

*The Literacy Lab  
Prototype Summary*



# ***Indigenous Lit Kit***

# The Challenge & Context

Since the convening of the lab, the unique circumstances and challenges of Indigenous students have been prominent. Our literature review yielded limited information surrounding current efforts being made to support this group; the needs of and challenges faced by Indigenous learners in Canadian school systems are under-researched and under-supported. By engaging with Indigenous Elders, community members, and school liaisons, the lab gained a better understanding of the physical and cultural disconnect between Alberta school systems and Indigenous communities.

Many programs, curricula, and learning resources are eurocentrically designed and delivered (Roberts, 2024, pp. 93–99). Many educators do not feel confident in their understanding of Indigenous ways of knowing, creating obstacles for transmitting knowledge and accurately portraying Indigenous communities throughout history (Oskineegish & Berger, 2013). Access points for culturally integrated learning and connections to community are particularly challenging for Indigenous students and parents/caregivers (Longboat, 2012). Some Indigenous parents feel unsure of how to engage in literacy practices with their children in ways that feel relevant or authentic. Some caregivers also expressed that, while recognizing its importance, they felt they lacked confidence to teach literacy and/or reading. Others stated that with so

many competing priorities such as housing, poverty, childcare, job security, cultural connection, food security, etc., that literacy development often fell to the bottom.

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 comments from workshops, this narrative was used as a tool to help identify possible leverage points for change. Major themes included;

- The need for culturally relevant and accessible literacy tools
- Fostering a shared love of learning vs. fostering a specific literacy skill
- Multi-literacy development and Indigenous practices for child rearing
- Family based approaches and activities for literacy, culture and language

With a deeper understanding, we crafted a new How Might We question specific to Indigenous children, caregivers and family-based approaches:

**How might we increase awareness around childhood literacy and foster a shared love of literacy and learning within Indigenous families?**

## *The Hypothesis*

If caregivers had an accessible, culturally relevant non-judgmental space that centered early childhood development through relational, cultural, and hands-on learning approaches, then Indigenous caregivers may be better able to support holistic learning grounded in family-based learning, multiliteracy development and relationality. Additionally, by using a strengths-based approach that recognizes the gifts and strengths that Indigenous parents and caregivers already possess, we might be better able to support caregiver capacity in fostering supportive home learning environments that enhance Indigenous children’s early literacy skills.

## *The Idea*

An idea brought forth by service providers and Indigenous community members was the creation of an Indigenous specific literacy pack (“Lit Kit”) that would include a carefully curated assortment of literacy tools, activities and resources that were culturally relevant and that families could use in-home and at their own pace. The kit would be designed specifically to support Indigenous families with children between the ages of 0-6. The initial idea generated excitement and usability but was further evolved into a virtual Lit Kit with four foundation pillars: Family-based learning, relationality, and multi-literacy development and cultural connection, as means to curate an abundance of relevant, accessible, and practical tools, resources, and activities. This switch not only allowed the solutions team to think differently about what and how to include resources but also allowed for an abundance of new tools and approaches.

***The Virtual Lit Kit: The Story Lodge*** would offer stories, activities, songs, and practical strategies that support literacy through engaging, relational learning. Co-created with Indigenous families, educators, and community organizations, the platform would prioritize cultural relevance while integrating multiliteracy, traditional knowledge, and positive parenting approaches.

# *Solution Team*

## **SOLUTION TEAM COACH: LATASHA CALF ROBE**

This group had three core members who supported the idea in coming to fruition. One participant works with an Indigenous-led non profit organization providing support services to Indigenous families. The other team member works as the executive director of a non-profit focused on free educational program delivery, specifically targeting child and adult literacy. Team coach Latasha Calf Robe was also thoroughly involved in the solution development for this team. She works as an Indigenous Consultant, adult educator and social impact facilitator supporting both Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations systems leadership and transformative change.

This group also had continued community input and engagement throughout its prototyping process from Indigenous Elders, educators, and programmers who gave crucial feedback as this prototype was developed. This included support from Natalie Wynn-Dempsey, founder of the Little Wonders program, who was essential in grounding this solution idea in reciprocity, care, and Indigenous values.

## **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.



**Kristina Cancillar**  
*Miskanawah*



**Teal Dratowany**  
*Further Education Society*

# The Process

This prototype team...

