

*The Literacy Lab
Prototype Summary*



Festival of Early Words

The Challenge & Context

Many families do not have the resources or time to sufficiently engage in early literacy practices with their children before they start formal schooling. Limited books in the home, a lack of language-rich environments, and insufficient parental knowledge are just a few major issues.

Even when caregivers understand the importance of early literacy, many families face difficult trade-offs that make it challenging to prioritize early literacy for young children. As noted by a similar initiative completed in Ontario, “Where meeting basic needs is seen as paramount, literacy is often viewed as an ancillary activity.” (Price, 2018). Literacy thus becomes a low financial priority. Further, research shows that children in low socioeconomic neighbourhoods are twice as likely to experience early developmental skill delay as their high socioeconomic peers, suggesting that the disadvantage they face when entering formal education builds upon itself (Left Unread, n.d.). Additionally, free early literacy programming is oversubscribed in many communities and only 67% of Calgarians have access to affordable childcare services (which may not have adequate literacy support themselves) (Enough for All, 2024). Taken together, it becomes especially difficult for families facing difficult trade-offs to prioritize participation in helpful literacy activities.

After identifying this struggle as a recurring and pressing problem, it was written into a “System Journey”- a fictional narrative illustrating how this issue may look through the lens of one child’s experience. Paired with secondary research and prominent workshop comments, this narrative was used to identify potential leverage points for change. Major themes included the need for more intentional community support, a desire for parents, educators, and community members to act as partners in fostering literacy, and a desire to foster a love of learning. Ultimately, conversations surrounding leverage points yielded an updated innovation question specific to struggles within the overlooked early years:

How might we support families facing difficult trade-offs to increase pre-kindergarten students’ exposure to reading?

The Hypothesis

By increasing caregivers' knowledge and providing practical strategies for creating rich language environments at home, parents can better support their children's early learning journeys. Effectively removing barriers to participation in an event celebrating all forms of literacy for young children will help families furthest from opportunity learn about best practices for supporting early learning skills.

The Idea

One solution proposed by community members was a "Festival of Early Words". This would be an accessible, inclusive event featuring tents, food trucks, booths, and other festival elements focused on interactive language-acquisition activities for young children. These could extend beyond reading text (e.g., singing, puppets, theatre, storytelling). The event would engage existing organizations supporting literacy in the city, and would focus its support on families furthest from opportunity.

WHAT IS A PROTOTYPE?

A prototype is a tool that gives you a chance to investigate your ideas and explore what could, should, or would come next, whether you are designing a new product, working out a new routine, or rearranging your furniture. It's a modest tool for the lofty goal of testing the future, or for at least testing a question you have about your future.

Stanford d.school: This is a Prototype?

Prototyping is about making ideas visual and tangible. It's a low cost version of an idea that can be tested, tweaked and made better with feedback... In social labs, prototyping is a key approach to developing, testing and improving on an idea at an early stage before many resources are committed to implementation.

MaRS: Living Guide to Social Innovation Labs

Solution Team

SOLUTION TEAM COACH: MATT MAYER

The team for the “Festival of Early Words” proposal consisted of six former Literacy Lab participants. Three had backgrounds in elementary education, one now working specifically in the learning differences space, another in pre-service teacher education, and the third an Indigenous Elder now working as a cultural advisor. Another member, previously an early childhood educator (ECE), works as a professor of Child Studies. The other two individuals had backgrounds in systems and change management, one of whom currently works at a different literacy-specific organization in the city.

Having educators’ and early learning professionals’ perspectives felt vital to the success of this team; these participants informed what they considered most important for caregivers of young children to know at an event such as the one envisioned. Those with experience in systems and change management provided excellent advice surrounding potential impact and organizing for success. The team noted that prototyping this solution may have been easier had it had a member with direct programming or connections with those furthest from opportunity – unfortunately, an original member fulfilling this need had to step away early in the process.

WHAT IS A SOLUTION TEAM?

A Solution Team is a small, focused group—typically up to six members—who work collaboratively to experiment, test and refine a solution idea. These teams form a core part of an innovation process, playing a hands-on role in developing and experimenting with real-world prototypes or “tests” of proposed solutions. Our aim was to work closely and iteratively, learning from small experiments and adapting the approach for a more refined test in the future. Each team was supported by a dedicated coach from the Literacy Lab team, but the core responsibility for planning and executing activities rested with the team members themselves. Team members committed to 40 hours of work over six months, which encompassed weekly meetings, individual action between meetings, and participation in prototypes.



Carola Tiltman
LD/ADHD Network



Jodi Nickel
*Mount Royal University,
Department of Education*



Cassandra Wyatt
Kids Literacy Collective



Evelyn Good Striker
*Calgary Public
Library Board*



Nancy Espetveidt
*Mount Royal University,
Faculty of Child Studies*



Juanita Brandt
*Juanita Brandt
Creative*

The Process

This prototype team...

- Collectively prioritized key elements of a successful “Festival” including activities that meaningfully expand caregivers’ understanding of literacy
- Identified a community partner hosting an event that was excited to allow the prototype to be set up at (Monterey Park Community Association’s annual stampede breakfast)
- Setup and hosted the session (engaged ~30 parents/caregivers and ~50kids)
- Conducted a structured team debrief to identify key learnings
- Planned additional prototypes in an effort to understand other key assumptions from the Festival prototype that were outstanding from the first prototype (see table below)

The Prototypes

1 Monterey Park Community Association Stampede Breakfast

KEY QUESTIONS

A small community event seemed like the ideal place to test out some of the elements of a “Festival of Early Words”. We wanted to gauge parents’ interest and determine whether hosting a festival could change behaviour and raise awareness.

