



The Literacy Lab

FINAL SUMMARY REPORT 2024 - 2026



Our home at Mount Royal University is situated on an ancient and storied land steeped in ceremony and history, which, until recently, was occupied exclusively by people indigenous to this place. With gratitude and reciprocity, we acknowledge the relationships to the land and all beings, and the songs, stories and teachings of the Siksika Nation, the Piikani Nation, the Kainai Nation, Îyethka Stoney Nakoda Nation (consisting of the Chiniki, Bearspaw and Goodstoney Nations), the people of the Tsuut'ina Nation, and the Métis.



Facilitated By

Facilitated by the Institute for Community Prosperity at Mount Royal University, in collaboration with Arete Initiative, the Literacy Lab (the Lab) was a multi-year social lab that brought together diverse community participants from across boundaries, backgrounds, and sectors to address the challenge of childhood literacy in Calgary. Over the course of 2 years, Lab participants dived into the patterns, structures, and systemic issues keeping the literacy challenge entrenched and worked collaboratively to design and test new approaches to addressing the issue.

Gratitude

Heartfelt thanks to our *Lab Counsel* and *Solutions Teams*, who not only contributed their time, resources, insights, and labour to this project, but who also embraced the complexity and uncertainty of the Lab journey.

Throughout the Lab process, there were many community members, educators, and students who contributed to this project. Thank you for your generous contributions.



Institute for Community Prosperity

The Institute for Community Prosperity is a hub of social innovation, systems-learning, and community engagement that bridges the knowledge, wisdom, and experience of community with academic learning and scholarly insight. We bring together community, students, and faculty from across disciplines, sectors and backgrounds to tackle the complex social and ecological challenges of our time.



Arete Initiative

The Arete Initiative is a boutique consulting firm dedicated to helping leaders and organizations live up to their highest potential by cultivating the personal and organizational leadership the future requires. Through a blend of strategy, innovation, and organizational excellence services, they facilitate meaningful systemic change by fostering collaboration.



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

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Contents

05	<i>Facilitated By & Gratitude</i>	26	Phase Two: Identifying Leverage Points
07	<i>The Lab Team</i>	27	<i>Journey Mapping & Narrative</i>
10	Introduction	28	<i>System Narratives</i>
11	<i>The Challenge & Context</i>	31	<i>Identifying Leverage Points</i>
12	<i>How Might We... Questions</i>	32	Phase Three: Prototyping
13	<i>Guiding Question</i>	33	<i>Solution Briefs</i>
14	<i>What is a Social Lab?</i>	33	<i>Solution Team Formation</i>
15	<i>The Double Diamond Process</i>	34	<i>Prototype 1: Understanding School in Calgary</i>
16	<i>Lab Counsel</i>	38	<i>Prototype 2: Indigenous Lit Kit</i>
18	<i>Phase Overview</i>	42	<i>Prototype 3: Festival of Early Words</i>
20	<i>Lab Journey</i>	46	<i>Prototype 4: Gen AI Chatbot</i>
22	Phase One: Challenge Mapping & Analysis	50	Prototype Implementation
23	<i>Community Engagement</i>	52	Learnings & Reflections
23	<i>Research</i>	60	Literacy Lab Showcase
24	<i>Challenge Mapping</i>	64	Community Connections
25	<i>Interactive Challenge Map</i>	66	References



1 in 5

Albertans have faced literacy challenges since childhood



25%

of Grade 3 children are not reading at grade level

*Introduction

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 (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022). 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 (Cree et al., 2023). 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 (Castles, et al., 2018).

The Challenge & Context

One in five Albertans have faced literacy challenges since childhood (Lane, 2023). Almost half of working-age Albertans do not have the literacy skills required to perform most jobs in today's economy (Lane, 2023). 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 (O'Grady et al., 2022). More than 1 million children in Canada have below grade reading skills, and 25% of Grade 3 children are not reading at grade level (Deloitte, 2020). 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 (Livingston, 2018). 75% of children who do not overcome early literacy challenges, struggle throughout their lives (Deloitte, 2020).

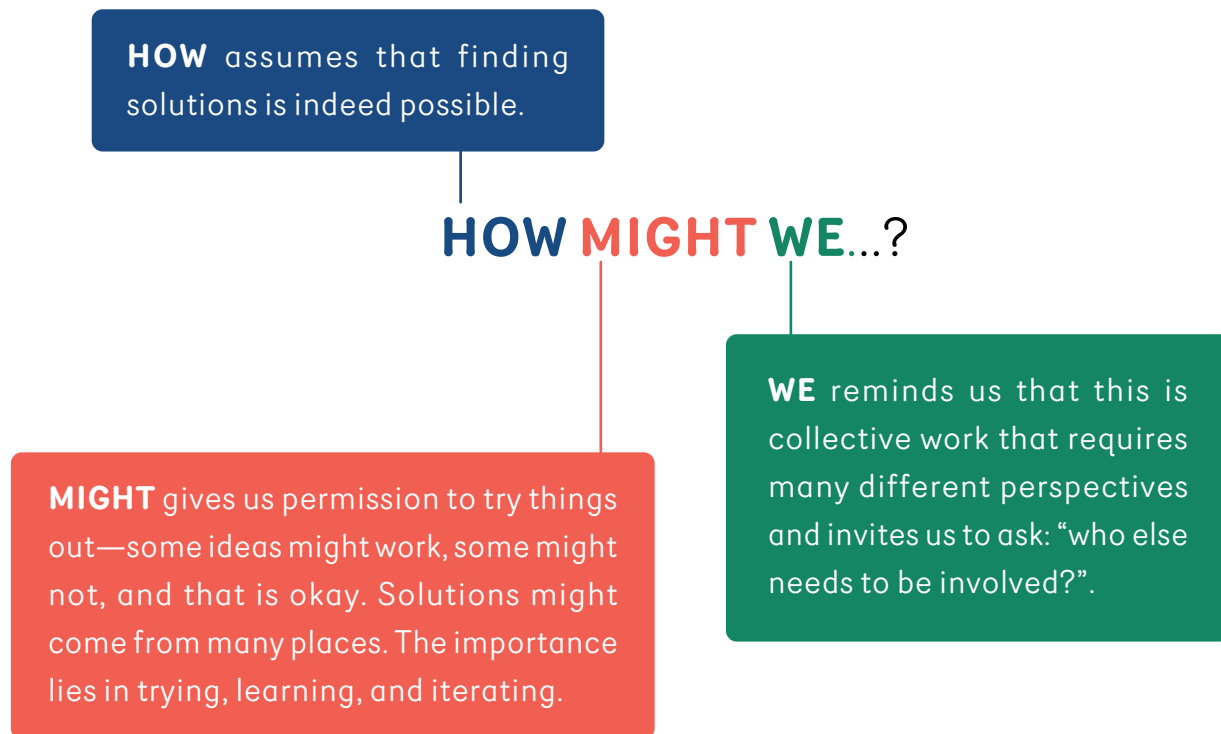
Teacher education, complex student needs, outdated assessment tools and conflicting pedagogical approaches to teaching reading are all significant factors in the literacy challenge. However, literacy does not happen in isolation nor is it restricted to the educational system. Covid-19 learning loss has put many children behind and struggling to catch up (Lane, 2023). Childhood trauma, domestic violence, poverty, lack of access to books, and the internet all affect a child's ability to learn (Lloyd, 2018; McNally et al., 2023). 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 (James & Turner, 2017). Black students in Canada face disproportionately high rates of suspension, dropout, and expulsion, and are streamed into applied rather than academic programs (James & Turner, 2017). Educational systems lack the data, the training, the evidence base, and the flexibility to adapt literacy and learning for the children and families most vulnerable to being left behind. Although this challenge is complex, it is imperative that collective attention is put towards it with a mindset of innovation and collaboration, in order to work in new ways and generate new ideas for addressing the issue.

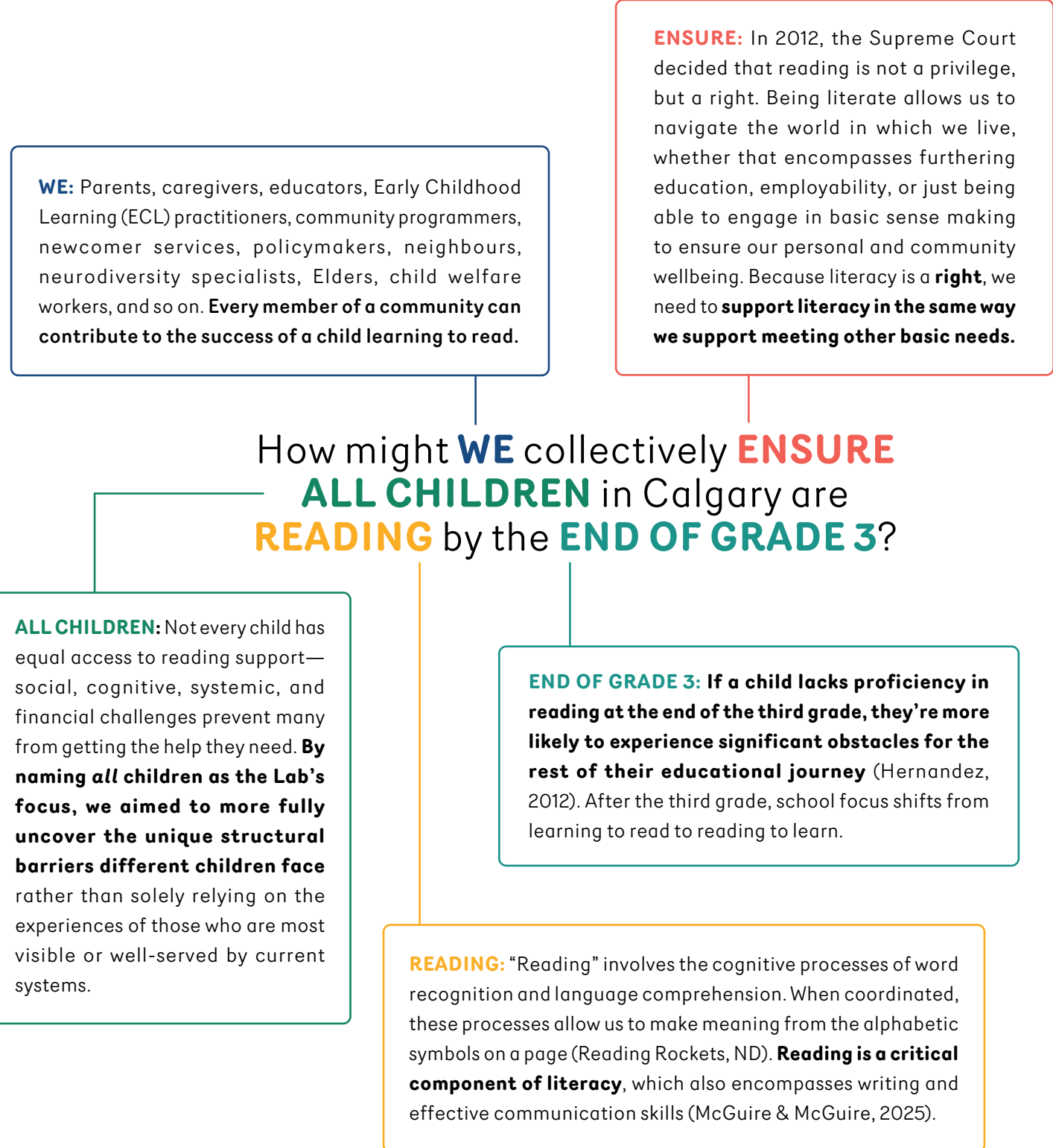
This is the calling of the Literacy Lab.

