

ANALYSIS OF THE SLN EARLY LITERACY ADVANCEMENT PROJECT

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INTRODUCTION

The Early Literacy Advancement (ELA) Project is an initiative created by the Saskatchewan Literacy Network. Early literacy, specifically early literacy in families, refers to a combination of life skills that children learn early on in life. This includes the basics, like reading and writing, but can also encompass other life skills not usually associated with literacy, such as cooking, singing, dancing, and so forth (Laing). The concept of literacy has evolved over time, from focusing mostly on reading and writing to a more plural view that takes into account the interactions between culture and literacy (Wasik, 2012). Though Saskatchewan adult literacy rates rank in the upper tier of Canadian provinces, there is still much work that can be done (figure 1) (Hayes, 2012).

The trinity of this project is as follows. The ELA project wanted to look at what families were doing, figure out how to support and encourage what they are already doing, and figure out how they can help build on what families are doing. This was to be accomplished by the afore-mentioned capturing of conversations surrounding early literacy. The ELA project was, in a sense, designed so that the SLN could learn things as well. The flow of information goes both ways, and the SLN wanted to maximize both their learning and the learning of their participants as much as possible.

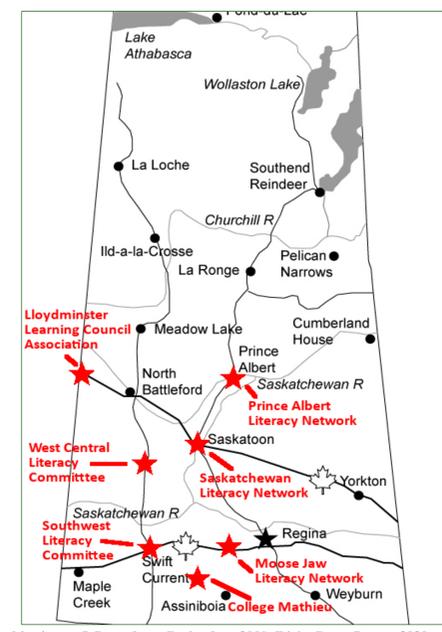
OBJECTIVES

In short, the primary objectives of the ELA project were as follows:

- Develop early literacy training, workshop, and knowledge-building modules, learning supports and resources,
- Provide these modules, supports and resources to literacy practitioners, those who work with families, and families themselves,
- To enhance a community of early learning practice in the province (SLN).

To accomplish these goals, the SLN planned to build on the existing foundations of early literacy in the province of Saskatchewan in order to increase capacity for early literacy advancement by working with groups of interest to promote early literacy for children aged 0-6 (SLN). More specifically, this meant training those working in literacy and related fields to enhance their support of early literacy knowledge and practice in their communities (SLN). It is also meant to help those who work with families, but not necessarily limited to just literacy, by enhancing their knowledge of early literacy and helping them to integrate early literacy advancement in to their every day work (SLN). The project was also meant to directly serve Saskatchewan families by allowing them to build their knowledge of early literacy, especially in areas that demonstrate lower overall rates of early literacy (SLN).

According to Claire Liang, the coordinator of the project, there were also two secondary objectives of the ELA Project. These were to capture conversations about early literacy from different organizations, and also to raise the profile of the SLN and other literacy networks throughout the province, some of which are displayed below.



THE PROJECT ITSELF

ELEMENTS

The ELA Project itself consisted of these elements:

- Three modules, designed to reach:
 - Literacy practitioners and those in related fields: a “train the trainer training module” (SLN)
 - Those who work with families, but do not have literacy as their main mandate: a “how-to workshop with tools to incorporate early literacy into their work” (SLN)
 - Families themselves: a “knowledge-building event meant to enhance families’ awareness of their role and confidence in their abilities as a child’s first teacher” (SLN)
- A coordinated suite of learning opportunities, designed to community capacity to support early literacy (SLN),
- Multiple opportunities for the above modules to be presented in communities across the province (SLN),
- Early literacy advancement resources, in print and online, to support these modules, including:
 - Existing resources, adapted where necessary and made available, and
 - New resources specifically developed to be linked with these new modules (SLN)
- An evaluation framework developed for the project (SLN), and
- Records of all SLN related learning opportunities that individuals participated in, invitations made, requests received, and training and support provided (SLN)

IMPLEMENTATION

Ultimately, the modules were implemented as full-day and half-day workshops. The full-day workshop consisted of resource and idea sharing, with the goal of enhancing participants’ knowledge of early family literacy. The full day workshops were also a chance to network with other organizations, both within the community and outside of it, to compare perspectives on early family literacy. The half-day workshops had similar goals, though they were much shorter sessions and therefore had less information given to participants all at once. One focus of these modules was to connect the content of the modules back to local resources, and so the SLN worked with organizations such as regional KidsFirst (a program that helps families in vulnerable positions) and regional literacy hubs to distribute the workshops and connect with participants (Laing).

ENGAGEMENT

Kids were engaged in the modules in a variety of ways. Many components of the modules were very open ended. For example, one consisted of nothing but pipe cleaners, building blocks, and other construction materials. Children and families were then encouraged to interact with these loose parts in whatever way they wanted. These “loose parts” modules allowed for open ended, collaborative interactions between children, their parents, and the facilitators of the modules, which further enhanced the participants’ knowledge of early literacy. Of course, some other modules were built with literacy skills in mind. These modules consisted of stations where children could do things like sing, or dance, or measure things in the kitchen. All of these are elements of day-to-day life that we do not normally associate with literacy, but which were fostered by these modules (Laing). See figure 2 for other areas of development not usually associated with literacy.

