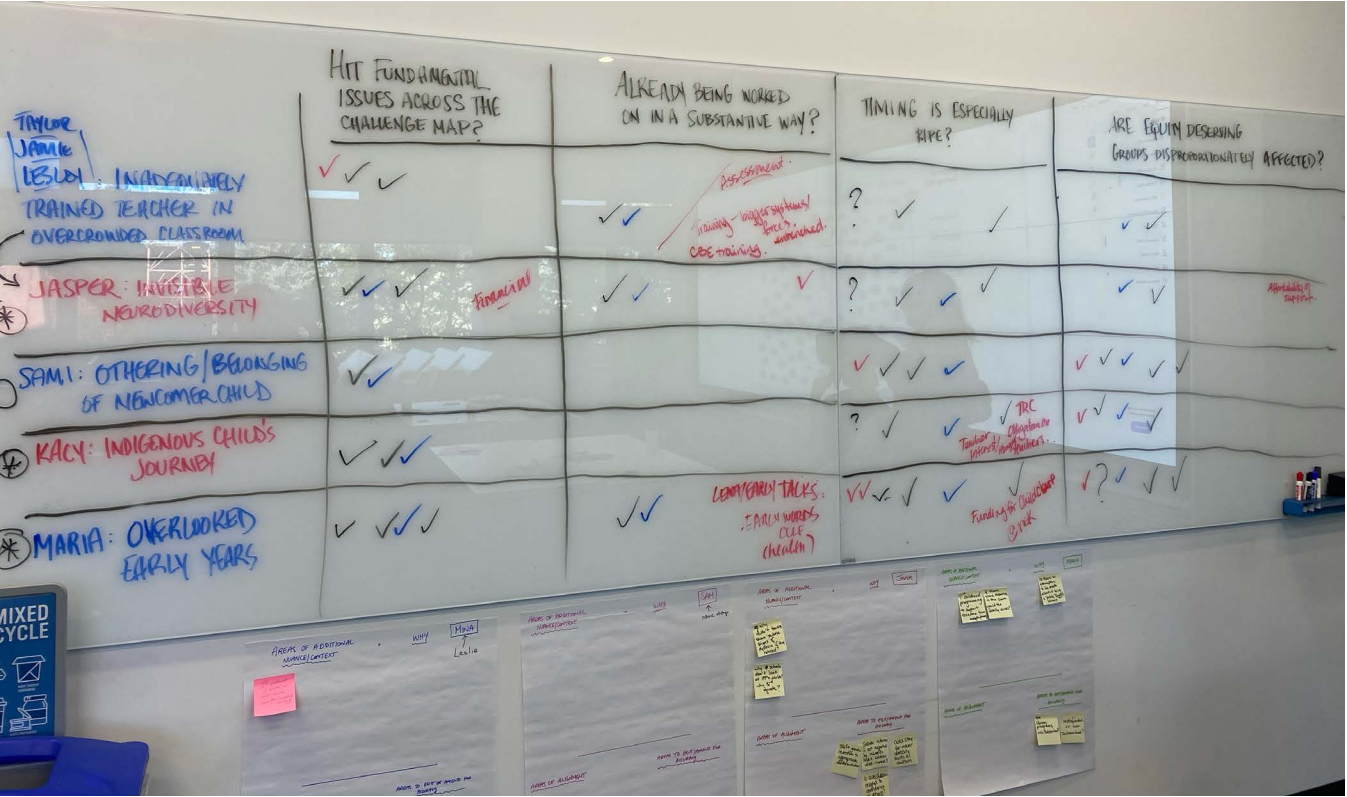
Each theme had a variety of categories that link to research, workshop results and quotes from the engagement to provide context and nuance to the themes.



PHASE 1: SYSTEMS & STORYTELLING

System Journeys & Narratives

The Challenge Map demonstrated the interconnectedness of the themes and categories and revealed some deeply entrenched and recurring patterns. These patterns were developed into “systems journeys,” which allowed us to zoom in on systemic challenges as experienced by a child. To bring these challenges to life and to test the accuracy of the system journeys, fictional narratives were created and shared with the broader community. The journeys were informed not only the challenge map but also by additional research, workshop results and community input. Ultimately, the Literacy Lab participants prioritized three key narratives that are deeply entrenched, and the Literacy Lab is well positioned to work on in 2025. The titles of these narratives include “Navigating Power and Inclusion Challenges for Newcomers to Canada,” “The Overlooked Early Years,” and “The Isolation of an Indigenous Child.”



PHASE 1: SYSTEMS & STORYTELLING

Leverage Identification

These system journeys were a tool to help Literacy Lab participants identify what parts of this journey, if addressed well, could have a significant (positive) impact on the rest of a child's literacy journey. This workshop, in addition to meetings with individual and group experts, yielded a more focused question that will guide the exploration of solutions in 2025. These include :

- Navigating Power and Inclusion Challenges for Newcomers to Canada: *How might we increase cultural responsiveness in reading instruction for newcomer children?*
- The Overlooked Early Years: *How might we support families experiencing difficult trade-offs to increase exposure to reading to pre-kindergarten children?*
- The Isolation of an Indigenous Child: *How might we increase awareness around childhood literacy and foster a shared love of literacy and learning within Indigenous families?*



PHASE 1: SYSTEMS & STORYTELLING

Where We're Going

As we enter Phase 2 of the Literacy Lab in 2025, we turn our focus to possible solutions to the aforementioned challenges and questions. To begin, a solution “brief” has been drafted for each leverage point. These briefs outline the purpose of the Literacy Lab, explain the basis of each leverage point, and extend an invitation for participation from community members. Those who work with the lab in Phase 2 will participate in workshops to brainstorm and test solution prototypes.