How Might We... Questions

How Might We (HMW) questions help us frame a challenge so we can start exploring possibilities together. HMW questions were conceived by Min Basadur and popularized by the design firm IDEO and the Stanford d.school. The question framing is intentional and each word has significance.



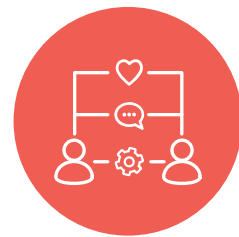
Guiding Question



What is a Social Lab?

Social labs are an approach to addressing complex social, environmental, and economic challenges. Complex challenges are multi-dimensional, constantly changing, interconnected, non-linear, and... messy. In a social lab, we bring together diverse participants from across traditional boundaries who bring different perspectives to an issue. Together, we dive into the patterns, structures, and mindsets that are keeping a particular challenge entrenched in order to uncover root causes and take more discerning action to create positive change. In the lab process, we are purposefully experimenting and learning in order to test, adapt, and iterate on our ideas. This approach allows us to continually reorient our work toward more meaningful change. Through the process, we are building trust and increasing collaboration, building capacities, knowledge, and skills, and co-creating solutions.

IN ESSENCE, SOCIAL LABS ARE THREE THINGS:



SYSTEMIC: Social labs seek 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.

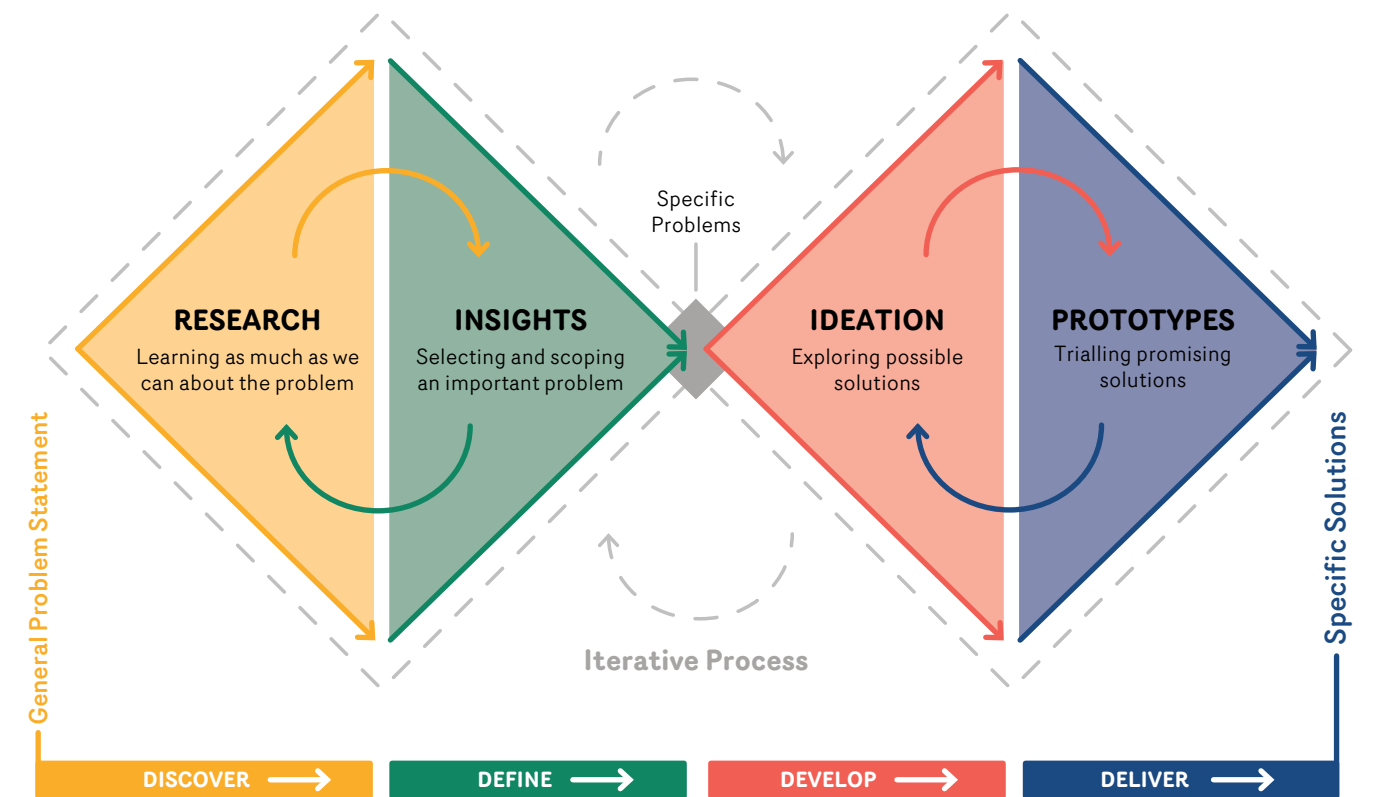


EXPERIMENTAL: Complex problems do not have singular or easy solutions. In a social lab, creativity is used to collectively generate new ideas and co-design potential solutions. Through continuous experimentation, learning and improving on ideas we can discover something with significant impact.

The Double Diamond Process

The Lab utilized the *Service Design Double Diamond Process* (Kaishin Chu) as an overarching innovation framework because of its prevalence in peer-reviewed innovation scholarship as well as its efficacy in practitioner contexts.

Although innovation does not necessarily occur sequentially in practice, the essence of the double-diamond model suggests that it's critical to take deliberate and systematic steps to better understand the nature of the problem that is aiming to be addressed. This includes unpacking the entanglement of the convening question from a variety of perspectives. Often, participants learn more about the problem from other perspectives and, collectively, those working on the problem are more discerning about proposing solutions that address root causes. The second phase opens up to an exploration of the range of solutions that can address the entrenched problem that have been explored and, eventually, converges around areas that will be selected to be tested or prototyped. Often, participants learn even more about the root causes of the problem and potential better ways to address the problem. Ultimately, this model provided an overall arc of where the Lab and its participants would emphasize its attention over time, ensuring that learning was a priority throughout.



