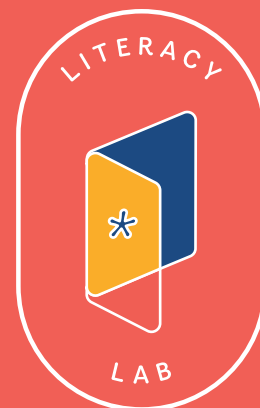


*The Literacy Lab  
Prototype Summary*



# *Understanding Schools in Calgary*

## *The Challenge & Context*

Newcomer students face unique challenges beyond language barriers. While children may experience stigma and isolation within the school system, families encounter additional financial and social stressors that accompany moving to a new country. Many cannot solely focus on the academic progress of their child in addition to potentially working multiple jobs, securing housing, and building community connections (Price, 2018).

Differing cultural norms, inaccurate expectations of the education system, and language barriers are preventing many newcomer caregivers from fully understanding how Calgary's school system works (Brown et al., 2020). As a result, many parents feel unable to participate meaningfully in their children's education or to advocate for their well-being and success. These challenges not only hinder the learning of newcomer children, but also affect their confidence and self-esteem, creating significant barriers to their long-term success (Bonifacci & Tobia, 2016).

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 creating stronger school partnerships and communication with parents, improving educator training, and minimizing interventions that remove newcomer children from their classroom to reduce isolation. Ultimately, conversations surrounding leverage points yielded a new How Might We question specific to improving the early learning experiences of newcomer children:

**How might we increase cultural responsiveness in reading instruction for newcomer children?**

## The Hypothesis

By providing caregivers with relevant information on how to engage with Alberta school systems, we will increase their capacity to support their children in literacy development as well as other subjects.

## The Idea

One solution proposed by community members was an “Understanding Schools in Calgary” information session. The original idea proposed that parents be invited to local libraries for instruction on how to read report cards and decipher grades, better understand curriculum basics, learn about available resources and supports, learn how to access online tools, and gain general insight into the expectations schools have for parents. The solution would require partnerships with school boards, the Calgary Board of Education (CBE) Welcome Centre, newcomer-serving organizations, and other bodies that work to increase the capacity of parents and newcomers. Facilitators would ideally be able to support caregivers in the language they’re most comfortable with, and childcare would be provided.

### 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.*

# *Solution Team*

## **SOLUTION TEAM COACH: ROBERT NICHOLS**

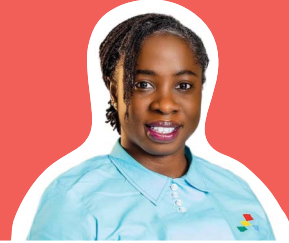
The group supporting this prototype was made up of six individuals from the Calgary community: Two work for local newcomer serving organizations; one participant runs a microschool focused on providing individualized learning support for third-culture students; two team members work for organizations focused on youth empowerment, one specifically supporting BIPOC youth; one participant works as a service designer for the Calgary Public Library. The members of this team provided both connection to and the insight of relevant partner organizations. Multiple team members were newcomers themselves and provided key perspectives and recommendations throughout the prototyping 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.



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**Luz Buritica**  
*Canadian Immigrant  
Women's Association*



**Musap Abdel**  
*Struggle Is  
Your Success*

# The Prototypes

## 1 *Registered Sessions Hosted at Centre for Newcomers*

### PROTOTYPE PROCESS

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- Reached out to a newcomer-serving community partner (Center for Newcomers [CFN]) and identified a specific subset of CFN's clients to reach out to (Arabic-speaking newcomer parents with young children in the CBE school system).
- Partnered with organizations that provide the information about school and learning that caregivers need (Calgary Bridge Foundation for Youth with its Get Ready For School! program, and Calgary Public Library with its array of multi-lingual literacy resources) to provide this information at an interactive information session.
- Planned to remove barriers to participation, including delivering the session in participants' first language, providing on-site childcare, choosing an accessible, familiar location, and providing refreshments.
- Hosted the session at Center for Newcomers. About 15 parents/caregivers and 20 children attended.
- Conducted a dedicated team debrief to identify key learnings and feedback from participants.

### PROTOTYPE LEARNINGS

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- The content delivered was necessary and relevant; parents/caregivers were very engaged.
- Providing literacy resources (i.e. from CPL) was an excellent complement to the school-related content provided by CBFY.
- Partner organizations and prototype participants asked about future sessions, suggesting that the prototype was helpful and desirable. CBFY, CFN, and CPL may seek further opportunities to partner on delivering similar sessions.
- Participants had a clear sense of trust with CFN and its people, programs and location. This approach was helpful for recruiting and created a safe place for participants to share the vulnerable challenges they were experiencing. It was also clearly helpful to have the session delivered in the participants' first language.
- Interactive sessions are very important. Despite the large amount of content to cover, working through the real challenges faced by parents/caregivers was enlightening and necessary to improve delivery and build awareness around these issues.
- An opportunity was identified to provide literacy activities (i.e. read-alongs) for children when offering childcare during future sessions.