Would an adjacent literacy event effectively engage parents or caregivers furthest from opportunity to raise awareness, and potentially change behaviour?

WHAT WE PLANNED/DID

- Identified key elements of a successful “Festival”, including activities that meaningfully expand caregivers’ understanding of literacy.
- Collaborated with the Monterey Park’s annual stampede breakfast.
- Set up and hosted our activities (literacy crafts, read-alouds, etc.).
- Engaged approximately 30 caregivers and 50 kids.

KEY LEARNINGS

- It was hard to reach our key demographic (families experiencing difficult trade-offs with younger children) by joining in on a general community event.
- While providing a breadth of resources was valuable, it may be more helpful to focus on key, unified messages about literacy that stick with parents.
- The community association was an excited partner, suggesting that further participation from community organizations is possible.

2 Women's Annex

KEY QUESTIONS

In the previous prototype, we did not reach our key demographic—those furthest from opportunity with young children. An opportunity arose to prototype with incarcerated women. We wanted to explore how to best tailor information and resources to this demographic and further understand how to connect with community organizations.

How can we best confer information to those furthest from opportunity to engage with their young children?

WHAT WE PLANNED/DID

To carry out this prototype, we planned to...

- Prepare an engaging presentation for Annex residents to build their capacity to engage their children in literacy activities, even over the phone.
- Offer resources (i.e. books) and tools (i.e. good read-aloud questions) for participants to trial.

Ultimately, we did not carry out this prototype—there were too many barriers to access and a lack of capabilities among the solution team to engage with this demographic.

KEY LEARNINGS

- Organizations are not aware of all existing programming they may have access to (i.e. people who may provide educational programming for incarcerated women).
- Despite this, there is a significant need to work with incarcerated women on engaging children in literacy, especially because of the extent of barriers they face.

3 Pink Hat Day

KEY QUESTIONS

A local literacy organization was hosting an event in which multiple solution team members were involved. Team members thought this may present a valuable opportunity to connect with caregivers about the importance of reading. We again wished to test if parents would be receptive to literacy information at an event (this time literacy-centric) even if not directly tailored to our primary demographic.

Would a literacy-centric event engage caregivers with young children, raise awareness, and potentially change behaviour?

WHAT WE PLANNED/DID

- Planned a brief session on picture books with no words to ensure families with young children were engaged.
- Purchased picture books to give away.

Ultimately, we did not carry out this prototype—the lead time was too short and too far from testing with the key demographic (i.e. families furthest from opportunity) as the event was held in an affluent neighbourhood.

KEY LEARNINGS

- Though this event mirrored the type of celebration the Festival entails, the audience (and potential content) did not align with our original audience.
- Prototyping with a stronger tie to core assumptions, rather than prototyping for speed is more effective.

4 Concierge of Literacy

KEY QUESTIONS

This prototype idea explored connecting families furthest from opportunity to the many free or low-cost literacy resources in the city.

How can we effectively share available literacy programming in places that those furthest from opportunity (with young children) may frequent?

WHAT WE PLANNED/DID

- We hoped to gather pamphlets and other programming information from relevant organizations to display and share at locations families were likely to already visit (e.g., grocery stores, child care centers).
- Our hope was to expand caregivers' knowledge of resources accessible to them.

Ultimately, we did not carry out this prototype—solution was conceptualized at the very end of the Literacy Lab process and recommended to be trialled by a literacy organization.

KEY LEARNINGS

- Families may be more likely to engage with literacy advice and support coming from an already trusted intermediary.
- Reaching this target demographic is difficult and may require going to them (rather than creating an event for them to come to).

The Learnings

- In a neighbourhood-wide event, it can be challenging to determine whether the key audience is engaged. Working with a trusted partner organization that works directly with the audience can be helpful for access.
- Consider activities that are both individual and collective to effectively engage parents/caregivers, because caregivers tend to step away when children are engaged, when the desire is to build their capacity to do so with their young children.
- Generating a very small prototype makes it challenging to test the wider benefits of bringing many organizations together
- It's easy to overlook the unique needs of a specific audience when planning an event. Efforts to broaden the event for greater inclusivity can sometimes dilute its focus and leave the intended audience further overlooked.

REVISITING THE HYPOTHESIS

By increasing caregivers' knowledge and providing practical strategies for creating rich language environments at home, parents will be able to better support their children's early learning journeys. Effectively removing barriers to participation in an event celebrating all forms of literacy for young children will help families furthest from opportunity learn about best practices for supporting early learning skills.

The Pathways

Based on the learnings from prototyping, this group sees three main potential pathways:

LARGER-SCALE FESTIVAL OF EARLY WORDS

With the right resources, timeline, and organizational collaboration, host a bigger (pilot-scale) Festival of Early Words utilizing the learnings gained through the Lab. The Calgary Bridge Foundation for Youth (CBFY) and the Kids Literacy Collective (KLC) have been identified as potential partners.

LITERACY HUB / CONCIERGE

Create a one-stop shop for all literacy supports in the city. This might mean creating an online resource hub, hosting a pop-up table at locations where families already are and providing brochures for different accessible programming, etc. The Kids Literacy Collective has expressed interest in this work.

TRUSTED INTERMEDIARIES

Trusted Intermediaries: Work with organizations not typically associated with literacy (i.e. hockey coaches, hairdressers, grocers, etc.) that are already connected to families. Provide them with tips and resources to pass along to families.

References

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