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 diverse experiences, perspectives, and understandings of the systems, structures, and factors that influence early childhood literacy. While the *Design & Facilitation Team* holds expertise in process design, facilitation, complex problem-solving, social innovation, and systems thinking, the *Lab Counsel* provides 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* makes and serves 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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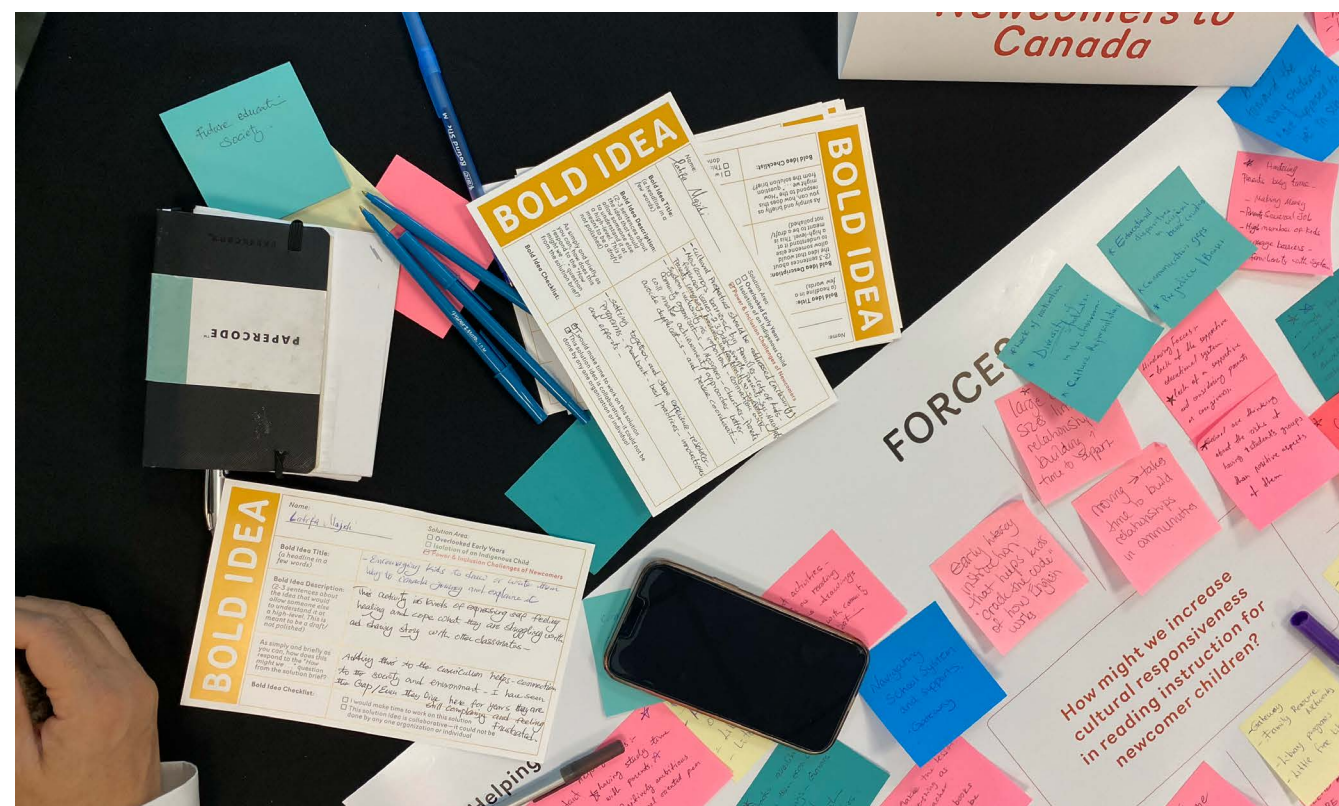
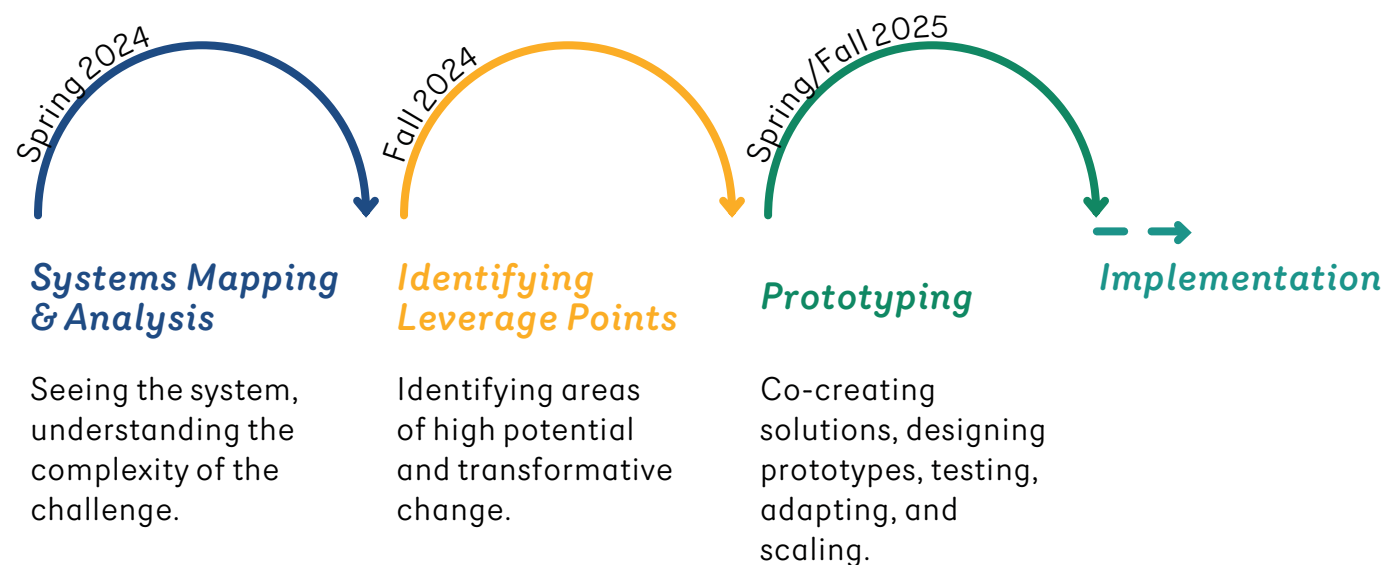
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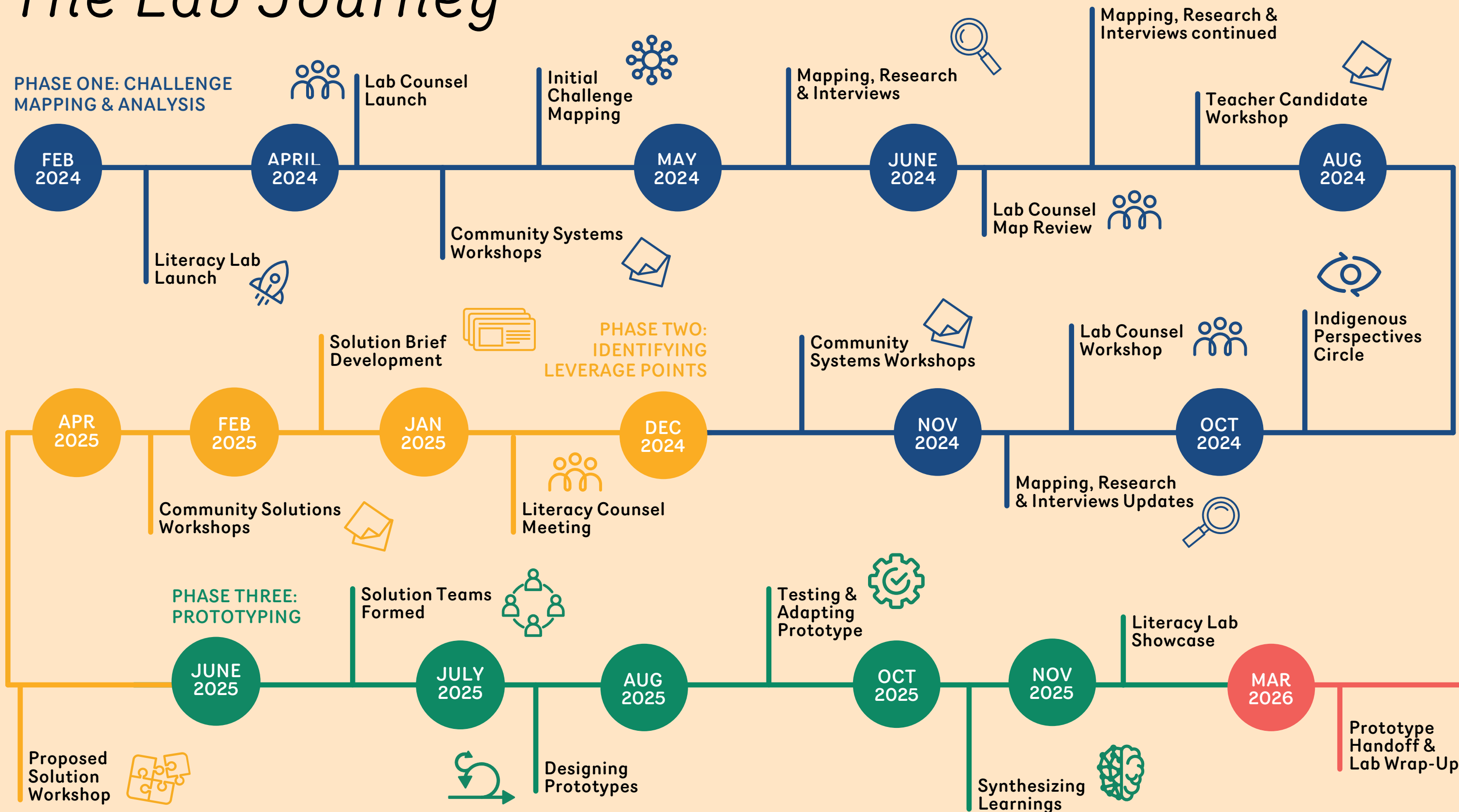
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Phase Overview

The Lab process is iterative and emergent. Although the overall trajectory of the process takes us from understanding the challenges within the system to testing and implementing solutions, we are constantly moving through a process of listening, observing, responding, and iterating.



The Lab Journey



*Phase One

CHALLENGE MAPPING & ANALYSIS

In order to better understand the complexities, connections, and unique challenges within the Calgary literacy context, the first phase of the Lab focused on bringing community together to explore and map the systemic challenges related to our convening question. This process included workshops, interviews, extensive document reviews and data visualization, resulting in a challenge map that identified key issues and challenges within the Literacy landscape in Calgary. Our approach aimed to centre the lived experiences and stories of people within the system and those impacted by the challenges. The map was vetted and validated through a community insights process, which led to the identification of high-potential areas for change.

Community Engagement

To more fully understand the issue of children's literacy as it exists in Calgary, the Literacy Lab engaged with 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. Initial community workshops were held to surface the experiences and perceptions, causes and implications of childhood literacy struggles in Calgary. The experiences of educators, child welfare workers, neurodiversity specialists, newcomer representatives, and other concerned community members were recorded and themed to better understand the major challenges within this issue.

Further workshops were held with teacher candidates to learn more about the teacher experience from those new to the system, and with Indigenous community members to understand their unique perspectives and experiences with Calgary school systems. *Lab Counsel* members were also interviewed one on one to share their expertise and experiences working with specialized populations.

In total, the Lab engaged with over 400 individuals across the Calgary community, including representatives from nearly 50 different organizations.

Research

After engaging directly with community members, additional secondary research was conducted to better understand the challenge. While many experiences were supported by the literature, key insights also came from that which wasn't present; there was a distinct lack of research surrounding the experiences and needs of Indigenous communities, highlighting a major gap in this system. Insight on the newcomer experience within the school system was also scarce.

Challenge Mapping

After examining both the experiences of community members and existing research, the first “Challenge Map” was created. This map (and its adaptations) helped the *Lab Team* to visualize the complexity and interconnectedness of childhood literacy struggles and revealed deeply entrenched and recurring patterns.

Several renditions of the map were created as our conversations evolved. Ultimately, a final challenge map was created. This map noted 115 unique challenges, all contributing to childhood literacy challenges in Calgary.

In examining each of the factors, seven distinct themes emerged:

- **Home Environment**
- **Child’s Internal Environment**
- **Classroom Challenges**
- **Challenges in Teaching**
- **Challenges in the School System**
- **Social Factors**
- **Indigenous Perspectives**

Each noted theme is made up of several, more specific sub-topics. All listed challenges reflect the community workshop content, relevant interview quotes, and secondary research completed throughout the first phase of the Lab. The map is a snapshot of the Calgary literacy landscape as it existed in the summer of 2024 when the initial research and engagement were conducted.

It is important to remember that complex systems are dynamic, non-linear, and constantly changing and, as such, a map is never complete. However, the stories and experiences shared with us through the interview process and workshops, along with in-depth document reviews give us a deeper understanding of the challenges, dynamics, and patterns within the system.