Figure 1: Saskatchewan Adult Literacy Skill Levels

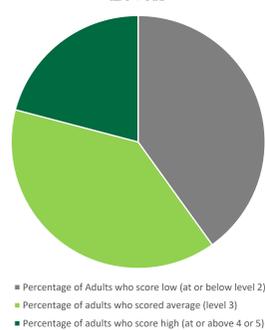
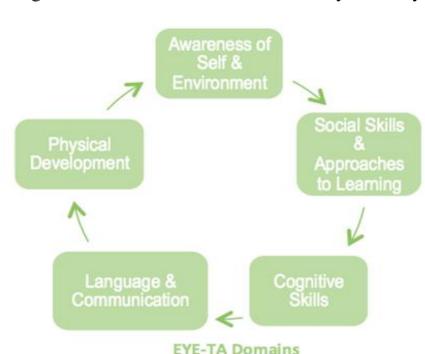


Figure 2: Areas of Evaluation for Early Literacy



OUTCOMES

As the project will continue until the end of March 2020, no results have been officially published by the SLN. However, I had a chance to speak with Claire Laing, the coordinator of the project, and see what she thought of the outcomes of the project.

One of the first things she told me was that the project was much larger than they anticipated. Though they originally planned for about fifty workshops across the province, the final number was closer to eighty (Laing). There was a definite difference in attitudes of participants between those who wanted to be there and those who were forced to attend the workshops, by a superior or otherwise. Those that actually wanted to be there were more open to new ideas and more engaged by the workshops, whereas those who were voluntold were less susceptible to new ideas and were less interested in the contents of the workshops. In terms of the contents of the modules themselves, participants wanted less theory and more hands-on experiences. The organizers found it much harder to connect the theory portions of the modules to people, but the hands-on learning was widely accepted. There were some organizational gaffes, as participants occasionally found themselves in the wrong training. However, Claire stated that, due to the overlap between the modules, this often was not as negative as it could have been (Laing).

Another thing the workshops helped to do was broaden participants’ definitions of literacy. Many of the people who attended the workshops had a narrow view of literacy, and this was expanded through their participation in the workshops. The organizers’ definition of “family” was also broadened. Many of the place that the ELA program visited dealt with struggling families, where the parent may not just be the mother or father of the child. There are cases where the authority figure in a child’s life is their aunt, or grandfather, or older sibling, and in these cases the modules and information must be tweaked to accommodate families who do not conform to the standard (Laing).

When asked at the end of the workshops about their participation, many participants struggled to answer what they wanted out of the project. One unexpected hot topic of discussion during the workshops was that it is key to support early literacy because this is the greatest time of growth. Some participants took issue with this, arguing that the teenage years are the most key time due to the rapid changes that teenagers experience. This relates to another observation from the workshops: that it is very hard to convince adults to change their teaching methods. The workshops operated under the mindset that sometimes children have to fail in order to learn, and it was hard for a lot of parents to accept this (Laing).

One final thing to note is that Claire and the SLN wanted to do some form of follow-up to the workshops, to see what worked, what did not, what people retained, what they did not retain, and so on. Unfortunately, due to budget constraints, this follow-up is unlikely to occur, even though the data would be useful should the SLN do something similar in the future.

OUTCOME OF OBJECTIVES

Was the ELA project a success? Without the follow-up proposed by the SLN, it is hard to be sure. I will look at the project objectives and see whether the project was successful in these areas.

- In its first goal, which was to develop early literacy training, workshop, and knowledge-building modules, learning supports and resources, the ELA succeeded. Admittedly, Claire has stated that the Family L.I.F.E. events, which were the hands-on modules mentioned previously, will likely have more of an impact than the trainings focussed towards literacy practitioners and other organizations. I also have suggestions about how this goal could be improved, but I will go over this below.

- In its second goal, which was to provide these modules, supports and resources to literacy practitioners, those who work with families, and families themselves, I would say the ELA was successful. No project will ever reach 100% of the population, so to call this goal a failure just because it did not reach everyone in the province would be unrealistic. Still, there are ways the distribution could have been enhanced, which I will discuss below.

- In its third goal, which was to enhance a community of early learning practice in the province, it is impossible to say at his point whether they were successful or not. Unfortunately, without the follow-up proposed by the SLN, it may never be possible to see whether the ELA actually enhanced this community or not. Time will tell.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The first recommendation I have is that there needs to be more communication and interaction between the SLN and other literacy organizations in the province. The impression I got from the members of the SLN is that their efforts would be greatly enhanced by a culture of collaboration between them and other literacy networks. The relative difficulty in organizing the ELA hints at the fact that the SLN is not as well connected to the rest of the province as it could be. The ELA project was a great start to begin to build that network. Now, that network must be maintained and enhanced.

Another point of interest is that the ELA has virtually no online presence. Multiple searches for information about the project revealed almost nothing. This is troubling, because some of the best ways to move the ideals of the ELA forward could be accomplished through an online medium. Yes, it is true that not every family has access to the internet, but it is also true that not every family had access to the ELA workshops. Some are too remote, or too poor, or affected by numerous other factors, and cannot be reached by a solely physical or solely online medium. A mix of both would aid in continuing the ideals of the ELA project past its end date.

I can only put forward two recommendations:

- That communication between the SLN and other literacy practitioners should be enhanced,
- That the spirit of the ELA project can live on in a mix of physical and online resources, even without funding



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