- Re-evaluated the concept – decided that a physical resource created additional barriers to access and emphasized a western approach to literacy development.
- Pivoted to create an **accessible, free online resource grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing.**
- Identified existing programs that the tool could provide value to and possibly live with long term, leading to a partnership with the Little Wonders Program – an Indigenous parenting program grounded in relationality and family development.
- Sourced and revised a list of tools and resources to be included in the online lit kit.
- Connected with an information designer, web designer, and partner programmer to plan for a website that could be tested by Indigenous caregivers.
- Developed the prototype website (“The Story Lodge”) and shared it with partner program participants for feedback.
- Designed and hosted a feedback session with Indigenous families that was grounded in reciprocity (~11 kids and ~ 8 parents, 4 Indigenous service providers)
- Had a dedicated debrief meeting discussing session learnings, important tool feedback, and next steps for the resource.

## 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.*

# *The Learnings*

- Change does not happen overnight – small steps make big changes over time.
- “Accessibility” needs to reflect the needs of the end user, and will change over time.
- Ideas need to be people and context specific and it takes time to understand this. The prototype needed to evolve as more learning occurred.
- Community partners are essential for both connecting with the audience and understanding their needs.
- Different organizations with complementary skills and expertise can partner to create powerful tools.
- Meaningful community relationships grow with time and they take dedicated effort.
- Cultural inclusivity is more than just visibility– it is design, process and connection as well.
- Centering reciprocity created trust and contributed to the genuine conversations and feedback received.

This prototype has already been tested with Indigenous caregivers, children, Elders, and service providers. Feedback affirmed:

- Families want culturally relevant, easy-to-use tools.
- Literacy becomes more engaging when rooted in culture and relationship.
- Reciprocity and community partnership are essential to trust and uptake.

## *The Potential*

The Story Lodge is not just a website; it is a scalable, community-informed tool with the potential to:

- Strengthen caregiver confidence and capacity.
- Increase early literacy engagement in the home.
- Shift mindsets about what literacy is and how it lives within Indigenous families.
- Support existing Indigenous-led programming across Calgary and beyond.

Across Calgary, Indigenous children and families continue to struggle with the transition into school systems (K-12), which are largely eurocentrically designed and delivered. Additionally, there remains gaps in educator preparedness regarding Indigenous ways of knowing and access to culturally responsive education for First Nations student success. At the same time, many Indigenous caregivers express a deep desire to support their children’s literacy—yet face barriers including lack of culturally relevant tools, competing life priorities, and confidence in teaching their children in ways that will support them in literacy development and cultural development.

The Story Lodge has the potential to respond to these gaps. Rather than positioning literacy as a technical skill alone, The Story Lodge fosters a shared love of learning rooted in family, culture, and everyday life. It is strengths-based, non-judgmental, and designed with—not for—Indigenous families.

# The Pathways

The Story Lodge emerged from listening deeply to Indigenous families and community partners. It reflects a belief that literacy lives in story, song, land, language, and relationship and that Indigenous parents and caregivers already carry powerful strengths. With the right stewardship and continued community partnership, The Story Lodge has the potential to become a meaningful, scalable tool that strengthens early literacy while honoring Indigenous knowledge systems and family-based learning. There are a number of pathways that have emerged through the creation and prototyping of the Story Lodge. It is our belief that this idea is ready to move from prototype to sustainable implementation. Potential pathways include:

## ORGANIZATIONAL STEWARDSHIP

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Supported hand-off of website and learnings to Miskanawah and the Little Wonders Program. The Story Lodge could live within the organization and be tailored to their current family program offerings, with an option to expand the website to be program specific, nation specific, or a border reach (ie. across southern Alberta).

Transition ownership to a literacy-focused or Indigenous organization that can expand and leverage the tool in spaces where literacy and/or parenting programs already exist within YYC or beyond.

An organizational steward would have the foundation to further develop the website and its long-term sustainability.

## CARE TRIAGE

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Solution team members could decide what feedback is most important to integrate and use the remaining project funds for these updates. A caretaker organization such as the Institute for Community Prosperity or Further Education Society would house the website. This option ensures the website remains live, but minimal content development would be conducted.

## References

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Oskineegish, M., & Berger, P. (2013). The role of the non-Native teacher in remote First Nations communities in northern Ontario. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 36(1), 113-125. <https://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/CJNE/article/view/196557/191518>

Roberts, C. (2024). Re-Storying education (pp. 93–99). Page Two.