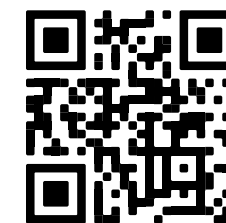
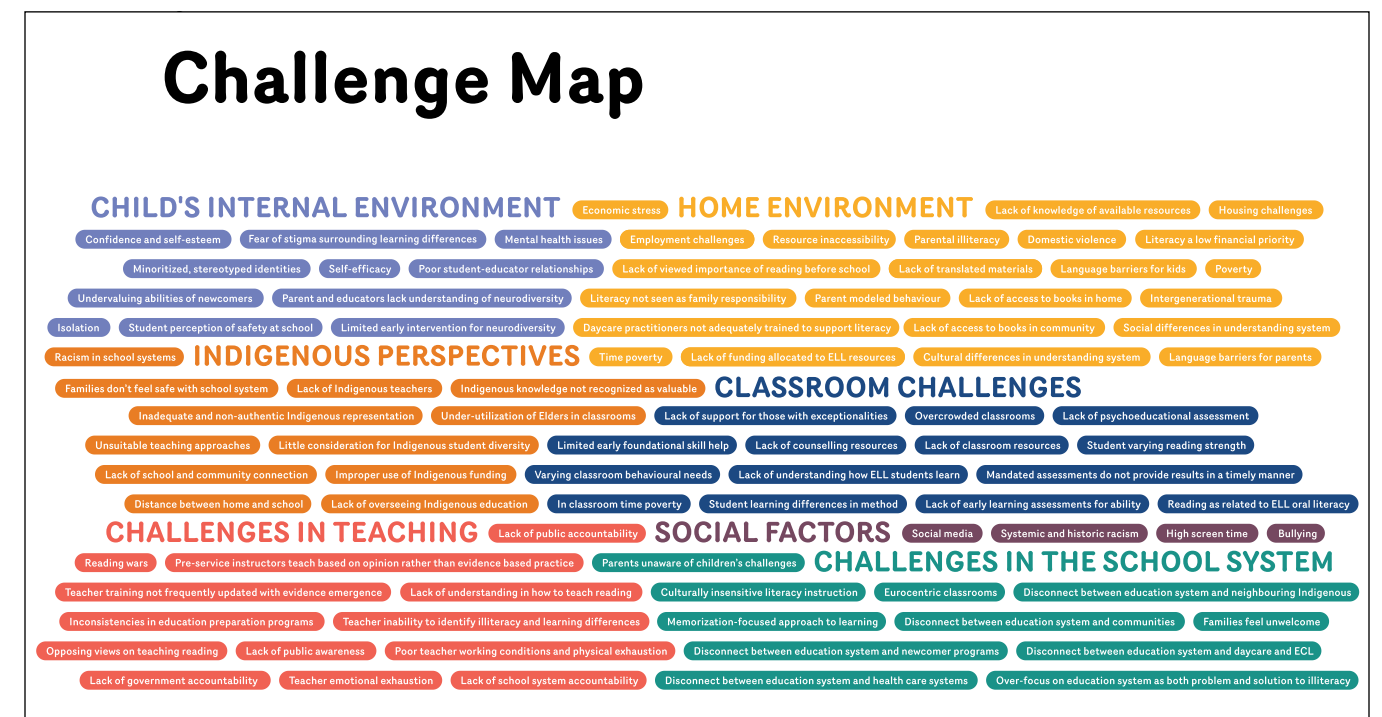
“The map is not the territory.”

Alfred Korzybski, 1981

Interactive Challenge Map

The challenge map was revisited at the end of the Literacy Lab and lightly updated. Throughout the Lab process, many participants had expressed interest in the map as a snapshot of Calgary’s local literacy system. The Lab team decided to create an interactive, digital version of the challenge map to further showcase the research, participant quotes, and interconnections within Calgary’s literacy system. The interactive map is an open-access resource that can be found on the Institute for Community Prosperity website.

The interactive Challenge Map is available as a tool for exploring issues related to Childhood Literacy and an entry point for understanding some of the interconnections across systems. Users are encouraged to engage in their own research and exploration.



**CLICK HERE OR SCAN
TO EXPLORE THE MAP**

*Phase Two

IDENTIFYING LEVERAGE POINTS

Using data harvested at community workshops, secondary research, and interviews, the *Lab Team* examined the patterns, relationships, and connections to identify points where intervention or change could potentially have transformative impact. This process included creating fictional narratives reflecting challenges described to us in phase one and creating journey maps relative to each story. Because social labs are time and resource intensive three areas of focus were chosen for prototyping in phase three. Chosen areas of focus were then shared back to community participants to further identify potential leverage points.

Journey Mapping & Narratives

Five major stories were noted throughout our workshops and research: the systemic isolation experienced by Indigenous children, a lack of power and inclusion faced by newcomer students, children furthest from opportunity entering school without foundational literacy skills, the lack of support and training to aid children with learning differences, and children being taught by inadequately prepared educators.

These stories were developed into “systems journeys”— fictional narratives which allowed us to zoom in on systemic challenges as experienced by a child. These narratives were informed by research, workshop results, and the shared experiences of participants. Using language and themes from the original challenge map, smaller, targeted maps were created to visualize the ways in which different barriers come together to form the complex circumstances that foster low literacy. Once crafted by the *Lab Team*, they were shared with *Lab Counsel* members and community members to test the accuracy of the entrenched journeys.

When attempting to select which challenges to move forward with in prototyping, the following questions were considered:

- To what extent does addressing this journey hit fundamental issues across the challenge map?
- To what extent is this journey already being worked on in a substantive way? (Would the Lab add value or detract from these efforts?)
- To what extent are challenges in this journey especially ripe to be addressed at this time (ie. impending policy changes, resource availability, current socio-cultural awareness, etc.)?
- Are equity deserving groups disproportionately affected in this journey? (Will work in this area positively impact equity-deserving groups or cause further burden?)

System Narratives

Three of the five narratives were selected for the solutions phase based on participant and *Lab Counsel* feedback and the current work being done to tackle each issue. Each narrative is a fictional account of a systemic challenge and key innovation area.

Navigating Power and Inclusion as a New Canadian

When Sami moved to Canada at 8 years old, he was placed in Grade 3 with kids his age. He was conversational in English but couldn't read or write in English. He and his parents signed up for ELL classes soon after they came to Canada and were put on a one-year waitlist. One day Sami came home from school and mentioned to his parents that he had been pulled from his regular classes to participate in an ELL class. His parents were surprised by this, given that they had not been consulted or consented to this decision. They had questions and concerns to raise with Sami's teacher in this regard. Both of his parents had jobs with long hours that didn't have a lot of flexibility. They also knew that communicating their concerns with the teacher would be hard, given their level of English proficiency. It took Sami's parents a while to meet with the teacher.

In the meantime, each time Sami was pulled into an ELL class, he continued to miss out on classes like social studies and math. He found the ELL lessons repetitive and overly basic and was puzzled that neither the curriculum nor the teacher celebrated his ability to speak three languages. As he fell behind in core subjects, it was viewed as a

lack of capability rather than the consequence of missing class time. His isolation from classmates also limited his English immersion, further slowing his progress.

When his parents finally met with the teacher, they felt that assumptions were made about their intelligence and knowledge based on their appearance and language. Rather than trying to understand their concerns, they were lectured on the Canadian system, reinforcing a power imbalance. Sami's parents left feeling misunderstood, and without the language skills to fully express their concerns, felt they had no choice but to accept things as they were.

When Sami's parents told him about the meeting, he felt annoyed and frustrated with them—not only for drawing more attention to him but also for being unable to effectively advocate or find solutions to help with his struggles. Sami and his parents felt that, because they were racialized newcomers with accents, Sami did not have equitable access to opportunities and resources that would allow him to pursue his goals and participate fully with his peers and in his community.

Isolation of an Indigenous Child

Kacy's parents carefully considered her schooling options, hoping to find a place that felt connected to their culture. Having recently moved from a First Nation near Calgary, they missed the sense of community they had left behind. They recognized the value of an educational experience grounded in Indigenous cultural norms and initially considered sending her to an Indigenous school. However, both Piitoayis and the Niitsitapi Learning Centre were much farther from their home than the local community school. Ultimately, they chose the community school so that Kacy didn't have to spend so long on the bus every day.

In her first week, Kacy quickly noticed that there were very few Indigenous children in her new classroom and none of the teachers or staff shared her cultural background either. Kacy struggled to make friends and some of the other children made jokes about her braids. Kacy's teacher had to keep reminding Kacy to call her Ms. Robinson instead of calling her by her first name. The new school felt so formal and Kacy struggled to find people with whom she could connect. The unkind behaviour from classmates continued and Kacy found herself feeling isolated from her classmates.

As these challenges mounted, Kacy's confidence began to wane. She found herself less motivated to engage with her reading assignments, and her frustration sometimes manifested as acting out in class. This prompted her teacher to email her parents, requesting a meeting to discuss Kacy's progress and behaviour. For Kacy's parents, this email was distressing for many reasons, but mainly because they felt a profound mistrust of the school system. They worried that this kind of attention at school could lead to Kacy being labelled or scrutinized or could trigger the family to be put under the microscope of social services. Her parents wanted to help Kacy get out of this feedback loop but they didn't know how.

Feeling their anxiety, Kacy sensed her parents' distress, compounding her struggles. Gradually, she began to internalize doubts about her abilities, convincing herself that she wasn't good enough. This belief further diminished her engagement at school, creating a troubling cycle that made it increasingly difficult for her to thrive academically.

The Overlooked Early Years

In a working-class neighborhood, Maria is born into a family where both parents work multiple low-wage jobs and are barely making ends meet. Her grandparents, who have cared for her from infancy, provide a nurturing home but lack the means to expose her to high-quality early literacy resources.

While some reading resources exist in Maria's community, they are difficult to access. The nearest public library offering early literacy programs is oversubscribed and often attended by families from outside the area who can afford the time and expense of driving there. Affordable early childhood education centers are limited, with lengthy waiting lists, and even at \$10 per day, they are still unaffordable for Maria's family.

Her early years lack exposure to books, interactive language-building activities and a language-enriched environment, which are crucial for literacy development, leaving Maria with a lower vocabulary than her peers.

By the time Maria begins kindergarten, she is already at a disadvantage. Her teachers notice her struggles and seek a psychoeducational assessment, however the school does not have funding to provide one for free and her family cannot afford a private assessment. By the end of third grade, Maria cannot read at third grade level and, unfortunately, the system has failed to intervene during critical early years.

Identifying Leverage Points

The system narratives were a tool to help Lab participants identify which parts of the stories, if properly addressed, could have a significant positive impact on the rest of a child's literacy experience. After sharing the narratives with Lab participants and topic experts, leverage points for change were identified. These resulted in three focus areas for solution exploration with guiding "How Might We.." questions.

Navigating Power and Inclusion as a New Canadian



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

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?

The Overlooked Early Years



How might we support families experiencing difficult trade-offs to increase exposure to reading to pre-kindergarten children?



“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

*Phase Three

PROTOTYPING

The third phase of the Lab became experimental with the introduction of ideating and prototyping—where we can generate new ideas, design, test, and iterate in order to discover potentially transformative solutions.

After further exploring challenge areas, participants proposed new, bold ideas that had the potential to be transformative solutions. They then joined *Solution Teams* to collaboratively design, test, and iterate these ideas. Teams carried out prototypes of their proposed solutions to further test assumptions surrounding what may or may not be successful in tackling unique barriers to literacy.