## 2 *Non-Registered Sessions Hosted at Saddletown Library*

### PROTOTYPE PROCESS

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- Based on learnings from the first prototype, the team planned a second prototype to test the format in a more public location with no pre-registration required.
- Consistent with the first prototype, the team partnered with a newcomer-serving organization to host the second prototype. The Canadian Immigrant Women's Association (CIWA) hosted the session during their regularly scheduled New Friends and Neighbourhood Groups program.
- The session was hosted at the CPL Saddletowne branch, located in the Genesis Centre, which is frequented by newcomer families. Refreshments and childcare were provided.
- Content was delivered in English, and session presenters also spoke participants' first languages so they could translate if needed.
- Prior to the session, team members walked around the library to invite caregivers to join.
- 16 people attended, including two caregivers who were invited immediately prior to the session.
- The team again hosted a debrief session and discussed potential next steps.

### PROTOTYPE LEARNINGS

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- Hosting a pre-registered session is preferred to a drop-in session. Without pre-registration, content can't always be presented in participants' first languages, and it is difficult to anticipate childcare needs. Furthermore, very few people dropped-in during prototype #2.
- Despite the logistical challenges, sessions should be personalized to the context of the participants as directly as possible—first language, age of children, school board. This promotes increased engagement during the session.
- Information design is really important to the success of sessions, and it could be improved upon. This could include:
  - Showing parents rather than just telling them by providing visuals to clear ambiguity
  - Engaging parents by asking questions along the way
  - Creating a QR code with links to resources mentioned, for caregivers' future reference.
  - Providing time for attendees to arrive late, enjoy refreshments, and socialize before starting the presentation improved the ease and flow of the session.
- The facilitator makes a difference!
- Target libraries/locations directed at younger demographics

## *The Learnings*

Caregivers came away from the sessions with increased knowledge about how to support the academic journeys of their children. Because of the contributions of the Calgary Public Library, parents left with a more robust understanding of the many literacy tools available to them.

### **REVISITING THE HYPOTHESIS**

By providing caregivers with relevant information on how to engage with Alberta school systems, we will increase their capacity to support their children in literacy development as well as other subjects.

## *The Potential*

- Partner organizations (CBFY, CPL, CFN, and CIWA) have programs with related missions, and the value of delivering together can be greater than the sum of its parts.
- CBFY's Get Ready for School presentation does not currently highlight literacy resources for children. A presentation highlighting CPL's literacy resources could be formalized and integrated into all of CBFY's Get Ready for School presentations.
- Potential to respond to the desire from CFN and CIWA to offer subsequent sessions
- Many literacy supports are available to newcomers, and this prototype helped to connect some of them for newcomer caregivers.
- Continue to learn more about what is important for newcomer caregivers to know as well as when they need the knowledge. This will allow resources to be created, updated, or delivered in more helpful ways.
- Tracking the stories shared by newcomer participants over time will support advocacy for a smoother integration and experience across all institutions.
- Different points of access may be useful for newcomers. Hosting online sessions, recording and posting live sessions with captioning, and creating shareable online resource packages were all discussed as options.

# The Pathways

## CPL AND CBFY COLLABORATION

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This prototype revealed a natural partnership between the Calgary Public Library (CPL) and the Calgary Bridge Foundation for Youth (CBFY). Future sessions of CBFY's *Get Ready for School!* program could be hosted and co-facilitated by the library. The additional literacy-specific resources shared by the library throughout prototyping filled an information gap and were very valued by session attendees.

## CBFY AND CIWA COLLABORATION

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Future partnership between CBFY and the Canadian Immigrant Women's Association (CIWA) may also be of benefit to the newcomer community. CIWA offers an existing in-house childcare option and serves a large number of newcomer parents who could benefit from the *Get Ready for School!* content. The sessions could take place at CIWA offices or community locations and be timed with the 2026 school registration calendar. This model could be adopted by any newcomer-serving organization (i.e. Centre for Newcomers).

## ONLINE DELIVERY

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Prototyping also suggested the value of trialing online information delivery. Hosting online sessions would remove transportation barriers and would offer an efficient way to segment participants by their first language, the age of their children, and their school board.

## OLDER DEMOGRAPHICS

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Our prototyping revealed additional need for these sessions with a focus on older children. While this was outside of the scope of the Literacy Lab, other organizations may be able to expand on the current sessions being offered to include other age demographics.

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