Solution Briefs

Prior to hosting further community engagement, past Lab participants were sent three solution briefs; each brief outlined the context and challenge of a chosen area of focus and invited community members to consider potential solutions to each specific HMW question.

With our three guiding questions in mind, the Lab hosted multiple community engagement workshops to explore potential solutions for each leverage point. Past participants, and new invitees with expertise in the chosen areas, were invited to share their thoughts and generate ideas by use of “Bold Idea” cards that responded to each areas’ HMW question. Participants voted on different ideas and attended further workshops to flesh out potential solutions. Ultimately, four solutions were identified by both participants and lab team members as having high potential for impact through prototyping.

Solution Team Formation

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 *Lab Team*, but the core responsibility for planning and executing activities rested with the team members themselves.

PROCESS

The main objective of the *Solution Teams* was to design and implement a small-scale ‘test’ of the solution, then learn and adapt the idea for a second test in the Fall.

This included:

- Scoping and selecting an appropriate prototype to test assumptions behind the named concept
- Preparing and executing that test—developing invitations, recruiting participants, organizing logistics, and facilitating the event
- Reflecting on the outcomes of the test and adapting the concept in preparation for a second iteration in the Fall
- Presenting insights and outcomes at the Literacy Lab year-end showcase.

Focus Area: Navigating Power and Inclusion as a New Canadian

PROTOTYPE 1

Understanding Schools in Calgary

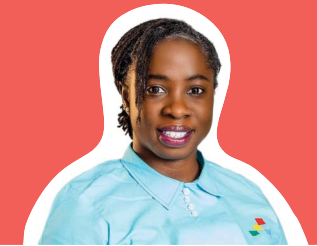
The “Understanding Schools in Calgary” *Solution Team* was made up of six individuals from the Calgary community: two work for local newcomer-serving organizations; one participant runs a microschool focused on providing individualized learning support for third-culture students; two team members work for organizations focused on youth empowerment, one specifically supporting BIPOC youth; and one participant works as a service designer for the Calgary Public Library.



Solution Team Members



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Centre for Newcomers



Ihuaku Azuma-Awoyo
Blossom Microschool



Kate Schutz
Calgary Public Library



Latifa Majidi
*Empowering Future,
Building Communities Society*



Luz Buritica
*Canadian Immigrant
Women's Association*



Musap Abdel
*Struggle Is
Your Success*

The Challenge

Differing cultural norms, unfamiliar expectations of the education system, and language barriers are preventing many newcomer caregivers from fully understanding how Calgary's school system works. 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.



The Hypothesis/Idea

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

- **CPL and CBFY Collaboration:** 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:** 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. This model could be adopted by any newcomer-serving organization (i.e. Centre for Newcomers).
- **Online Delivery:** 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.



The Prototype Process

This prototype team...

- **Reached out to a newcomer-serving community partner**, Centre for Newcomers (CFN), and identified a specific subset of their 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 that caregivers need** (Calgary Bridge Foundation for Youth (CBFY) with its Get Ready For School! program, and Calgary Public Library (CPL) 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 Arabic, providing on-site childcare, choosing an accessible, familiar location, and providing refreshments.
- **Hosted the session at Centre for Newcomers** (engaged ~15 parents/caregivers and 20 children)
- **Conducted a dedicated team debrief** to identify key learnings and feedback from participants.
- **Planned a second prototype** based on learnings.
- **Partnered with another newcomer-serving organization** and hosted the session in a different location.



The Learning

- The content delivered was necessary and relevant; parents/caregivers were very engaged.
- 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.



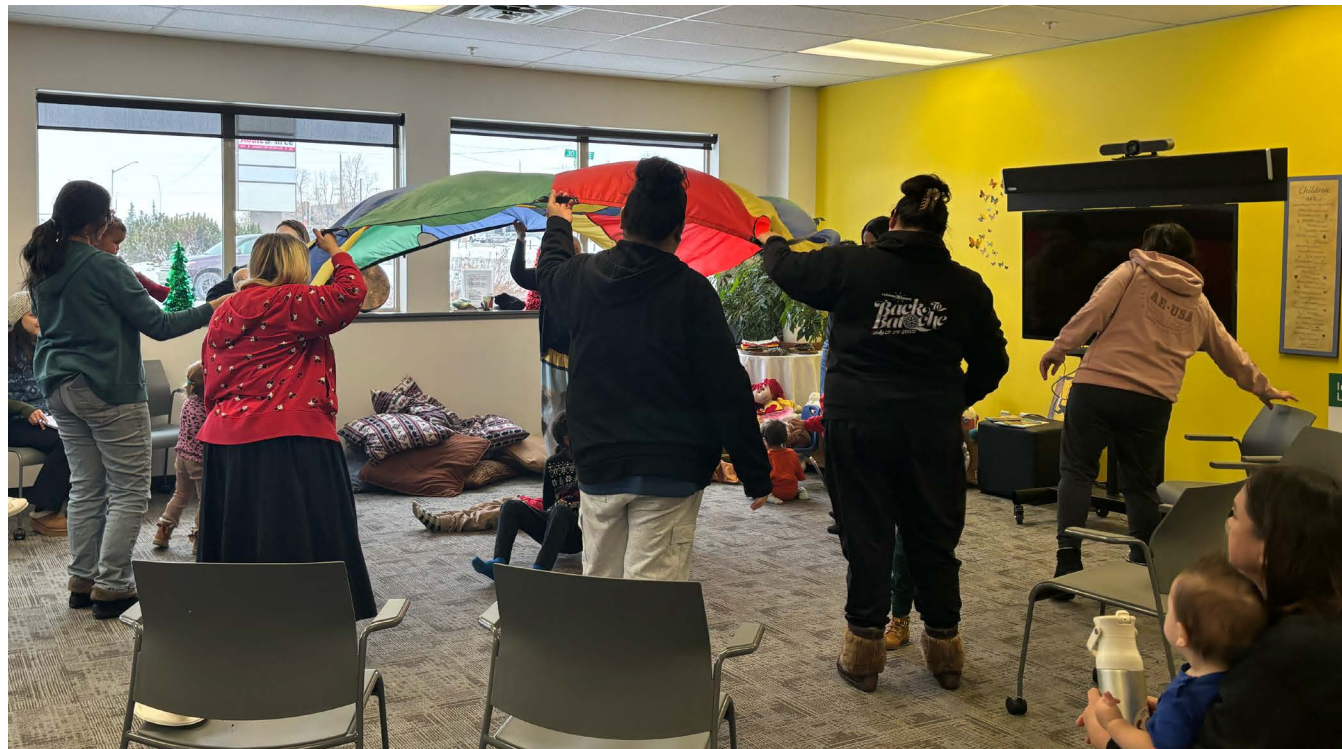
Focus Area: Isolation of an Indigenous Child

PROTOTYPE 2

Indigenous Lit Kit

The “Indigenous Lit Kit” *Solution Team* had three core members and an advisory council. One participant works with families through a not-for-profit, Indigenous-led 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 a 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.



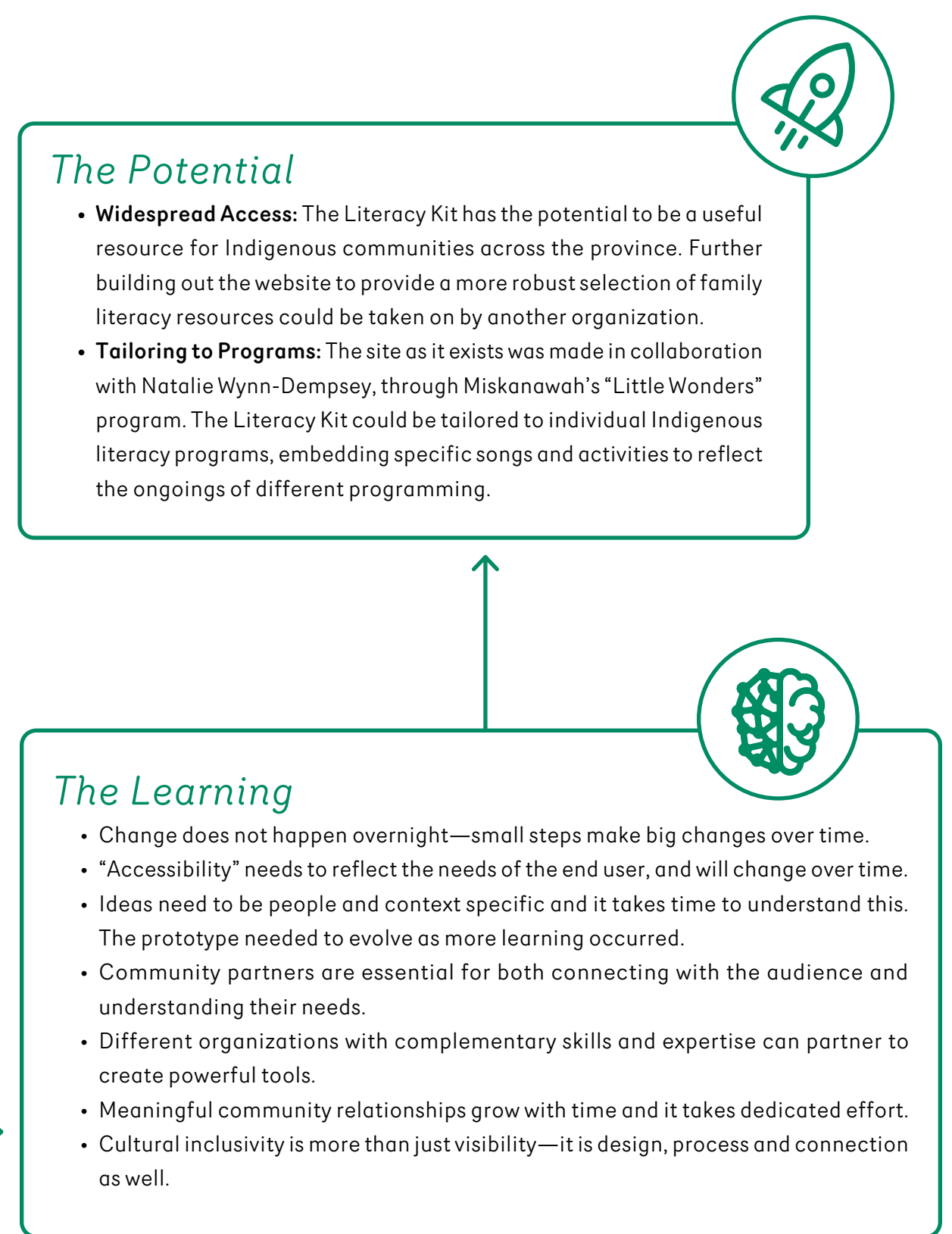
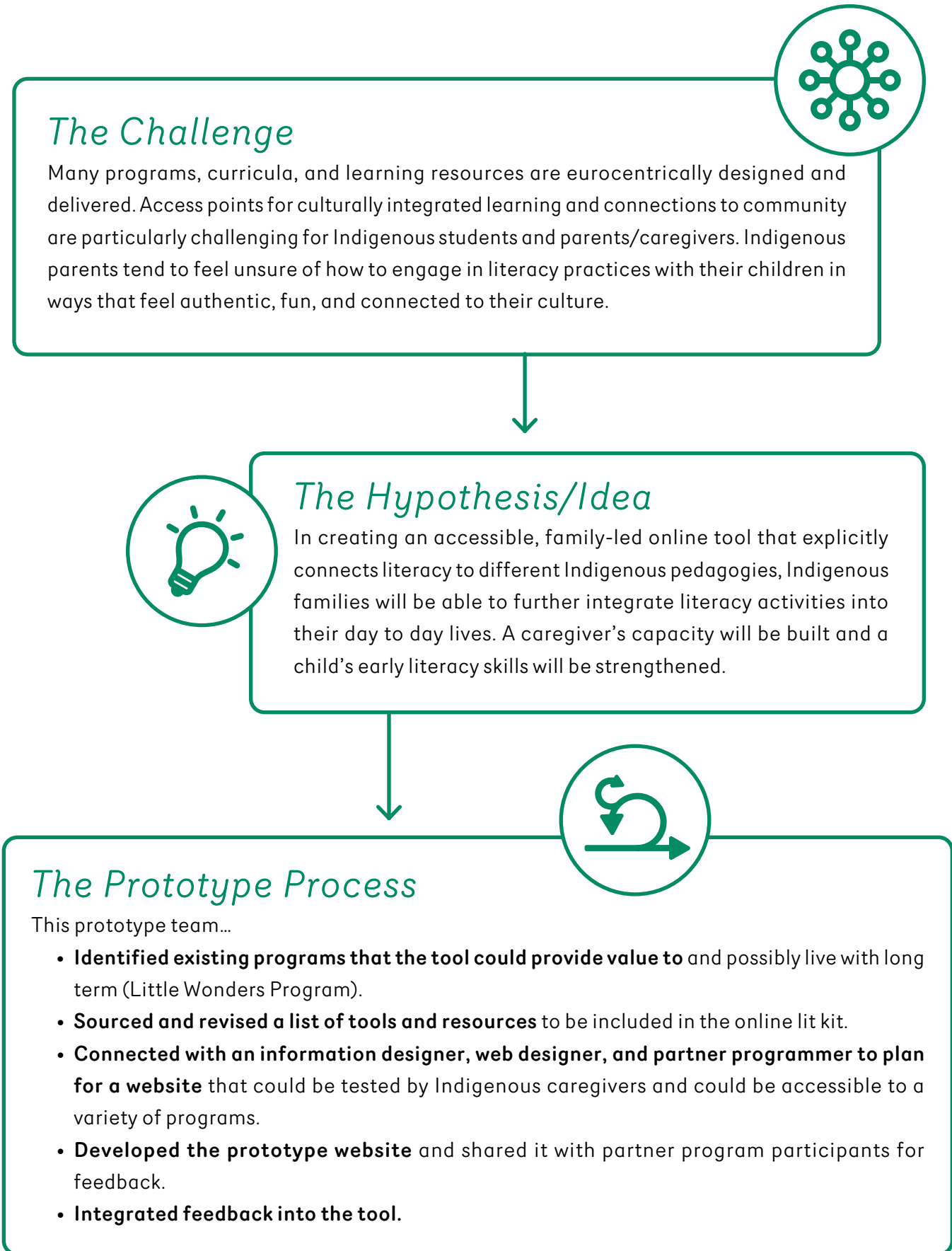
Solution Team Members



Kristina Cancillar
Miskanawah



Teal Dratowany
Further Education Society



Focus Area: The Overlooked Early Years

PROTOTYPE 3

Festival of Early Words

The team for the “Festival of Early Words” proposal was made up of six past 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 is an Indigenous Elder now working as a cultural advisor. Another member, previously an early childhood educator (ECE), works as an early childhood education professor. 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.

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



Solution Team Members



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



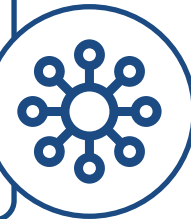
Nancy Espetveidt
Mount Royal University,
Faculty of Child Studies



Juanita Brandt
Juanita Brandt
Creative

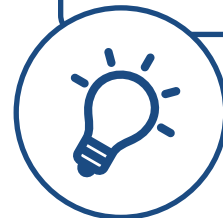
The Challenge

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 do understand the importance of early literacy, many families are facing difficult trade-offs that make it challenging to prioritize early exposure to literacy for young children.



The Hypothesis/Idea

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 participate in an event that celebrates all forms of literacy for young children will help families furthest from opportunity to learn about best practices in supporting early learning skills.



The Potential

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

- **Large-scale Festival of Early Words:** With the right resources, timeline, and organizational collaboration, host an actual Festival of Early Words utilizing the learnings gained through the Lab.
- **Literacy Hub:** 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.
- **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 for them to pass on to families.



The Prototype Process

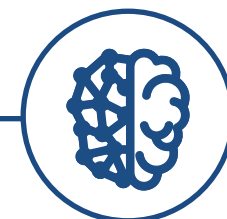
This prototype team...

- **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 setup at (Monterey Park Community Association's annual stampede breakfast).
- **Setup and hosted the session** (engaged ~30 parents/caregivers and ~50 kids).
- Conducted a structured team **debrief to identify key learnings**.
- **Planned additional prototypes in an effort to further understand key assumptions** from the Festival prototype that were outstanding from the first prototype.



The Learning

- In a neighbourhood-wide event, it can be challenging to ascertain if the key audience is being engaged with. Working with a trusted partner organization that works directly with the audience is helpful.
- Consider activities that are both individual and collective in order to effectively engage the parents/caregivers. Parents tended to step away when children engaged in activities.
- Generating a very small prototype creates challenges testing the wider benefits from other organizations working 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 overlooked.

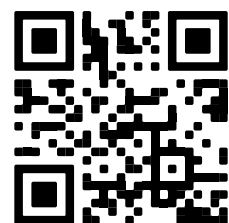
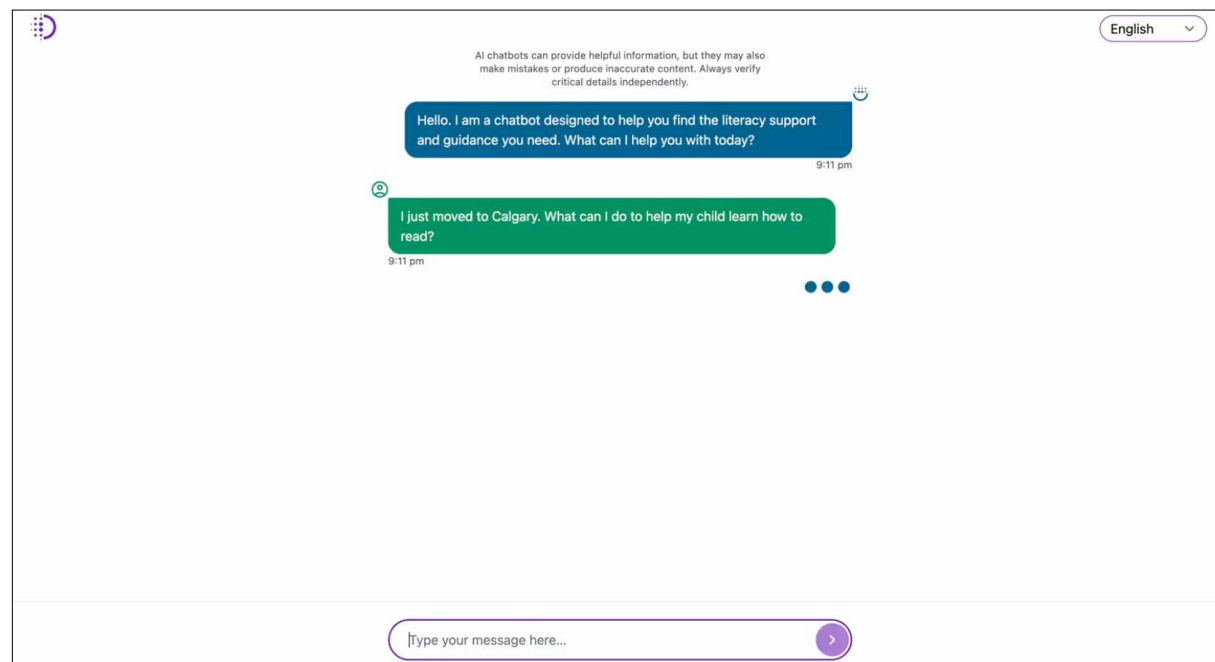


PROTOTYPE 4

AI Chatbot

The team for the “Generative AI Chatbot” solution had two members. Matt, the Lab Steward, conveyed the conceptual framework of the project to software developer Andrew Thomson. Andrew built the tech stack and programmed the chatbot with Matt as an advisor.

Creating a Generative AI chatbot that draws on programs, events and resources from literacy organizations’ websites will be a tool that newcomers can use to get up-to-date information on literacy resources that are based on their needs. The chatbot would also be less costly to maintain compared to traditional approaches (e.g. managing a database or creating an ecosystem map).



[CLICK HERE](#) OR SCAN TO SEE
HOW THE CHATBOT WORKS

Solution Team Members



Matt Mayer
Arete Initiative



Andrew Thomson
Software Developer

The Challenge

Many newcomer caregivers, caseworkers, and other support groups may not know the extent of resources available to them and may miss out on opportunities to support their child. At the same time, new organizations are formed and existing programs are added, changed, or removed. Online database resources for newcomers tend to not have extensive literacy resources and are expensive and cumbersome to maintain.



The Hypothesis/Idea

Creating a Generative AI chatbot that draws on programs, events, and resources from literacy organizations' websites will be a tool that newcomers can use to access up-to-date information on literacy events, programs, and resources that are based on their needs. The chatbot would also be less costly to maintain compared to traditional approaches (e.g. managing a database or creating an ecosystem map).



The Prototype Process

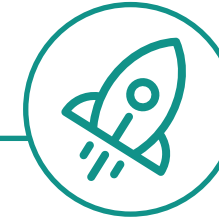
This prototype team...

- Discussed the feasibility of the challenge with a software developer and conceptualized a GenAI solution.
- Gathered a list of local literacy organizations in the city that provide literacy services to newcomers.
- Selected the technology stack and inputted the local organizations into a prototype.
- Tested the tool with Literacy Lab Team, individuals working directly with newcomers, newcomers themselves, and seasoned literacy practitioners (~15 individuals)
- Integrated feedback from tests where appropriate with prototype scope, triaging additional features where needed.
- Discussed the utility of the tool with relevant literacy organizations to pass along for further investment and software development.



The Potential

- Newcomers may experience greater empowerment when using a tool like this as it has the potential to work in multiple languages, can provide highly contextualized information to each user, and will automatically update.
- Newcomers may require resources not offered by the organization servicing them. This tool could help the literacy organizations help the user navigate the literacy system based on what they need at any given moment.
- The tool is currently designed to help newcomers, however, could easily be adapted to other sub-categories (e.g. neurodiverse children) or aggregated to broader categories (e.g. all literacy needs for children that are in Grade 3 or younger).



The Learning

- Centering the users and being confident about the problem the technology aims to solve is critical in the discovery process
- Early feedback from a variety of perspectives is helpful, especially with prospective users. For example, it was realized that the translated text in Hindi was speaking too formally and at a very advanced level which was not the case when engaging in English.
- Costs still exist to maintain the tool as it must be updated with new local organizations or programs. Additionally, the "tokens" drawn to use the tool must be updated.



**Prototype Implementation*

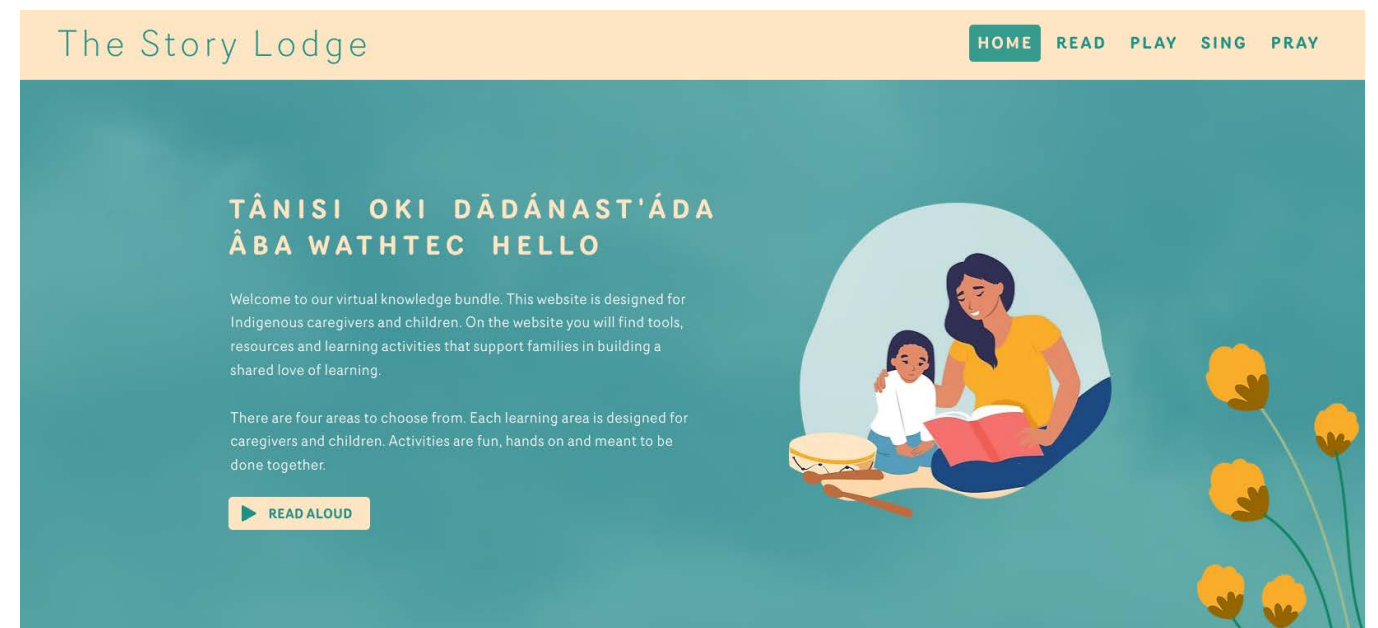
Understanding Schools

The Calgary Public Library formally accepted a proposal from a *Solution Team* member to continue the work of the Understanding Schools in Calgary prototype. It will be fully operationalized in the coming months in collaboration with the Calgary Bridge Foundation for Youth.



Indigenous Lit Kit

Miskanawah, the broader organizational collaborator for the Indigenous Literacy Kit, has agreed to fully steward the project moving forward. They will build out and continue to utilize the online Lit Kit in their programming as they see fit.



*Learning & Reflection

Social labs are about challenging mindsets and doing things differently. The complex problems that social labs seek to address do not have simple answers nor are the pathways straightforward. Throughout the Lab journey we are constantly trying new things, failing, learning, changing approaches, and moving forward.

We learn as much about the process of innovation and collaboration as we do about the issue at the centre of the Lab. We are continuously unearthing tensions and surfacing new questions.

WHAT DID WE LEARN ABOUT THE LITERACY LANDSCAPE IN THIS PROCESS?

→ *Beyond the “Usual Suspects”*

Literacy truly impacts every part of a community. An important part of this Lab was bringing as many diverse perspectives to the table as possible; rather than only consulting educators or working with organizations with clear mandates for literacy. The Lab collaborated with those impacted by low literacy, those with different lived experience, and those who saw the system and its challenges in diverse ways. Every experience with literacy is nuanced and by seeking out the stories and perspectives of those beyond “the usual suspects”, we gained a deeper understanding of the many touchpoints literacy has in Calgary. When these voices are not accounted for, our understanding of the systemic challenges is incomplete.

How might we collectively ensure that frequently overlooked voices are included in community conversations and solutions work? How might we better honour the perspectives of those historically excluded from literacy and education spaces?

“The Lab created space for people to express needs thoughtfully and respectfully, and to feel represented and cared for in the process. That kind of environment is rare, and it makes meaningful, lasting work possible.”

Organizational Partner

“You have to have the voices of the community you seek to reach in developing prototypes.”

Solution Team Member

→ The Literacy Landscape is Full of Blind Spots

Over the course of the Lab, we heard repeatedly that people were unaware of the work being done by other organizations in support of literacy. Several participants noted that a highlight of the Lab was getting to make connections with those from other organizations that shared similar projects, goals, or priorities. The challenge revealed the extent of blind spots and disconnection across Calgary's literacy ecosystem. It became apparent that more opportunities need to be created to bring together organizations and community members working across the system.

Cooperation within the literacy ecosystem is paramount to change. This applies to organizational collaboration, but also extends to awareness and partnership across systems that extend beyond education. More trusted partners means broader cooperation and synergized action, but this is made difficult when cross-community awareness is missing.

How might we further illuminate systemic blind spots to create more intentional and effective collaboration?

“Many organizations are doing similar work and we could be so much more effective by working collectively and sharing resources.”

Solution Team Member

“Network and collaboration is key to achieve success.”

Solution Team Member

→ Literacy as a Both/And Problem

Childhood literacy is a multi-faceted issue. Many perspectives on root causes, barriers, and solutions are deeply entrenched (as exemplified by the ongoing “Reading Wars”). Entrenched perspectives posed a challenge in the Lab process. The Lab had an incredible assortment of knowledgeable professionals and changemakers that represented a breadth of perspectives on childhood literacy. While some participants were very passionate about new approaches, others felt frustrated by the choices made. In prototyping, we found that in order to engage effectively with the challenge, looking at the problem from multiple perspectives and giving each fair consideration was necessary, albeit challenging.

The literacy landscape is full of fixed mindsets that may prevent or challenge the ability to examine the system in a different way. Complex challenges are difficult to loosen and, like literacy, require us to embrace the both/and mindset in order to explore new possibilities for action and problem solving—even when it challenges what we know. In holding on too tightly, we fail to acknowledge the full extent of the problem and limit our ability to generate new approaches and solutions.

How might we more fully evaluate entrenched community challenges to broaden perspectives and shift mindsets?

“The Lab helped surface a deeper question: How do we make learning to read something families and children genuinely enjoy together? When literacy is joyful, relational, and confidence-building, it opens doors to a child's gifts and sense of possibility. Reading then becomes a bridge, not just to academic success, but to belonging, imagination, and connection.”

Organizational Partner

“The most challenging part for me was surrendering ego and truly practicing humility. The process asked me to hold something with care, and then be willing to open it up for feedback, guidance, and shared ownership. That requires trust, appreciation for others' expertise, and a willingness to be changed by the process, not just affirmed by it.”

Organizational Partner

WHAT ARE WE LEARNING ABOUT SOCIAL LABS?

→ *Battling Perfectionism & Managing Expectations*

The lab process is unique and challenges our typical ways of working. In the thick of prototyping, participants who do not have a grounded understanding of social innovation work may feel defeated. Experiences from this Lab high-lighted the importance of checking in with participants around what we are (and are not) doing. Social labs are not meant to solve problems in their entirety, they are designed to shift patterns. Ensuring participants understand this helps to prevent feelings of failure when prototyping does not go as expected. Failure is success when learnings are mobilized toward change.

In future labs, prioritizing unpacking the elements of social innovation and prototyping for participants more fully may combat perfectionism and prevent debilitating frustration.

How might we better prepare and support participants engaging with prototyping and systems change work for the first time? How might we equip them for frustration and “failure”?

“Once we had decided on [the initial idea], I felt like that was our job. I felt like a failure. We were entrusted to do it and we aren’t even close. I felt like we let everyone down... I was not prepared for failure. I felt like I was half drowning the second year.”

Solution Team Member

“We need to create the conditions for folks to not let perfection get in the way of [prototyping].”

Lab Team Member

→ *Labs Can’t Do it All*

Social labs are time and resource intensive and because of this we simply are not able to dive deeply into every aspect of the challenge. The process of choosing areas of focus for the Lab was not about ranking areas of importance. This, we discovered, was incredibly subjective from participant to participant, from expert to expert. Rather, the process sought to identify systemic blind spots. What areas of this problem are overlooked? Where can we shift patterns in new ways?

→ *Too Slow... and Too Fast*

The Literacy Lab spanned two years; some periods felt incredibly slow, while others flew by. Several *Solution* and *Lab Team* members noted how quickly time seemed to pass once we began prototyping. Shorter timelines do create urgency and this can be helpful for creativity and spurring action. However, when timelines become such a pressure that important work is rushed through or participants experience significant stress, they must be reevaluated.

We are pre-programmed to jump into solutions. Complex problems require a level of patience in order to see below the surface. Taking time with a problem allows participants the opportunity to become immersed, allow for relational processes, and go beyond usual ways of evaluating challenges and their solutions.

How might we balance action, reflection, and thoughtful process?

“What I found most valuable was that the process took time... this Lab allowed us to slow down, include community voices, and create something preventative rather than reactive. That pace honoured the complexity of literacy, culture, and family life, and it reflected a genuine care for doing the work well and in a good way.”

Organizational Partner

“We went from broad learning to super narrow learning too quickly. It felt like we lost some ideas along the way. It felt like we were racing.”

Solution Team Member

→ Time Commitments are Difficult!

The *Lab Counsel* and *Solution Team* members were deeply committed to the process. Having said this, the reality of work that is largely volunteer is that people cannot always invest the time that a lab may demand. People are committed to the issue but it is difficult to continuously carve out hours in busy schedules. The time spent learning with one another through this process was a gift, but also had the potential to become burdensome. Because prototyping moved swiftly, missing one meeting meant falling behind. Disconnection became a challenge. As with other social labs, figuring out how to best engage with and honour the time of our participants is an important question we continue to explore.

How might we create a lab process that provides the time and space needed to build authentic relationships, challenge and break through entrenched mindsets, and create space for creative problem solving, while not burdening otherwise already overstretched participants?

“Like most group work that you aren’t mandated to do (that is “off the side of your desk) some folks can commit more and are more invested than others. Decision makers from each organization need to be actively involved to push the work to a place of operationalization.”

Solution Team Member

“Some people came once in a while, but threw the conversations out of whack. They didn’t follow the evolution. We restarted and didn’t get anywhere.”

Solution Team Member

→ Creating Opportunities for Connection

Online meetings are the most convenient for many participants, but some reflected that they became isolating. In phase one, we were regularly gathering and discussing. The lack of in-person meetings and gatherings during phase two may have been a disservice to *Solution Team* members and impeded idea generation. Creating opportunities for connection amidst competing schedules should be considered in future labs.

How might we provide opportunities for meaningful, in-person engagement without overwhelming the busy schedules of participants?

“I wish I had known that other teams were going through wobbles. It would have been good to connect with other teams. Solution teams were isolated.”

Solution Team Member

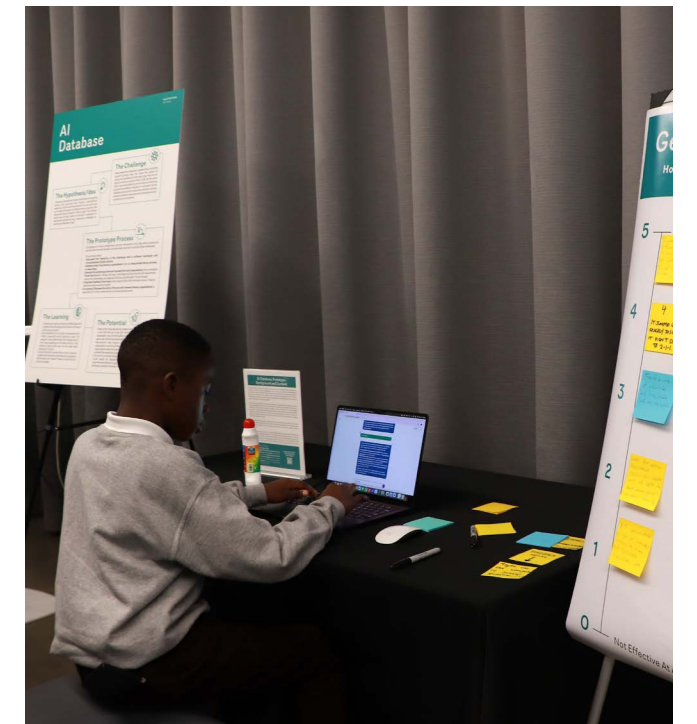
“Real engagement is still a barrier (people are looking for shortcuts to human engagement), but connection cannot be short cut. It is not an advantage to our civic society.”

Solution Team Member

Literacy Lab Showcase



The *Design & Facilitation Team* and *Solution Teams* hosted community members, partners, educators, and supporters at the Central Library for the Literacy Lab Showcase. The Showcase was an opportunity for *Solution Teams* to share their prototypes and insights with community and celebrate their hard work.



LITERACY LAB SHOWCASE

NEXT STEPS

HOW DOES ONE END A LAB?

SOME PROTOTYPES HAVE CLEAR PATHS FORWARD!

NOVEMBER 26, 2025

TREATY 7 IS NOT JUST A PLACE. IT IS A COMMITMENT TO BE IN RIGHT RELATIONSHIP.

We are feeling the good vibrations!

ELDER ROY BEAR CHIEF

We have to look at the environment our children are in. It's a training ground for our children!

LEARNING TO READ IS A BASIC HUMAN RIGHT.

So many dedicated organizations & passionate educators have been part of this work!

LEARNING TO READ

IT HAPPENS BETWEEN THE AGES OF 6 & 9.

READING TO LEARN

THIS IS NOT A SIMPLE ISSUE OR A SIMPLE FIX!

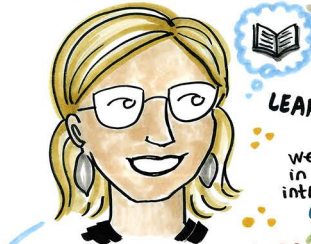
a SOCIAL LAB IS SYSTEMIC

SOCIAL EXPERIMENTAL



MATT MAYER
Literacy Lab Steward

THANK YOU FOR BEING HERE & FOR CARING SO MUCH!



LENA SOOTS-HALEY
Director of the Institute for Community Prosperity

WE'RE ALL HERE BECAUSE WE CARE DEEPLY ABOUT OUR COMMUNITY.

we exist in a complex & intricate web of connections.

We seek to SHIFT the patterns...
...with the CHILD at the CENTRE.



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

WHY is the convening question of the Literacy Lab IMPORTANT to you?

IT'S IMPORTANT TO FIND OPPORTUNITIES TO KEEP OUR YOUTH CONNECTED TO OUR ELDERS.

THE MOST LITERATE COMMUNITY IN THE WORLD!

I CARE, AS A PARENT.

my wife was a grade 3 teacher. Her specialty was early literacy.

I've never met Nicholas, the student she taught. But I've thought about him for 20 years.

It's heartbreaking to see kids struggle. This is a beautiful initiative!

children make sense of their world through language!

THE LIBRARY'S CHILDREN'S LODGE

WE HAVE 20,000 VISITORS TO LIBRARY LOCATIONS EVERY DAY!

I'M EXCITED THAT WE'RE TALKING TOGETHER ABOUT NEW THINGS!

THE LIBRARY IS THE MOST AMAZING PLACE FOR THIS KIND OF WORK.



SARAH MEILLEUR
Calgary Public Library



KEN LIMA-COELHO
Big Brothers Big Sisters

LEARN... FAIL... GO FORWARD...
This way of learning is uncomfortable, but it's inevitable.

The Lab set out to create a space to investigate these questions!

THANK YOU!

SOLUTIONS TEAMS

INDIGENOUS LIT KIT

How might we increase awareness around childhood literacy & foster a shared love of literacy with Indigenous families?

Our question came from the guidance we received. We started with the idea of a Resource Pack...

We rethought our idea...

FAMILY EDUCATION SESSION

Families had to be in the centre!

AN ONLINE LIT KIT!

WE LEARNED FROM THE Little Wonders Program...

PLAY WITH ME

READ WITH ME

PRAY WITH ME

THE STORY BUNDLE

THE WORK DOESN'T MATTER IF THE RELATIONSHIPS ARE NOT THERE FIRST!

WE WANTED TO MAKE SURE THE WORK REFLECTED INDIGENOUS WORLD VIEWS.

LITERACY IS NOT JUST AN ACADEMIC PRACTICE!

a small tool can have a large impact!



THANK YOU TO ALL THE COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS THAT PARTNERED WITH US!

UNDERSTANDING SCHOOLS

LITERACY IS FUNDAMENTAL TO SUCCESS!

LOW LITERACY IS A CRISIS.

newcomer caregivers & children often face a LACK of POWER & INCLUSION in school systems.

EDUCATIONAL EXPECTATIONS??

parents were NOT well-informed!

parents need to be EMPOWERED to advocate for their children!

we went straight to the EXPERTS: the parents.

we partnered with TRUSTED community agencies.

personalization

Trust

relationships

parents walked out with confidence!

ADVOCACY

THESE CHANGES SIGNALLED A DEEPER LASTING foundation for literacy support!

LITTLE WONDERS PROGRAM WITH MISS NATALIE



Centre for Newcomers

MONTEREY PARK COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION

FESTIVAL of EARLY WORDS

IF "READING FLOATS ON A SEA OF TALK..."

early conversations build foundations for literacy!

...WHY are young children standing on the shore?

We had a VISION... our prototype:

festival of early words at the Monterey Park Stampede Breakfast

We did a partner survey...

we worked with incarcerated mothers at the women's annex...

pink hat day...

IT'S DIFFICULT TO DOWNSCALE a festival!

We want to focus on a specific demographic.

NEXT STEPS...

PLAN A FESTIVAL...

A DIGITAL LITERACY HUB...

TRUSTED INTERMEDIARIES...



IMMIGRANT SERVICES CALGARY

LAB & RESEARCH ASSISTANTS

GEN AI CHATBOT

Navigating the literacy system is like planning a WEDDING!

even the literacy practitioners can find this work challenging!

a DATABASE? So... we built a GENERATIVE AI CHATBOT

WHAT ARE THE NEEDS? TRUSTED CONTENT

THE AI CONNECTS THE DOTS TO PROVIDE INFORMATION.

We developed a PROTOTYPE & tested it with 20 people.

multiple languages

IT'S NOT PERFECT... BUT I THINK WE'RE ONTO SOMETHING!

THIS COULD BE THE BEGINNING...

THIS IS ALL POSSIBLE BECAUSE OF THE GENEROUS GIFT OF AN ANONYMOUS DONOR THROUGH THE CALGARY FOUNDATION!



OUR COMMUNICATIONS & ENGAGEMENT ASSISTANT

THANK YOU!

Community Connections



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“When literacy is joyful, relational, and confidence-building, it opens doors to a child’s gifts and sense of possibility. Reading then becomes a bridge, not just to academic success, but to belonging, imagination, and connection.”

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